

# Book Review:

## Art and Design in 1960s New York

by Amanda Gluibizzi

### Kyle Katz

Graduate Student  
School of Planning,  
College of Design, Architecture,  
Art, and Planning  
University of Cincinnati

[katzkt@mail.uc.edu](mailto:katzkt@mail.uc.edu)

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In *Art and Design in 1960s New York*, Amanda Gluibizzi, explores the intersectionality of art, design, advertising, and signage during the period of great social unrest. The 1960s were a challenging time for New York. High poverty, widespread crime, and economic decline culminated in New York City defaulting on its credit in 1975. This social turmoil coincided with the flourishing of art and design in New York, as both fields responded to an urban environment in flux. It is within this context, a city in crisis, that Gluibizzi examines the ways in which artists began to incorporate elements of the city, its design, its civic and commercial signage, into their art. Fundamental to this analysis is how the fields of art and design responded to each other during that time, and how the lines between the two fields became increasingly blurred as artists and designers pushed the boundaries of their respective fields.

Instead of using artists and designers as counterpoints to each other, the author explores their works in tandem. In this way, a dialogue is built around signage and wayfinding themes of New York at the time, explored from both artistic and design perspectives, and with the philosophical works of Ludwig Wittgenstein providing the backbone for much of the dialogue and analysis.

When writing about design, Gluibizzi includes everything from print advertising – such as that found in magazines and on billboards – to civic and street signage, as well as wayfinding strategies such as those employed for the Noorda and Vignelli map of the New York Subway. The Combines of artist Robert Rauschenberg help to inform our understanding of the controversy over billboards (chapter 3), and Vito Acconci's wayfinding-focused *Following Piece* provides for a more sinister interpretation of the

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efforts at developing a new signage system for the New York Subway (chapter 4). Finally, solutions to the social and economic crises are called for in back-to-back design and art exhibitions in 1972 (chapter 5).

The sources employed throughout the book are diverse, spanning from the art pieces and design products of the time to the personal and published writings and interviews of artists, designers, and urban thinkers, as well as current published literature. The extensive use of primary source materials, especially those written or recorded by the artists and designers themselves, provides sound supporting evidence of the interaction of the two fields and the influence of the urban environment on their work. Of the book's five chapters, this review focuses on chapters 3-5 since those chapters pertain primarily to issues of signage and wayfinding at that time. Chapters 1 and 2 are informative as well, and those interested in pop art and print advertising are encouraged to read these.

In chapter 3, *Navigating the Vernacular Glance: Billboards, Signs, and the Urban Combine*, Gluibizzi explores how artists, such as Robert Rauschenberg, exploited the "explosion of grammatical rules" (p. 82) brought about by the proliferation of billboards. While Rauschenberg seemed receptive to the insertion of billboards into the urban landscape by incorporating the style and syntax into his Combines, his acceptance contrasted with the vocal opposition of designers, planners, urban thinkers, and suburban homemakers who saw billboards as unsafe eyesores, leading to an uncontrolled "linguistic chaos" (p. 79).

The conflict over billboards centered around aesthetics and safety, with the likes of Robert Moses arguing that billboards would spoil the "scenic areas and fine architecture," or they would "endanger the safety of motorists" (p. 77). The visual confusion of the New York urban environment, thought to be exacerbated by billboards, led some artists such as Rauschenberg to examine the implications of these concepts in their work. Using arrows, civic signage, and traffic lights, Gluibizzi effectively argues that Rauschenberg's Combines guide "the viewer's eye through and around the aspects of the works that might act as billboards would to prevent straightforward pro-

gress through the composition" (p. 83). The viewer is required to make sense of the competing signage of the Combines, much as they are forced to make sense of an increasingly illegible urban streetscape. The nexus of art, design, and the response of both fields to street signage, comes to the fore in this chapter.

In Chapter 4, the analysis turns to wayfinding, where Gluibizzi compares the Unimark design plan and methodology for an overhaul of the New York Subway System signage, with Vito Acconci's performance art titled *Following Piece*. The subway at the time was in poor condition and was considered an "undesigned misery" by Mayor John Lindsay's own Task Force on Urban Design. Consultants for Unimark, Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda, were contracted by the Metropolitan Transit Authority to attempt an effective redesign of the signage, and to perform passenger flow studies. These passenger flow studies, in which the passengers were "followed" (p. 117) by Noorda, and points of decision or mistakes were marked on a map of the subway, allowed for the creation of "a plan for the installation of signage at needed points along the paths through the stations" (p. 117).

