Decolonial Aesthetics from the Americas
University of Toronto, Hart House
October 10 - 12, 2013

Panel on
Decolonizing the Local:
Canadian Artistic Practice in the context of the Americas
Gordon Brent Ingram, side stream environmental design, Vancouver
Decolonial Aesthetics from the Americas
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Repopulating Contentious Territory:
Recent Indigenous Aesthetic Interventions in Public Space on the
West Coast of Canada
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Repopulating Contentious Territory:
Recent Indigenous Aesthetic Interventions in Public Space on the
West Coast of Canada

Thanks to the organizers of this meeting and their arranging for transportation and accommodation budgets for people like me who have come a long ways to be able to contribute!!!
Repopulating Contentious Territory:
Recent Indigenous Aesthetic Interventions in Public Space on the West Coast of Canada

Copies of the paper for this presentation and these powerpoint graphics are available in PDF by scrolling down a few screens at www.gordonbrentingram.ca
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Repopulating Contentious Territory

Introduction
Despite the rising profile of indigenous artists in contemporary Canadian art in recent decades, significant blind spots and conflict zones remain.

On the West Coast of Canada, interventions by First Nations artists in public space outside of reserve lands and tourists spots continue to be rare and difficult to negotiate.
Decolonial aesthetics could well involve engaging shared communities, spaces and resources in ways that necessarily contest older notions of the public, propriety and the fair distribution of wealth -- through cultural production in public space.

In order to envision a new strategies of contemporary indigenous art focused on re-occupation, a phase of remapping, testing and repopulating is first necessary and could be termed "re-populating" (after two centuries of demographic declines).
Site-based art, outdoors in public space, and performances in similar sites can be cathartic for communities that continue to suffer from the legacies of colonialism and neo-colonialism and, in particular, displacement, segregation, and erasure.

Such public practices and new genres, that progressively move away from visual language centred on European canons, will powerful bases for construction of local forms of de-colonial and post-colonial aesthetics.
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Kwakw'waka village, Edward S Curtis “Kwakiutl House-Frame” circa 1910
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Public art in Alert Bay, British Columbia ca 1900, a Kwakwak'waka cultural centre
Repopulating Contentious Territory

Ancestors of artist Marianne Nicolson probably for the coronation of George V in 1910, Dzawada'enuxw Tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, used as part of the work by Marianne Nicolson, Wanx’id: to hide, to be hidden, 2010 exhibited in Borderzones - New Art Across Cultures - Museum of Anthropology - University of British Columbia
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**Repopulating Contentious Territory**
Just four years after that surreptitious “Potlatch” for the coronation of George V, the Kwikwasut’inuxw chiefs engaged in a milestone in the anti-colonial struggle on the West Coast in the 1914 McKenna-McBride Commission, British Columbia.
After describing the erasure of contemporary site-based visual production by indigenous artist in public space on the West Coast, I explore of some of the more transformative work in public space of three artists working in the region:

1. Rebecca Belmore's outdoor performances;

2. the urban re-inscriptions in the last video of the late Terry Haines' video, the 2013 Coyote X; and

3. Marianne Nicolson’s larger works that further break the barriers to more permanent installations of contemporary site-based work in public space.
Problem Statement:
Continued erasure of indigenous artists and history in public space – An example from Vancouver's False Creek
A century after the 1914 McKenna-McBride Commission hearings, perhaps the first modern challenges to colonialism (not that it ever went unchallenged), indigenous populations are increasing, there is increasingly First Nations direction of education and culture, and communities are beginning to rebuild after a century and half of repression.

Contemporary indigenous culture is being re-inserted into public space but rarely for very long.
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2013 Sept 23 Vancouver reconciliation march - roughly 70,000 people
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**Repopulating Contentious Territory**

2013 Sept 23 Vancouver reconciliation march – photo by Fatima Jaffer
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2013 Sept 23 Vancouver reconciliation march – photo by Fatima Jaffer
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2013 Sept 23 Vancouver reconciliation march – photo by Fatima Jaffer
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Repopulating Contentious Territory

2013 Sept 23 Vancouver reconciliation march – photo by Fatima Jaffer
But these infrequent, ephemeral events where First Nations are decolonizing public spaces have not lead, so far, to many ongoing indigenous aesthetic explorations nor secure markers and site-based works.

