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# THE GAZE (INWARD/OUTWARD)

text by emily r. pellerin / photography by brandon wickenkamp

If you're looking for a pickpocket in action or a proposal against a crimson skyline or a woman in heels to crash and burn or some sort of drama, mistortune, proclamation, radicalism—if you look long enough—you may find it here. But these dramas, these stories, exist everywhere; all over in the little bits, in the tuck of a pant leg into a sock, in the whispered touch of an elbow against a forearm, in the wind-in-her-hair of the sound of a truck's squealing break or the shutter of a camera lens or the whiff of tobacco.

This is an art, to be exercised; distracted by expectation, I pursue a fabricated and intentional attentiveness. I hunt for the downplayed dramas of the everyday, within the exteriors of three art spaces of New York City: The Whitney, MoMA PS1, and the Brooklyn Museum.

## THE WHITNEY

When the wind blows along Gansevoort Street from the Hudson River, when it tunnels through the blocks eastbound, carrying with it wafts of gyro and hot dogs, it blows the edges of skirts up and it warbles ponytails and you can see on the faces it passes, steeped in hot sunshine, that it is welcome.

Outside the Whitney Museum of American Art, to one side, is the High Line, New York City's above ground, hard-won former railway-turned-public park; to the other side is the river, mediated by the West Side Highway.

Abutting the Whitney is one of the many entrances to the High Line—an ample staircase connecting street level to the park grounds above, a two-way regurgitator of amblers. Descending step by step, into the shadow of below-the-park, are new age debutantes: skateboard poses saunter down the big broad stairs, into the mouth of Manhattan, into the city's gruff, gross streets; into the loins of arts and culture and commerce.

It is late afternoon. These gruff, gross streets are primmer directly surrounding the museum. There's a persistent clutter and clatter of feet on those primmer streets, moving into and out of the lobby. Around the building, the sun pierces and ricochets off the chrome of cars careening along the highway. The Whitney shrouds its customers in its looming, gentle shade.

The Renzo Piano-designed rooftop, of the Renzo Piano-designed building, extends nearly to touch the High Line, an intersection disallowing art to end. A continuous vision of infrastructure, landscape, concept, creation. Foot traffic between the two sites collides, merges, becomes one and the same. Wheel traffic, too; more skateboards, four wheels; a wheel chair, electric, four wheels; strollers, four wheels each; bicycles, stationary, locked up, two wheels per one frame. Many wheels in the single frame of the moment.

The moment is zesty. It is Louis Vuitton-meets-Opening Ceremony-meets-Eastpak-meets-Goyard. Kids and couples and peddlers and pedants and lots and lots of pigeons, pious in their fidelity to this—their—space.

The moment is long legs moving in and out of the museum's clear glass rotating doors. It's a tasting menu of the trendy and the blandly touristic, the uninspired and the over-styled and the nonchalantly incredibly cool, and the genuinely, beautifully normal.

The moment is when sunglasses become un-needed, when dusk flirts, winks and then disappears into the dark corners of the horizon and you never see this particular one again.

A barge saunters by on the river past this dusk; both are too coy.

The concrete of the Whitney's footprint against this dusk is whiter, less tarred, smoother than the pebbly asphalt beside it on the city's streets and the city's sidewalks. Their cobbled, darker asphalt is grated, pitted and potted and pocked and spliced like a patchwork quilt. Cars hobble over their uneven planes.

The colors of the moment are changing. The automated, digital rotating canvases of the Whitney's vertical billboards shift: promotion then promotion then promotion then promotion. The sun dips and the lights flicker against nearby faces strengthen with it, a reflexive and compensatory brightness. The lime-ish green elevator up to the High Line transitions sky bound, smoothly migrating between window panel level to window panel level to window panel level till the top. Lime-ish green park chairs converge concentrically, in different formations, with each fleeting group of sitters.

Stair dwellers dwell, sitting on their seats, and when the museum premises close for the evening, a fleet of flip-flops and high tops and kitten heels scuffs the ground on which these stair sitters sit, pushing pavement behind them, and the rubber soles of tennis shoes rub that same ground goodbye. The shadows of receding patrons outpace them, beating their every move, stretching ahead of them, gargantuan, mimicking the jostle of each gait.

There are five rows of steps up from Gansevoort Street to the large rotating doors of the Whitney. The steps are just deep enough to sit, but span nearly the full width of the building. Inside, through the full wall of windows, color explodes from the museum's gift shop; rows of plates and boxes and scarves and books. At the lobby level, there is no hiding in this glass house of artistry. There is secrecy, though, to the upstairs. An employment of pay-to-enter notions of artistic sanctity, housed within this structure boasting Glenn Ligon's hugely emblazoned "AMERICA" above its ticket desk.

