

[Acknowledgements, Intro...]

For 4 days in 1978, Ken Lum stood in the same spot at the side of the Trans Canada Highway from 6 to 8 AM facing the suburbs as morning commuters streamed past on their way into Vancouver. He stood immobile – there were no theatrics other than his steadfast purposefulness of simply being there – he was occupying territory not usually claimed as a site for cultural activity.

In 1987, Deborah Koenker with partner Roberto Pacheco collaborated to make physical their enthrallment with a magnificent tree. They sought the cooperation of three neighbours whose real estate converged at the tree's perimeter. Koenker and Pacheco built a structure that crossed boundaries and promoted the coming together of neighbours and strangers to join in a sensory celebration of the tree's swell to blossom.

In 1992, Susan Schuppli installed 15 “unsanctioned” plaques throughout downtown Vancouver. The plaques mimicked the style of historical signage mounted for Expo 86 to “celebrate the city's past”. In contrast, Schuppli's plaques referred to prosaic experiences of the city as they unfolded in the present. Confounding expectations of what constitutes history, the artist privileged commonplace occurrences and the lived experiences of places.

On Christmas morning 2009, the work of 12 artists' were lost in a fire at Kingsway and Broadway – Kathleen Ritter's among them. Much of Ritter's past work was performance based – her archive documented fleeting interactions with the public. Appealing to the generosity of the same publics who voluntarily collaborated in her art production, Ritter put out ads asking for evidence of her gestures to help her re-invent her practice.

All four projects were located in relatively unexpected places: the side of a freeway, backyard, pseudo-architectural heritage sites and, (want ads aside), collective memory. They were unsanctioned in the sense they were not commissioned or given permission to be there. The artists simply asserted their right to be considered among everything else within the public sphere. They created zones in which the private and personal were linked with the universal and the commonplace. All of them were temporary works – in some cases, as in Susan Schuppli and Kathleen Ritter, the longevity of their projects were determined by outside forces – the future of the work lay in the hands of others.

My approach to this talk was to select one work from each of the past four decades that I continue to carry with me – refer to – acknowledge as something important – something that had impact – resonates. Looking for an example from each decade was a process of contextualizing art in relation to this place of Vancouver.

To preface, I worked for the City in their Public Art Program as a consultant from 1999 to 2004. My first task – an initiation of sorts - was to become familiar with the existing archive – the public art registry – fill in the gaps – photograph and document. This wasn't as bureaucratically guided as one might imagine, but the reality was there were three program streams, and artist-driven, temporary projects like *Mr. Peanut* or Joey Morgan's *Tide Catchers* didn't fit into any of them. The impetus for founding Other Sights for Artists' Projects may have started here, but for the purposes of this talk I set myself some very subjective criteria: the artwork I would talk about had to take up room in my memory as something that altered my perception of public space.

“Entertainment for Surrey”; The Cherry Tree Project”; “Plaque Project”; and “Call for Works”

With these selections, my approach was to interview the artists with a series of questions that touched on site, memory, experience, meaning, audience and impact. My first two questions were what was their memory of producing the work and what did the piece mean to them?

Considering it was 32 years ago, Ken Lum remembers distinctly his experience of standing beside the freeway. He describes the work as an important, but difficult one in that it marked his transition from being employed as a research scientist for the Ministry of Agriculture in Aldergrove to that of a Fine Arts student at Simon Fraser University. He described a wide-eyed wonder for the arts, a world he was only recently introduced to and was quickly becoming immersed within.

Quote:

“When driving back from work one day, I remember seeing a man standing on the grass, nobody lived in that area then, and I thought what the heck is he doing there? Passing him, I looked in my rear view mirror and saw there was a car 60 metres behind him at the side of the road - the presence of the car made sense – it provided a reason for him to be there. I started to think, what would happen if the car wasn’t there? And kept thinking about it all the way to the Port Mann Bridge. I realized that it didn’t take much to awaken my curiosity because the repetitiveness of the daily drive was so mind-numbingly boring. The next day, I thought, I wonder what would happen if I did the same thing as that other guy and just stood there for awhile – to present something familiar like standing, but in an unfamiliar context?”

