

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Aiming to Disrupt Ads in New York City, Artworks Instead Blend In

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Public Art Fund's *Commercial Break* places interventions by 23 artists on advertising screens around the city.



Hayal Pozanti, "RELENTLESS TENDERNESS" at the Westfield World Trade Center (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise indicated)

The idea behind *Commercial Break* – an exhibition produced by Public Art Fund (PAF) of 23 artists' versions of visual "interruptions within the advertising cycles" on some of New York City's most public screens – seems like a good one. The artist list is appealingly international, including Cory Arcangel, Korakrit Arunanondchai, Martine Syms, Hayal Pozanti, Cécile B. Evans, Tabor Robak, and Mary Reid Kelley. The project looks to inject an aesthetic time-out into the onslaught of commercial images meant to sell us new and improved versions of ourselves. It's important that the work is being shown in public, because certainly more than languages, professions, or nationalities, New Yorkers share a familiarity with the discourse of advertising. It is merciless in its attempt to convince viewers of their own lack and of their need to buy their way out of the hole.

But the project's images are not so much a break as a *pause* — in some cases, by my count, a four-second interlude in which I'm not even sure what I'm looking at and not sure it's all that different from what came before and what comes after. I took a picture of something I assumed was part of the exhibition, displayed on a kiosk in the West Village, and it turned out not to belong at all. I also took the train for almost an hour to get to the Oculus, a 360-degree LED marquee outside the Barclays Center in Brooklyn. When I got there, I stared at the screen for a while — I don't know how long — but didn't recognize anything that looked different than a commercial. It's very possible I didn't stay long enough to catch whatever images were in the exhibition, because, in truth, I didn't know what precisely I was looking for.

Eventually I gave up and hopped back on the train toward the Westfield World Trade Center, where I finally did recognize an odd set of hieroglyphics against a background that spelled out "Relentless Tenderness" — [Hayal Pozanti's](#) piece — as something other than commerce. The billboard near Times Square displayed [Brian Bress's](#) contribution, which was more intriguing to me because it seemed to contain four distinct "canvases" of unique work; each one was bright, with blue tones dominating and humanoid characters seemingly costumed like professional sports mascots. They were whimsical and offbeat, but the experience of seeing them was so brief, I only really found satisfaction by looking at the images I captured with my phone.

Where *Commercial Break* falls short of my expectations is in its lack of inventiveness beyond the merely visual. Like work that has preceded it, the project could have been more educational, intellectually challenging, or critically focused. The press release indicates that it draws inspiration from PAF's previous exhibition series *Messages to the Public*, which ran in Times Square from 1982 to '90. However, the organization might have done better to take cues from *Art Breaks*, a series of 30-second commercials produced in the '80s that aired on MTV; the series introduced a wider public to a raft of downtown NYC artists, including Doug Aitken, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Richard Prince, and generated such good feeling that MoMA PS1 and Creative Time teamed up to relaunch it with a new crop of artists in April 2012. Even if the priority were only on giving the artists involved a larger stage for their work, PAF might have looked to [Chris Burden's commercials](#) from the early 1970s, which took greater risks; one featured footage of him crawling on his belly over broken glass. Better still, in the '90s, Marilyn Minter purchased 30-second spots to show her *100 Food Porn commercial* during the *David Letterman* and *Arsenio Hall Shows*, unironically using the power of advertising to publicize her exhibition at Simon Watson gallery. And in terms of using the platform to provoke critical evaluation, there may not be a better example than Richard Serra's [slightly-longer-than-commercial-length video](#) from 1973, whose scrolling text critiques the medium of television and its handmaiden, the advertising spot, as "propaganda for profit."

I wanted to like *Commercial Break*. More than fleeting images, I wanted to see visual works that begin to get at how we've come to such an easy acceptance of the notion of a break from a signal that won't let up — how we got to the place where the need to constantly buy things became naturalized. I recognize that the Public Art Fund likely had to operate within the parameters given to them by voracious for-profit businesses, or the city, which has created partnerships with such businesses to operate the LinkNYC kiosks, but we need more than a break. We need an end.

[Commercial Break](#) continues at locations around New York City through March 5.