"Mapping and Marking" public art program

Alison Appelbe

Arts médiatiques, sculpture et installation
Numéro 92, été 2010

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/63038ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Citer cet article

An imposing sign erected where the historically poorer and tougher East Vancouver meets the more affluent and influential Westside may be the most visible—and talked about—piece of public art ever erected in the city.

In January, Ken Lum’s Monument for East Vancouver was lifted by crane and planted in a railway embankment at Clark Drive and East 6th Avenue—directly above the Vancouver Community College Clark Drive Skytrain station.

This 18.2-metre-high “cross”—containing the words “East” and “Van,” with the two words intersecting at the letter “a”—serves as both a territorial marker and revival of an underground symbol of pride and rebellion in East Van. Though never “formalized,” the symbol has existed in East Vancouver for more than 60 years. The sign also functions as a powerful (critics might argue “in-your-face”) landmark.

“It’s epic at night,” says one of many bloggers who have commented on its appeal and meaning. “It sucks. It’s a nightmare. Please take it down,” says another voice in a multi-thread discussion. “All I did was lift the repression [of the symbol] and everybody starts spouting on the chat lines,” says a delighted Lum.

Born and raised in East Vancouver, Ken Lum has long been familiar with the intersecting phrase “East Van” and its function as graffiti or underground symbol. “It was provisional—maybe knifed into a school desk or written on the outside wall of a grocery store,” Lum says. “Somehow it kind of floated. And sometime you’d see the word ‘rules’ underneath” (either suggesting, falsely, that East Van ran or runs the wider city, or simply boasting of power). “It was adopted by Eastside gangs,” adds Lum, by which he means mostly tough-seeming teen boys who hung out and engaged in the likes of fistfights. “It was a rich symbol. And it was stealthy. Pretty much everybody on the Eastside was familiar with it. It has survived since the 1940s, but it was never formalized.”

The fact that the words “East” and “Van” form a “cross” only adds to its complexity, with Lum believing that the “sacred” aspect of what is a territorial symbol or statement cancels out any purely religious inference. At the same time, he says that the “cross” may hint at the suffering experienced by immigrant groups largely confined to the east of the city.

And bloggers have views. “I think it’s offensive. It really looks like a cross to me and I’m not Christian,” posts Julie. Retorts blogger Jay: “If it had Jesus strapped to it, you would have a point.”

Lum also sees sociological irony in “East Van rules.” It might also refer, he says, to rigid restrictions imposed, for example, on Catholic immigrants, by church and family. Yet another commenter suggests that Lum, an internationally successful artist, has simply capitulated. “What was once a jiffy-markered icon of working-class shit-kicker wearing tough guys and hooligans (has been) reinvented as a symbol of branding and gentrification,” he writes. Because today, when a shoddy East Vancouver bungalow on a 33-foot lot costs $1 million, even the East Side is affluent and gentrified.

Monument for East Vancouver is one of eight works in the City of Vancouver’s “Mapping and Marking” public art program, coinciding with the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games. Costing more than $200,000 (a quarter of the Mapping and Marking budget), Lum’s work is a steel, aluminum and Plexiglas structure embedded in an embankment along a submerged railway right-of-way that cuts diagonally through the city. And while Main Street, about a dozen blocks to the west, was historically the (unofficial) division between East and West Vancouver, the growing affluence and property values have (arguably) pushed that division east. Clark and East 6th is gritty, and Lum likes the location for that reason. Also, East 6th ends at Clark like a T, forcing traffic to turn left or
right—another delicious irony. Also, Clark Drive is the city’s major north-south truck route. “It’s a mess,” Lum admits. “You don’t see anything like it on the Westside.” The “Monument” rises above this scene—utterly unavoidable, especially if you’re driving from the west. “A lot of work went into the design of the construction,” says Lum, who rejects criticism that he “appropriated” the symbol. The “cross” is outlined and “the corners are softened.” In daylight, the silver paint makes it bright. At dusk, a computer trips photo cells that turn on LED lights. At night it’s truly dramatic.

