

## Public Art Works

SEASON 1 - EPISODE #5

### THE ART OF THE AD

Sue de Beer & Arianna Gil

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**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Hi everybody. Welcome back to the Public Art Fund podcast Public Art Works, where we use public art as a means jumpstarting broader conversations about New York City, our history, and our current moment, which is something that lies at the very core of what we think public art should do.



**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** I'm your host Jeffrey Wright, and on this episode we're exploring the relationship between art and activism. Specifically, we're looking at the ways in which artists create works that support their activism and how things like fashion and even skateboarding can become potent tools. To answer these and other questions, we're going to check in with Public Art Fund artist Sue De Beer and skater-slash-organizer Arianna Gil.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** But first, werewolves.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** I so wish you all could see this... What you're hearing is a premonition—what might happen when girl becomes beast. What you're missing are the gorgeously lit and composed visuals that comprise Sue de Beer's *The White Wolf*, a two-channel video installation she exhibited at the Marianne Boesky Gallery here in New York last year.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** A doctor played by the musician Yuka Honda wraps herself in a white sheet. As she sleeps and dreams, we see a flicker of the white wolf. We see a lighthouse. A bloodied body mid-surgery that is—fun fact—Public Art Fund's own associate curator, Daniel S. Palmer.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** It's scary, yes. But it's also lush. A surrealist fairy tale heightened by Sue's signature approach to lighting, composition, and storytelling. The twinning. The dreamy, jewel-toned palette... It all suggests the complex psychological space that Sue's been known to mine in her work, which ranges from still photography to multi-channel video installations like this one.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Here's Sue, discussing the project:

**SUE DE BEER:** On the simplest level, it's a D-grade horror film, it's a werewolf film, it's done on a teeny tiny budget and it's created by an artist, so it takes a lot of liberties with the genre.

**SUE DE BEER:** I think the thing that I was interested in about the werewolf was involuntary physical transformation, a human body changing without you having control over it, and how this speaks to the self. Where is the human, where does it begin and end? Part of the freedom and the beauty of being an artist is that you can take existing formats and you can shift them. And the way that you shift them is through shifting content, and ideas, and meaning.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** That shifting of content and ideas is at the very core of Sue's Public Art Fund commission as well, a video work that was screened on a billboard in Times Square as part of a 2017 group exhibition called *Commercial Break*. The show featured 23 artists whose work disrupted the paid programming on advertising screens city-wide. The project was a great fit for Sue, who has thought quite a lot about image culture in her work over the years.

**SUE DE BEER:** My work draws from existing source material to construct meaning. I tend to look at cultural detritus I guess, or kind of unconscious heartbeat of a broader cultural set of images or image-making and to try to construct maybe a tighter set of images or thoughts to create a specific idea about a specific theme. Which is something also that's in the piece that I did for Public Art Fund, but it's something that has been consistent going back to, I think, my very first solo exhibition as a young artist.

**SUE DE BEER:** When Dan approached me to do that project—

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** That's Public-Art-Fund-curator Dan, the one who cameo-d in *The White Wolf*...

**SUE DE BEER:** I think that he was thinking of my history of portraiture, he was thinking about the space, Times Square. I had recently been doing some commercial work, and he and I had discussed the difference between producing images for visual art and images that exist in a commercial space and, you know, my experience doing commercial work is that it's targeted in a way that I find to be non-inclusive. Times Square it's the commercial space for moving image and it was a pretty great challenge I guess, to think about that space and how it would be possible to shift that space, or who you expect to see in that space and who would be interesting to add to that space.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Let's pause for a second here as that question is a good one. How do you shift a space like Times Square? And who would you want or expect to see celebrated in a space like Times Square? Before we hear how Sue herself answered this question, let's see what everyday New Yorkers had to say.

**PUBLIC VOICE 1:** I would want to see Lebron James on a billboard in Times Square.

**PUBLIC VOICE 2:** Maybe that girl Barb from *Stranger Things*?

**PUBLIC VOICE 3:** I'm going to be super basic and I'm going to say Timothée Chalamet. That is the first person that comes to mind, because I'm obsessed with him.