The urban landscape, in West Coast cities such as Vancouver, remains largely colonial and barely neocolonial -- and, in particular, the constellations of public art.
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Problem Statement:

Continued erasure of indigenous artists and history in public space – An example from Vancouver’s False Creek
The last decades of the village and cultural centre of Snaaq on Vancouver’s False Creek
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- False Creek public art analysis (nearly all works installed since 1985)
  > 100 outdoor public art and historical markers
  < 5 permanent sites specifically by or about First Nations
  all current installations effectively “neocolonial” = NC
  proposed site for Vancouver Art Gallery = ?
  Emily Carr University for Art and Design current campus = ECUAD
  Emily Carr University for Art and Design future campus = ECUAD+
  Giant Artist-in-Res Centre - the major space for exhibiting contemporary indigenous works = Grr
  Contemporary Art Gallery
  Burrard Field Stn = CAG

NC
ECUAD
NC
NC
NC
NC
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Ocean Art Works
("Granville Island First Nations Shed")
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**Repopulating Contentious Territory**

Ocean Art Works
("Granville Island First Nations Shed")
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2010
“Truce Installation”
with graphics
by Corrine Hunt
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**Repopulating Contentious Territory**

2010
“Truce Installation” with graphics by Corrine Hunt
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2010

“Truce Installation” with graphics by Corrine Hunt

The Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games would like to thank Teck Resources Limited for its generous support of the Truce Installation.

The Truce Installation features the Vancouver 2010 medal artwork created by Canadian artist Corrine Hunt.

L’installation de la Trève met en vedette l’œuvre créée pour les médailles de Vancouver 2010 par l’artiste canadienne Corrine Hunt.
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Lookout 2001
Christos Dikeakos & Noel Best
Repopulating Contentious Territory:

What is problematic and troubling about this indigenous erasure in the public space around False Creek is that Vancouver and institutions in this arts precinct are positioning themselves as comprising one of the leading centres for contemporary indigenous culture, particularly production of visual works, in Canada.
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Some barriers to indigenous aesthetic interventions in public space

Contemporary barriers to indigenous public art in broader venues are,

1. sometimes political economic (as related to urban policy and administrators);
2. often economic (these projects can be difficult and risky to manage – more than the economy of art galleries); and
3. sometimes internalized as not genres available to indigenous artists working in dialogue with broader communities.
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Susan Point, "Flight (Spindle Whorl),” 1995 (Vancouver International Airport), 4.8 m in diameter (16’
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Beyond the confines of reserves & tourist spots: Challenging neo-colonial publics and constraints on aesthetic production
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Tartlip First Nation (main Indian Reserve negotiated through a 1852 Douglas Treaty)
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T’sartlip Indian Reserve: Strategic sites, spaces & markers

△ 'Deadman Island' the site of traditionary (and relatively public) mortuary carvings
+ traditional Salish food production / horticultural lands as in 'Indian gardens'
$ Stelly's Cross Road that divided the Tsartlip from other treaty lands – lands to the south of which eventually taken counter to the terms of the 1852 Douglas Treaty
# Tsartlip (Jesuit) Residential School shut down by the band council in 1960 for "abuse" with the building raised
!!! LAU, WELNEW Tribal School that currently teaches the SÉNĆOTEN Language  !!!
@ First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council in partnership with Google

[@] + + + + + + + + +
#
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Tsartlip mortuary box - Museum of Anthropology
University of British Columbia
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W̱ JOEĆEP - T’sartlip First Nation:
Diverse demographics, experiences, spaces & cultural production

language: SENĆOŦEN speakers (fuent or schooled) or not SENĆOŦEN speakers

T’sartlip both parents, T’sartlip one parent and the other a Salishan language speaker, T’sartlip one parent and other parent Salish indigenous heritage, T’sartlip one parent and other parent not indigenous
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WJOÉP - T’sartlip First Nation:
Diverse demographics, experiences, spaces & cultural production

legal: Indian status (card), non-status

education: residential school survivor, not residential schooled (day school), public school, T'sartlip schooled, access to higher education
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W̱JOŦE̱P - T’sartlip First Nation:
Diverse demographics, experiences, spaces & cultural production

housing: access to reserve housing, no access to reserve housing, on a wait list, access to non-reserve rental housing

food: access to traditional food knowledge and foods or access to traditional knowledge but not food, no access to traditional food knowledge or foods
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Repopulating Contentious Territory

