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LABYRINTH

A journey through London's underground by Mark Wallinger

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Mark Wallinger was commissioned by *Art on the Underground* to install pieces celebrating the 150th anniversary of the tube. He created 270 framed labyrinths in eleven stylistic variations, baked into black and white vitreous enamel. One was placed at each tube station in London. In a transcribed conversation with Marina Warner that appears at the beginning of *Labyrinth: A journey through London's underground*, Wallinger explains that he chose the form of the labyrinth because it is a condensed straight line, rather than a maze where one encounters dead-ends and potentially gets lost. TfL certainly do not want anyone getting lost in the tube.

The installation never engendered much interest, perhaps because the labyrinths are sanitized of any offending historic or aesthetic elements. Or perhaps they were simply difficult to distinguish from the rest of the subterranean signage. As Wallinger explained to Will Self (who also wrote the foreword to this book), he had little say in where the art was placed. And he stated an intent to stay close to TfL's aesthetic (their roundel and typeface), even to the point of having the company that makes TfL's signs produce the prints. (Part of the funding for this project was provided by JCDecaux, the outdoor advertising corporation.)

The bulk of the text is adapted from Wikipedia entries about individual tube stations, though the entries are loaded with detail and are remarkably up to date. The entries are paired with energetic photographs of Wallinger's work by Thierry Bal that drift between architectural and street photography. One can feel Bal's struggle to make the labyrinths more stimulating, squeezing himself into contorted corners and using mirrors to frame passing passengers in awkward spontaneous moments of self-awareness. His strained efforts to photograph all 270 labyrinths in an interesting way is a more luring piece of art than the labyrinths themselves.

But Bal's photos are also frustrating. It is obvious many of the photographs were taken with a tripod, the use of which is expressly forbidden by TfL. As is "loitering" in stations. As is selling photos of stations one has captured. Bal's photos only serve to reinforce the fact that the tube today is not a democratic space in London, contrary to Tasmin Dillon's comment in the preface that it is "one of the last truly democratic civil spaces".

It is obvious Wallinger made a compromise for privileged access to space that an artist could never otherwise engage with. *Labyrinth* brings a bit of colour and data to the exhibition, but it is, in the end, more a reflection of the unrelenting corporatization of public infrastructure than the innovative art book it could have been.