

Chloë Bass's new audio-based public art project will be heard over the P.A. system at 14 M.T.A. stations around New York, urging commuters, "If you hear something, free something."



By Aruna D'Souza

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Through Oct. 5, commuters making their way through the crowds at 14 subway stations throughout New York may notice a new type of announcement on the public address system. "What we hear changes how we feel. How we feel changes what we do. And what we do changes the world around us, even if just for a moment," one says.

Some sound like snippets of overheard conversations:

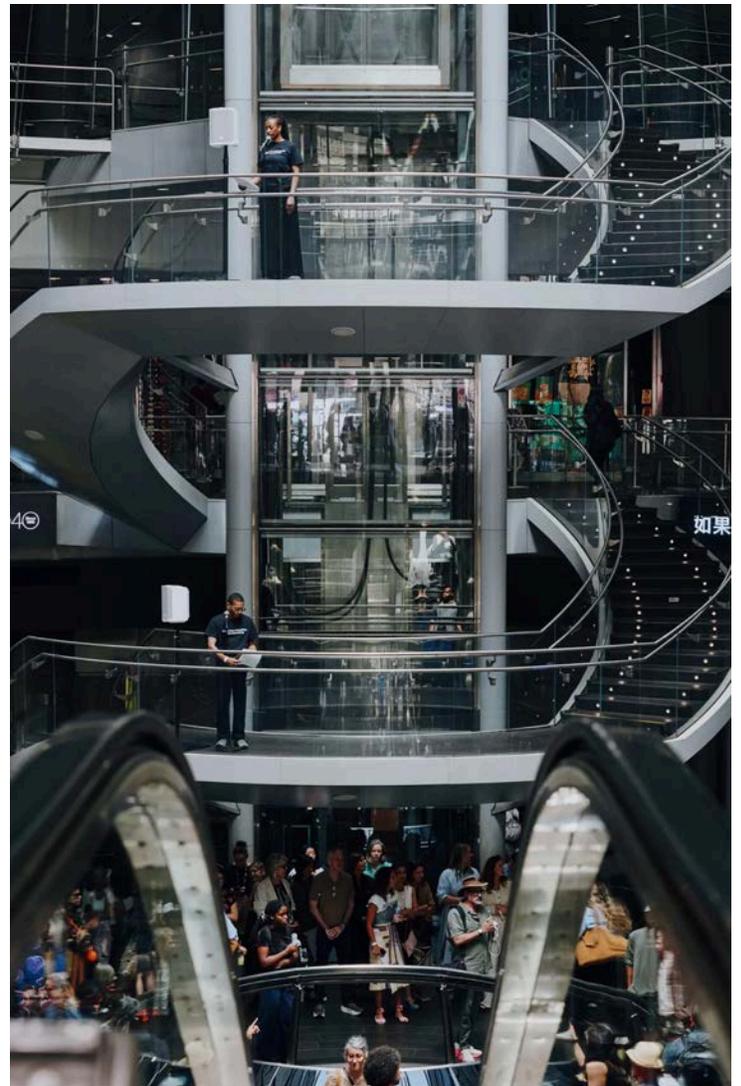
"Remember when Aretha Franklin died and people were singing her songs together on crowded train cars?"

Each will end with the words "If you hear something, free something," which is also the title of this ambitious public art project by the conceptual artist Chloë Bass.

It's a play on the familiar, post-9/11 messaging, "If you see something, say something." Bass turns around the instruction to be ever-vigilant in the face of threat, coaxing us instead "to return

to ourselves in public space, and to experience it as a place where we engage with others instead of only being suspicious of others.”

The project is a collaboration among Bass, the public art organization Creative Time and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Arts & Design department. The M.T.A. has had a robust public art program over the years, including the mosaics that decorate subway stations around the city — Bass herself did one in 2024 in Brooklyn. But this is the first time they’ve allowed an artist to broadcast over the M.T.A.’s public address system.



