

How Much Is That Big Sign In The Window? Ron Terada's Translations

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The Vancouver-based artist Ron Terada has garnered a considerable international reputation from his often witty reworking of public signage, popular culture and art world ephemera and advertising, or as he has put it in an interview on the website *Bad at Sports*, “translations of what is out there.”



Fig. 1. *Entering City of Vancouver*, 2002, 3M reflective highway vinyl, extruded aluminium, industrial lights, galvanized steel, wood.

In 2002, he had a copy fabricated of the City of Vancouver highway sign, which was shown inside the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in the city (Fig. 1). The relocation of the statement

“ENTERING CITY OF VANCOUVER” into an art gallery immediately points to Duchamp’s readymades. The sign *was* built, but there is no suggestion of any difference from the standard road signs located on the city boundaries. Furthermore, as Michael Darling has noted, the sign disturbs conventional categories of art itself, since it “is almost a found object, mimics the flat frontality and lighting necessities of painting, takes up enough space to be a sculpture, and has the kind of energizing presence to make a claim as installation”. (44) Perhaps more importantly, it refers to the legacy of the group of artists associated with the City of Vancouver— Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, and Ken Lum, and references the Vancouver Conceptual artists The N.E. Thing Company, Iain and Ingrid Baxter, who during the 1960s and 1970s erected signs to name and therefore amusingly claim ownership of various public sites (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. N.E Thing Co., *You Will Soon Pass By*, 1969, *Virtual Museum of Canada*, Web, 5 March, 2010.

This appropriation of the sign into his gallery show stakes a new generational claim in the Vancouver school of photo conceptualists who have become synonymous with the art

produced in the city—a kind of brand Vancouver. It also alludes to the importance of place in canonic narratives of Canadian art and literature (where is “here” or more to the point who decides who constitutes the group that defines “here”?), and questions the validity of defining art by region in a globalized world. This sign was included in the exhibition *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art* exhibited from 2003-2005 at Seattle Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Vancouver Art Gallery and the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco. The exhibition sought to point up artistic links along the 2, 200 mile transnational coastal corridor. “The west coast,” the edge of the western world, is a mythical place, largely invented by 1960s counter culture. In this context, The “Vancouver School” and even the “City of Vancouver” start to look somewhat insular and fragile as discrete identities. As the directors of the institutions argue in the foreword of the exhibition catalogue:

[B]y offering evidence of creative cross-talk and shared aesthetic concerns among artists living and working on North America’s west coast, this exhibition reveals the need to redefine our notions of “regional” art centers, expanding them beyond considerations of national identity. (6)

Defining Terada as a “Vancouver-based” artist, then, appears to be something of an anachronism in a now fundamentally globalised art world, and his “ENTERING CITY OF VANCOUVER” sign may be read as both claim to a stake and critique of parochial identities.



Fig. 3. Ron Terada, *You Have Left the American Sector (Vous Êtes Sortis de Secteur Américain)*, Windsor Arts Advocacy, 2005, Web, 15 March, 2010.

In 2005, Terada executed his first public commission, another road sign, with a nod towards Checkpoint Charlie, bore the text “YOU HAVE LEFT THE AMERICAN SECTOR/ VOUS ÊTES SORTIS DU SECTEUR AMÉRICAIN” (Fig. 3). Clearly, the piece identifies the U.S. as a fundamentally military power. Consider how ludicrous it would be to situate it on the other side of the border: “YOU HAVE LEFT THE CANADIAN SECTOR”. Municipal city workers from Windsor, Ontario, responding to complaints from local businesses that it might damage relations between the two countries and offend USAmerican tourists, were instructed to remove the sign six days after it had been erected at the border crossing between Windsor and Detroit. Terada is nowhere to be seen in the piece, and the city appears to be its author. Terada had been invited to put up a sign to immediately take it down. Subsequently it has been shown in various galleries; not least in the exhibition “De L’Écriture” at the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Montreal in 2007, but having it stare at

a white wall instead of Detroit dilutes its impact (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Ron Terada, *Vous Êtes Sorti du Secteur Américain (You Have Left the American Sector)*, 2005, reflective highway vinyl, extruded aluminium, galvanized steel, wood; *Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montreal*, Web, 12 March, 2010.