On one of the rows of steps sits a young man, sucking his silver neck chain with his lower lip jut out, a big juicy nervous tic.

Behind him, on the exterior of the window-walls is plastered a list of museum patrons' names, through which you have to look to see inside, to the members' desk and elevator doors and stairwell and "Untitled" (America), 1994 by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, a hanging string of lights, glittery and majestic and mystic. Foregrounding the democratic museumspace on this window-scape will always be the names of the rich.







# MOMA PS1

Seven white, miniature rooftops cap the bodies of seven hunter green portable toilets outside MoMA PS1 in Long Island City, Queens. Adjacent to this utilitarian row is a utilitarian row of Citi Bikes. The bikes all traveled from somewhere to station outside this museum. The bikes will all navigate off to somewhere else from here. There's as little telling where these bikes will go next as there is of where the contents of the toilets go from here.

Steamy mist rolls sleepily off the top of the museum's squat concrete façade, its entry point. The mist is a peek into the interior courtyard's installation, Hide & Seek by Dream the Combine, a collaboration between artist-architects Jennifer Newsom Carruthers and Tom Carruthers, which is a lot of mirrors, is interactive, is very BIG, is a grown-up playland of image and self-image and dreamlike distortion (and which has been replaced by now). The steamy mist is fitting.

The steamy mist is cooling. Each time an emission exudes breathily from the rooftop toward the exterior ether, there's a hushed sibilance courtesy whatever pipeline is producing the spew, discernable and dreamlike against the noises of construction and deconstruction going on in front of, behind, and beside the institution.

Standing at its entranceway, you can see three new high-rises being erected, all within a radial stone's throw. Machine boxes elevate workers, bright yellow capsules careening up and down, up and down, the gleaming facades of partial buildings, these nascent towers, these nubile stalks growing along the Queens waterfront, poised to be richly pollinated with tenants.

A trio of builders moves past MoMA PS1, trailing like ducklings or ants or grown men, faces dirtied, in fluorescent yellow vests. They patter by blithely.

Past the line-up chortles the abrasive, yet Pavlovian-pleasant, jack-in-the-box jingle of an ice cream truck. It moseys around the block. A small gathering of people glance up from their cigarettes toward it. Smoke breakers. Some cross the street, others loiter near the museum doors, where there's a generous tree staffing shade for enterers and exiters.

In this shadowed stamp onto the concrete below echo the chirps of little warbling sparrows. They are hidden in the tree's branches and they are plentiful and they sound like they are having a lot of fun. A light-footed older woman in a blazer steps through a host of birds who've touched down, and they scatter. She pats down her hair as the wind sifts through it, and makes a headband of her sunglasses to keep it in place. Behind her, a business-looking man enters the building and removes his sunglasses immediately. (Courtesy? Habit? Myopia?)

There are lots of sunglasses today. There will be lots of sunglasses for some more days, as the summer extends through its hottest temperatures, and its most toured weeks culminate.

People touring into this space, today, from down the block, look at their cell phone screens, back up at the building, back down at their screens, squinting their eyes to double check, once more, that this red brick school house-joint-Brutalist slab contains the affiliate to the Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan's shiny institutional golden child.

