

## Wayfinding through Ruins and Castles in a Governors Island Art Intervention

by Allison Meier on September 3, 2015



It's unlikely you'd notice any of the art in Governors Island's *Visitors* without a map, as it's hiding in an abandoned swimming pool, a nondescript rock in a fortress, and those hulking billboards urban eyes are trained to ignore. Some of the work in the nine-artist exhibition only exists on paper, in the navigational publication offered in bright yellow newspaper racks.

*Visitors* is part of Art CommissionsGI, which programs site-specific art through the Trust for Governors Island. Curators Tom Eccles, executive director of Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies, and Ruba Katrib, curator at SculptureCenter, state in the publication (which is also available online) that the pieces "offer a subtle push to consider the idiosyncrasies, mysteries, and fantasies, provoked by time spent on Governors Island."

I set out on a sunny afternoon to see what I could of *Visitors*, and although I can't say I got transported into some mysterious alternate reality, it did encourage exploration into overlooked aspects of Governors Island. Right at the landing for the Manhattan ferry is a huge glossy billboard by Darren Bader, part of his staged photo shoot with models of surreal scenes on the island. Here two women seem to be burying sea urchins or something beneath concrete under the text "Conservation." I enjoyed that the longer you stare it at, the stranger it becomes, even if I'm not sure what a woman in high heels engaged in construction would mean to a departing ferry rider who had no clue this was part of an art installation. Likewise for Ajay Kurian's children's pools right across on Soissons Landing, where we find a policeman puppet floating in one, chains resting in the bottom of another, and a LEGO lily pad sinking down in a third.



Elsewhere on the island, Nina Beier has a huge photograph of a crab grasping a pill draped in an empty swimming pool, part of her continued experimentation with odd imagery in stock photos. In the brick Castle Williams, Peter Fischli and David Weiss's "Kling Klong" is a sound installation inside what appears to be a plain boulder, playing chimes in a quiet corner of the building. Out by Hammock Grove, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster has a free library with post-apocalyptic sci-fi books to lend for your island jaunt (the one available at my visit was Jeff Noon's *Vurt*). All of these, like Bader's billboard, have simple label text and no indication of their wider place in *Visitors*, although their hidden-in-plain-sight nature gives us a sense of discovery.

*Visitors* also has art that's conceptual rather than physical, like Rachel Rose's maps for the island that are more suggestions of experiences rather than navigational tools (one for an "antagonist" seems to trespass on construction sites, although perhaps that makes sense). And for when you depart the island, there's a texting piece by Pilvi Takala called "Invisible Friend," based on apps like Invisible Girlfriend, where you can collaborate on a fictional narrative that imagines your day's adventure. My invisible friend immediately seemed to think we had evaded trouble by sneaking into some "burned houses"; perhaps this invisible friend was texting from one of the post-apocalyptic sci-fi novels.

None of the individual pieces completely transform your day out on the island, but it is promising that Art CommissionsGI is considering unconventional public art that isn't immediately accessible and that requires time and a journey. With 172 acres on the island and structures that go back to the 18th century, there's great possibility for placemaking and site-specific art. Up on Fort Jay, the central fortification, is another current installation not part of *Visitors* — "Sky Cannon" by Brad Farwell — that replaces the muzzles of five Civil War cannons with huge mirrors. Even this simple intervention completely transforms the place, reflecting the surrounding harbor and skyscrapers and clouds above, connecting the past and the present in an unexpected way.