A paradox: In an age when privacy has dwindled, public space seems to be atrophying too. Your phone tracks your every move, your most intimate data are logged for eternity, and yet increasingly, the civic squares in which you snap your selfie — and which define urban life — are not precisely public after all. In New York, more than 500 spaces that appear to be collective land are in fact “privately owned public space.” (One public atrium on Fifth Avenue, not always open to the public, belongs to the president of the United States.)
How do we assert our common ownership of the spaces through which we circulate? One way is through public art — through artists’ acts of imagination, and viewers’ embrace of the realms they create. Public art sometimes gets a bad rap, and not without reason: Too often it’s aesthetic kitsch, as in the notorious CowParade of 2000, or corporate promotion, like the doleful “Fearless Girl” at Wall Street. But there is serious sculpture out there in our parks and piazzas, and over the last week I’ve been bombing up and down the avenues in search of it. (The art critic’s secret weapon: Citi Bike!)

Some lie undisturbed in leafy gardens that remain in the city’s wheelhouse. Others lie in heavily trafficked squares maintained by business improvement districts. But all of them are free, and all are yours to lay claim to. What follows is an outdoor art pilgrimage, extending across Manhattan, from north to south, and ending just over the Brooklyn Bridge.
Anish Kapoor

While Mr. Koons goes for monumentality with balloons pumped full of hot air, Anish Kapoor proposes—at the invitation of the Public Art Fund, which also mounted Ms. Glynn’s and Ms. Novitskova’s work—an antimonolith for Brooklyn Bridge Park: a circular fountain, 26 feet in diameter, from which water doesn’t gush forth but is sucked into the earth instead. “Descension,” which Mr. Kapoor earlier installed at the Palace of Versailles, is also a spectacle of sound: The drain rumbles loudly while the mucky, mushroom-colored water is inhaled into the ground. Its aspiratory abyss, which may put you in mind of a toilet with the handle stuck, has rather blunt metaphorical resonance in today’s America. But don’t tell that to the kids flocking to its edge: They love it.