

In/With Chelsea

Audio tour of signs by Shannon Finnegan

Track 1: Introduction

Hi! I'm Shannon Finnegan. I am an artist and I made a series of five signs for this project with the High Line *In/With Chelsea*.

I knew from the start that I wanted to make an audio tour to go with this installation. I'm disabled and my disability impacts my walking and standing. Because this project spread out over about 10 blocks, I wanted to make an option for experiencing the work that didn't require walking. So, if you're listening from home, welcome! Also, on their own, the signs are not accessible if you are blind or low vision. Since this project is by disabled people and for disabled people, it felt essential to have a non-visual option for experiencing the artwork. So if you prefer to audio over visual documentation, welcome!

I visited the signs for the first time on October 11th, 2019. It was a sunny and cool Friday afternoon. This tour follows that visit, and I describe what I saw and experienced. I also chime in with some of my thoughts about the artwork and the process of making it.

Track 2: Making the signs

First, some background. *In/With Chelsea* was commissioned by the High Line. My understanding is that the goal was to connect with communities local to the High Line and showcase some of their history and stories. I am one of four artists who worked on this project, each of us working with a specific community and producing a set of signs.

I was asked to connect with disabled people in the Northern Chelsea and Hell's Kitchen neighborhoods. I was specifically interested in what makes the city, and these neighborhoods in particular, accessible or inaccessible to disabled people.

I connected with people through Fountain House, a space and community for people living with mental illness; Center for Independence of the Disabled New York (CIDNY), a service organization for people with disabilities; and through Heidi Latsky, a Hell's Kitchen resident who has an extensive network of creative disabled people through her dance company Heidi Latsky Dance. In total, I talked with about 50 people for this project.

I want to note that people who participated in this project use a variety of language to talk about their embodied experience. Some identify as disabled, some as people with disabilities, some as chronically ill. Others use more specific language like having depression, bipolar disorder, or

being blind, Deaf, autistic, or hard of hearing. I use the term “disabled people” expansively, but it is important to know that it is a catch all term which does not replace the nuance and specificity that people use to describe their experiences.

Track 3: Common to all the signs

There are a number of things common to all of the signs I made. Each features a quote from a participant in the project. The text fills the signs in all caps and was hand-lettered by me. The spacing and size of the letters vary at times. The letter shapes are graphic with confident lines, made even smoother through the digitization process, but overall, the text feels wobbly and was made without the goal of perfection, symmetry, or sameness.

The signs are all two-colors. One color for the text and one color for the background. I chose the colors fairly intuitively, checking their contrast for maximum legibility.

The signs themselves are about 8 x 11 inches, roughly the size of a piece of printer paper. They are thin metal with rounded corners. Each is installed on a light pole, about 5 feet up from the ground. There is a bolt at the top and bottom that attaches the sign to two metal bands that wrap around the pole. The signs were fabricated and installed by the Department of Transportation, so they have a similar look and feel to other types of street signs — parking signs, stop signs, traffic signs.

At the very bottom of each sign is a strip of space with information about the project. It has the High Line logo, my name, and two urls: thehighline.org/signsproject and nyc.gov/dotart.

Track 4: Mario’s Sign

Okay, now the tour!

My plan was to tour the signs from south to north. I arrived at the first sign at 10th Ave and 27th by car. There was gridlock on 10th so it was a slow process getting there. When I arrived at the corner, it took me a minute to get oriented and find the sign, but eventually, I spotted it. This one is blue text on a pink background that reads, “Mario: Public benches, how wonderful, you know. You can actually walk and sit and catch your breath and have a sandwich, soda, or cup of coffee.”

The signs are embedded in the fabric of the city so I want to give you a sense of what I was seeing and experiencing while I was there. This is what I noted:

"As I'm standing at the sign, behind it to the left is a park, the view of it mostly blocked by a big truck. And to the right are the Elliot Chelsea houses, public housing. Facing the sign is Kasmin gallery — it has a modern facade. The shades are partially drawn but I can see parts of abstract paintings inside. Down the block, about one story up from street level, I see the High Line, snaking through some brick buildings. There's a lot of traffic on 10th Avenue right now. A lot of honking and gridlock."

Since this sign references benches, I wanted to see if I could see any benches from the sign itself. Across the street, there's a bus stop with a bench. A little bit further there is a seating area on the grounds of the Elliot Chelsea houses.

Mario is a Fountain House member who has spent a lot of time in Hell's Kitchen. I wanted to feature this snippet of our conversation on a sign because it connects to ideas I heard from a lot of people. As disabled people, we often need rest, and there aren't many places to rest in the city, especially if you don't want to spend money.

Track 5: Kumhee's Sign

I walked up 10th Avenue for three blocks to get to the next sign. 10th Avenue was busy — lots of pedestrians. I think school had just let out, there were lots of kids and families around. When I turned onto 30th Street things felt mellower.

I spotted the sign right away. This one is light blue text on a forest green background. It reads, "Kumhee: I grew up around non-disabled people, so I've learned how to deal with their discomfort."

