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Art in Odd Places

Even when measured against the standard eclectic New York avenue, 14th Street is especially diverse. From Union Square Park to Trader Joe's, the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary and a bunch of discount clothing and electronic stores, the sites are, well, all over the map. This month its span of almost two miles, from Avenue C to the Hudson River, is looking even more varied than usual, since a group of almost 60 artists with a wide range of art projects has invaded for the fifth annual Art in Odd Places festival.

Previously, the Odd Places festival has sprawled throughout the East Village, but last year Ed Woodham, its founder and director, chose 14th Street and decided to return there again since "you just get this whole gamut of people."

Each year the festival has a theme; this time artists were asked to explore meanings of "sign." "It's a word loaded with different interpretations," Mr. Woodham said. "Today's world is full of signs clearly pointing to a need for an adjustment of the status quo, yet life as normal continues on seemingly ignoring them," he added. "What's up with that?"

The festival projects, using the theme as a jumping-off point, include guided tours that

highlight the history of the area (one is devoted entirely to the bricks that make up Stuyvesant Town); a roving quartet of horn players who plant themselves at the four corners of intersections and play Mexican folk ballads; a team of good Samaritans offering to give directions in several different languages; even performers wearing crocheted outfits and holding signs from several countries, above.

There are more subtle offerings as well, like poetry on manhole covers, love letters hidden in unexpected places and dollar bills slipped into phone booths or other nooks where they may or may not be discovered.

The average harried New Yorker may miss a lot, but that doesn't bother Mr. Woodham. One goal is to encourage the reassessment of familiar surroundings, he said: "So much of our audience is unaware that the Art in Odd Places festival exists on 14th Street until they happen upon a performance or installation. I'm hoping that for a moment they will rethink their routine trajectory and see the same corner they've passed by hundreds of times in a new light."

(Through Oct. 26. Project descriptions, schedules and a map are available at artinodplaces.org.) STEVEN McELROY