In 2005, Terada produced a block neon sign *Stay Away From Lonely Places* which appeared as part of his exhibition on the exterior wall of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver (Fig. 5). Like the USAmerican curator of conceptual art Seth Siegelbaum, Terada here seeks to extend the conventional gallery space.

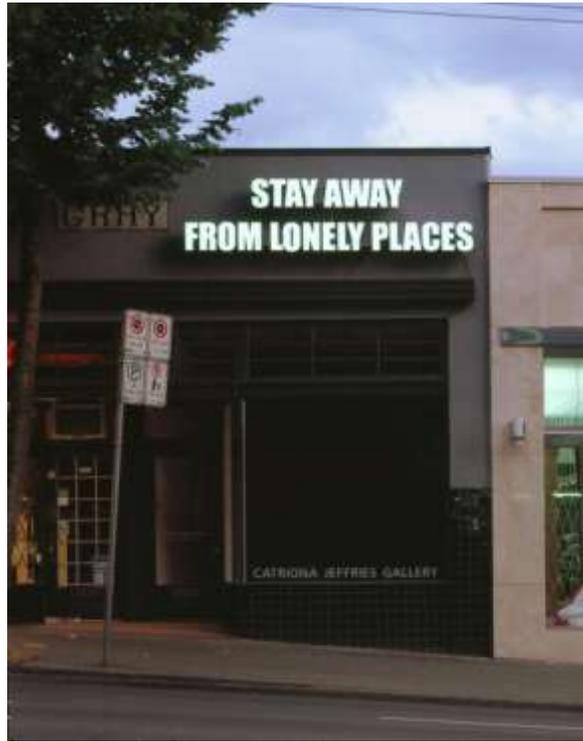


Fig. 5. Ron Terada, *Stay Away from Lonely Places*, 2005, *M HKA*, Web, 5 March, 2010.

Vying for attention in the thick of commercial signs, Terada's apparently simple admonition, a quote or "translation" from a Willie Nelson song, is reminiscent of tabloid generated paternal panic about urban danger—"Don't go down that dark alley". At the same time, it glows prominently on an art gallery above the dealer's name, which seems to claim authorship, and hints at a critique of the art world and the gallery system. In 2006, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham had the sign fixed on a rundown chapel before it was turned into studio space (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Ron Terada, *Stay Away from Lonely Places*, 2006, *Art Gallery of Nova Scotia*, Web, 3 April , 2010.

On the drab streets of the post industrial Midlands, the slick white Vegas neon sign looks conspicuously out of place, and although the volume of the admonishment is increased, the sign might even be talking to itself.

Terada's most recent and largest public sign was commissioned by the Olympic and Paralympic Art Program to coincide with the Games that were held in Vancouver in 2010 (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Ron Terada, *The Words Don't Fit the Picture*, 2009, *Livedesign*, Web, April 2, 2010.

The Words Don't Fit the Picture, a light based work erected outside the Vancouver Central Library, is a deceptively simple statement. The text is another “translation” of a Willie Nelson song about the end of an affair. On the City of Vancouver website, Terada himself has suggested that “within the context of a public library, the work touches upon...the use of words and language as boundless and imaginative, as a catalyst for a multiplicity of meanings.” Indeed the text does seem open to any number of interpretations, one of which is that the slash between image/text, picture and words, is too thick. There is little hope for a stable and comfortable relationship between image and text if words are endless chains of signifiers, scuttling away from any definitive meaning. Or the piece might be read as nostalgic, and no longer “fitting” its location. Vancouver was once so dense with neon that the glow from the city made it recognizable from the air. A reminder of those days is the famous Bowmac sign on West Broadway (Fig. 8), once the largest free standing sign in North America, now half obscured by the Toys R Us logo. A sign of the times.



