

INSTALLATION

Steve Starger

June Bisantz's Irreverent Signs

Connecticut artist June Bisantz has been sticking her face in the public's business for years. She's not being rude or self-righteous; she is, as artists like to say, appropriating public spaces and attaching her visage to billboards, bus signage, movie-theater screen ads, movie posters, and magazine ads to comment on such high-profile targets as American pop culture and advertising.

Bisantz's brand of satire is pointed but gentle. Her work elicits smiles more than outrage. She wants her audiences to laugh at the ridiculousness of her head superimposed on a wrestler straining in a tug of war with a giant ape from the 1949 movie *Mighty Joe Young*. She wants you to giggle at a billboard showing her body, cringing as she rides a roller coaster. She'd like you to join her in ecstatic ads that show her computer-morphed face smiling on a 1950s-era body, adoring her dishwasher and smiling over an ironing board while dressed in a flared skirt that would look divine on June Cleaver. And while you're chuckling, she'd like you to consider fresh uses for all of those obnoxious billboards and screen ads. A good laugh at our own expense can be good medicine.

In Bisantz's latest public installation, *Directions for Use*, her image is nowhere to be found. Instead, she transforms familiar commercial, construction, and road signage into devices that telegraph simple messages on how to lower one's stress level and enjoy life's daily challenges in a lighter frame of mind. As delightful as Bisantz's previous installations have been with the artist at their self-mocking center, it's refreshing to see her step back and allow her epigrammatic signs speak for themselves.

Directions for Use, co-presented by Bisantz and New Haven's Artspace, is set up in a downtown New Haven "pocket park." The subtlest of Bisantz's public installations, *Directions for Use* (the title seems to be a sly reference to both literal use of the park and adjustment of attitude) blends into its urban surroundings well enough to be missed by the unobservant or preoccupied. Such was the case on a recent visit to the park, which is set up at a bus stop on a warm, sunny, mid-fall day.

While Bisantz's messages glowed in bright colors within the park and on the side of an adjacent building, life went on as usual: People waited for their bus, talked intensely on cell phones, and sat on park benches while they ate their lunches. Perhaps those people, who seemed like park regulars, had become used to Bisantz's puckish signs and had absorbed their messages. The scene was peaceful; the space provided a respite, however brief, from the noise and mayhem that impinge on the quality of daily life in the city.

Directions for Use is divided into a number of related sections. A large vinyl banner attached to a wall backing The Lot displays all of Bisantz's signs, acting as a key to the project's particulars. The banner is easily visible from the street and is clearly meant to attract curious passersby. Bisantz distills her prescription for the installation into one succinct line: "Read directions carefully; for best results, use only as directed." Would that some of the directions on medicine bottles were as clearly stated.



The park proper is adorned with digitally altered traffic signs, recognizable by their iconic shapes and colors. A rectangular yellow sign emblazoned "Think" is accompanied by a silhouette of Rodin's *The Thinker*. A green sign exhorts readers to "Read," while a red sign invites lookers to "Play." For emphasis, Bisantz includes a silhouette of a drummer boy with a drum strapped around his middle, his arms raised, his hands, holding drumsticks, ready to rattle off a paradiddle or two. Other signs advise, "Do Not Block Ideas," keep a "Fresh Perspective," and "Meet Here" (a diamond-shaped sign showing two arrows curving from opposite directions

The proximity of the park to a bus stop allows Bisantz to attach her signage to the backs of some New Haven city buses, spreading her messages even further. This begs the question of what would happen if hundreds of people descended on the little park all at once. For one, the crowd could heed some of Bisantz's displayed advice: "Play," "Say Hello," "Celebrate," "Rough Road Ends."

The final piece of *Directions for Use* is a vinyl, mesh canopy that overhangs the park, projecting shadows of the signs onto the ground. Here is where the heart of Bisantz's creation comes together, literally and figuratively.

It would take a deeply committed cynic not to get even a small charge out of Bisantz's friendly audacity. If Bisantz is a trickster, she's also a healer in artist's clothing. *Directions for Use* is potable snake oil for living the good life. Through March 2007 ■



All images: June Bisantz, *Directions for Use* (installation), mixed media, 2005. Courtesy of the artist. Location: The Lot, 812 Chapel St., New Haven, CT/Presented by Bisantz and Artspace, New Haven, CT.