The project will be audible in 14 subway stations, including the Fulton Street station in Lower Manhattan. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

“If you hear something, feel something” kicked off with a live performance on September 3, where the full suite of recordings were performed live. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

The 10- to 45-second announcements, 24 in all, will be aired in English, Spanish, Arabic, Bangla, Haitian Kreyòl, and Mandarin — six of the top 10 commonly spoken languages in New York City. (ASL translations will also be available on the Creative Time website.) They are voiced by a range of vocalists, assembled in part through an on-the-street casting of regular New Yorkers. At the Fulton St. station in Lower Manhattan, videos will be shown on the hour on nearly 50 digital billboards.

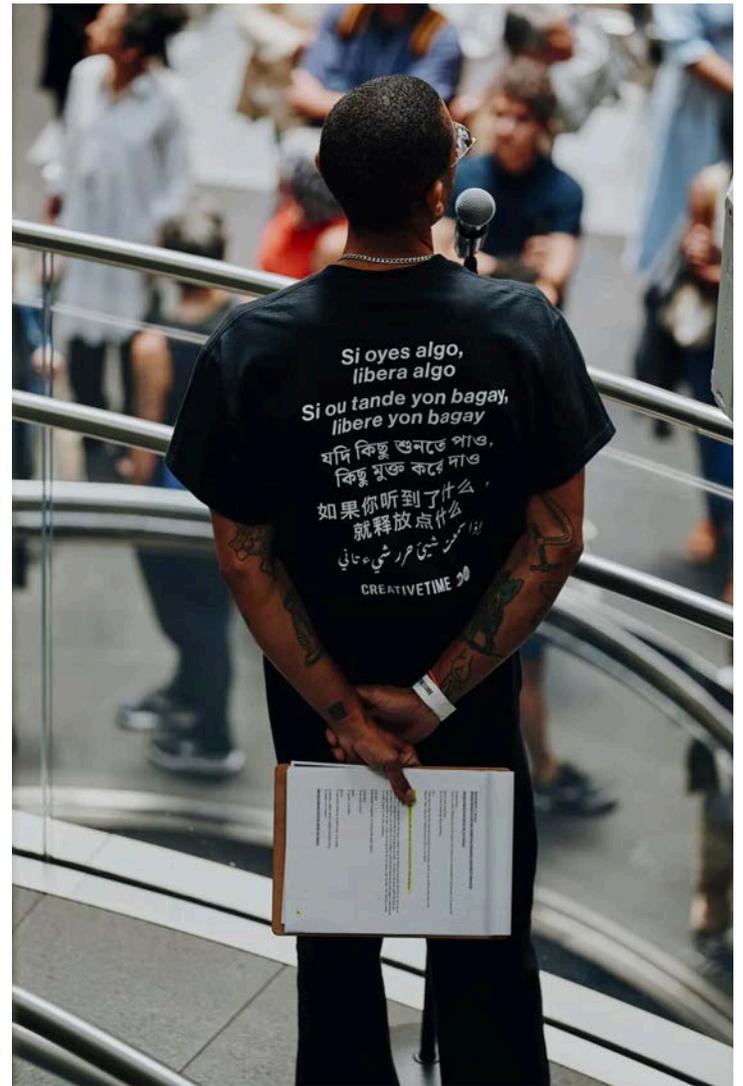
“You’ll be able to hear the announcements in places in the subway system where you have a moment of peace, a moment of calm — maybe as you’re exiting the station, or as you’re transferring between two trains,” said Juliette Michaelson, the M.T.A. chief of staff and chief of strategic planning, who until recently was interim director of M.T.A. Arts & Design. “Those moments, times, places, where people would be more receptive to a little bit of joy, a little bit of art in their day.”