**PUBLIC VOICE 4:** Um, Chance the Rapper.

**PUBLIC VOICE 5:** Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

**PUBLIC VOICE 6:** If I had to pick somebody I would pick Wrigley. Wrigley is my dog.

**PUBLIC VOICE 7:** I would want to see somebody like Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama.

**PUBLIC VOICE 8:** Barack Obama. That's what every what, what every New Yorker says.

**PUBLIC VOICE 9:** Malala, you know, someone like her, I think someone who has done something positive for the world.

**PUBLIC VOICE 10:** I mean, I feel like just people that are not represented on a regular basis, you know? Like a person like myself, a person of color. A lot of black businesses that are not really presented out there, and sometimes even their ideas are stolen and they're made even bigger by somebody else.

**PUBLIC VOICE 11:** Someone with something to say that could use a valuable platform like that. What I would like to see is something for the greater good.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** I should add here that Public Art Fund once asked itself this question too and the answer was, obviously: art and artists. From 1982 to 1990, Public Art Fund ran *Messages to the Public*, an exhibition series that invited artists to create and screen a work of art on the first digital billboard in Times Square.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** The roster is... impressive. The artists included Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Lorna Simpson, Richard Prince, Alfredo Jaar, David Wojnarowicz, Kiki Smith, Vito Acconci, the Guerilla Girls, and Jenny Holzer, whose work on this project marked her first foray into LED lighting as a medium—something she's perhaps best known-for today. It's also where Holzer debuted the truism: "Abuse of power comes as no surprise," which became a rallying cry for women in the art world in the wake of #MeToo.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** So who and what did Sue de Beer want to put on a billboard in Times Square? At the time, the answer was a skater-activist collective that she'd just learned about called Brujas and its founder, Arianna Gil.

**SUE DE BEER:** I mean I'll often see someone performing or see someone in a room, and remember their face or remember them doing something. And I came to Arianna in a similar way in that she has this this group, Brujas, which is both a kind of skateboarding group and

also a political group in my mind. And I had heard about Brujas and then Arianna was in residency at Recess Gallery doing a project with Gita Black. So I went down with a friend of mine and saw her working with her community and creating this series of lectures and she seemed so just amazing. I mean really together and really sharp and she's so substantive. And I thought, for sure this is someone that would be great to put in Times Square.

**ARIANNA GIL:** My name is Arianna Gil. I'm one of the co-founders of Brujas. Brujas is an urban, freeform, autonomous, radical, gender self-determining collective from New York City.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Bruja technically means "witch" in Spanish and likely originally referred to female healers from indigenous populations. And Arianna's group is but one of the many ways young LatinX artists and activists are reclaiming the term.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Last summer, Brujas was in-residency at Performance Space 122 in the East Village, where they created a public artwork of their own called the *Brujas Training Facility*. The installation featured an indoor skatepark where the group hosted daily "Open Skates," as well as a series of collaborative workshops on a range of issues affecting the Brujas community. Which its members define as follows....

**RIPLEY SOPRANO:** Brujas is multiple things at once. It's a group that produces streetwear, ready to wear clothes. It's a community organization that like does its own programming and events. And it's like a political organization that does like knowledge production around like radical thought.

**AGATHA SANCHEZ:** We skate, we make music, we do many things just to get together and try to fix things.

**RIPLEY SOPRANO:** It's not just skateboarders anymore. It's like a group of artists and healers and hustlers and political organizers and I kind of come more from the like political organizing background.

**ISAAC MADISON:** Another way to describe it is like friends who love each other and take care of each other. It's like a way of being together, like a kind of sociality potentially, right? That like is really exciting to me. It's, my friends are Brujas.

**RIPLEY SOPRANO:** I was thinking about this earlier because I was thinking about like the Spanish like gendering of words and how like Brujas is like oh all women witches or whatever. And that definitely was true at the beginning. Like it was a group of mostly young women from New York who are Latina who were skateboarding at this one skate park in the Bronx. And now it's kind of like grown into this like multi-dimensional, multi-racial, multi-gender group of like yeah, all kids that grew up in New York City, who went to like New York City public schools and are really dedicated to radical movements and also really interested in aesthetics. Everyone's like always rolling through Arianna's mom's house and like producing work together and it's

just, yeah it's really exciting.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Here's Arianna again...

**ARIANNA GIL:** I think the coolest way to just talk about it is an educational model to bring people in, in different ways, people who don't necessarily like to sit down and go, listen to lectures can engage as skateboarders, or can engage at parties, or can engage through the clothing. The world can feel so flat sometimes and so boring to me and I think a lot of my peers because I feel like a lot of our political power has been just stripped from us before we were even conscientized to really understand what we wanted from the world.

