

Going Nowhere Fast: Ken Lum, *Four Boats Stranded*, and the Aporia of 'Public Art'

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Fig. 1. View of north façade of Vancouver Art Gallery. Note on roof, Ken Lum, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*, 2000. Steel, fibreglass, paint, polyurethane. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Major Purchase Fund, the Canada Millennium Partnership Program of the Millennium Bureau of Canada and the British Columbia 2000 Community Spirit Fund (VAG 2000.25 a-d).

Artist and critic Mark Lewis has stated that public art is “an imperative, a repeated and deliberate articulation.”¹ To this assertion I would add that the term ‘Public Art’ itself adjoins a further layer of legislation to an already over-determined practice. While the term holds pejorative connotations for many art historians and critics, it evokes the promise of enfranchisement and the expectation of a communal and pleasurable cultural consumption for many of the non-art-going public. The name enacts a forced reconciliation between two estranged entities that cannot easily be resolved by the practice itself. The contradictions and tensions that are contained within the union of ‘public’ and ‘art’ are brought to the fore in a millennial public art project of the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) entitled *On*

Location: Public Art for the New Millennium and in Ken Lum's accepted proposal for that project, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*. The work, as we will find, navigates the difficult terrain between collective consensus and individual imagination, between careful self-representation and direct opposition to dominant narratives, and between the voicing and silencing of contradictions within the genre of public art itself.

On Location: Public Art for the New Millennium, a large-scale curatorial public art project undertaken by Vancouver Art Gallery Senior Curator Bruce Grenville, began in the spring of 1999.² Eight Canadian artists were invited to compete for the eventual commissioning of two on-site public artworks by the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Committee. Artists Henry Tsang, Judy Radul, Janet Cardiff, Robert Davidson, Kim Adams, Persimmon Blackbridge, Myfanwy MacLeod, and Ken Lum each received \$6000 to complete a three-dimensional maquette, drawings, a 250 word statement, and a budget for a project of up to \$80,000. The artists were asked to respond directly to the site surrounding the gallery, particularly, to the fabric of postmodern urban experience, and the interests of a diverse local public described as "office-workers, shoppers, youth, street people, and tourists" who activate the space with "public demonstrations, celebratory events, street busking, and casual public assembly."³ From this multitude of possible meanings for the space, the gallery asked the artists to produce a

work that related to either "youth culture" or "street life" and the new millennium.⁴

The first phase of the project involved the production of these proposals and their exhibition in display cases outside the gallery throughout the summer of 2000. The proposals were exhibited one or two at a time for four months and positioned in Robson Plaza—a local site of diverse public gatherings. The display was accompanied by a number of public programming initiatives designed to establish dialogue with the public. Animateurs were on site during peak hours to give talks, answer questions, and engage passers-by; a public forum was held; and viewer feedback was elicited in the form of comment cards, email and a telephone hotline. This feedback was conceived of as a chance to reconcile the divide between the art institution and members of the public who would not necessarily visit the Gallery:

On Location provides an important opportunity for the Vancouver Art Gallery to enter the new millennium with a strong public face and a visible commitment to contemporary public art. The new millennium offers a significant occasion for us to imagine and produce new public spaces for inhabitants and visitors to this city, and this project is an important step toward this realization. The millennium offers an important symbolic

opportunity to both look forward and look backward, to imagine and to assess, to celebrate and anticipate.⁵

The complicated solicitation of public opinion on Robson Street appears to be at the heart of a larger set of curatorial interests carried out by Bruce Grenville *inside* the VAG as well. In the spring of 2001, an exhibit of the Russian collaborative team Komar and Melamid, entitled *Komar and Melamid: Canada's Most Wanted and Most Unwanted Paintings*, was held on the main floor. As part of their practice the team began in the 1990s to poll nations across the world regarding their tastes and opinions with regards to art. The duo creates paintings based on the compiled results. These are presented alongside bar graphs, pie charts, and other forms of tabulation that are realized in two and three dimensional form. There are striking parallels between the interests articulated for the *On Location* project and a passage written by Grenville for the brochure that accompanied the Komar and Melamid exhibition: "The project also reveals the considerable gap between the current exhibition programming in Canadian public art institutions and the taste of its audience.... If an ideal art, a truly public art, can exist it must be formed in a real dialogue between artists and their audiences."⁶ Within the structure of the *On Location* project, the Gallery was careful to specify that the comment cards and other forms of outreach were *dialogue* rather than *democracy*, and that the opinions provided by the public would not

directly impact the selection and production of the successful proposals. Instead, it was the artists who were given the task of connecting art and public. They were instructed that their proposals were to be created with the desire to foster dialogue, and that "the final commission will incorporate artist responses to the public discourse."⁷ Lum's response to the voice of the public was a deliberate silence.