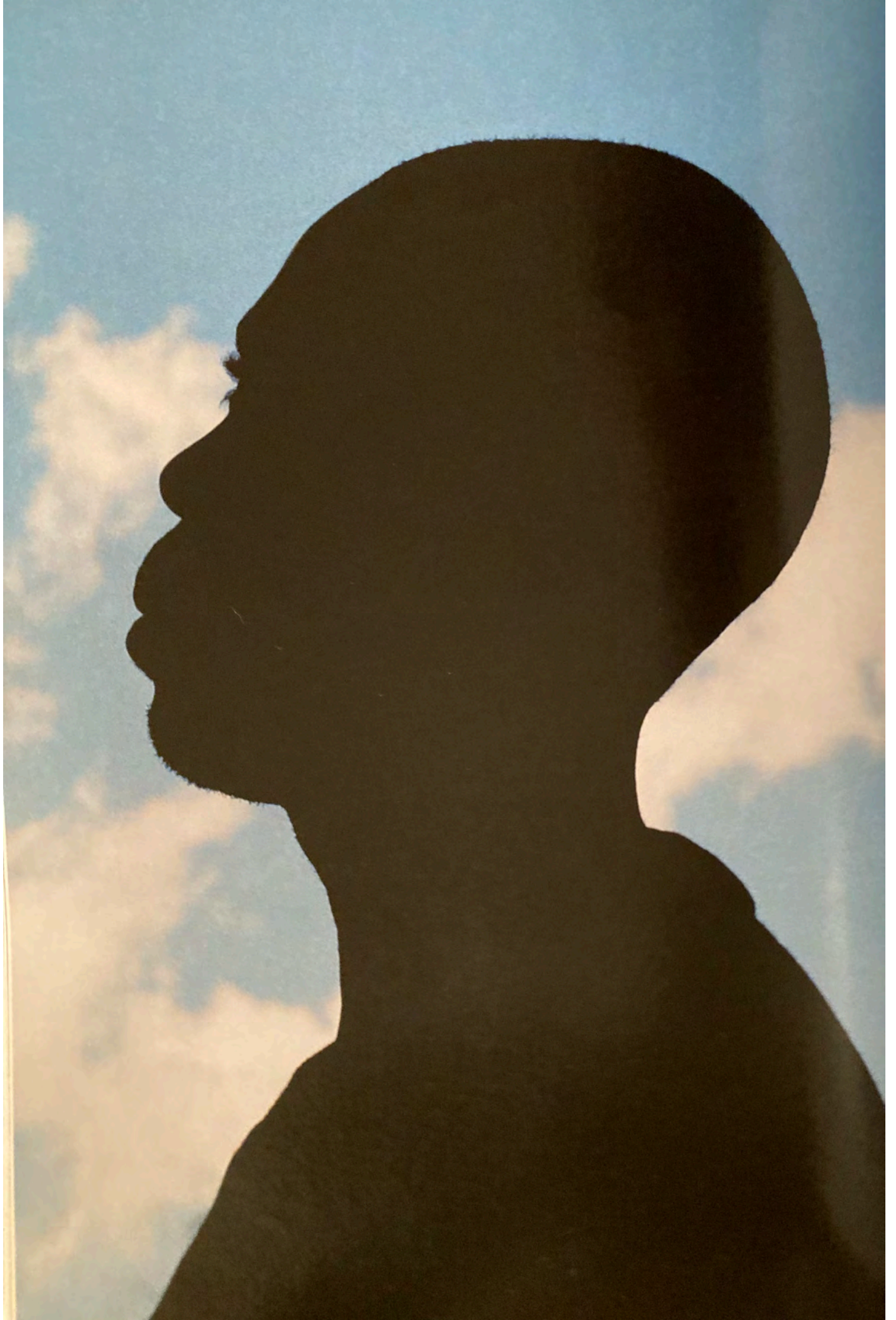
What's distinct about this exterior corner of this museum is what's distinct about many spaces in New York City. It is at once quiet, hushed, removed from the bustle of life, and still bonkers with activity: the beep beep beeps of reversing demolition trucks, the screeching above ground subway blocks in the distance, the whispers of footsteps and murmurs of indistinct art criticism and reflections on the obscurity inside.

The obscurity outside: an LED light cord travels, syncopates around the front rim of the building. It moves like data points shimmying across a marquee, an illegible, lighted Morse code; or guppies darting around at your feet through an opaque lens of river; or some sort of art-world brainwash.

The energy is subdued here. It is relaxed. The curiosity that this entrance building piques—with its sparkly ribbon of LED and its rooftop protrusions, growths from the architectural sculptures inside—soothingly levels the environment of construction, labor, oppressive heat, traffic, chaotic public transit.

The energy is placid here, at Jackson and 46th Avenues, where activity feels kinetic but contained, abled but absorbed into the chunkiness of the corner's impactful edifice.