Though Bass has made many public artworks — often in the form of poetic “suggestions” inscribed onto billboards, rocks, mirrors, aluminum plaques and other devices — this is her first audio work. Born and raised in New York, Bass, 41, conceived the project over the course of her long train and bus commutes between

Brooklyn and Queens College, where she taught in the visual arts program for more than eight years. (She left that position this summer.) “I normally used it as a form of studio time — I would read or write or think or photograph,” she said. “But after 2016, there were more and more announcements, and they were really wrecking my emotional landscape.”



Rena Anakwe was one of the performers on Sept 3. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times



Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, the artist, composer, and performer, created the distinctive sound that starts each announcement. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

While broadcasts conveying basic information or emergency instructions were understandable and necessary, she said the constant reminders of police presence and increasingly frequent attempts to shape people's behavior disrupted her thoughts.

"We're constantly being asked to internalize the idea that we are supposed to be watchful over each other, not in a supportive or caring way, but to report things to someone else," she said. "Even the 'Courtesy Counts' campaigns are telling you how to behave."

"'If you hear something, free something' doesn't tell anyone what to do ever," Bass said.

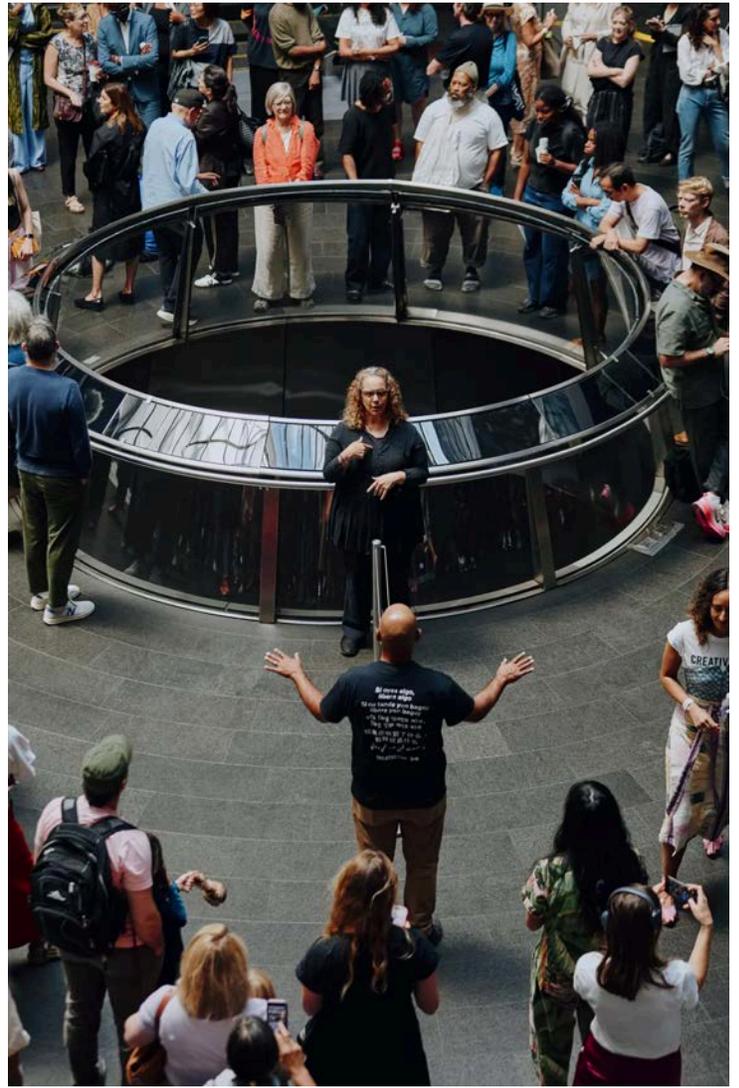
Diya Vij, curator at Creative Time, said that when she and Bass started thinking about what the project could achieve, they realized "it could help people see themselves and each other again and think about being neighbors and community differently in a space that might feel more tense than it should."

It's a quietly radical intervention. But Michaelson said she is not worried that the announcements might undermine the transit authority's focus on safety. "For the M.T.A., vigilance will always be a priority," she said. "I think people will be able to differentiate between Chloë's messaging and ours and still say something if they see something."