From the group of eight artists, Ken Lum's and Kim Adams' proposals were accepted for permanent on-site installation, and Janet Cardiff produced a web-based project founded on her participation several years later. Unlike Adams' and Cardiff's submissions, however, Lum's work did not overtly take up either street or youth culture. Instead it responded to the Gallery's repeated emphasis on the *diversity* of the artists chosen to participate in the project.⁸ On this count, Lum's subject matter relates to his own identity as a child of Chinese immigrant heritage, which he has discussed in relation to own practice.⁹ This is a financial investment to be sure, but also one of a more symbolic form of capital for the institution of the gallery and the city itself. Likewise, presumably for Lum, there was also some stake in his participation: some capital likewise conferred upon him through the permanent installation of his work on top of the city's major art institution.

Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White consists of four models of historically significant vessels installed at the north, south, east and west corners of the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery (figs 1, 2). Each boat references a moment



Fig. 2. View of south façade of Vancouver Art Gallery. Note on roof, Ken Lum, *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White*, 2000. Steel, fibreglass, paint, polyurethane. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Major Purchase Fund, the Canada Millennium Partnership Program of the Millennium Bureau of Canada and the British Columbia 2000 Community Spirit Fund (VAG 2000.25 a-d).

associated with boundaries, borders, and mobility in the region's history: a First Nations' longboat (coloured red); Captain Vancouver's ship, the *Discovery* (coloured white); the *Komagata Maru*, whose Sikh, Muslim and Hindu passengers were violently denied entry at the port of Vancouver in 1914 (coloured black); and the notorious merchant vessel that brought Chinese refugees into British Columbia in 1999 (coloured yellow). Constructed of fibreglass, the boats are visible though not obvious to the passerby, and require the viewer to circumnavigate the building in order to see the work in its entirety. Thus the work poses a postcolonial critique of historical

events that raise issues around land ownership, colonial occupation, and immigration. The boats perch upon a building that was formerly the city's Court House, the very judicial building that upheld colonialist discrimination; the gallery roof acts as a high-water mark for Vancouver's 'flood of immigrants' whether they are Indigenous, European, Indian, or Asian. The title of the work refers to a children's Sunday school song composed during the American Civil War:

Jesus loves the little
children.
All the children of the
world.
Red and yellow, black

and white,
 They are precious in his
 sight.
 Jesus loves the little
 children of the world.¹⁰

Lum plays on the fact that the song was meant to instruct children by constructing boats that are not to scale and that evoke brightly-coloured toys. The lyrics, and their reductive ethnic typologies, are now appropriated in order to instruct adults of a globalized culture, which claims multiculturalism and tolerance. Moreover, the difficulty viewing *Four Boats Stranded* from street level serves to call up the invisibility of these events within Vancouver's larger social narratives and civic identity.

With the Gallery's imagined audience of "inhabitants and visitors" in mind, it is important to contextualize *Four Boats Stranded* within the fiscal and discursive constraints surrounding the development of the *On Location* project. Funding lies at the heart of anxieties around the heterogeneous nature of public art and its close ties to private/corporate or public/civic interests. Unlike the majority of public artworks which are funded by the city's Private Development Program percentage-for-art initiative, the *On Location* project was funded by the Canada Millennium Partnership Program, British Columbia 2000 Community Spirit Fund, and the Canada Council for the Arts.¹¹ Following the World Exposition in 1986, Vancouver was concerned with the maintenance of economic strength and international reputation that had been tenuously established by the centennial event.

Setting out their vision for public art in a report published in 1987, the newly-formed Art in Public Places subcommittee explicitly foregrounded the connection between economic and artistic concerns:

Vancouver cannot be a Pacific Rim Centre for advanced technology and international trade without developing the cultural amenities that attract skilled workers and managers. Moreover, its cultural facilities and programming, combined with its increasingly sophisticated urban ambience, could easily become as important as its mountains and oceans in attracting tourists.¹²

The particular set of interests set out by the Gallery in its description of the project reflects a concept of public art as a vehicle of civic pride, economic vigor, and millennial celebration. Perhaps a passage from a local tourism website posted in 2005 will underline the discursive importance of Lum's *Four Boats*:

