

FURNISHING POSITIONS 02

REPRESENTATION | PRESENTATION

ISSUE 02

DYLAN MINER | CHEYANNE TURIONS

29/09/2014

CONTINGENT CONVERGENCES

CHEYANNE TURIONS

In 2003, it was announced that Vancouver would host the 2010 Winter Olympic games, but protests against the spectacle started long before. Opposition was declared—against the anticipated displacement of low-income residents, civic debt in the face of extraordinary corporate gains, and infractions of Indigenous sovereignty. These criticisms focus on the dark side of neoliberalism, according to which the boundaries between private and collective expressions are recoded in favour of commercial interests. For urban theorist Miguel Robles-Durán, public space is no longer a place available to all for social gatherings, debate, protest, or retreat without specific purpose for the simple reason that these uses do not “[meet] the requirements of the private investors, private corporations, and of public-private alliances to extract land rent and most importantly, to develop new spaces in which to re-invest their accumulated surplus.”¹ As preparations for the games mounted around Vancouver, these tensions were predictably aggravated.

Mega-events mobilize a microcosm of practices that drive social, economic, and political transformations in service of neoliberal agendas. Long before the events arrive, and even before a host is assigned, cities compete to offer the most lucrative benefit packages to the mega-event overlords, including significant tax breaks and robust infrastructure developments. Little if any democratic input is sought from local citizens, but the cultural and economic costs are subsequently downloaded onto them, through rollbacks of social services, increased surveillance of public spaces, and gentrification of neighbourhoods.

Responding to these effects—well documented elsewhere and anticipated in Vancouver—the artist-run centre VIVO took an institutional stance of resistance. Since its founding in 1973, VIVO Media Arts Centre (then known as Satellite Video Exchange Society, and later Video In) has served as a meeting point between artists and activists, fostering both complementarity and tension between them. Hoping to preserve this practice of encounter, the decision was made early on for VIVO to refrain from applying for Cultural Olympiad funding, a rollout of over \$20 million to arts and culture organizations in Vancouver to realize the cultural programming mandate of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Over the three-year lead-up to the Olympics, other cultural organizations across the city competed for this funding to realize projects to stoke the fever of sports on the horizon. When core financial support for many of these organizations was revoked without warning due to drastic cuts made by the province of British Columbia to the BC Arts Council’s budget, cultural workers were outraged, but not really surprised.² In the official narrative, overspending on Olympic infrastructure and security was, of course, unrelated to these arts cuts. However, the general

feeling within the cultural sector was that the two events—cuts to the BC Arts Council and overspending on the Olympics—were causally related. Culture, as an expression of the public, was sacrificed for urban development under the guise of future-tense economic growth, and the claim that the games would “pay for themselves,” despite the abundance of research to the contrary.

In the glow of imminent spectacle, the terms of Cultural Olympiad funding became more sinister: accepting Olympiad money prohibited artists from speaking critically of the event by virtue of a clause in their funding contracts: “The artist shall at all times refrain from making any negative or derogatory remarks respecting VANOC, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Olympic movement generally, Bell and/or other sponsors associated with VANOC.”³ VIVO was the only artist-run centre to expressly abstain from seeking these funds, operating outside of the sanctioned frame of participation, and therefore within the parameters of free speech.

And then suddenly, even the rights of citizens at large were compromised. The City of Vancouver attempted to legislate against expressed dissent through the passage of temporary bylaws that banned leaflets, posters, advertising, and graffiti that “did not ‘celebrate’ the 2010 Winter Games and ‘create or enhance a festive environment and atmosphere.’” The ordinance criminalized anti-Olympic signs and gave Canadian authorities the right to remove them from both public and private property.⁴ Public space, broadly understood as the entire visual realm, was thought to belong properly to the IOC and their sponsors, rather than the residents of Vancouver, especially those residents who did not embrace the Olympic vibe. In this equation, free speech was less valuable than the façade of absolute conviviality and sponsorship coherence.