Of the 24 announcements, Bass herself only voices one. "I wasn't planning on it," she said. "But the day we were in the recording studio, I got really jealous."



Chloë Bass at the Fulton Street station. Her desire to make the work was prompted by the increase in official announcements in the subway. “It was wrecking my emotional landscape,” she said. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times



ASL interpretation of the announcements, which will be heard in the subway in the six most commonly spoken languages in New York, will be available on the Creative Time website Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

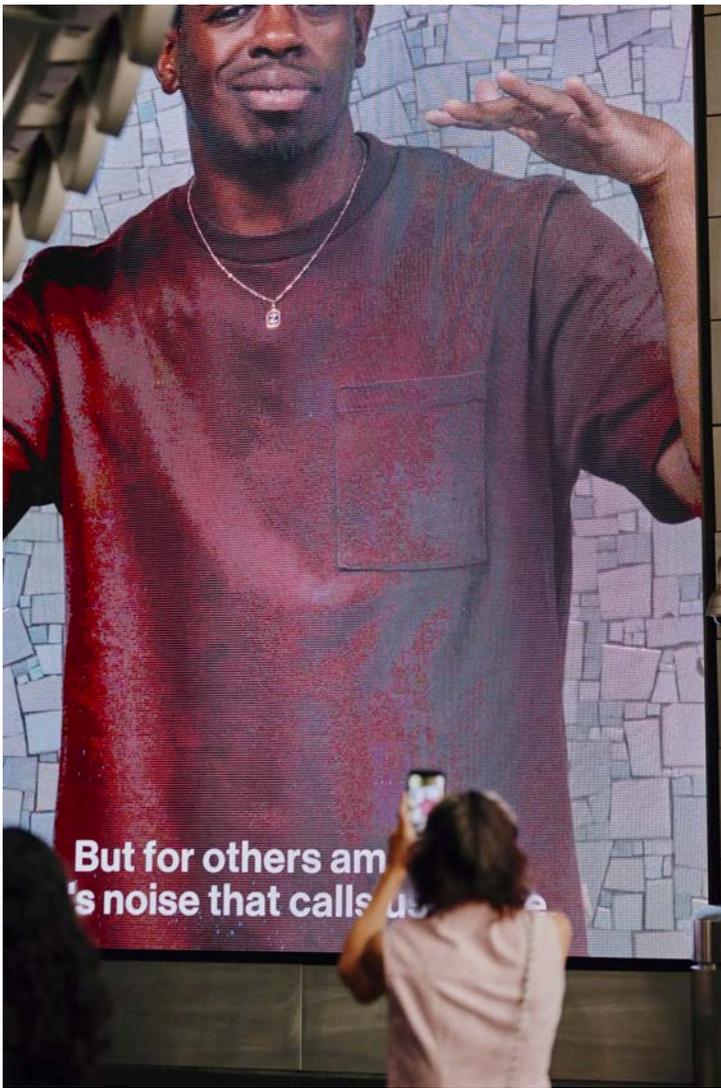
In addition to voices, the messages include sonic elements made in collaboration with the musician Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste, who created the musical tone that opens each. (It draws in part from Bass’s research into the healing qualities of certain frequencies.)

Before writing the scripts, Bass convened a series of focus groups composed of commuters, M.T.A. employees, transportation advocates and teenagers. (“Large groups of teens are everybody’s subway nightmare, but they’re New Yorkers, too,” she said.)

