

Psychedelic Satire in the Grey Zone of Public Space

Alexis Hogan

I began my summer as Open Space's curatorial assistant toward the end of May 2014. A few short days after I familiarized myself with the exhibition and strike of *Strange Encounters*, Chloe Lum and Yannick Desranleau (a.k.a. Seripop) landed in Victoria from Montreal to begin their two-week-long residency *We're never gonna get close because it's hanging, since we took off the horse but kept the rider*. The artists descended upon Open Space with large reams of patterned, silkscreened paper saturated in striking colours. Their combination of Tyvek and pre-screened paper was to be glued, folded, and stitched into a series of hats that could be swiftly deployed around the Capital Regional District (CRD) as playful, visually disruptive, site-specific interventions.

The Montreal pair has been creating art and noise (AIDSWolf) together for fifteen years¹, and they've focused much of their conceptual and material exploration probing the entropic devolution of their materials-in-practice, demonstrated in works such as *Avancez en arrière* (2012) and *J'm'en suis déjà souvenu* (2012). Both works highlight the nature of urban expansion evidenced through continual mutations of land, cityscapes, and civic spaces in the name of development and capitalist progress. Wielding their neon hydra of sculpture, serigraphy, and colour theory, Lum and Desranleau provoke sensorial stimulation, and through their critical manipulations of modernist techniques, they incite latent ephemeral cultures.

I wasn't familiar with their work—noise or art—and so I was entirely unprepared for how Lum and Desranleau's intellectual and material practice would colour the

introduction to my term at Open Space, as well as impact my own theoretical and aesthetic considerations.

Lum and Desranleau's time in residence at Open Space followed a divergent trajectory²: they maintained the core of their creative foundation but aimed their sights upon civically endorsed sculpture and its characteristic banality. The pair picked a prime location to instigate their particular vein of Western cultural critique. Victoria is the capital of British Columbia, a port city for cruise ships, and a major tourist destination on the West Coast of North America. Its cityscape is adorned with well-groomed pockets that create a seamless tableau for postcards and selfies. The capital is rife with objects championed as art for all audiences, from bronze monuments to dull abstractions, most passed over time and again as the pieces are conceived only to recede into a metropolitan backdrop as "urban furniture."² Lum and Desranleau chose sanctioned projects from the CRD inventory of public art, which allowed the artists to scrutinize the relationship of civic sculpture to the notion of an implied homogenous and ambivalent public audience. Concurrently, the length of the place-based context of their residency encouraged the artists to emphasize the invisibilized governance of public space, communal objects, and private property.

True to the history of their practice, Lum and Desranleau's time in residence at Open Space maintained an effective tension between elements of humour and sharp sociocultural critique. To preserve this balance, Lum and Desranleau have a system of rules. I don't know if their rules are hierarchical, but I noticed first that each piece of paper compounds the sensation of visual overload. Then, the artists utilize their self-imposed structure of never-ending tasks until they loop and grow and time simply runs out—then the work is finished². Lum and Desranleau's residency at Open Space was no

exception to their rules: it began with a list of approximately twenty works that they chose to festoon their psychedelic cartoon hats upon. Then their projects quickly escalated into a challenge to leave remarkable ephemera on every piece of public art possible—minus war memorials and First Nations' works. I'm not conflating the two, but each occupies a particular, sensitive space in both the private and public realms.

The first piece to be deployed in Lum and Desranleau's residency was a comically oversized hat resembling a dunce cap, printed in swatches of subdued peach and sky blue. I rode with Lum, Desranleau, curator Doug Jarvis, and then assistant curator Sara Fruchtman in broad daylight (the lot of us poorly camouflaged with vis-a-vests and hard hats) to the first site, the *Terry Fox Memorial* (Nathan Scott, 2005) at one of Victoria's many tourist destinations, Mile Zero.

The artists did not have more than a minute to reflect upon their installation when a neighbourhood vigilante confronted the team. It was an illuminating exchange. The man instantaneously perceived our actions as stepping outside of unspoken moral boundaries and therefore took it upon himself to police our actions. Shoot first; ask questions never.

I think the first sentences out of his mouth were "You're not fooling anyone with your vests and hard hats. This is not art! That's a dunce cap! This is worse than graffiti. What have you *ever* done in your lives that can compare to what Terry Fox did?"

His vitriol left us all momentarily dumb struck, until the next spear-like question erupted snidely out of him—"What does this *thing* even do?" Lum, looking directly at him, put quite simply: "It protects him from the elements."

Without reductively explaining the project, Lum had volleyed a respectful but significant response to the gentleman's tirade. The neighbourhood watch-cum-art critic had not taken one moment to ask what we were doing or why we were doing it. But he

knew we were artists and, to top it off, imposters. And the man knew what art was. He responded with all-too-familiar paternal modernist fervour; through his attitude, he defined art to his audience of miscreants and insisted that we had committed sacrilege upon “Art” and memory, and personal sacrifice. One could easily read from his reaction that the anarchic gesture of the artists’ intervention and the collaborative efforts of their accomplices were far more threatening than the actuality of a flimsy hat perched upon a statue, vulnerable to the Pacific’s wind.

