

THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS  
**CAPITAL** BETA

## Times Square billboards answer a high-brow calling: Art

By [Dan Rosenblum](#)

12:11 pm Jun. 19, 2012

**An artsy crowd filtered into Times Square last night, bathed along with the tourists in the weird *Blade Runner* light of the usually baldly-consumerist electronic billboards there.**

But up on two large portable L.E.D. screens, and later on a couple of the giant permanent screens that light the square, art was replacing commerce, for a short while anyway, with thousands of original works submitted to [Artists Wanted](#), a local art-outreach organization, cycling through.



*Photos by Dan Rosenblum*

As hundreds gathered, a pop-up society of art-world cool kids and Times Square hustlers took shape. Three stilt-walkers hired for the event, playing in a band, marched around the crowd, followed by a masked man carrying a cross and a sign decrying the devil, as well as another man papering the crowd with fliers advertising a local restaurant. A child with a sign advertising “Free Hugs” got takers on the outer fringe of the crowd.

But the energized crowd mostly had its eyes glued to the twin screens as they flashed images, holding each for three or four seconds. The event, titled [Art Takes Times Square](#), was the culmination of an open call for artwork from Artists Wanted. Nearly everyone there seemed to be taking pictures or video of the screens, waiting for their own pieces to show. (Each screen cycled through all the images by artist name, one from A-Z, the other from Z-A.) Like a huge graduation ceremony, cheers went up from different corners as artists and their family and friends managed to snap shots of the big screens.

But the main event was the announcement of the winner of Art Takes Times Square, light artist [Vicki DaSilva](#), and the projection of her work on the truly huge screens that tower over the square, amid the giant banners for Dunkin' Donuts and Bud Light.

“You know, we couldn’t do a test run with the screen, so it was hard to imagine what it would actually look like,” said Artists Wanted C.E.O. William Etundi Jr., standing in the crowd. “And to see her work up on these screens that go dozens of stories high is just phenomenal.”



Etundi started out promoting the Bushwick loft parties put on by [The Danger](#), events that mixed theater, burlesque, performance art, dance, and music. In 2007, he and artist Jason Goodman founded Artists Wanted to provide emerging artists with tools to enter the establishment. Winners of the organization's open calls used to be displayed in galleries, but last night, for the first time, they had a bigger, brighter showing. The event was made possible through a collaboration with the [Times Square Alliance](#) and

[Chashama](#)—an arts group that typically uses vacant storefronts to host art (and is backed by Anita Durst, [daughter of real estate developer Douglas Durst](#)).

Etundi said that showing art in a space traditionally ruled by commercial interests could be liberating for artists and the exhibition of their work.

“It doesn’t have to be in a gallery, which can be kind of alienating for a lot of people,” he said. “It can be fun, it can be dynamic and it can be very public. And the experience of the actual seeing of art can be fun and intriguing and all the ways that the austerity of a gallery kind of loses. That’s not to say that galleries are bad—they’re not mutually exclusive—but there’s another way to do it that can include a lot more people in a bigger, louder, more dynamic way.”

Etundi said one million people voted on the 35,000 submissions before the finalists (the top one percent) were judged by the organization. DaSilva seemed like an appropriate final choice, especially given her preferred medium.

DaSilva moved to New York in 1983, and began working on what's called "light graffiti"—manipulating lights during long photographic exposures to create shapes or language. Her recent works include projections of pro-Occupy Wall Street slogans on buildings during the winter's protests; large, curving [walls of light](#) that call to mind the work of Richard Serra; or images that overlay complex patterns in light, like her [Homage to Burberry](#).

The winning piece, *Jasmine/Never Sorry (For Ai Weiwei)* was a tribute to the Chinese artist that she made in April 2011 when Ai was detained by authorities in China. The color of the light in the work is a pale yellow, reflecting Ai's Twitter-based support of a "Jasmine Revolution," and it spells out the phrase "never sorry" inside an otherwise empty room.

On the curved Nasdaq screen and the vertical banner running up the corner of the Reuters building, video clips showed DaSilva making her light graffiti. They didn't overpower the square, though Etundi said that starting July 1, pieces would begin playing on more than a dozen screens along Times Square, including the one on the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

(Times Square is becoming a bit of a crowdsourced showcase: The Dunkin' Donuts billboard collects pictures from its social-media fans, while a Sprint ad, which alternated with DaSilva's piece, prompts viewers to Tweet about the brand for a chance to have their Twitter profile featured there.)



Around 8:30, after a third circuit of the crowd was completed by the marching band and as the evening darkened, Etundi, DaSilva, and [Questlove](#)—the host for the event's afterparty—mounted the stage. Etundi thanked the crowd for coming and congratulated DaSilva. Questlove, in a black hoodie emblazoned with a small knit heart and a green dollar sign, spoke briefly but with spirit about supporting artists, then hung back, leaning on a podium. DaSilva then gave a quick speech, admitting that when she first became interested in graffiti her greatest fear was getting arrested, and that this in turn led her down the path to her current practice and, she said, to owning the medium. The light painting community, she said, was 40 million strong. After that, George Lewis Jr., who records as Twin Shadow, premiered a video for his song "[Five Seconds](#)" on the two screens.

DaSilva, who won a \$10,000 prize, told the crowd that she had started her work because she was inspired by hip-hop and graffiti culture. Afterward, she stood with her husband and excitedly spoke to friends and supporters.

"I dream about this. You drive through Times Square and say, Wow, it'll be so cool to have my light graffiti and light painting photography up on there. It'll be the greatest platform for exhibition because it's L.E.D. screens and it's so perfect. And I work at night and it's just so perfect, and here it is."

Fans and artists lingered for several hours watching as the screens flashed works into the evening. [Cat Morris](#), an [iPhonographer](#), said her submission was shot and processed entirely using an iPhone. She said her piece had lit up the square at 7:55.

“It’s already on Facebook,” she said.

Like many of the artists, Morris' work had already been submitted to (and accepted at) a number of other exhibitions, and she entered Art Takes Times Square after a friend told her about the contest.

“Well, I’m born and raised in Manhattan, so Times Square is *it*, right? Even though we didn’t get the final piece, it’s really nice to see your work large and in public, and yeah, it’s pretty exciting.”

The event's organizers, DaSilva and her entourage, and some of the participants eventually headed to an afterparty in the pedestrian arcade of the nearby Condé Nast Building (owned by the Durst Organization). But the larger portion of the group stayed behind on Broadway, still holding their cameras up, waiting for their pieces to premiere in Times Square.

<http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2012/06/6012774/times-square-billboards-answer-high-brow-calling-art>