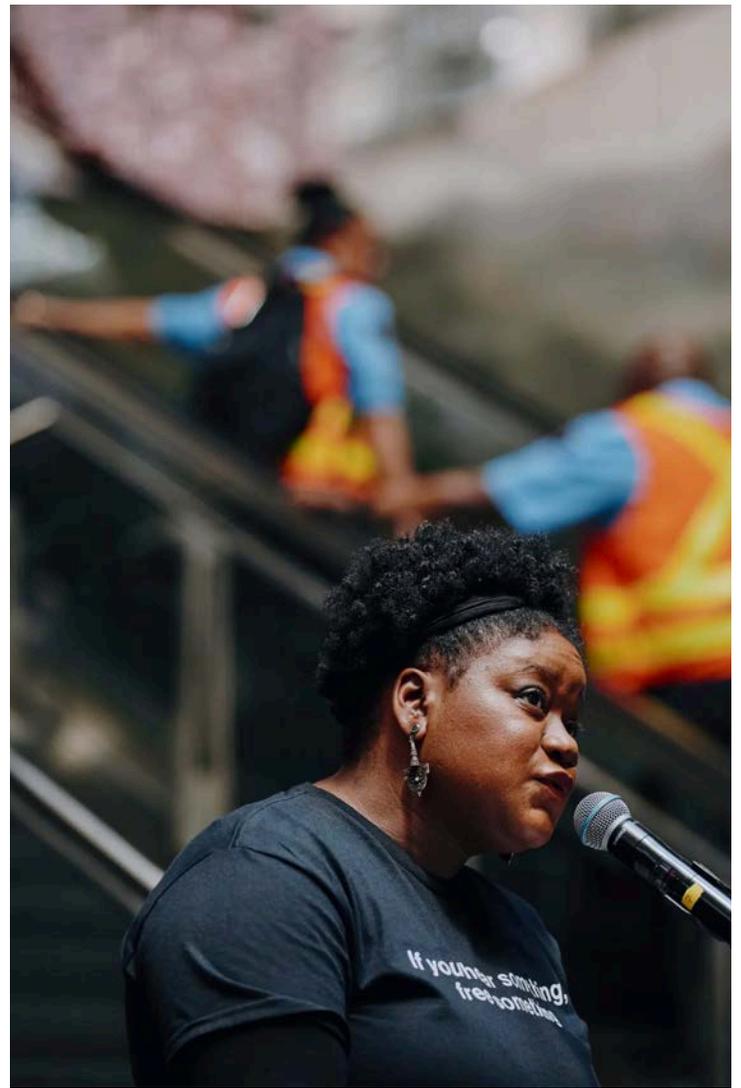
Maggie Murtha, part of the project team at the M.T.A., said one of her takeaways from the focus groups was that “there was a longing to feel connected to the people around you.”

Since Bass’s announcements function as “counterprogramming” to the M.T.A.’s usual fare, the venture required a range of approvals within the M.T.A. “We’ve worked with Chloë in the past and done many projects with Creative Time, so there was trust there,” Michaelson said.

The artwork presented technical and logistical challenges as well, including choosing which among the city’s 472 stations would be appropriate for broadcasting the announcements.



At the Fulton Street station, nearly 50 digital video screens will show videos to accompany the sound work. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times



Ashley Grier performed on Sept. 3. M.T.A. workers and police officers could be seen stopping to listen to the announcements. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

It was decided that the messages shouldn't be heard on platforms, to avoid confusion among commuters and so are limited to mezzanines and tunnels. Then there was a negotiation over the script. Bass avoided certain words because while they worked in a

poetic context they were clearly not appropriate on a public address system. (“Threat” was one word that was removed, the artist said.

The artist and the M.T.A. were fully aligned when it came to encouraging New Yorkers to think about life underground as a space of community.

“I think people who don’t live here might think that taking the subway is just how people get to work,” Michaelson said. She added that her boss, Janno Lieber, the chair of the M.T.A., “likes to say that the subway is the town square of New York City. For our town square to give riders a moment of thoughtfulness during their commute is just great fun.”

A correction was made on Sept. 30, 2025: An earlier version of this article attributed an erroneous distinction to the languages spoken in New York City that were used in subway announcements. They are six of the top 10 languages spoken in the city, but not the top six.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Down in the Subway, Uplifting Messages