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Developed by the New York-based company Submedia, a series of ads in the PATH train tunnels underneath the Hudson River utilizes a system based on the Zoetrope to create an ephemeral new kind of animation.
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The Ad at the End of the Tunnel

A nineteenth-century toy inspires a twenty-first-century phantasm--one paid for by a sponsor.

By Karrie Jacobs

Posted June 19, 2006

My cousin the urban planner has invited me to hear Daniel Libeskind speak at a synagogue, so one spring evening I take the PATH train from the temporary World Trade Center station, in Lower Manhattan under the Hudson River, to Hoboken, New Jersey. In the dark tunnel, just before the train pulls into the Exchange Place station in Jersey City, a flock of giant birds materializes outside the window and somehow morphs into a shiny Nissan Murano. What appears to be a hallucination rapidly transforms itself into a car commercial.

Later I tell my cousin's wife, Edie, about the amazing thing I've seen. A hardened PATH train commuter, she informs me that there have been ads like that in the tunnel for years. "I feel like they're projecting advertising on the inside of my eyelids," she complains. Well, yeah, that's how it feels to me too, except it is such a beguiling sensation that I have to know how the ad--with its flickering miragelike quality--got there. For me this is the best thing that can happen on any routine trip: a bit of visual stimulus will provoke my curiosity; a random image will act as a trailhead leading me deep into the creative undergrowth of the city. When I go home I do what curiosity now demands: a Google search.

I discover that the ads I've seen are the product of a New York-based company called Submedia, cofounded by a young Columbia-educated astrophysicist named Joshua Spodek. The firm has been placing them in transit tunnels since 2001. But what's most interesting is that the ads use a system based on a Zoetrope, the nineteenth-century toy in which a series of drawings on the inside of a spinning wheel are viewed through slits on the outside, creating a primitive form of animation.

This explains the ephemeral quality of the images--and it makes me even more curious. In a world full of images so high definition that it almost hurts to look at them, I love that the ones I see on the PATH train are so delicate that they hover on the boundary between there and not there. I imagine that Submedia will have a creative department that is deeply immersed in the aesthetic of their chosen medium.

Sadly, when I visit Submedia headquarters I find that it's located in the sort of generic Midtown office that small businesses can rent fully furnished and staffed. There I meet the firm's current CEO, Peter Corrigan, an affable salesman in an argyle sweater who tells me that the Nissan ad I saw is simply repurposed TV commercial footage. On a conference room whiteboard he draws a diagram illustrating the setup. Mounted on the tunnel wall are a series of 3-by-4-foot boxes--139 on the PATH display I saw--with fluorescent lights inside and a series of slits on the lids. The images--individual frames of a video--are digitally compressed into tall, narrow stripes of data and arrayed on long paper strips inside the boxes. The whole system is marvelously low tech except for the state-of-the-art computerized imaging



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By Karrie Jacobs

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and printing techniques needed to create the high-density photographic stripes. Ingenious, but I leave feeling as if my trail has hit a dead end.

I pick up the trail the next day when I have coffee in a West Village café with Spodek. He has the clean-cut look of your basic all-American boy, but he's several orders of magnitude more intense than his appearance suggests. He has a PhD in astrophysics, used to work on the XMM-Newton satellite (a space observatory that tracks events in deep space), and now, at 34, he's about to complete his MBA. Somehow about a decade ago he got sidetracked by Zoetropes: he felt driven to find out if their "circular geometry" could be translated into "linear geometry." Why? "It's the sort of thing my brain is trained to do."

Commercially minded friends realized that Spodek's obsession could be an advertising medium, and by 1999 he had a working model. When I suggest to Spodek that his company was somehow a product of the start-up mania of the late 1990s, a period during which every bright idea became a magnet for venture capital, he denies it. "I had no idea about the dot-com boom. I wasn't thinking about Bezos," he says, referring to the Amazon founder. "I was thinking about Einstein and Newton." Now he's thinking more about the inventor as entrepreneur--Thomas Alva Edison is his model.

One reason the Submedia ad grabbed me is that it reminds me of an old urban mystery I never bothered to explore. Twenty years ago I used to see an animated sequence of op art outside the window of the D Train as it moved through the dark between the Manhattan Bridge and the DeKalb Avenue station, in Brooklyn. I do another Google search and dredge up a Web page devoted to that legendary artwork: *Masstransiscope*, by artist Bill Brand.

I catch up with Brand at Anthology Film Archives, where he's hosting a monthlong retrospective of films that his company, BB Optics, restored and helped to create. The 57-year-old spent much of the 1970s writing programs that would allow him to generate and film vivid effects using a mainframe computer in the basement of New York&-Presbyterian Hospital. His breakthrough 1979 film, *Split Decision*, involves disjointed live-action footage overprinted with complex, frenetic geometric animation. Brand's primitive visual effects are so intense that they literally make me dizzy.

Like Spodek's creation, Brand's original linear Zoetrope was a low-tech system with one key high-tech component. A 300-foot-long slotted box sat on the platform of the abandoned Myrtle Avenue subway station. Inside were cartoon images hand-painted on the kind of reflective sheeting invented by 3M for street signs, a material designed specifically to efficiently reflect light back to its source.

Brand made *Masstransiscope* with the financial and logistical backing of Creative Time, an organization devoted to public art. Why? "I just wanted to." He also wanted the kind of dedicated attention that Submedia now sells to its advertisers and remembers thinking, "What would it be like to have a big audience?" His piece went up in 1980 and was visible for years. "I used to maintain it," he says. "I had covert access, and I'd go down there to fix things." Today it's dark and needs cleaning, new bulbs, and ballasts. However, Brand recently received grant money to possibly--pending MTA approval--restore and relight his *Masstransiscope*.

I feel as though I've accomplished something now: not only have I traced the flickering light to its creators but I've discovered that they know each other. Early in the life of Submedia, Spodek contacted Brand; and while Spodek claims Edison as a role model, I suspect he's also greatly influenced by the older artist. Spodek's business partners would be pleased if he spent more time improving the physical components of the Submedia display, but he says, "I've become more interested in the medium as a medium. Twentieth-century art has come alive for me now. I go to MoMA all the time."

My trail ultimately leads to Spodek's apartment, where he shows me the

artworks he now creates for display in clubs and galleries. Hanging on the wall is a miniature version of the Submedia display, a slotted black box four feet long. He keeps pulling long strips of compressed images from a pile on the floor and placing them inside the box. I walk back and forth in front of it, watching the compressed images fatten into pictures of dancers who pirouette, frug, and shimmy. Here is the thing I'd been hoping to find since I saw the birds on the PATH train: the medium as medium. Here is the real reason Spodek's linear Zoetrope exists. To me it's like discovering the source of the Nile.

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