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## In a Phone Booth in Times Square: Immigration Stories Come to Life in Aman Mojadidi's 'Once Upon a Place'

BY Carolyn Twersky (<http://www.artnews.com/author/ctwersky/>) POSTED 07/07/17 9:30 AM

213

33

7

277



Aman Mojadidi in front of "Once Upon a Place"  
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When Aman Mojadidi came up with the idea for his big public installation piece in the heart of New York City, he never thought it would be so relevant to the current political climate. But now his three phone booths placed expectantly in Times Square have become an element in a fight for immigrants' rights.

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The work, titled "Once Upon a Place" and running through September 5, was first conceived as a simple storytelling project when Mojadidi learned that phone booths were being removed from public spaces and decided to reclaim them. "It seemed to be an interesting format to use, to not only bring back this form of the phone booth as a conduit for storytelling but to fill it with a different kind of story of some of the people who have come to New York within the last generation," the artist said.

As the political conditions surrounding immigration changed, however, Mojadidi, whose parents emigrated to Florida from Kabul, Afghanistan, in the late 1960s, found himself on a more provocative mission as he traveled through New York's five boroughs to collect stories from a variety of émigrés. Now, 70 of those stories can be heard in three phone booths in Time Square that sit on colored carpets bearing messages like "take a moment, step into a booth" and "pick up the phone and listen."

The overstimulating setting of the city center creates a sharp contrast with the isolated booths, which bear their original minimalist form. "It's such a visual cacophony here that it didn't make sense to try to make an artwork that challenged Times Square," Mojadidi said. Most of the material making up the booths is original, sporting authentic graffiti that can't quite be made out, though certain panels have been swapped with new ones that feature subtle maps of the five boroughs. The tops of the booths read "New York" in 12 different languages.

Upon walking into a booth, a visitor may pick up a phone, either in response to a ring that goes off every few minutes or out of simple curiosity. On the other end is a voice telling one of the stories that plays in a continuous loop. The tale could be in English or in a variety of other languages (including the African tongue known as Ga). "I decided to allow people to speak in whatever language they felt most comfortable," Mojadidi said. "I decided not to translate because I wanted people to hear the emotion in people's voices. A translator would just be translating the words, not the feeling."



The phone booths sit on top of red and blue carpets in Times Square  
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Keeping interviewees comfortable and making his motivations clear was an issue when Mojadidi, who was raised in the U.S. but is based now in Paris, began collecting stories in the run-up to the presidential election last fall. "There was a lot of hesitation, a lot of suspicion of what I wanted," he said.

New negativity directed toward immigrants made certain people wary to share their stories. "Originally, I was planning to have workshops where a large group of people would come in," Mojadidi said. "In the end, because people were wary about collective gatherings, it ended up being one-on-one a lot, which became a more intimate experience."

There is no mistaking the political poignancy of the project, as evidenced by the appearance of New York State Senator Brad Hoylman at the installation's opening last week. "We're fighting tooth and nail to make sure that immigrants know that New York City's doors remain open," Hoylman said, citing his support of a New York State Liberty Act bill that would make New York the first sanctuary state for immigrants.

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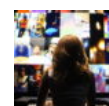


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The political tenor seemed lost on certain passersby, however, as after the opening men, women, and children stopped their strolls through Times Square to take selfies in a phone booth—a novelty these days along the lines of cassette tapes and record players. Some picked up the phone to see who was ringing but placed it back on the receiver after getting a photo op or realizing they didn't understand the language being spoken on the other end of the line. Others seemed to listen intently to stories, some of which last up to 15 minutes, and exited the booths knowing a lot about a stranger they will likely never meet.

Adam Churlik, a 15-year-old boy from outside Pittsburgh, left the booth with a new story of a woman who came to America with her family. Though he only “kind of” knew about the current political climate surrounding immigrant rights, he said he appreciated the story nonetheless.

Avishek Kumar, visiting from New Jersey, learned about a Chinese immigrant after entering the box thinking it was a real phone booth. Upon learning the nature of the installation's purpose and hearing the Chinese immigrant's story, Kumar, 36, was happy to see the phone booths installed. “It promotes openness and diversity,” he said, “and exposes people to different cultures and eliminates the alien nature of outsiders coming here.”

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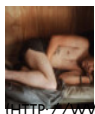
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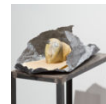


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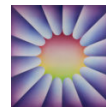
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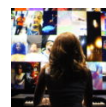
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