Here is what I noted about the surroundings:

"This is an interesting little pocket because to my right is the section of the High Line called the Spur. From there, the High Line wraps in front of me under this brand new, giant glass building that's part of Hudson Yards, and then wraps around and is also on my left. And then behind me is another tall, new building. So there is the feeling of being in an enclosure in this area. It feels very new, very clean here. Almost all of the buildings that I can see from here look new. There is a lot of metal and glass. New structures and then mixed in, little bits of the High Line, which is old, but has a fresh feeling because it has been so carefully restored and maintained.

Kumhee's sign is underneath another sign that says, 'Truck loading only, Monday through Friday, 8am to 7pm.' They share this light pole together."

In my conversation with Kumhee, we spent a lot of time talking about different attitudes toward disability both in the US and in Korea where she lived until she was six. This particular quote

echoes things I heard from a lot of participants. That the way people react to you and interact with you has a big impact on the ways you move through the city.

Track 6: Ernest and Marla's Sign

I ended up doing some backtracking to get to this sign because I misread my map. Eventually, I walked from 30th Street to 29th Street via a pedestrian path that goes under the High Line. 29th Street was pretty quiet. Halfway down the block I found the sign. This one reads, "Ernest & Marla: Someone on SSI used to be able to afford an apartment in this neighborhood. Housing is always a fight." The lettering is in a dark, purplish blue on a light blue background. The pole has some moving van flyers and a lost cat poster. At the top is a banner that says "NYC, real estate capital of the world" co-branded with the city logo and the logo of CBRE. I later googled CBRE and found out it is a commercial real estate agency.

When I'm looking at sign what I see behind it is a big, brand new, modern building. I can see from a sign that it is called Soori Highline. I looked up their website later. The building is described there as, "an exclusive collection of 31 one- to five-bedroom apartments, marrying crafted luxury with the pleasures inspired by a destination resort."

Across the street is an older, shabbier residential building and a gallery with a bright yellow exterior. When I visited, it was trash day, so there were bags out all along the street.

The text on this sign comes from two conversations I had. Ernest is a Fountain House member. He was telling me that in the 70s and 80s, Fountain House used to be able to help members find housing nearby. At that time rents were low enough that someone receiving Supplemental Security Income, a welfare program for senior citizens and disabled people, could afford rent in the area. He said, "This area wasn't high class back then."

Marla, someone I connected with through Heidi Latsky, also talked a lot about housing. She has been active in the disability rights community for decades and said that creating and protecting affordable, accessible housing is something they are constantly working on.

Track 7: Amy's Sign

At this point, I had been standing and walking for a while and needed a break. I got a coffee near Kumhee's sign and rested for a while in a cafe. Next I headed east to 9th Avenue. 9th Avenue between 31st and 33rd has huge construction projects on both sides of the street — along the west side is Hudson Yards construction and on the east side they are remodeling the

giant, historic James A. Farley Post Office building to be an Amtrak concourse. I was looking for the sign on the wrong side of the street for a while but found it on the Farley Building side.

There is a chain link fence along the edge of the sidewalk, so the only way to view the sign is through the fence. This sign reads, "Amy: I had to stay at a Holiday Inn in my own neighborhood because my building has one elevator and it broke."

There was scaffolding in every direction when I was at the sign. As I looked at the sign the view beyond it in the distance was the new Hudson Yards towers. To the right is a brand new building with a massive marble lobby. Outside is a privately owned, public space with chairs, tables, benches, and some very young looking trees.

Housing came up in a lot of my conversations but was an especially big part of my conversation with Amy. She is a wheelchair user and hasn't been able to find a good housing situation. She said she was ready to be somewhere she could settle into. One of the big draw backs of her current building is that it only has one elevator, so when it breaks down, she can't get in or out.

Track 8: Local New Yorker's Sign

After going north one block, I turned west again on 34th Street. I found the last sign there close to 10th Avenue.

This one reads, "Local New Yorker: People with disabilities don't always need help. You can ask us for help." The text is light blue on a purple, gray background.

This sign is in front of a deli, advertising pizza, salad, heroes, paninis, and lottery tickets. The sign is adjacent to an M34 Select Bus Service stop. Farther in the distance is more construction, especially as I looked west.

The sign shares the pole with a banner that says "HYHK Hudson Yards Hell's Kitchen, HYHKalliance.org." I think that's the local business development association.

The text featured on the sign came from one of the conversations with CIDNY community members. At one group meeting we spent a lot of time talking about interactions they had with other New Yorkers. People rushing them in the subway, people trying to help without asking first, and the general assumption that people with disabilities always need help. We are also a resource for each other and our communities.

Track 9: Outro

From there I headed farther west to the new Hudson Yards subway station. I stopped for a seltzer and another break in Bella Abzug park before getting on the train home.

I want to take a moment to thank the people involved in this project. Fountain House, CIDNY, and Heidi Latsky were such helpful and supportive partners. Thank you to Ariel Willmott and Jess Powers who help me with so much coordination and outreach. Thank you to all the staff members at the High Line who supported this project: Solana Chetman, Diya Vij, Tanya Albrigtsen-Frable, Cassie Wagler, and Alicia Russo. And I am especially thankful to all the participants in this project. They shared so much about how they navigate and exist in the city — the conversations were so fun and insightful. I hope the future holds better and more numerous spaces, resources, and networks for disabled people. May we flourish here.