Lum’s audience were commuters – some responded by slowing down the first day, honking the next, ignoring the third and fourth. From the first hour of the first day, Lum realized his function was no different than the road sign he was standing near – on the fifth day, he replaced himself with a sign shaped in his silhouette.

It didn’t matter to him if the commuters understood his work to be “art”. The main signifier to indicate it was worthy of recognition was the purposefulness he displayed by showing up each day in the same spot for no apparent reason. Perhaps for some, seeing the erected silhouette on the fifth day was the same as Lum noticing the lone man’s car – it provided the missing piece of information that explained his presence. Lum used the side of the freeway as a site to confront publicly, lived experience – his presence transformed the space by introducing new significations and levels of ambiguity.

He describes *Entertainment for Surrey* as being his first to address issues of identity – the unwieldy negotiation of one’s own presence in relation to the social field - a negotiation he continues to address in his work today. Rather than pursue the validity awarded to autonomous works of art exhibited in galleries, Lum chose the “frictional encounters of the street”<sup>1</sup>.

*The Cherry Tree Project* literally bridged three back gardens in a working class, ethnically diverse neighbourhood. The convergence of these properties was an unusual urban phenomenon for Vancouver – this little pocket ‘sans’ alley. Despite the possibility for a common, shared green, each property was bounded by fencing to demarcate where one piece of real estate ended and another began. The canopy of the cherry tree crossed these boundaries and its blossoming was an annual event that raised the focal point from ground to sky – it was anticipated and celebrated.

For Deborah Koenker, *The Cherry Tree Project* represented a seamless transition between graduate school in California to resuming art production in post Expo 86 Vancouver. Deborah settled back into the same house and with the help of her partner, architect Roberto Pacheco, immediately began working on a structure that would allow people to move up, in, and around the tree. The structure was meant only to exist for the duration of the

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<sup>1</sup> Curators Melissa Brookhart Beyer and Jill Dawsey, 2003, *Walking in the City: Spatial Practices in Art, from the Mid-1960's to the Present*, exhibition brief, Apexart Curatorial Program, NYC

blossoms – although it had an elegant beauty in its own right, its main purpose was to enable access. A ladder provided entry from one end, a set of stairs on the other. People were invited to climb, walk, rest, observe and experience the tree from a new vantage point.

Koenker and Pacheco and their neighbours opened up their yards to the public for a series of weekends. News spread by word of mouth and through the local press. Neighbours from surrounding blocks visited and gradually, an extended conversation unfolded over the three weeks the tree was in its glory. The piece inspired people's imagination for what other bridging structures might be built and memories of other trees and their stories couldn't be suppressed.

Ignoring the instruments of regulation, no building permits were applied for, no insurance packages sought, no security preparations made, or interpretative materials printed. Koenker's project penetrated what would typically be a private space and its strength lay in her tenacity to share. The emotional, social, cultural and political situation she created determined the kind of social relations that unfolded – where Lum's repeated presence on the freeway could be seen as confrontational, Koenker's project was based on a spirit of cooperation.

Susan Schuppli's *Plaque Project* was willfully disruptive. She installed 15 enameled blue and white plaques "guerrilla fashion" throughout Vancouver's downtown core. All of them were written in the present tense and implied a female author. Some were removed quite quickly, while others remained in place for years. By their very presence, they posed a simple question: what histories matter?

She writes:

"Given how slight the plaques were, in that they slipped into the familiar category of historical marker - designed to mimic the shape and size of the plaques installed throughout Vancouver around the time of [the Worlds Fair], it is quite probable that many people may not have read them at first glance, perhaps even ever. However, anyone who eventually did notice them would probably be puzzled by the ambiguous and ordinary nature of the texts that referred to commonplace experiences of the city rather than to momentous occasions usually marked by public signage."

