

Under Metronome

public art

As 24 hours pass on the millennium clock, an on-the-street reporter talks orifice politics.

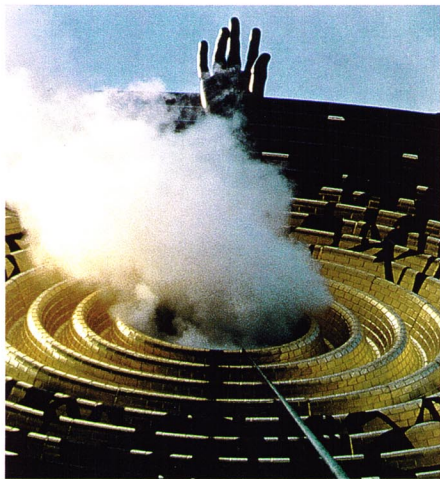
When something novel is added to their city, New Yorkers are generally the last people to stop on the street to notice it. Tourists look up, but locals, famously, look down (out of fear, perhaps, or the hope of finding free money) unless otherwise inspired by a fire, falling bricks, or a suicidal jumper. So it is testament to the bravado and perversity of a new piece of public art that it has had the power to arrest even the most jaded passers-by—albeit usually out of indignation.

Rising improbably over the side of Union Square, Metronome is indeed worth a look. The piece is a nearly \$3 million gift to the city from the Related Companies, developers of One Union Square, a new commercial, residential, and entertainment complex that occupies the whole block

between 13th and 14th streets and Fourth Avenue and Broadway. Looking up we see, from left to right, a giant, digital clock (one side counting up to midnight, the other counting down, both flickering in the middle with shared tenths of seconds); a 100-foot-tall, 60-foot-wide, gold-flecked brick relief sculpture with a huge, ominous hole in the middle; and, off to the right, unlit and relatively discreet, a spherical moon-phase indicator that's more than five feet tall.

Most people think it sucks. Is there another way to look at it?

Metronome makes what is beyond question one of Manhattan's most enjoyable surreal tableaux. The clock numbers churn, the moon spins in its plastic bubble, and that great dark nostril flares. Occasionally, perhaps



when the dew point permits, this blow-hole issues a thick column of steam.

For the artists, Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzler, winners of a Rome Prize in 1994, Metronome is a meditation on time. Two times, really: the ticking pace of New York life and that other, natural world of slower tocks. The grandiose names given to each element underline this conceit: the clock is "The Passage"; the brick wall is "The Infinity"; a colossal, gesturing hand above it is called "The Relic"; a shipwrecked boulder below has been baptized "The Matter"; and a 67-foot-long bronze flügelhorn is, of course, "The Focus."

Everything one would need to demystify the work is available on the Web (www.metronome-related.com), but it has proven to be more fun for New Yorkers to make up their own names. The Infinity has been variously rebuffed "The Orifice," "The Sphincter," and, by a poet who resides nearby, "the business end of downtown that it flashes to the rest of the city."

In recognition of the 24/7 spirit of Metronome, and to celebrate this thing that has gotten so many New Yorkers looking and thinking at the same time, I spent 24 hours—midnight to midnight—at its feet. I talked to those people whom I caught trying to size up the installation. **continued on page 48**

Steamrolling: Metronome, a meditation on time, is single-handedly getting New Yorkers to wonder at public art.

The Metropolis Observed

Under Metronome

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A chronicle of these hours follows; let's call it "The Loiter."

MIDNIGHT The clock rolls over—all zeros for a split second—but a promised (daily at noon and midnight) horn tone does not sound. A Rosie Probert visiting from Wales (20-something, favoring wool) stops to declare: "I think it's trash, noise or no."

1:12 AM Very little action (it's a weeknight) until I'm joined briefly by another gawker, he under a comb-over, giving his name as Mog Edwards: "It's so dumb. It's so bad. It's amazing it exists."

1:43 AM An elaborately pierced and costumed couple passes, Polly Garter: "Bad mall art." Nogoood Boyo: "Yeah. It's like so . . . suburban."

2:50 AM Online art director: "It looks like some astrological portal to a place you wouldn't want to go." Aspiring actor with undivulged day job: "I don't know. I just don't know."

4:12 AM I approach a cop, Officer Black, near the Gandhi memorial (loincloth, staff in hand). "I'm not interested in playing this game."

5:00 AM A disoriented early bird says his name is Captain Cat: "It's weird here. You walk and you walk until something like this just falls out of the sky."

6:25 AM Breaking daylight. The thing looks best at dusk and dawn: less real than usual. A jogger, Mary Ann Sailors: "The thing is giving me cramps."

8:45 AM Even people running to work can't ignore Metronome. A butcher—they still exist?—Dylan Beynon: "I know it's awful, but I want to like it. It looks good when the steam is going." The steam's not going.

NOON Sirens, car horns behind a bus blocking the intersection at 14th and Fourth, TLC on a passing boom box. No action from The Orifice. Not even a puff.

1:22 PM A girl on a junker bike—leopard bag, blue Pumas, of course—completes her seventh revolution of the square. "Totally awesome. No. It sucks. Is that what you want to hear?"

2:05 PM A design-savvy investment banker, Thomas Pugh, tries to figure it out: "The fact that it's a little inscrutable makes it interesting. I saw a thing like this at the Pompidou in Paris, but they took it away."

2:21 PM Then, as if conjured up by Pugh's remark, a French tourist named Gossamer: "It has really too much gold. It's a building from Donald Trump?"

3:15 PM Mae Rose Cottage says that Metronome almost killed her. "I was standing over there waiting to cross the street once, and the steam came out, and it made this big noise, and I jumped because I thought I was going to get hit by a truck. But then when I was looking up at it, I did almost get hit by a bus."

6:20 PM Getting dark and still no steam.

7:11 PM A group of seven armor-clad knights come around from where they've been mock battling at the north end of the square. The biggest guy is in chain mail and a doctored lacrosse helmet: "It's wack. That's it."

9:12 PM Despite the fact that the thing is at its most surreal—planes heading to LaGuardia are passing regularly over its shoulder, the digits are flashing—no one cares. A Brit passes, too fast to get a name: "That rot? Can't be bothered."

11:23 PM Slower now. Lily Smalls, a waitress at a nearby restaurant, gets out of work and waits across from the art wall for a ride. She does this every night. "The hand scares me."

11:56 PM The moon, a well-waned crescent, peeks out from behind One Union Square. A skate punk, grinding around the plaza opposite Metronome for over an hour, finally stops. He says his name is Waldo. I ask him what he thinks. "The clock? The clock is life."

MIDNIGHT Again, lots of zeros: no sound, no steam. — Ian LeBon