Acconci explores this wayfinding technique in *Following Piece*, in which Acconci chooses "a person at random, in the street... following him wherever he goes, however long or far he travels" (p. 119). Gluibizzi shows how both artist and designer followed a similar process. Both plotted their targets' movements; both produced maps; likewise, both showed an awareness of the imposition of their actions on unsuspecting subjects.

With the focus centered on subway signage, the author explores typology, and the way in which typeface, font, serif or sans serif, can influence how signage is designed and passenger perceptions of the signage in the New York Subway. Gluibizzi writes that "by its nature, signage must navigate between the geographic, the pictographic, and the typographic" (p. 127). Unimark's recommendation to replace the "amateurish" and "folksy" (pp. 114, 119) hand-painted subway signage with a clean Helvetica was an effort to improve readability but also appeared to assert a level of control over a chaotic wayfinding system. The choice of typeface such as Helvetica and other sans serif fonts allowed for, as Gluibizzi writes,

more “dictatorial undertones,” (p. 128) leaving the traveler with less flexibility to question their path.

At times, the analysis appears stretched, and the dialogue between the work of the artists and that of designers could sometimes be difficult to follow. Yet this historical perspective, looking at the “undesigned misery” (p. 113) of the New York subway, is a thoughtful study of how artists and designers employed wayfinding techniques in their work.

In Chapter 5, *What’s the Matter with the Megalopolis*, the setting is a New York City in decay. Congested streets, pollution, and aging public transit led the city to host two exhibitions, one for artists and one for designers, with the goal of responding to the many challenges facing the city in the 1960s and 1970s.

The 1972 design exhibition, titled “Making New York Understandable” explored the fundamental problem of the “illegibility” of New York, and how designers struggled with an “un-understandable city” (p. 144). Indeed, the invitation to contribute to the “Making New York Understandable” design exhibition stated the challenge clearly: “We make posters to sell products on highways, then get lost going home on those same highways. We make public service ads but we can’t read the public subway map in our own city” (p. 144).

Designers, according to Gluibizzi, traced the illegibility of New York back to the cognitive mapping concept proposed by Kevin Lynch. Unlike centrally designed cities such as Paris, New York, Gluibizzi writes, appeared to have been built ad-hoc. An incoherent street grid, larger than life architecture, and a disorienting subway system all served to undermine a traveler’s ability to wayfind by locating known landmarks and monuments.

Following the design exhibition, artists provided a response with an exhibition of their own, titled “Making the Megalopolis Matter: The Artists Answer.” Gluibizzi approaches both exhibitions with a critical eye, comparing works from each, and parsing the major themes to which both designers and artists were responding. It is in this vein of comparison that Gluibizzi returns to the Unimark and its design efforts for the subway. The 1972 subway map, the product of Unimark’s subway analysis created by Massimo Vignelli, is contrasted with the art piece *Walls Paper*, by Gordon Matta-Clark, which appeared in the “Megalopolis” exhibition. Far from presenting a solution, Matta-Clark’s piece, depicting houses on the verge of being torn down, touched on the fears of designers that their “fixes” to the signage problems of New York would be vain and superficial, and would fail to resolve the city’s many challenges. Here Gluibizzi returns to the Vignelli map, for “in print and in public, the subway map was called out for making the city, once again, un-understandable” (p. 177). Seen as a solution to a decades-old problem, the new subway map had failed, and was scrapped in 1978.

*Art and Design in 1960s New York* is art-heavy and challenging for the non-artist to decipher at times. The reader is also left wondering how this method of analysis could be applied to modern signage and wayfinding challenges. Concluding remarks outlining new areas of research would have been helpful for this. However, the book is well-organized, and the author has carefully interwoven layers of history, art, design,

and the urban landscape into a complex narrative of a city in flux. Indeed, the examination of how art and design employed civic and commercial signage and wayfinding strategies provides a fascinating interpretation of how both fields responded to the city's urban challenges. *Art and Design in 1960s New York* is an insightful contribution to wayfinding and signage research, blending art and design perspectives in a historical context that researchers from disciplines spanning art, design, signage, and wayfinding will find valuable.