Hear and feel the roar of a jet engine above, circulating northbound to Queens across the gray vacant sky.  
 Hear and feel the subway gurgling underneath, here; these benches pick up its movement, they share its shake. Connected terrestrial organs of the urban corpus.  
 Hear and feel the rumble of the pneumatic sprinkler installation at the Brooklyn Museum's easternmost point. It is entrancing. The splatter of the water, as each stream  
 plats back onto the ground from its ascent, is aggressive, is letting you know the down is as important as the up.  
 A man reclines back, seated atop an elevated portion of the side of a flowerbed adjacent to the dancing water. He teeters with his legs in the air as his core supports his pose.  
 He is wearing clunky Velcro cast boots and scrubs, just the pants, with a huge hole at the crotch. As he leans, his body V-shaped, he's holding the hole open to air out his genitals.  
 His movements are slothful. A few moments later and he has removed the hospital-blue trousers and thrown them, balled up, into the trashcan nearby. He hobbles, both legs contorted,  
 toward a young man in a baseball cap whose toddler-aged daughter is lying face down like a starfish on the corner of Washington Avenue and Eastern Parkway. She is screaming and  
 crying and will not get up. Her complexion fit leaves her hair played out angelically around her head.  
 The V-shaped man, now upright in black boxer briefs and his Velcro boots, offers one of his belongings, plucked from the gills of a baby stroller filled with miscellany, to the father: a  
 bright pink child's backpack. In his underwear, arms extended, distance kept, crazy painted all over him, movement erratic but slow, he is unthreatening but nonetheless entirely  
 uncomfortable to experience. The father rejects the offer.  
 Undemeath the oblivious starfish girl, the morning's rain has stained the crisp concrete wet. Patches have dried up, so the sprawling sidewalk looks like a series of Rorschach tests.  
 The man has rolled his stroller off and away from the jetting streams of the sprinklers, which are soaring now, the cyclical installation nearing its climax. The  
 waters geyser forcefully and touch the sky higher, higher, higher, tickling the line of the tops of buildings across Eastern Parkway. With a final  
 pump, the apex is transgressed and the pace of the jets slows. The beat of the pneumatic thrusts crests, too, returning to slowness,  
 something more akin to the way the heart moves, boom-boom ing to the downbeat of the splatters.  
 And the cycle continues, and the water soars.

## BROOKLYN MUSEUM

The cement, bleacher-like steps of the Brooklyn Museum face this hydro-art architected by WET Design, of Las Vegas's Bellagio fountain fame. The seats-cum-steps are gargantuan and visually impactful, a snippet of sidewalk splendor. They're gray and they're big and they're not yet steeped with the burn of today's sun.

The steps are a newer addition to the museum, but the institution's original structure has been here over 100 years. In the 1930s, its entranceway was a sprawling row upon row upon row of narrow stairs, stretching from the full width of its elevated building down toward the street. In an act of democracy and accessibility, these were demolished, and replaced with an entrance building at ground level.

More recently, in 2004, this lobby was added onto. The visor of glass and chrome, protruding from the entrance building, hangs over and out and looks like a spaceship might, if it were attached to an historic Beaux-Arts structure. Opaque panels tier into the air like a telescope extended, like multiplying honeycombs, a futuristic appendage plunging into its borough, asserting continuity between Brooklyn and Brooklyn's own artspace.

The red subway line spits out passengers through its threshold directly onto this renovated artspace's manicured promenade. A portal to enter into or emerge from; an opportunity of intra-borough escape, indiscriminate between "from" or "to."

One young couple sits facing the subway entrance, backs to the museum, arms around each other, exploring the contents of a cell phone together on a bench underneath a feeble tree.

Of the other transit and seating areas along the promenade, everything is striated. Curved, in an arc shape that mimics the museum's own curved facade: stripes of grassy space, intercut with stripes of concrete, which function as both low benches and raised pathways. Lines of brick in the ground, cosmetic additions conjoining concrete slab to concrete slab, radiate outward from the building in one symmetrical arc like sonic waves, echoes of the shape of this semicircular entrance.

The couple under the tree has rearranged. Her head is in his lap and her arm curves like a swan's neck up around his nape, reaching for him closer, closer.

A woman poses nearby in front of the canopies of the neighboring Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and a man snags her photograph with a point-and-shoot. They giggle and reconvene. Another man, standing in front of the wall distinguishing the Brooklyn Museum from the garden, yells with his arms up and out, "The beauty around us!" His camera crew, a small cohort of three, points and shoots. He yells again, "The beauty around us!" and, prompted by his team, again, "The beauty around us," and, arms up wider, wider, again, "The beauty around us!" Then he is done. They got the shot. Meanwhile, a woman walks past the museum, receding out of earshot, with two large bouquets of flowers overflowing from her arms. Maybe she is hosting a dinner party this evening! Maybe she is hungry for green-space, hungry for the beauty around us.

The couple under the tree is now standing on the bench they prior sat on, still facing away from the museum. The boy caresses the girl's backside with one full palm, low back to butt to low back to butt, on top of her light, flowing dress, and then opens an umbrella for her as the rain starts again, and begins to assail them with its sprinkles. Gentle, pointillist stains against a born-again concrete.