**ARIANNA GIL:** I'm super interested in what a worker-owned and collective model of streetwear looks like. I'm so stoked just on the pure knowledge that we have as a group, in under four years, have like produced um together. Just like learned so much about the industry, learned so much about markets, learned so much about bullsh-t, so much about Capitalism. So, all of it is really just a, an attempt to just take the world back.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** These broader goals also shape the ways in which Arianna thinks about art and public art in particular.

**ARIANNA GIL:** I mean I think that there's a lot that has to be interrogated about conceptualizing public art. I grew up with community-based art practices or communities that practice, which were artistic and without those I wouldn't be the person that I am or inspired to the levels I am inspired on a daily basis. Things like block parties, things like the performance art that happens in a skate park. Streetwear is a publicly accessed art because it's designed to be worn in public, outside, in the street.

**ARIANNA GIL:** I think that curators have a responsibility to intentionally bring new kinds of thinking to public spaces, to expose young people, and communities in general to new ideas while being cognizant and respectful of the culture of that arena, of that area, space. I think that amplifying the voice of native to New York City youth is part of like how you conceive of cultural sensitivity, like Max B. on a billboard. Those are like three major components that I think are important to like the public display of art.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Which brings us back to Sue, whose contribution to Public Art Fund's *Commercial Break* was a series of three micro-films featuring Arianna and Bro-jas—

**ARIANNA GIL:** Sometimes we refer to the male members of Brujas as Bro-jas—Purp Perez. They played on a digital billboard on the east side of Times Square, flanked by ads for hotels and hair products.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Each 10-second film features Arianna and Purp, both in Brujas skatewear. We see them skating, talking, laughing. We see them lit in Sue's characteristic jewel tones.

We see close-ups of their clothes and accessories, just as we would in a traditional ad. Yet Sue's films end with a different sort of call to action: an image of a protest banner that says, "Don't mourn, organize."

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** One of the films makes use of other archival elements too: images of great activists of the past including Emma Goldman, Angela Davis, and Max B. The work's title, *If They Come in the Morning*, is borrowed from Davis's seminal 1971 critique of the U.S. prison system, which she wrote and edited while in prison herself. Davis borrowed that language too—it's a reworking of something James Baldwin wrote to her in a letter in 1970. He wrote: "If they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Here's Sue again.

**SUE DE BEER:** I mean, I think for many people working on that project, you know, the election had just happened and it was such a terrible moment and continues to unfold in this horrifying way. But it seemed like such a beautiful thing to put someone with the agency and vision that Arianna has, you know, and to support her and her work and her project.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** One aspect of that project is a streetwear line called 1971, which Sue featured prominently in her films.

**SUE DE BEER:** The name of the line is 1971, which celebrates the date September 9th, 1971, which was a date when 1,000 prisoners rioted and seized control of Attica Prison in New York. And you know, rather than creating a giant billboard for H&M, why not have 1971 have a billboard? It just seemed like a beautiful opportunity to do that. To, to give someone that I respected a platform or a presence, I guess, in that space.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** So what impact can a platform like this have? Public Art Fund brought Sue and Arianna back together to discuss.

**SUE DE BEER:** When I was learning more about you and about Brujas the way that you had put together ideas and, and people and thinking and, again, advocacy around this streetwear line was really interesting to me. So, can you tell me more about 1971?

**ARIANNA GIL:** 1971 was the beginning of Brujas Special Collection. So, now we've continued to use the special collection model but it was the first time we put like a fall collection out. And it was a two-piece gym set. We called it the P.E. set, doubling for Political Education and Physical Education. And it was how we could materially support our friends affected by the prison industrial complex. So, it was a fundraiser. It was a Kickstarter, shout out Kickstarter. I mean, amazingly, this nationally coordinated strike was launched on the anniversary of the Attica Rebellion, September 9th. When did we launch this project?

**ARIANNA GIL:** I was going to say 2016. Yeah. Yeah

**SUE DE BEER:** It was 2016.

**ARIANNA GIL:** It was 2016. So yeah, so 2016. And then about a month after we had the materials prepared to launch this. It was also to bring awareness and education to people who had no idea about the prison strike that was happening, had no idea about the Attica Rebellion either. So, it was our way of disseminating information and then also bringing material resources to prisoners and members of the Brujas community who are constantly being criminalized for being brown, black, queer, rebels in public space.