Fig. 8. BowMac sign, Vancouver, *Aol News*, Web, March 11, 2010.

An alternative would be to consider the “fit” between the signage (the words) and not the city as a whole, but specifically the Vancouver Central Library (the picture) behind it.

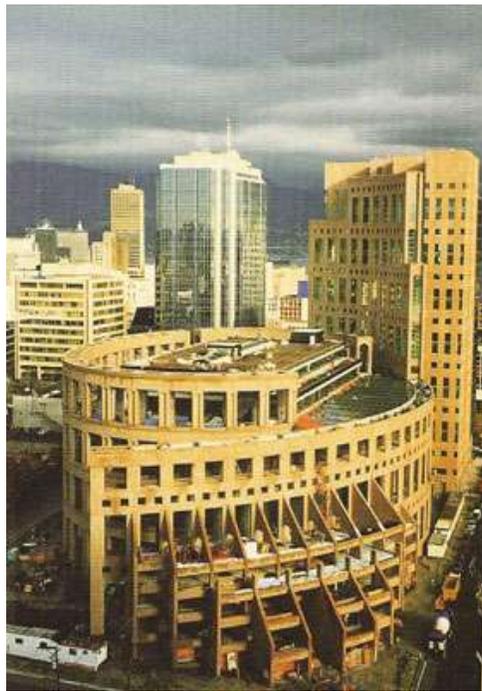


Fig. 9. Vancouver Public Library, *National Library Relocations*, Web, March 30, 2010.

The building (Fig. 9) clearly references the Colosseum in Rome, and thus insists on a European and imperial heritage. Terada's sign on the other hand is vernacular Vancouver, and no, thankfully, it does not fit.

Inevitably, the context of the 2010 Winter Olympics suggests another reading. The Olympic Games are drenched in a rhetoric of international and multicultural harmony through healthy competition. However protests against the Games in Vancouver redefined them as a publicly funded \$6 billion corporate promotion scam, that ignored Native land claims, poverty and homelessness, and civil liberties—"I Believe," the anthem for the Games, rang out right off key in the Downtown Lower East Side. Furthermore artists participating in the Cultural Olympiad were obliged to sign a contract which included the clause:

The artist shall at all times refrain from making any negative or derogatory remarks respecting VANOC (the organizing committee), the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Olympic movement generally, Bell and/or other sponsors associated with VANOC.

This restriction (which even Raymond T. Grant, the former artistic director of the Salt Lake City 2002 Olympic Winter Games Arts Festival complained about) is hardly in keeping with the advertised spirit of the Olympics. Terada's piece circumvents this gagging order—the Olympic rhetoric indeed doesn't fit the Olympic spectacle.

Terada's translations of art world ephemera include signs and posters for exhibitions. For the 2006 *Territory* exhibition at Artspeak and Presentation House Gallery, Terada produced mobile signboards presented in civic spaces around Vancouver, (again with a nod to The N.E. Thing Company) one of which he recycled for the piece he contributed to the exhibition *Concrete Language* at the Contemporary Art Gallery later that year (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Ron Terada, *Untitled (Concrete Language)*, 2006, ink jet print 111.8 x 139.7 cm., *Contemporary Art Gallery*, Web, April 6, 2010.

The sign bore only the title of the show, a strategy he has used before in the neon pieces for the exhibitions *These Days* and *Promises* (both 2001), and invites comparison with U.S conceptual language artist Lawrence Weiner who stated “Every artist’s work has a title. Titles are my work.” (quoted Morley 143). In Terada’s photographic translation of the sign, once again all is not as it seems: it is not what it is, to misquote a recent Terada neon sign (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Ron Terada, *It Is What It Is*, 2008, 15 mm white neon tubing, 91.5 × 449.6 cm., *The Canadian Design Resource*, Web, April, 4, 2010.