Vancouver is Canada's fastest-growing metropolis, and a city of magical contradictions - from rough-and-tumble Hastings Street, where timeworn brickwork still exudes a wild, beer-for-a-dime, seaport-town atmosphere, to trendy Robson Street, with its futuristic Japanese noodle houses and haute couture. Vancouver has long touted itself as Canada's

gateway to the Pacific Rim, and for decades, waves of immigrants have broken on its shore.¹³

This disturbing gloss on extreme social and economic inequalities in Vancouver's past and present reveals a complicated web of discourse into which Lum's proposal inserts itself, heightening the importance of the critique expressed by Lum's four boats that sit stranded upon the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

But if Lum's express interest was to reveal the problematic assumptions inherent in the city's dominant narratives, why would he choose to represent them in a way that disabled their effective communication? In the short text that accompanied the work's unveiling, curator and critic Melanie O'Brian touched upon the multiple readings of the work's social commentary, but these were not taken up in any significant way by either critics or scholars.¹⁴ What was too clear-cut to warrant extensive consideration by this public of experts was significantly misunderstood by the general public who consistently interpreted the work as either a troubling celebration of racism or, more frequently, pleasurable commentary on the city's maritime location.¹⁵

Through the disinterest of the art world and the misunderstanding of the general public, Lum's work slipped through the crack of 'public art'—the very gap that the words are meant to bridge—and into relative obsolescence. That is not to imply, however, that on some level obsolescence was not Lum's interest from the beginning. Indeed, this

could have been the only means of subversion within a highly legislated public art project that deliberately emphasized the imperative that the work must be both 'public' and 'art'. Judging from the criticality of Lum's previous interventions in public space, one might infer (perhaps erroneously, but not wholly without justification) that Lum would be reluctant to embrace the overly sincere and celebratory rhetoric manifest in the *On Location* project. This past November, for example, Lum was awarded the second annual Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Award of \$25,000, and the Vancouver Sun published an article in recognition of the national achievement of the local artist. The article describes *Four Boats Stranded* as evidence of Lum's long-term investment in issues of art and public space. Importantly, alongside its description of Lum's interests, the article reiterates Lum's self-proclaimed "old-fashioned modernism.... That modernist idea that a work of art is to perform a kind of auto critique – a kind of self-exaggeration that brings out an illumination of the systems by which the work is read."¹⁶ In a similar vein, Lum spoke to his view of public art practice in a talk that accompanied the unveiling of *Four Boats Stranded* in the fall of 2001. In this lecture Lum asserted his discomfort with the practice of public art, characterizing it as a genre fraught with many layers of problems. However, he also voiced concern that public art cannot be approached merely as an "underground, rear-guard tactic."¹⁷ Given these two assertions (that public art is problematic, but cannot

be avant-garde), I suggest that the work's two-fold reception is as much aporia as obsolescence; an insoluble paradox that constitutes an uncanny sort of success. Read in this way, the meaning of Lum's *Four Boats Stranded* does not reside solely in its explicit content, but also in its subtext of self-reflexivity that is manifest in the work's material qualities and discursive context. In other words, it is an instance of public art about public art, or "meta-public-art."

The gaps in signification that I have indicated thus far are further revealed in three interconnected formal aspects of the work that concerned viewers whose comment cards have been archived at the VAG and which I will consider for the remainder of this paper. The first of these issues pertains to the public's overwhelming dismay regarding the work's lack of visibility and accessibility. As one frustrated individual wrote: "[t]he public would miss the boats where situated. This is no creativity in simply putting silhouettes of boats on the Gallery. What's the craftsmanship?"¹⁸ The physical distance of the boats from the viewer seems to shrug off public engagement; it precludes both intimate scrutiny and absorption as cultural capital. At the same time, the fact that the VAG itself forms the barrier between the artwork and its public is suitably ironic. That is, the very institutional structure that claims to unite the public and the art, stands in the way of their connection.

The reiteration of the gap between 'public' and 'art' is related to the second point of consideration: the public's response to the boats'

decontextualization from water and recontextualization atop the gallery. Although Lum's title explicitly states that the boats are in fact "stranded," there is a recurrent concern with the lack of water in the piece. This is exemplified by two suggestions made by the public: "...I think the boats would look nicer if the fountain was constructed and a water place to put the boats. Perhaps out in front of the building" and "I would like to suggest having the boats on the ground in front on the pavement and make pavement/ceramic waves around the structures the waves could meet the bottom of the stairs leading the boats to the gallery."¹⁹ In contrast to Lum's intervention, Komar and Melamid's exhibited work *Canada's Most Wanted Painting* not only represents water, but an idyllic shore (fig. 3). There are no ships containing refugees, nor even ships of commerce. If there had been, they would undeniably have been rendered fully mobile and 'properly' situated.