WJO-EAP - T’sartlip First Nation: Diverse demographics, experiences, spaces & cultural production

culture: access to traditional cultural works or no access to traditional cultural works: material / non-material / performance

space, facilities and support to contemporize
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**Repopulating Contentious Territory:**

The Impending Nisga'a Deal.
Last Stand.
Chump Change.
1996 acrylic on canvas
201.0 cm x 245.1 cm
Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun
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Repopulating Contentious Territory:

drawing by artist & curator, Rose Mary Spahan

Salish (dog then sheep) wool spindle whorl recontemporized as animation / kinetic works
Some decolonization processes in landscape aesthetics & public art

The Tsartlip were able to dismantle a local nexus of neo-colonial aesthetic power, including over public space, because relatively early they contested native education and reasserted their language.

And a century and a half long communal belief that some of their treaty lands were taken from them provided an entre to reassert their culture outside of the territory of the main Indian Reserve.
Some decolonization processes in landscape aesthetics & public art

But the Tsartlip have yet to repatriate much of their material culture from museums – some of which remains poorly labelled.

Tsartlip engagement in contemporary site-based genres may well remain limited because of the particular interests of its artists whose studios are scattered across the region.
As Tsartlip communities come to more cultural crossroads, contemporary aesthetics in indigenous public art are often driven by the following decolonial processes: assertion of language; recovery of material culture and associated productions skills; recovery and repopulation of territory, cultural landscapes, environmental resources and respective land use and livelihoods – in the context of threats to local biological and cultural diversity and climate change; re-assertion of continuing relationships to food resources; re-assertion of family, sexual diversity, and communal relationships;
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acknowledgement of continuing violence (as in Vancouver's missing women a topic addressed in Rebecca Belmore's 2002, "Vigil" performances);
acknowledgement of historical events, victories, and injustices;
acknowledgement of traditional territories and territorial experiences;
unpacking various spiritual movements and experiences (that have tended to be conflated and misrepresented);
creating space for various kinds of healing; and
highlighting and contemporizing largely forgotten local traditions, styles or media.
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Rebecca Belmore's performance interventions in public space

Rebecca Belmore, Coyote Woman, 1991, Graphite sur papier, 33 X 50 cm
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Vigil 2002
The most influential and symbolic indigenous work produced in Vancouver in the first decade of this century was Rebecca Belmore’s performance, Vigil (2002), during which she cleaned a sidewalk on a filthy corner of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, evoked the names of dozens of murdered and missing aboriginal women, and alternatively nailed and unravelled a red dress (in a heavy rain).
Rebecca Belmore, “Vigil,” 2002 (Vancouver)
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Rebecca Belmore, “Vigil,” 2002 (Vancouver)
Rebecca Belmore, “Feast For Scavengers,” 2007 (Victoria)
photo by Peter Morin
Feast For Scavengers 2007
Belmore’s 2007 "Feast For Scavengers," performed in Victoria, explored the cusp of land and sea art and the rich cultural tropes around European marine contact. As another strategy for repopulating public space, Belmore illustrated the deteriorating states of traditional fisheries and the respective precarity and deprivations around traditional foods. Bellmore literally waded into a tangle including a raft, nets, herring roe as intended bait and a reticent seagull.
Rebecca Belmore, “Feast For Scavengers,” 2007 (Victoria)
Rebecca Belmore, “Feast For Scavengers,” 2007 (Victoria) photo by Peter Morin
Rebecca Belmore, “Feast For Scavengers” 2007 (Victoria)
photo by Peter Morin
Worth 2010
The performance alluded to a well-publicized court action by a Toronto-based art dealer. Belmore confronted the economy of cultural production still largely stacked against the autonomy and prosperity of indigenous artists.