Against these threats of censorship, citizens and activists deployed a diversity of tactics: the BC Civil Liberties Association mounted a successful legal challenge against the temporary bylaws (the sole exception being that Anti-Olympic sentiment could not utilize the copyrighted logos of sponsors or the IOC). Some artists and artist-run centres accepted Olympiad funding and mounted projects that obliquely addressed the political, social, and economic repercussions of playing the role of host city. At VIVO, a public space was created, through the rejection of public funds.⁵

If public space is indeterminate and radically open by necessity, the centre carefully constructed a void, as a space of potentiality. For many months prior to the winter games, VIVO facilitated meetings for an ad hoc group of community members to discuss ideas about the needs of the city, in order to discover how best to use the bare resources of the space. Provoked by the mega-event and aggravated by associated legislation, VIVO’s refusal of Cultural Olympiad funding created the conditions for a counter-culture, cultivated from the will, criticality, and energy of whoever showed up. The constructed void was an experiment in embodied cultural negotiation.

What actually transpired at VIVO during the Olympics occupied the centre around the clock. It called itself *Safe Assembly*.⁶ According to VIVO’s project statement:

In order to preserve our history as a place for artists to engage in a culture of critical action, VIVO has chosen not to participate in the 2010 Cultural Olympiad. We intend to use the clarity of our position outside of this

*spectacle to operate as a hub for analysis, skill sharing, production, and collaboration. We want to create a space for artists to consider their own production in relation to the events and systems around them.*⁷

While a core group facilitated the space and the events, it is important to note that the structure was radically open; the programs were meant to accommodate whatever forms of expression or occupation they might be called upon to entertain. The people who worked as programmers acted as facilitators, not curators. Solidarities were thus built to produce a space that could register dissent.

Safe Assembly was many things. It was *Afternoon School*, a free school that responded to the city-wide disruption of post-secondary education. It was the *Evening News*, a series of forums for sharing experiences, observations, footage, and art in response to the coverage portrayed in major media outlets. It was the *Vancouver [de]tour Guide*, a Google mapping project in response to the corporate, sanitized version of the city offered to tourists by the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC). It was *Safe Façade*, a series of window works critiquing violations of Aboriginal and civil rights, in the face of the city’s attempts to curtail expression. *Safe Assembly* was also a radio station, which was the only aspect of the project to be shut down by authorities. On the second day of the Olympics, people wearing VANOC jackets, armed with VANOC business cards, and claiming to be from Industry Canada—the governmental agency that oversees radio, spectrum, and telecommunications standards across the country—demanded that the very humble, short-range transmissions come to an immediate halt.

There were other ways that the Olympics redefined public space. It is now possible to take rapid transit from the airport to the city centre. The construction of Olympic infrastructure, including the widening of the Sea-to-Sky Highway between Whistler and Vancouver, involved extensive destruction to the traditional lands of the Lil’wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples on whose unceded territory the games were mounted (despite protests mounted by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people). Less obvious markers of the impact of the Olympics also remain, such as the surveillance cameras installed in public spaces that just didn’t seem to get packed up at the end of it all.

By refusing public funding, VIVO used privately owned space to generate a temporary public space. Given the brutally clear relationship between power and space, *Safe Assembly* was able to transcend the use of social issues as subject matter for art to become a political art work for sixteen days in February 2010. This fleeting, excited concurrence of energy and resources is what public space has become in our neoliberal present-tense, which thwarts investment in longer-lasting public spaces. Today, it exists as a philosophical position, a thing produced collectively through struggle. And so we make it.

This essay was informed by an interview with Kika Thorne conducted on July 23, 2014, with additional comments by Alex Muir. Thorne is the former Curator/Programmer at VIVO Media Arts (2007-2010). Muir has worked at VIVO in various capacities since 2008.