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Artspace, New Haven, CT – www.artspacect.com

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50¢

Faces In The Crowd

Area residents' notable achievements

Journal Inquirer Staff

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June Bisantz, professor of Digital Art & Design at Eastern Connecticut State University, will display her latest work, "True Life Story," through June 30 at South Street Seaport Pier 17 Mall in New York City. The work satirizes personal pressures, personal feelings of inadequacy, and self-imposed restrictions in a series of four colorful images. The displays appear on back-lit advertising panels and door clings.



Left, door clings, above back-lit advertising kiosk
South Street Seaport Pier 17 Mall, NYC

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Vital Signs Of Intelligent Life

ArtSpace New Haven Exhibit Invites Us To Yield To Our Imagination

STORY BY ADRIAN BRUNE | PHOTOS BY JOHON WOIKE | THE HARTFORD COURANT



ARTIST June Bisantz created a series of playful signs on display at The Lot, an outdoor arts space in New Haven. The signs are meant to engage passers-by in a fun, positive way.



ENJOYING THE LOT, Melissa Matos and Naitza Diaz, both 15 and from New Haven, share a laugh as they wait for a bus. Artist June Bisantz created the series of playful signs, in ArtSpace's outdoor site, 812 Chapel St., New Haven.

Though a fairly empty space at the time, The Lot, New Haven's public art space, shouted out to artist June Bisantz.

"Walking around, it became very clear to me that a lot of people made an effort to make The Lot hospitable, but I instantly realized the one thing it lacked was directions," Bisantz said. "And what better way to get those across than street signage."

So the artist, largely known in Hartford for her whimsical billboards and bus advertisements, set to work devising her answer to pedestrian traffic signals. The resulting exhibit, "Directions for Use," features whimsical variations on traditional street signs. Instead of "Stop," "Walk/Don't Walk," "Detour" or "Road Ends Here," the exhibit offers "Do Not Block Ideas," "Be Prepared To Rest" and even a Fred Astaire silhouette next to an order to "Dance."

"I had always wondered what it would be like to walk down the street and have a sign speak directly to you," Bisantz said. "Instead of something negative, like 'Don't Park,' it could say 'Cheer Up' or 'Think About This.'"

ArtSpace New Haven, the nonprofit arts organization that oversees The Lot, cleaned up the empty land behind the Chapel Street bus stop for just this type of exhibit.

The third of four installations funded by a state grant, "Directions for Use" was chosen by ArtSpace and a team of local arts professionals for its light-hearted, colorful and quirky take on everyday urban signals, said Denise Markonish, ArtSpace's gallery director. "The signs, which look like traditional stop [or] yield signs, are far from that and encourage people to play with the ideas of the expected," she said.

The images from "Directions for Use" also will be displayed on the side of New Haven city buses through December in an effort to invite more than downtown dwellers to visit the space.

When sitting down to conceive "Directions for Use," Bisantz said she refused to limit her creativity, and beyond mundane American street signs, she sought inspiration from the more unusual, sometimes laughable European signage. "There's a pretty wide variation of what can pass in Europe, and that was liberating," Bisantz said.

"I started doing drawings of what really resonated with me and gradually developed a iconography — a language that was personal to me but could blend in with the public landscape," she said.

While it seems that, on the surface, "Directions for Use" is a bit of a departure for Bisantz, who teaches digital art and design at Eastern Connecticut State University, the long-time artist says it follows a natural progression in her public statements.



IN LIFE

Please Read Sign

"I had always wondered what it would be like to walk down the street and have a sign speak directly to you. Instead of something negative, like 'Don't Park,' it could say 'Cheer Up' or 'Think About This.'"

— Connecticut artist June Bisantz, explaining the impetus for her exhibit at The Lot in New Haven.

"I don't want to just participate in pop culture; I want to be a part of it," she says. And, indeed, Bisantz has.

Beginning in October 2000, the Connecticut native embarked on her first public project, "Drive-By Museums," a series of four pieces featuring her likeness in several incarnations, encouraging people to stay positive in life. One in particular, "Stay in the Struggle," which imposed Bisantz's head on both male and female bodies participating in a Tug of War match, was installed in Hartford and then adorned city buses in Boston two years later.

