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The Only Free Ride at Columbia

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Three years ago, when University President Lee Bollinger asked Gregory Mosher if he could make art a part of the Columbia experience, Mosher went around asking students what that would take. "What we hear over and over again is that people know it's all out there, but don't know where to begin," explained Mosher, who is now the director of the Arts Initiative at Columbia known as CUArts.

Enter the CUArts Art Train, a free program that is currently in its third semester at Columbia.

The Art Train began when CUArts began to run free gallery tours on five consecutive Saturdays per semester. Though there used to be only one tour per weekend, the turnout has recently been high enough to demand that two separate Art Trains be conducted at once. This could be because the activity is not only open to Columbia students but to family and friends as well—since the Art Train is free and structured, "it's the ideal parent activity," said Caralyn Spector, the Arts Initiative program manager.

Between 30 and 50 students ride the Art Train every week. After the participants have congregated on the corner of 116th Street and Broadway, their tour guides lead them to several carefully picked galleries. Each tour is designed to follow a somewhat broad theme, which is chosen according to the interests and knowledge of that weekend's particular docents.

This Saturday, April 14, one Art Train will head up to Harlem, while the other will explore the scene in SoHo. Past guides have taken groups to the East Village, the Upper East Side, and, of course, Chelsea, among other places.

"It's a great way to see the city, how the neighborhoods inspire artists, and how artists change the neighborhoods," said Barbaros Oezylmaz, a post-doctoral physicist who attended all of the Art Trains last fall.

The Art Trains are headed by two docents each, all of whom are somehow affiliated with Columbia—some are MFA and PhD students or professors, but they are all either art historians or practicing visual artists. For example, Caleb Smith and Catherine Czacki are conducting the tour through Harlem this weekend. In addition to being an art historian, Smith is one of the proud few to have walked every street in Manhattan, and he took extensive photographs along the way. Czacki is a visual artist whose work, according to the Arts Initiative Web site, involves "colliding past with future and feeling her way through the dark of the vortex." These are clearly people who know what they're

doing.

And one mustn't forget how the Art Train got its name: the tour groups travel by subway. During the Art Train's first semester, the tour groups went to the galleries via chartered bus, but this soon changed.

"What are we doing? Teaching people the way to go to galleries is on a bus?" Mosher asked. It was decided that the Art Bus would become the Art Train, so that people would experience the galleries the way real New Yorkers do.

Incidentally, this weekend also marks an important step for the Art Train. In addition to the two regular gallery tours, on Sunday, the first-ever Music Train invites students and their guests to listen to the Juan Carmona flamenco ensemble at Symphony Space. This might prove more difficult to keep up, though, because unlike galleries, concerts cost money. But for the time being, CUArts is covering the cost and hopes to continue to do so in the future.

According to Mosher, his goal in creating the Art Train was to "demystify the whole experience of going to a gallery." And for the most part, he seems to have succeeded. Not only has the Art Train made galleries more accessible to the Columbia community, it has also been an enjoyable experience for those who have taken part.

The Art Train is "a great opportunity to take advantage of New York City," said Brett Benowitz, CC '09, who has so far attended four Art Trains. "I mean that's why we all came to Columbia in the first place, right?"

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