The public's anxiety regarding the lack of water and the suggestion that a fountain be constructed for the boats is significant when we consider that Lum's initial idea for the work stemmed from the plaque that marks the Centennial Fountain in front of the gallery on Georgia street.²⁰ The fountain was built in 1966 to commemorate the union of the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, and represents an imagined primordial Celtic heritage of (some) of the settlers that colonized the Vancouver area. In this way, Lum's 'stranding' of the boats could be read as the result of a particularly triumphal surge of the fountain: a successful effort to expel



Fig. 3. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, *Canada's Most Wanted*, 1999. Oil on canvas, 68.0 x 98.5 x 4.0 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG 2001.12.1).

those memories of colonization that the dominant narrative might wish to forget. Poet Lisa Robertson describes the coded resonance of civic fountains in Vancouver in “The Fountain Transcript.” Discussing the large sculpture fountain of a crab in front of the Vancouver Planetarium, Robertson quotes a civic official who stated in 1966 that “To bring together architecture and sculpture, and weave them around a theme of water, is to symbolize Vancouver in the most profound manner possible.”²¹ Robertson’s poetic prose points out that Vancouver’s fountains now mask corporate power: “We enjoy thinking of our peninsula as a sort of liquid-filled decorative paperweight ... At the sparkling edges of pedestrian consciousness they dribble and froth. They are corporate fantasies.”²²

Ultimately, the decontextualization of the boats seems to signal a draining of the water from the collective consciousness, to which even rolling cement waves are preferable.

Perhaps one final digression will reveal the deeper significance of the boats’ estrangement from their ‘natural’ context and link this once again to *Four Boats Stranded*. As Scott Watson described in an article published in 1991, the idea of nature looms large in the public imagination of Vancouverites. Watson points out that this is central to the work of local artists like Lum and others whose works address the legacy of this modernist mythology. In the final passage of the article, Watson foreshadows a tipping point emerging with the city’s art production and ability to engage with issues of race

and identity politics.

Of course, it is the insistence of these 'other' voices that occupies the most alert in contemporary art scenes all over the world, not just in Vancouver. But here, for the time being, no one is prepared to make a circus out of it. If the city faces even more drastic ruination at the

hands of developers than it had in the late sixties, if the forests are being decimated at a rate that rivals the destruction of the Amazon, if corporate ghouls and stunted failed entrepreneurs continue to run governments, if hate-mongering, sexism and racism are all on a precipitous rise, then its

also true more and more artists are stepping out of the frames and constructions made for them by others and refusing, to use a well-known Canadianism, to shut the fuck up.²³

I include this lengthy polemical statement because its optimism regarding the possibilities of Adornian critical space in late 20th century culture stands in stark relief to the conditions of production of the *On Location* project as well as the "frames and constructions" to which Lum's work was intimately connected. In this way, the lack of life and activity of this drained paperweight sets the stage for a sad circus indeed. If public art is meant to



Fig. 4. Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, *Canada's Most Unwanted*, 1999. Oil on paperboard, 23.0 x 15.3 x 2.0 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, commissioned by Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG 2001.12.2).

enliven the denaturalized urban fabric in a similar way to a fountain, then the stranded boats speak to the function of public art itself and constitute another layer of signification and reflexivity.

The third and final aspect of *Four Boats Stranded* that I will consider here pertains to the many concerns that were raised by the public regarding the inappropriateness of the aesthetic of the boats in relation to the “heritage” architecture of the gallery, and their preference for a seamless aesthetic that adhered to the value of the traditional style. I quote only two examples here: “Dorky and dangerous. Does not fit with the classic lines of the building” or “The ‘additions’ which is what the boats seem like, look inharmonious in a bad way in relation with the gallery.”²⁴ Once again, Lum did not take his cue from Komar and Melamid whose polls repeatedly demonstrated the general public’s distaste for abstraction (fig. 4). Devoid of narrativity or detail, the ontology of these objects is even somewhat misrepresented by O’Brian in the brochure text where they are described as “elegantly simplified”.²⁵ Rather than convey elegance, the simplification of the boats serves to concretize the moving spectacle of contemporary media and deny more affective forms of memory-making so often embraced in public monuments of memorialization. These still and silent vessels, devoid of the bodies that authenticate the original in contrast to the copy, function as simulacra in the Deleuzian sense:

Pop Art is the example
Deleuze uses for
simulacra that have

successfully broken out of the copy mold: the multiplied, stylized images take on a life of their own. The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the “model” but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum’s own mad proliferation.²⁶

Echoing the critical strategies of Pop Art that inform so much of Lum’s practice, the aesthetic of Lum’s boats stand not only for a didactic critique of historical inequality and its contemporary continuation, but also for the mode of its continuation through media in the contemporary period and, by extension, the implication of public art as a mode of Habermasian publicity or as a terrain between the Appadurain “scapes.” Thus the aporia enacted through the production, representation, and reception of *Four Boats* relates to a number of fundamental contradictions and tensions of modernity and the development of capitalism and democracy to the current postmodern, globalized moment.

The desire for obsolescence will be highest at the site of its greatest impossibility. So-called public art appears to be going nowhere (and going nowhere fast) but instead of wishing it away, some of us resist rather than ignore its banal contradictions and do not lose hope. In this vein, the sum total of formal transgressions enacted by Ken Lum’s *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White* enable an alternative reading of the work. I

have argued that the work's failures to communicate or inspire, while performing a number of functions relating to the subject matter itself, also contain a subtext of subversion to the practice of public art. The sad circus of public art continues today, and as the VAG will be moving to a new location we are left to wonder whether and what the significance of the *Four Boats* will be as Vancouver enters another period of concentrated self-presentation that will culminate in the winter of 2010.

Notes:

† Many thanks to Professor William Wood for his contributions during the various phases of this project, and whose immense knowledge of the field was invaluable. Thanks also to Professor Maureen Ryan who brought my attention to the piece in the beginning and Dr. Jillian Taylor-Lerner for her perceptive revisions.

1. Mark Lewis, "The Technologies of Public Art," *Vanguard*, November 1987: 14.
2. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location: Public Art For the New Millenium* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, c.2001), np.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Bruce Grenville, "The People's Choice," *Komar and Melamid: Canada's Most Wanted and Most Unwanted Paintings* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, c.1999), np.
7. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location*.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Richard Rhodes, "Ken Lum's Outsider Art," *Globe and Mail*, May 12, 2001, V3; Sara Milroy, "The Art of Bricks and Mortar," *Globe and Mail*, November 3, 2001, V9; Ken Lum, "Cumberland's Chinatown site," *Western Living*, June 2001, 41; Ken Lum, "Artist Talk" (audiotape of lecture given at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C., September, 2001, archived at the Vancouver Art Gallery Library).
10. Lum, "Artist Talk." Lum discussed the relevance of the song lyrics and even asked the audience to sing the song along with him.
11. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location*.
12. City of Vancouver Department of Social Planning, *Cultural Directions for Vancouver: A Policy Guide for the 1990's* (Vancouver: Department of Social Planning, 1987), i.
13. I first came upon this quotation on the homepage of a commercial tourism website in September 2006. The original site no longer exists, but interestingly the text has been included word-for-word in several local websites including National Car Rentals and a facilitating workshop. National Car Rental "Great Discounts for Car Rental at Vancouver Canada," <http://www.nationalcar.com/getMainContent.do?pageKey=national-car-rental-vancouver-downtown>.
14. Melanie O'Brien, *Ken Lum: Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White, 2001* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2001), np.
15. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location*. See section documenting comment cards.
16. Kevin Griffin, "Vancouver artist wins Hnatyshyn award," *Vancouver Sun*, November 27, 2007, <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/arts/story.html?id=b423b433-c180-43ba-90de-2074cf3db058>.
17. Lum, "Artist Talk."
18. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location*. See section documenting comment cards.
19. *Ibid.*

20. Lum, "Artist Talk."
21. Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2003), 56.
22. *Ibid.*, 55.
23. Scott Watson, "The Generic City and Its Discontents: Vancouver Accounts for Itself," *Arts Magazine*, February 1991, 64. See also Jeff Wall, "Traditions and Counter-Traditions in Vancouver Art: A Deeper Background for Ken Lum's Work," in *1990 Witte de With: The Lectures* (Uitgevers: Witte de With & Imschoot, 1991), 67-81.
24. Vancouver Art Gallery, *On Location*. See section documenting comment cards.
25. O'Brien, *Ken Lum*.
26. Brian Massumi, "Realer than Real: the Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari," *Copyright 1* (1987), http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/realer.htm.