She described putting up the plaques as surprisingly easy "when performed with a certain public confidence rather than as covert operation."

Quote:

"Passers-by were rarely confrontational, if at all and only mildly interested in something that was taking place within the urban infrastructure. Overall there was a general air of acceptance that these kinds of events were commonplace in cities. Collectively, we seem to feel we don't have the power to question actions occurring in the public domain - somehow civic jurisdiction over events taking place in the city is perceived as entirely out of the hands of its citizens. I imagine that even if people may have wondered or questioned what was going on with the plaques (why they were being put where they were, by whom, and for whom) they were subsumed by the larger narratives of civic urban development."

An exception occurred when installing one of the plaques in Gastown. A local resident caught sight of them from an apartment across the street, as they were about to attach it to the wall. They called the police claiming someone was stealing public property – from their perspective, the plaque had always been there. The police arrived and confiscated the plaque.

Susan writes: " I tried explaining that it was in fact an art project (neglecting to mention that it was a guerrilla

project) and after much scrutiny of the plaque's text the police finally gave it back, stating the text didn't make sense and since they couldn't figure it out, it must be "art".

Time was implicitly registered in the *Plaque Project* by the fact that Schuppli's "decoys" made no mention of specific dates with notable histories and personalities attached to them. "The very fact of their ambiguity overturned the indexical nature of traditional plaques that typically point to something that happened on a site on a particular day. The absence of any absolute temporal signifier reclaimed the plaques for a history that unfolds over and through time rather than a history marked by the metric passing of chronological events."

In "The New Berlin", Karen E. Till writes:

"People become obsessed with material remnants because the past is a fiction: what remains are memories that are defined by our mourning for that which can no longer be present."<sup>2</sup>

and

"... if the past is a construction, if our understandings of time change with our needs in the present, then what is being made?"<sup>3</sup>

Kathleen Ritter is interested in the residual, the stuff just off to the side.

When she wrote the text for her ad requesting contributions to help re-invent her archive, she understood it was a way of reconciling the loss of her work to a devastating studio fire. It was also a generative gesture, a way to make something new from "bits" of the past.

Quote:

"My studio mates had a dinner a week or so after the fire and we talked about each of our losses. At a certain point, the conversation turned to stories about encounters with my work. I realized my memory of what I had produced was not nearly as exciting as what other people remembered. "

The space that Ritter's "Call for Works" suggests is that of collective memory. She relies upon the contributions of others to make sense of her actions. Her work occupies a discursive space – a space that draws attention to the peripheral, the edges illuminated by light cast from some other centre stage event. It was these quiet incidentals shared over dinner that inspired Ritter's "call and response" approach to re-inventing her practice. She is experimenting with her own history – what does the archive mean? Why is it valuable and who is it for?

Time is represented in Ritter's practice in both short and long term. She recognizes that any work exists in a very specific period of time: a couple of seconds, a couple of years, a couple of decades – "you want to believe the residual affects of the work (the archive) will last much longer". The discursive space that a work resides within has longevity.

By bringing forward these four projects, I'd like to reassert their public presence. Ritter reminds us that works don't need to physically exist in order to have long lasting value. One might not even have to physically experience them, witness them.

Of the four projects, I only actually saw a few of the physical traces of Schuppli's work and briefly was a participant in two of Ritter's many performances – and yet, hearing the story of Ken Lum standing at the side of the freeway,

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<sup>2</sup> Karen E. Till, 2005, *The New Berlin, Memory, Politics, Place*, Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, page 14

<sup>3</sup> Karen E. Till, 2005, *The New Berlin, Memory, Politics, Place*, Minneapolis/London, University of Minnesota Press, page 14

and seeing the documentation of the structure circling the cherry tree, resonate over time as if I'd been there.

My memories of each of these works aren't fixed – I remake and re-member them from the particularities of each present I recall them within. I have great respect for these works – in part because they came about because they just needed to be done – with no invitation.