The Vancouver Contemporary Art Gallery statement on the show claims that each artist “builds relations between text and visual material that move beyond the typical discursive or diagrammatic functions of language.” Terada’s piece looks perfectly transparent though—it’s just the name of the exhibition. It doesn’t seem to draw attention to its form at all. The bland lettering of commercial signage doesn’t speak to the typographical pyrotechnics of the poetry to which it refers. Yet, the photograph of a sign placed in an vacant lot adjacent to piles of concrete girders, which when viewed end on look like “A”s, literally piles of concrete language or letters at least, the sign accurately identifies the territory, while in the background there is graffiti’d concrete wall--language *on* concrete. Terada’s sign functions as a reading of what is at first sight an invisible urban scene, pointing up the way language in landscape inevitably changes our relationship with place. The piece is again likely an ironic reference to Terada being positioned as a “Vancouver” artist. Ian Wallace, one of the founding fathers of Vancouver conceptual art, (who also participated in the exhibition) came to visual art via literature, publishing concrete poetry in bill bissett’s

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blewointment magazine in the 1960s (Fig. 12).

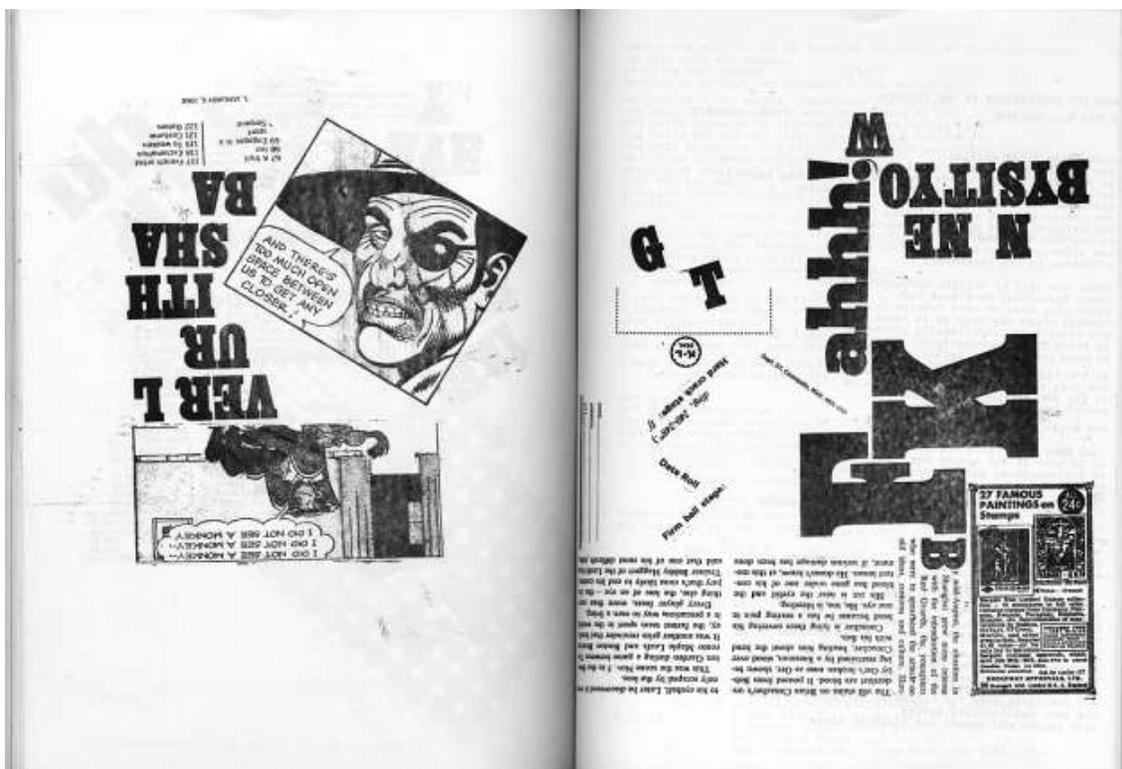


Fig. 12. Ian Wallace, text in *blewointment*, 1968, *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, Web, April 2, 2010.