Beginning with a sign at the main entrance to the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG) that read, "I AM WORTH MORE THAN ONE MILLION DOLLARS TO MY PEOPLE" ["DOLLARS" in red with other lettering in black], Bellmore unfolded two flat pieces into complex tapestries, alluding to the early trade items of fur pelts and blankets.
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**Worth 2010 continued**

Bellmore then laid on the blanket as if in a state of shock and later folded the two pieces handing them over to the Chief Curator and Associate Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery.
Rebecca Belmore “Worth,” 2010 (Vancouver)
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Rebecca Belmore “Worth,” 2010 (Vancouver)
The urban re-inscriptions in Terry Haines' video, *Coyote X*

The four channel video installation, "Coyote X", was completed in 2013 by Terry Haines, only weeks before he died. *Coyote X* focuses on both coyotes in urban Vancouver, an animal of great importance to the artist’s Secwepemc and Tsilhqot’ñ communities of central British Columbia, and as a totem for a range of experiences of insecurity, survival, and mortality including living with HIV. At one point in the video, Haines spray-painted red positive symbols on rocks at a public beach near Vancouver.
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Terry Haines, “COYOTE X,” 2013. A 17 minute, four screen video projection installation
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Terry Haines, “COYOTE X,” 2013, A 17 minute, four screen video projection installation
The language of re-populating: 
The public markers of Marianne Nicolson

Dzawada’enuxw artist Marianne Nicolson of the Kwakwaka’wakw Nation has been able to concretize some of her visions within the safer canons of site-based mixed-media. Nicolson began creating works in her traditional territory up Kingcome Inlet and over the last decade, also created a number of large works in metropolitan Vancouver.
Nicholson's site-based "Cliff Painting" (1998) contemporized traditional copper designs on a large surface above the sea as part of reasserting natural landscapes as spaces for Kwakwaka’wakw culture and sovereignty. The practices for repopulating in "Cliff Painting" are subtle and powerful adaptations for cultural renewal. Cliff painting for indigenous cultures on the coast had been relegated to a prehistoric media, not connected to contemporary practices, until Nicholson started working on that project.
Marianne Nicolson, “Kingcome Inlet Pictograph,” 28' x 38’ painting “to commemorate the survival and continued existence of the Musgamakw Dzawada'enuxw people within their territories”
Nicholson began working with family photographs and creating installations and environments such as the 2006, "Bakwina?tsi ? | The Container for Souls."

In her 2010 "Wanx’id: to hide, to be hidden," Nicholson worked with family photograph were ancestors were wearing traditional regalia, effectively committing illegal acts with masks and other religious objects subject to police seizure under the Potlatch ban in the third section of the 1884 Indian Act -- but almost jokingly assuming some kind of protection because the event was supposedly to celebrate the 1910 coronation of George V.
Nicolson's 2008 "The House of the Ghosts" represents a more expansive and urban intervention in her rapidly expanding and mixed-media and site-based practices where a three story banner was installed for a month on the north side of the Vancouver Art Gallery. This large, site-based work was part of an intercultural conversation between two kinds of public space: that of Nicolson’s traditional Dzawada’enuxw territory and multicultural and globalizing Vancouver, virtually all of which is on unceded territory (and not that of her Kwakwaka’wakw Nation).
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Marianne Nicolson has been able to engage in public art commissions, most notably, her 2009, "My People Will Rise Up (Like a Thunderbird From the Sea)" and 2009, "The Land is a Person". While these permanent, site-based works are relatively innocuous and safe as public art goes, heavily managed by respective clients and owners, they represent milestone in pushing contemporary indigenous aesthetics back out on to the land.

And "My People Will Rise Up (Like a Thunderbird From the Sea)" engaged in the text of the 1967 speech of Chief Dan George of the Squamish who had some critical points, related to continued colonialism, on the centennial of Canada.
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Marianne Nicolson – “My People Will Rise Up (Like a Thunderbird From the Sea),” 2009, North Vancouver
Marianne Nicolson, “My People Will Rise Up (Like a Thunderbird From the Sea),” 2009, North Vancouver
Marianne Nicolson, *The Land is a Person*, 2011, 22' high, glass, steel, wood, concrete and light. “Acknowledges the land as equivalent to humanity,” installed in the garden of the Cedar Springs retirement residence in North Vancouver.
As part of her 2013 exhibit, "Walking on Water (Thin Ice)," Nicolson’s video, "Wel’ida Pała (The Flood)" explores the vulnerability of her family’s village up Kingcome Inlet to disaster and climate change, combining documentary practices with an adjacent installation of orca whales sometimes thought to have the power of prophecy. The repopulating in this installation loops back to both documentary and the revisiting and reiterating Kwakwaka’wakw sculptural cannons through adjacent edged glass installations.
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Marianne Nicolson, glass and wood installations part of the April 6, 2013 - May 4, 2013 exhibit, Walking on Water (Thin Ice), at Equinox Gallery, Vancouver
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Site-based sculpture celebrating and enlarging a traditional fishing weir on the BC coast – artist undetermined though this had been thought to be by Marianne Nicolson
Conclusions: Strategies & prospects

