

“Eye Exam: Train Tales”

-Jason Foumberg, New City, June 24, 2008

“In June 1900, more than a century ago, the Armitage station on the Northwestern Elevated, currently known as the Brown Line, first opened its doors to commuters, and up until 2006, when construction began as part of the Brown Line Capacity Expansion Project, not much about the original station had changed. Now, after two years of undergoing a massive re-facing, the Armitage station is nearly complete, and boasting a sleek, modern look. The crowning jewel of this facelift is a photographic installation by Jonathan Gitelson titled “Chicago EI Stories” displayed on the station's back wall. A sprawling mosaic comprised of photographic glass tiles that display forty-two footnoted pictures of places around Chicago was inspired by interviews Gitelson conducted atop the old Armitage platform.”

“Gitelson, whose photography usually centers on ‘everyday phenomenon,’ was commissioned by the CTA to create a work of public art after his pictures were spotted at a show at a Cultural Center exhibit. ‘I came up with this idea to do one portrait a day outside the station for a year.’ This idea was turned down due to the number of liabilities of having peoples' pictures displayed in public places, so he began thinking about how he could tell a person's story without actually showing them. ‘The [second] proposal basically was: I want to interview people on the site that's being torn down about their memories, or life, or whatever here in town. And then I'd go to the location where the story took place and take a picture of the setting, and then print part of the story...so you know it's like part personal history, part city history.’ The proposal was accepted, and he spent three months, from February to April 2007, on the platform asking commuters to spin a story about a place in Chicago that was important to them.”

“Sporting multiple layers, a hat and a beard to ward against the bitter cold, Gitelson—armed with a recorder, a sketch of the piece and an official letter from the city (to prove that he wasn't thieving identities)—spent five or six days every week gathering interviews. Though Gitelson loves meeting and talking to new people, he explains, “It's hard just going up to people and being like, ‘Hey my name is Jon. Tell me your story.’...At first I didn't know how to ask the question right. I would say, ‘Tell me about a place you like in Chicago,’ and like the first fifty people I interviewed all said Millennium Park... So that was one thing, figuring out how to get people to open up.”

“Another problem was timing interviews with only eight minutes between trains. ‘Basically after a train passed, the first person up would be the person I'd have to get. Otherwise, if I waited a few minutes, someone would start telling me a story and then their train would come, and I had to get them to sign a release so they'd be running for the train and I'd be running after with their release.’ In the end, he

conducted more than 400 interviews, which were whittled to 100 from which the final forty-two were chosen.”

Each interview had to be cut due to the limitation of physical space beneath the pictures, but Gitelson decided that wasn't enough. "I thought the people's voices would be really important. Reading something and hearing something are very different. Sometimes you can just see someone from hearing their voice even if you've never met them." So, he created a Web site ([www.chicagoelstories.com](http://www.chicagoelstories.com)) with the interviews in full. Clicking on a picture will play the story behind it. "The whole time there was this idea of having two components: public art in terms of physical public art, and public art in terms of online public art." This innovative approach allows the work to reach a wider audience than just Brown Line commuters. "What I'm trying to do, in an ideal world, is have people either go through the station and then be interested in seeing the Web site, or have people see the Web site and be interested in going to the station," but people can certainly take their time. Adrift in cyberspace or in person, "Chicago EL Stories" should remain a vibrant landmark for at least the next hundred years.