**ARIANNA GIL:** So, the people that we supported through this fund have been the F2L organization, which we were able to make \$7,000 donation to, who specifically deal with queer and trans prisoners of color. And then the Brujas Fund has like supported skateboarders who are in prison, people who are skaters who have just gotten out of prison. We did a legal drop-in where we paid people's um transit fines because like there's a huge issue in our community with like fine farming, like those at the margins and who can't afford are like being taxed by the state to raise municipal funds. So they don't have three dollars to take the train out of your neighborhood to go skate, so you hop the turnstile and then now you're a hundred dollars in debt to the state. So we were paying that, which felt really good, to engage with skateboarders in our community at that level.

**ARIANNA GIL:** Some of the work that I've been doing right now is definitely about what kinds of people are subject to violence and what kind of images, specially talking about people who are sick. The obsession with like, with gore and punishment on bodies has so informed the critique that Brujas has like put forward on the like bio-psychiatry. But I'm interested in your expansion on the space between you and an image and the space between you and another person in post-internet. How you like experience and process images.

**SUE DE BEER:** Yeah, and it's funny because those gaps are still there but there are so many more images in between you and the other thing that you're thinking about. So the werewolf film was so much about images and ingesting images but it's hard for me to reconstruct what the images were that I was looking at or thinking about. And also the, maybe another link between this and the werewolf film is that you know there is something about these images that's also about control. The Times Square project, it was anomalous because of the location. And, although as a person I think politically and very, especially in this moment, conscious and aware of structures and it's drifted in and out of my work before but often my work is not specifically political in that way. Although, I do do quite a bit of portraiture.

**SUE DE BEER:** For me the piece was about you, not about me. And so I wanted to be as true to you as possible. I wanted it to be a portrait of you, one that you would like, not one that I would like. And one thing that I do think can happen is that you know artists or brands can really exploit people and kind of extract value from them and I didn't want you to feel like that. I guess I wanted you to feel like it was a, a platform for you to present a version of yourself that you agree with, like almost in a way I was working for you, rather than working for myself.

And in particular with this space being such a public space it felt really crucial that that was true. I'm glad it felt that way to you.

**ARIANNA GIL:** Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah I mean Times Square is a, is a really quirky place. Like, the police are like armed with machine guns in Times Square. It's a lot of surveillance. I wonder sometimes if doing these kinds of projects and building these kinds of relationships protect Brujas in certain ways? Sometimes when people with a little bit more um institutional backing, presence, legitimacy reach out, and give us these opportunities it makes my group I think in a certain capacity feel a bit safer. Which is a huge because the fear of whatever fascist retaliation can be debilitating in how big and beautifully we can dream sometimes because of seeing a lot of the comrades and the people in the struggle being you know dismantled. So, just in light of that, seeing our message amongst a lot of oppositional messaging was very exciting and gave, I think, a lot of people a lot of hope in our capacity to sustain.

**SUE DE BEER:** It felt subversive in a positive way and it, again, I think I had this sense of of who goes to this space and what the audience is and I really loved the idea of this audience, you know, receiving this information, and having to think about it, and maybe walking away with it in their mind.

**ARIANNA GIL:** A bunch of us were in a cab coming uptown from something together and we had the cab driver drive through Times Square so that we could see it, it was really cool.

**SUE DE BEER:** Good. that's so nice.

**ARIANNA GIL:** It was totally out of route but the cab driver was like was young and he like liked our energy and he was like, alright, and drove us past it and it was fun.

**SUE DE BEER:** That's so great. That makes me really happy.

**ARIANNA GIL:** Yeah. That was cool.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Thank you all for listening and a big thanks to Sue and Arianna for sharing.

**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Please be sure to visit our website, [publicartfund.org](http://publicartfund.org), for more information on Sue's work and Brujas and for links to shop the latest Brujas collection. And please tune in next time, for a very special dialogue between Public Art Fund director and chief curator Nicholas Baume and artist Ai Weiwei.

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**JEFFREY WRIGHT:** Public Art Works is a podcast by Public Art Fund, produced with SandenWolff.



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