This process of better drawing on modern as well as traditional resources to express complex experiences about the global as well as the local is central, on the West Coast, to new decolonial aesthetics – especially site-based works.
Any kind of decolonial aesthetic anywhere in Canada must initially acknowledge the specificity and the full extent of the losses of local indigenous communities, populations, economies and cultures. These tentative beginnings of decolonial aesthetics on the West Coast have centred on acknowledgement of the unresolved indigenous experiences of depopulation, displacement, and loss of sovereignty combined with still largely symbolic efforts to return to, intervene in and repopulate still contested lands as safe and multicultural public spaces.
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The works by Belmore, Haines, and Nicolson discussed here have contributed to this proto-aesthetic of "re-populating" in numerous ways notably through the following topics, media, spaces, events, and transformations:

Rebecca Bellmore
a. acknowledging violence (especially to aboriginal women);
b. acknowledging population losses;
c. body modification through penning the names of missing and dead women who once worked in the neighbourhood;
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d. destroying a red dress on a Vancouver street with nearly a century of street prostitution;
e. expressing frustration and rage in public;
f. exploring the link between colonialism and the decline in local fisheries and the subsequent health-related and cultural precarity resulting from loss of traditional food resources;
g. swimming in highly polluted water (near one of Victoria's infamous outfalls of untreated sewage) as part of assembling a floating installation (in the chilly waters of November);
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h. reclaiming a historic Songhees village site for indigenous cultural performance;

i. confronting the inequities for indigenous creators in the Canadian visual arts economy;

j. asserting her right to place her works and respective labours with institutions of her choosing;

Terry Haines

k. exploring precarity through a key trickster character from his cultural traditions;

l. exploring the urban resurgence the coyote as a symbol for cultural resilience and survival;
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m. re-inscribing a prestige, colonial landscape often hostile to indigenous people, as a locale for resurgence of a traditional cultural figure;

n. exploring mortality as part of contemporary indigenous experience (and lower average life spans);

o. video self-portraiture as an indigenous person;

p. symbolically transforming public space through recording his spray-painting red 'X's (as in "Coyote X");

q. continuing to build narratives and make visual art while grappling with a health crisis;

r. creating a four channel video space, involving a large projection wall, that became a space, after the death of Haines, for performances;
Repopulating Contentious Territory

Marianne Nicolson

s. contemporizing traditional cliff painting;
t. engaging around family histories and previous acts of resistance (and sardonic humour);
u. linking visual art to efforts to protect indigenous languages from extinction;
v. combining family and documentary photographs in mixed-media installations;
w. adding etched glass as a media for transmission of traditional forms, designs, and stories;
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x. enlarging mixed media into permanent outdoor structures and building surfaces;
y. grappling with political events important to First Nations but relatively poorly known throughout local populations;
z. re-asserting traditional designs as often functioning as architecture and public art;
aa. acknowledging environmental deterioration (as related to logging and climate change); and
bb. mixing video and mixed-media installations.
When the kinds of marginalization and erasure that we see around False Creek take place currently and in the recent past, the mechanisms of cultural production and placement can be identified as embodying neo-colonial inequities, notions of culture, and essential aesthetics. In other words, when art works exist within the context of public space, they have a relationship to neo-colonial and retrenchment processes – either challenging some of these transactions and power relationships, as very few if any of these works do, or challenge obfuscation which could obstruct the installation of such works.
Certainly, the project of reinsertion of diverse experiences of indigeneity, local cultures, and corrective historical details into public space is part of the Debordian concept of "environmental planning" based on the kinds of equitable social dialogues about public space that these three artists have begun to envision.

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