In the end, Monument for East Vancouver is about bringing an historic Eastside attitude—proud and tough—to public attention. “The piece monumentalizes a rear-guard gesture of defiance, protest and assertion of identity,” Lum writes. “To say that this will probably become an iconic, and likely cherished, symbol of East Vancouver is... an understatement,” adds blogger Mike Klassen on City Focus.

Ken Lum is concerned with private and public identity, space and politics. He’s known particularly for his photo-text work. Another major Vancouver work is Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery. A seven-metre-tall globe, called Jan. 1, 1960 in reference to a worldwide process of decolonization, was recently unveiled in Utrecht in the Netherlands. Lum has participated in numerous international biennales, and taught at the University of British Columbia and École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

“MAPPING AND MARKING” PUBLIC ART PROGRAM

Among the seven other projects in the City of Vancouver’s “Mapping and Marking” public art program is artist Fiona Bowie’s video and photography-based work called Surface. A regular passenger ferry on Vancouver’s False Creek is fitted with two underwater cameras that document marine life and transmit the information onto a number of above water locations, including the website www.surfacer.ca. Surface is intended to draw attention to a history of industrial pollution of False Creek, as well as the dire condition of large water bodies around the world. Says Bowie, whose work is...
exhibited in Canada, the U.S. and Europe: “We’re at a point where our oceans are in a real state, and part of this for me is bringing this issue to the surface.” With the cooperation of the firm Aquabus, Bowie has installed two cameras under one of its ferries—a colour video camera (with a underwater LYNN T38 enhancement that penetrates murky conditions) and an infrared camera for photographing at night. A computer relays the imaging to a monitor on the ferry (where passengers can see it) and to a large LED screen on a concrete tower at the Ocean Cement plant on Granville Island, where it can be seen from the water and north False Creek; monitors present it in the nearby Granville Island and Roundhouse community centres, as well as online (where its viewable, Bowie points out, on many portable devices).

Anna Ruth created Sensory Maps of the City of Vancouver. Educated in Vancouver, the artist returned here to continue work on “the meaning of boundary through the exploration of line.” For Sensory Maps of the City of Vancouver, Ruth rode 13 Vancouver public transit routes over a 15-hour period. On each trip, she noted information about the driver, passengers, weather conditions and stops. At the same time, she recorded the vibrations of the vehicle on paper with pen. The information and drawings were transferred to posters installed in glass-covered frames at 40 city bus shelters. The result is a combination of printed information and large abstract line drawing. Numbers on the drawing, linked to a table, indicate where, for example, the overhead bus cables came off the electric wires. Ruth describes the work as “experiential” rather than a statement about public transit. “These drawings evoke a traditional type of mapping; exploring, discovering and defining a territory through a physical journey,” she writes. A graduate of the Emily Carr University of Art and Design and L’École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Cornouaille in France, Ruth now lives in Jyvaskyla, Finland.

Other Mapping and Marking projects include Vanessa Kwan’s Vancouver Vancouver Vancouver, a temporary mobile installation consisting of custom-made postcards, sculptural “kiosk” and interactive website, and David MacWilliam’s Kingsway Luminaires, a series of hand-cast opaque forms on lamp stands along Knight Street at Kingsway in East Vancouver. The LED lights, which change colour from dusk to dawn, reflect historic fixtures.

Blue by Project Rainbow (Sydney Vermont, Heidi Nutley, Jesse Birch and Jade Boyd) is an experimental film and dance documentary, featuring members of the Canadian Women’s Ski Jumping Team at settings in a changing East Vancouver. Paul Wong’s 5 features five interdisciplinary arts and media events at five sites with five journeys, sensory experiences, etc., and Geoffrey Farmer’s Every Letter In The Alphabet is a series of temporary exhibits on the subject of text and the city. All the events ran throughout the Olympic period.

Alison APPELBE is a Vancouver-based freelance writer and photographer, with a special interest in art, architecture and travel, particularly to historic places.