Lum and Desranleau’s gesture struck a nerve. What the artists and their team had failed to recognize with the *Terry Fox Memorial* was that, like war memorials or First Nation’s public art works, Terry Fox’s legacy moves the statue out of the realm of art. In this instance, as Open Space director Helen Marzolf so aptly put it, “For a secular community, the statue of Terry Fox inhabits the space of a shrine.”³ As soon as we had a moment to reflect upon this notion in a post-installation dialogue, the trespass against the community at large became embarrassingly clear.

Although the artists’ first intervention may have been read as inconsiderate or disgraceful, the act of playful irreverence toward a piece of public sculpture in combination with the response it elicited from the artists’ audience, precisely exemplified the subject of the artists’ interrogations. The artists had irrevocably called forth the verbalization of their audiences’ expectations of communal spaces and objects, and contemporary art. Capping Terry Fox was like blowing cigar smoke into a room full of invisible lasers; after the initial provocation, the artists had a clear indication of the psychic terrain they had chosen to traverse. Consequently, the anticipation for Lum and Desranleau’s projects and audience shifted. Though the artists prepared for a potential onslaught of negative reception during the remainder of their time in

residence, the artists persisted, and used *We're never gonna get close* to encourage the temporal metamorphosis of dormant municipal art.

What is most salient about *We're never gonna get close* is that as an audience, the series of interventions invokes our positionality as subjects constantly engaging in seemingly neutral public spaces. Whether or not the community appreciated Lum and Desranleau's work, they were, in moments, spurred into active embodiments of democracy. For instance, the individual at Mile Zero satisfied his outrage by removing the hat from the *Terry Fox Memorial* and was clearly triumphant in self-recognition of his agency in that moment. And as an artist and curator with an invested interest in print-media, sculpture and critical cultural theory, my experience of the work was quite opposite to the gentleman's at Mile Zero, and I will detail it in later paragraphs.

To construe Lum and Desranleau's residency at Open Space as a series of artistic interventions that were negatively received would be entirely misleading. The artists bequeathed upward of twenty pieces of public sculpture with the kaleidoscopic patterns of their iconic markers⁴, many of them in high-profile places such as Victoria's Inner Harbour. Throughout the majority of these actions, the artists and their assistants were photographed, cheered by onlookers, or even physically supported if the instalment demanded it.

The encouragement from the melange of tourists and locals was not necessarily born out of an immediate recognition and investment in lampooning the stagnancy of public sculpture. Rather, individuals became engaged with the artist's collaborations out of an instantaneous detection of the surreality and charisma of Lum and Desranleau's activities, which were forceful enough to momentarily reactivate spaces and objects in uncanny ways. The sheer scale and ambition of *We're never gonna get close* was enough to jolt throngs of individuals out of their unconscious participation in

the spectacle of tourism and daily life and into conscious participation in the artists' interventions or, at least, conscientious voyeurism.

For me, the most affecting intervention occurred when the artists placed a large ship-like hat on the statue *Captain James Cook* (Freeborn, 1976). The statue signals a crucial nexus in Victoria's downtown core; it is a central figure in the visage of the Inner Harbour; it is across the street from the Empress Hotel, and concurrently, is situated across the street from the capital city's Parliament Building. I photo-documented the stream of activity as *Cook's* imposing bronze persona was belittled by the juvenile absurdity of an immense multicoloured paper boat. In effect, the artists created a parody of one of the many monuments to Canada's colonial project (past and present). Though the act was fleeting, the transformation of *Cook* and the creation of a new memorial in Victoria's inherently contemporary settler colonialist landscape was immensely satisfying for me. Dozens of tourists photographed the renovated image of the colonial project. It's significant to note that *Cook's* ship navigated through Nootka Sound, Nuuchahnulth territory, and landed in the Tahsis Inlet. According to hegemonic Canadian history, his "discovery" of the inlet created the birthplace of British Columbia. The symbol of colonialism was sullied by an impudent act of subterfuge, employed by cheeky artists with thoroughly developed critical intent. Through an open act of irreverence toward a sick, corrupt mentality that has poisoned these territories and its Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities for 200 years, their intervention rendered, for an instant, an icon of colonialism ludicrous and powerless.

Yet now the series of interventions, *We're never gonna get close*, has faded into the archive of memory. The host of those that happened upon the altered urban

furniture are left to reflect upon what those obtuse hats did to the pieces and their public.

Works Cited

Wolf Shenk, Joshua. "The End of Genius." *Sunday Review*. The New York Times. 19 July 2014. Web. 22 July 2014.

¹ seripop "Seripop culture," *Seripop*, August 1, 2014, <http://seripop.tumblr.com/page/2>.

² Desranleau, Yannick and Chloe Lum. "*We're never gonna get close because it's hanging, since we took off the horse but kept the rider* Artist's Talk." Open Space Arts Society. Victoria, BC. 13 June 2104. Artist's Talk.

³ Marzolf, Helen. Personal interview. 12 July 2014.

⁴ Desranleau, Yannick. Personal interview. 11 July 2014.