NOTES

- 1 Miguel Robles-Durán, “For the Brief Moments of Confrontation,” in *Make Shift City, Renegotiating the Urban Commons*, ed. Francesca Ferguson and Urban Drift Projects, in cooperation with the Berlin Senate for Urban Development (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2013), 25-31.
- 2 As reported in *The Tyee* at the time, “core B.C. provincial arts funding is slated to fall by more than 88 per cent over two years, from \$19.5 million in 2008-09 down to \$2.25 million in 2010-11, according to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture.” Cited in Charles Campbell, “B.C. Arts Cuts ‘Devastating’ Says Tory Minister,” *The Tyee*, September 28, 2009, <http://thetyee.ca/News/2009/09/28/ArtsCuts>.
- 3 Marsha Lederman, “Salt Lake’s Olympic Artistic Director Sends Open Letter to VANOC,” *The Globe and Mail*, February 11, 2010, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/salt-lakes-olympic-artistic-director-sends-open-letter-to-vanoc/article4305699>.
- 4 Jules Boykoff, “The Anti-Olympics,” *The New Left Review* 67 (January-February, 2011): 41-59, <http://newleftreview.org/11/67/jules-boykoff-the-anti-olympics>.
- 5 Although the Cultural Olympiad funds were not public in the sense of this country’s art councils, which operate at arms length, I use “public” to denote that the funds were not from private sources, be that patronage or sponsorship. The Vancouver Olympic Committee administered the funds.
- 6 *Safe Assembly* programming was facilitated by Am Johal, Amy Lynn Kazymchuk, Lois Klassen, Alex Muir, Cecily Nicholson, Nicholas Perrin, Emilio Rojas, Kristen Roos, Althea Thauberger, Kika Thorne and myself, cheyanne turions, with support from the VIVO Management Collective and Board of Directors.
- 7 <http://artsydartsy.herokuapp.com/events/1270-safe-assembly-2010>
In the four years since *Safe Assembly* took place, revamped websites and the challenge of data migration means that there is no available archive of the events on VIVO’s website. The text from the press release here is taken from a Vancouver-based events-listing website called *Artsy Dartsy*.

PUBLISHER:
BLACKWOOD GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
MISSISSAUGA

3359 MISSISSAUGA ROAD
MISSISSAUGA, ON L5L 1G6
WWW.BLACKWOODGALLERY.CA

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DYLAN MINER (Métis) is Associate Professor at Michigan State University, where he coordinates a new Indigenous Contemporary Art Initiative. He holds a PhD from The University of New Mexico and has published more than fifty journal articles, book chapters, critical essays, and encyclopedia entries. In 2010, he was awarded an Artist Leadership Fellowship from the National Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian Institution). Since 2010, he has been featured in more than thirteen solo exhibitions and been artist-in-residence at institutions such as the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, École supérieure des beaux-arts in Nantes, the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture, Rabbit Island, Santa Fe Art Institute, and various universities. His artwork has been the subject of articles or reviewed in publications including *ARTnews*, *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Indian Country Today*, *First American Art Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Guardian*, *Måg Magazine* (Norway), and *The Chicago Sun-Times*, among others.

CHEYANNE TURIONS is an independent, Toronto-based curator and writer who holds a degree in Philosophy from the University of British Columbia. Most recently she co-curated (with Kim Simon) the series *Canadian Ecstasy* with poet and performance artist Ariana Reines at Gallery TPW and reviewed the Kuwait Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture for *C Magazine*. She is also the director of No Reading After the Internet (Toronto), and sits on the Board of Directors for the journal *Filip* and the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre. She was the Shop Manager/Curator at Art Metropole from 2012-2014 and is now a part of the organization’s Lifetime Membership. Currently she is a member of the co-creative team for the Art and Society theme within the Cities for People project.

ARTIST PROJECT (reverse):
DYLAN MINER, *All Land is Indigenous*, 2014

ALL SPACE IS PUBLIC

ALL LAND IS INDIGENOUS

