

A Decade in the City

# Placemaking

**PuSh 10** YEARS crossing  
the line

# Ten Blocks: Small Notes on the Public Imaginary

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I remember the first public performance I saw in Vancouver:

Back in 2001, I watched a work called *Yellow Diablo vs. 1980 Camaro*.

Dressed only in a *lucha libre* mask and a pair of tight jeans, and armed with a ladder (to accommodate flying body slams) the performer beat the shit out of a vintage Camaro parked in the middle of the street at Carrall and Water. Audiences were mixed—frat boys heading out to the Blarney Stone and fans of performance art assembled to watch this, the Yellow Diablo's most fearsome match up. Contact mics strapped to the performer's body provided a fuzzy soundtrack. I remember feeling a sense of fear—for one man's broken bones—and an uneasy sense of wonder: how could this be happening in the street?<sup>i</sup>

Flash forward a few years and I'm watching other bodies in the streets on Granville, and other beleaguered cars. The Canucks lost and of course we had a riot. Burning trucks, beer bottles and massive LED screens, tension and broken glass. Déjà vu.

And roll it back a couple years from there and I'm sitting in the Vancouver Public Library on a set of bleachers with some headphones on. There's a performance that I'm watching across the atrium. There are 100 of us or so watching, a rapt audience, while others come and go on their way to the library. They don't notice us, don't notice the performers speaking quietly to each other and into hidden microphones. I am enthralled again and feel another kind of uneasiness.<sup>ii</sup>

And (last one, I promise) it's 2003 and I'm looking for this performance in Chinatown, and I can't find it. An artist is touching a thousand people in the course of her day—small things like brushing her hand on someone's sleeve while she chooses a lemon, a small tap on the shoulder as she passes a man on the street. A click counter in her hand, she roams around enacting her quiet gestures of physical connection. I'm angry because I can't find her, and I miss the whole thing.<sup>iii</sup>

All of these things and so much more in 10 square blocks. Various the neighbourhoods are called Chinatown, the Downtown Eastside, Crosstown, Downtown. Some names are historical or generic, others seem more like real estate creations—something to distinguish a city's aspirations from some of the poorest (and most culturally diverse) postal codes on the continent.

We don't always fight about sports. Sometimes we have bigger fish to fry, and my memory of Canucks riots bleeds into our collective knowledge of Occupy Vancouver, the Anti-Asian riots, the Gastown riots, APEC, Guns N' Roses (fuck you, Axl), Idle No More, this year's commemorations, last year's protests and peaceful demonstrations. In these streets we gather to see art, to hurl post boxes, to cry in public.

In the life of a city performance can be a violent act. It can be the equivalent of broken bones; a gathering up and exploding of our fear of what is possible in public space. Of what we already know is possible in public space. Watching *Yellow Diablo*, I wondered what might happen if the audience joined in, if we lost our sense of things and began to throw ourselves into cars, windows, one another. We did not, on that night, but the feelings of potential energy—invigorated and fearful—stayed in my limbs for days afterwards.

Performance can be a tender thing. It's not always about the sharp edges of spectacle. Once in a while there is integration, when the experience of a work oscillates between the 'real' and composed. In this there is another kind of uneasiness, and *small metal objects* presented by the PuSh Festival in 2008 was one of those works. It was an odd

inhabitation of the public library—unmistakable for those who knew it was happening and unremarkable for those on their way to return a book. It existed alongside the regular goings-on of the library, in a burbling exchange with the flow of public life. To be honest I can't remember the details of the narrative, but what remains is the intimate sensation of the performer's voice in my ear in that soaring atrium, and a slow revelation: that the texture of public space can be shifted by a work's tenderness (and here I define "tender" as a creative gesture that is sensitive, generous and open-ended; a porous addition to the spaces we share).

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Performance can disappear into thin air. Sometimes we don't even know when it happens. Sometimes we don't really care. But the act of looking and sometimes coming up empty-handed is in itself an exercise in how to experience art in public space. Here there is no guarantee of money well spent or details to match the program notes. There is rather a true reflection of crowd-life (where the view is chronically bad): things are not experienced as clear images so much as ripples—a symptom of our connectivity, or just something that passes through.

Having searched the streets for the artist who was touching a thousand people, and coming up wanting, I started to understand something that has served me well in the intervening years: there is creative power in a figment, or rather an after-image. It is an exercise in a public imaginary—artists sometimes create ghosts, on the verge of disappearing, and we must fill in the blurred ends; over time the picture appears, not so much fixed as evolving.

Performance changes with the life of the city.

We are violent, we are tender, we disappear in a crowd. We can't control ourselves sometimes. These performances reflect our citizenship and connectivity, and speak diversely to how we inhabit our city. In a way they teach us to be more conscious citizens, to identify and absorb where the edges of our anger and our tenderness meet. More than this, they produce a sense of the imaginary in direct overlap with the real. That muscular potential energy, the bending of our expectations, the ghostly image of what might have been; all of these produce new possibilities for how we engage with and envision public space. In the street and in a crowd we use our fullest powers of imagination: we see what is, what could be and where we stand—or how we act—within it.

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i. *Yellow Diablo vs. 1980 Camaro* is a work by David Yonge. It was presented by the Live Biennial of Performance Art in conjunction with Access Gallery on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2001.

ii. *small metal objects* by Back to Back Theatre (Australia) was presented by PuSh International Performing Arts Festival from January 30 – February 3, 2008.

iii. Diane Borsato's *Touching 1000 People* was curated by Kathleen Ritter for Artspeak Gallery. It took place from May 20 – 30, 2003.

Vanessa Kwan is a Vancouver-based artist and curator. Recent projects include a public artwork called *Geyser for Hillcrest Park* (with Erica Stocking), *Sad Sack*, a series of collaborations on the subject of melancholy, and *Everything Between Open and Closed*, a study of signs. As performance programmer for the Vancouver Art Gallery, she co-produced *Guided Tour* (Peter Reder, PuSh 2012) and *Sometimes I Think, I Can See You* (Mariano Pensotti, PuSh 2013). She was curator of *sad sack, by night* for Club PuSh in 2013, and will be performing with *Norma*, an art collective active since 2003, at the 2014 Festival.