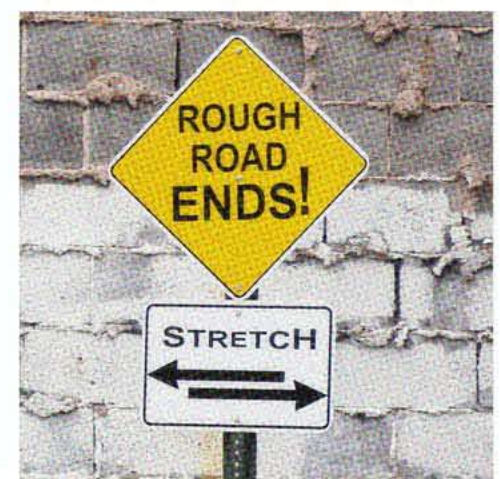
For her next public project (her largest to date), Bisantz took on infomercial advertising. On 17 billboards and 17 buses reaching from her hometown of Willimantic to North Adams, Mass., "Five Easy Steps" used five images (with Bisantz again as the main model) — combining vintage graphics with an infomercial advertising approach — aimed at contradicting the idea that achieving goals is a grim struggle. A popular favorite was "Take Action," in which Bisantz wears a nurse's uniform and readily offers passers-by "Action" in a bottle.

Finally, last summer, Bisantz came out with "Coming Soon!! Art Replaces Advertising," an exhibit that appropriated movie advertising at seven theaters across Connecticut and cast Bisantz as the main character in three vintage posters promoting imaginary movies of high stakes, adventure and reward.

"It was my comment on absolute fascination with stardom — that any of our lives can be just as important as a celebrity's," she explained.

Bisantz says she will not entirely abandon her practice of being part of her work. But she plans on continuing to experiment with public signage as a means to offer life advice.

"'Directions For Use' opened up another vein, another area to move toward in my public work," said Bisantz, who next plans to use pedestrian crossing buttons for positive reinforcement. "It's all about using environment in a constructive way."



JOHN WOIKE / THE HARTFORD COURANT



ALL WEEKENDS
DIRECTIONS FOR USE



AT THE LOT:
October 13-March 18, 2007
The Lot, 812 Chapel
Outdoors; open 24 hours daily
Artspace presents Season 2 in the renovated art park, site of a once-blighted lot on Chapel Street. To launch the second in our two-year program of temporary exhibitions, June Bisantz builds a playground of signs calling viewers to action. Keep an eye out for CT Transit buses displaying some of the signage!

pre view

CONNECTICUT

oct 2006

NEW HAVEN, OPEN CITY

THE ARTISTS' STUDIOS OF NEW HAVEN ARE OPEN THROUGH OCTOBER. BY LISA GATES



At left, a visualization of June Bisantz' installation, "Directions for Use"

Even more than money and sales, artists need each other," explains Helen Kauder, executive director of Artspace in New Haven. It's the underlying rationale for the gallery's ninth annual City Wide Open Studios. Over the course of three weekends in October, more than 500 local artists open their studios to the public. Tours are planned at the Erector Square complex, the largest collection of artist studios in the city, and through individual studios scattered throughout different New Haven neighborhoods.

In conjunction with CWOS, Artspace also opens a new installation at the Lot, a formerly abandoned lot adjacent to the gallery. Willimantic artist June Bisantz-Evans has been injecting art into public spaces like billboards and movie theater screens in the past few years. "One of the problems with installation art," Bisantz-Evans explained, "is that people don't know how to use it."

So for her installation, Bisantz-Evans offers lots of directions, literally. She's covered the space with signs that resemble the metal signage all around us. But

instead of the ubiquitous "No Parking," these signs invite you to park yourself there, to sit, dance, think, and interact with the space.

After the installation at the Lot, which will be up through April, Bisantz-Evans is thinking about her next project, one that connects with her background as a musician. "I'd love to work with those pedestrian crossing buttons. I'd install another button and when you push it, you'd hear thunderous applause." She laughed. "That idea just makes me happy." P