Response

Thank you, Carla, for your paper. I appreciated your insightful explication of the process by which the four boats found themselves on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the curatorial intentions with respect to the relationship between the artist and the work, on the one hand, and the public on the other, and your archival research into the public response to the proposal.

However, what I take to be the larger issue behind the paper is not Ken Lum's *Four Boats* specifically, but rather the notion of public art in general, and its teetering on the edge of obsolescence—a state that requires us to question the relationship that is

envisioned between the projected public and so-called public art works, and the potential therein for critical self-awareness.

As Sara Mameni indicated in her opening remarks yesterday, the purpose of this symposium is not simply for us graduate students to present our current research, but rather to generate fruitful discussion concerning the transition of ideas and methodologies within art and art history. Thus, for the purposes of promoting such a discussion concerning the possible obsolescence of so-called public art, or perhaps a much-needed rearticulation of what we mean by the term public art, I want to expand the discussion beyond Ken Lum's *Four Boats* and introduce an example of a public art work in Vancouver that has recently found itself in the press, specifically because of the relationship that has emerged between it and "the public".

Device to Root Out Evil, by American sculptor Dennis Oppenheim, currently resides at Harbour Green Park, in Coal Harbour, downtown Vancouver. The 7.6-meter tall glass, steel, and aluminum sculpture represents a church, upside-down with its spire sticking into the ground. First exhibited at the 1997 Venice Biennale, it was installed in Vancouver as part of the 2005 Vancouver International Sculpture Biennale. The owner of the sculpture offered to loan it to the city on a long-term basis, so that it could remain in its current location semi-permanently, but it was announced this week that the offer will be turned down and the work will be removed because of "mixed public responses."

Specifically, the two reasons cited are that, first, the work obstructs the view of the harbour—let’s not forget that Coal Harbour includes some of the most expensive real estate in the city—and second, “some people...say that they feel the subject matter isn’t appropriate.”¹ In other words, an upside-down church presented as art makes people uncomfortable, and so rather than be confronted with this discomfort, the work must be removed.

It is significant to this discussion that the biennale organizers intentionally bypassed the usual process for the installation of permanent works of art in public spaces in this city.² Rather than include the public in the process, the organizers decided to have the work bought by a private foundation, which would then donate the work to the city. However, the public (or a section therein) refused to be side-stepped and wrote letters to the city expressing their discontent. Through the failure of the biennale organizer’s plan to bypass the public in the installation of this public art work, this case demonstrates a fundamental disjunct between competing visions of the purpose of public art, and more specifically the



Fig. 5. Dennis Oppenheim, *Device to Root Out Evil*, 1997. Galvanized structural steel, anodized perforated aluminum, transparent red Venetian glass, and concrete foundations, 6.71 x 5.49 x 2.74 m. Photo: Fred Buchor.

role played by the very term “public” in “public art.”

As Carla’s paper describes it, the process behind the development of the *Four Boats*—and the *On Location* project more generally—was specifically designed to foster dialogue between the artist, the artwork, and the public, and provide a space for such dialogue to occur. What resulted was a dissatisfied public that was given the semblance of a voice, which was then essentially ignored by the artist. Okay. In the

Oppenheim case, the dialogue between the public and the artwork and the artist was overtly occluded from the development process, but members of the public—those who found their view of the harbour obstructed—spoke up and “the public” effectively claimed for itself a determining role in the process. Okay.

Carla’s paper ends with the two-pronged claim that, on the one hand, “public art is going nowhere fast” but, on the other hand, there is the possibility to resist its banal contradictions and not lose hope. I can’t help but wonder if the only hope left for a so-called public art that can incite critical thought and dialogue around the immediate (and very public) concerns of our current moment is an art in which the so-called public has no say whatsoever. So, I suppose my question for you Carla—given that you still have hope for public art—what potential do you see for public art as a strategy of resistance? And, furthermore, if such potential exists, what work do you see the term “public” doing in the combined term “public art”?

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Notes:

1. Denise Ryan, “Controversial Sculpture Coming Down,” *Vancouver Sun*, March 26, 2008, <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/news/story.html?id=51cb7cd2-7b5e-490a-8d3a-dc9e1cd9f325&k=65737>.
2. This does not even begin to address the reasons for the organizers’ actions. It is significant to this discussion that the biennale

is the brainchild of Vancouver art dealer Barrie Mowat, and that the budget consists primarily of privately-raised funds.