Fig. 13. Ron Terada, *Untitled*, 1993, acrylic on gesso on linen, 106.5 x 183 cm., *Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art*, Web, 3 April, 2010.

In the mid 1990s, Terada produced a series of meticulously painted enlargements on canvas of adverts for shows placed in *Artforum* (Fig 13). Terada's attention to art advertising has its precedents in the work, for example, of the British artist Simon Linke, and the 1981 "Pictures and Promises" exhibition at The Kitchen in New York, curated by Barbara Kruger, a show in which advertisements, logos and works of art were given equal status on the walls of the gallery.

Terada's *Ad Paintings*—one of which reproduces the advert for an Ian Wallace show—occupy an ambivalent position between homage to and critique of the gallery system. The art world, like any other commercial venture, has an economic base in which advertising plays a central role. The *Ad Paintings*, then, unashamedly foreground the mercantile aspects of art. Or, by translating the advert into the art, by making the advert all there is, do these paintings not imply an emptiness at the heart of the business? Value in the art world is determined by where you show. How many people read *Artforum* for the adverts? "Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory...it is the map that engenders the territory" as Baudrillard put it (quoted in Morley 176). In Terada's *Ad Paintings*, it is the advert that engenders the art.

Further exploring the role of the advert in the art world, Terada, in collaboration with the bookshop Art Metropole in Toronto, produced "The Trading Places Issue," Vol. 1 No. 1, of the magazine *Defile* (Spring 2003) (Fig. 14). The title refers to General Idea's *FILE Magazine*, which was published by Art Metropole from 1972 to 1989.



Fig. 14. Ron Terada, *Defile*, Art Metropole, Web, 30 March 2010.

Terada sent invitations to a number of Canadian and international arts magazines to advertise in the first issue of *Defile*—a magazine which would be solely constituted by the elicited adverts. In return, the magazines contacted were to provide advertising for *Defile*: a trading of art world territories.

Terada's most ambitious, or perhaps audacious, project in disturbing the categories of art and advertising is his exhibition *Catalogue* at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2003. The catalogue is not just a supplementary, printed support, but the very substance of the exhibition (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. *Catalogue*, 2003.

This manoeuvre harks back to late 1960s New York conceptual art curator Seth Siegelbaum's exhibitions in which the catalogues *were* the shows. (The connection is made firmer if we consider that Siegelbaum often included the work of The N.E. Thing Company in his projects). Sponsors for Terada's catalogue were contacted and those who donated money received a signed edition of a photographic print by Terada. More importantly, their names constituted the exhibition in the gallery, appearing on both the walls and the windows. Terada's *Catalogue*, then, is only the publication itself and the advertised names of the sponsors. Terada's strategy here points even more clearly than in the *Ad Paintings* to the economic structures on which the art world relies. There is no overt critique here of the exploited artist. The exhibition is a very shrewd way of getting a gallery to produce an extremely lavish catalogue for a relatively young artist from which not just the artist but also

the institution stands to gain prestige. And of course the sponsors too, who instead of having their names on the walls of the entrance as gesture of gratitude, or more likely publicity, are promoted to the walls of the gallery and become the exhibition in the gallery. So has Terada become the prey to the market forces at work in the contemporary art world, even if everyone stands to gain from his strategies? Is he only in it for the money? Such questions falsely assume that art should exist in some vacuum beyond the economic forces in which it circulates, that it should remain unsullied by commerce. As Jens Hoffman argues:

The show is a self-generating system, a perfect metaphor for the current state of the art world, where conflicts and controversies seem to be a thing of the past. In the end everyone gets what they want: the patrons are recognized as supporters of the local art community, the Contemporary Art Gallery is acknowledged for being a reflexive and progressive institution, the audience experiences a challenging exhibition, the critics get something to reflect upon and, most important, Terada gets his catalogue! (37)

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