



## From windows to tunnels, art that is meant to surprise



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You're driving through a thunderous rainstorm, water pummeling the windshield and rooftop so loud you can barely think, and then --

Your car passes beneath a bridge. Silence.

Then crash, splash, back into the pelting storm.

That sudden change of reality — of sound — is the idea that inspired Madison artists Marina Kelly and Megan Katz to create “Asylum,” a soundscape scheduled to be installed from April 20 through May 11 in the pedestrian tunnel under East Johnson Street bordering Tenney Park.

It's one of many projects sponsored by BLINK, a city-run grant program that encourages small-scale public art projects throughout Madison.

Like “Asylum,” BLINK projects are meant to be unexpected — and pop up for only a matter of weeks or months before they disappear again.

That's also the case of “Focal Points,” a video installation by Aaron Granat that recently went into the otherwise-vacant Union Corners building on East Washington Avenue near Milwaukee Street.

That work is visible through the front windows of the building each night from sundown until 3 a.m., through May 3.

Granat's “Focal Points” is a series of 22, minute-long video portraits of local artists, each standing beside a work he or she has created in a studio or gallery.

“The artist stands next to the work and exists in what I like to call a state of purity — they're not trying to contrive a performance or attract our attention,” said Granat, 29, who runs the video production company Kino Brain and helps teach a media production class at UW-Madison.

The Madison-area artists featured in “Focal Points” include well-known names such as Fred Stonehouse and David Wells — and Granat is hoping to add more video portraits while the piece is showing at Union Corners.

“If it could actually evolve while it’s up, that would be fantastic,” he said. “I like to think of myself as an archivist compiling this ever-developing and expanding archive of contemporary artists.”

By contrast, the visitor’s experience with the soundscape “Asylum” is meant to be fleeting, heard only as people pass through the short underpass near the Yahara River.

To create it, artists Katz and Kelly collected sounds from the tunnel, and are adding a few more to make an audio loop that will repeat every 10 to 20 minutes.

“Sound is inherently about vibration, so it’s always about movement. And, of course, in this space there’s a lot of movement: The movement of people riding their bikes, walking, running with their dog,” said Kelly, who is the program coordinator for a residential community for UW-Madison art students and also is a dancer.

“It seemed really interesting to us to think that the tunnel is constantly absorbing sounds in a new way.”

Both Kelly and Katz have a background in video production, but producing an outdoor piece entirely with sound was a new experience, they said. After much research, they decided to use car stereo equipment for their project, powered by rechargeable auto or marine batteries. Housings for the equipment were fabricated by a friend who is a welder.

Katz and Kelly, whose blog is at [mykmakworks.com](http://mykmakworks.com), became friends and collaborators after meeting at UW-Madison and discovering they have a similar artistic curiosity about the world.

“We are very ideas-based,” said Katz, who also works as the events and marketing manager for the university’s Center for the Humanites.

“We come up with an idea that we’re interested in, and then we figure out how to make it happen,” she said. “In every case, there’s been a huge learning curve.”

The two received a BLINK grant for “Asylum” in 2011. They spent the next three years hunting for a bridge where they could do the project, figuring out logistics and sound equipment and waiting for good weather.

Such are the challenges of public art, said Karin Wolf, arts administrator for the city of Madison.

“BLINK is always pending the artist’s ability to pull it off,” she said. “We think of Madison as one city, but it actually has so many different jurisdictions. There’s private property, school property, state property, county property, the university. If somebody wants to put up a flagpole, that’s a whole different process depending on whose property it is.”

Because of the city support that comes with a BLINK grant, it’s a chance for artists “to step into public art pretty gently,” Wolf said.

“Some people hate it and never do it again. Other people really get into it” and get a successful public-art project to put on their resume.

The Madison Arts Commission awards about 10 BLINK grants a year, for a total of around \$10,000, Wolf said. Project grants can be as much as \$1,500, but many are less.

The program is unusual, Wolf said, because it is artist generated — not a call for artists for a specific site that's fraught with expectations and regulations.

“For that reason (BLINK) has become my favorite project,” she said. “I’m so used to these other public art projects where we put an artist in a box and we squeeze it tighter and tighter until they can barely have a creative thought.”

“But BLINK is much more about lighter, quicker, cheaper — the freedom to actually realize an idea of one’s own,” she said. “I’ve just seen so much more creativity and inventiveness because of that. I would never in a million years put out a call for a soundscaping under a bridge. But (Kelly and Katz) came up with that idea, and it’s really avant-garde and delightful.”