



MOVEABLE CITY

curated by Vanessa Brown

11-18 September 2009

Cineworks Annex at the Ironworks [235 Alexander]

INTRODUCTION

SKOOL is a summer practicum and curatorial internship project initiated by *Centre des arts actuels Skol* in Montréal, Quebec and adopted [and adapted] by Cineworks Independent Filmmakers Society in Vancouver, British Columbia. Over the summer of 2009, from June until September, Vanessa Brown curated Moveable City, a media art exhibition that explores potentiality in the built environment. This program, exhibited at the Cineworks annex at Vancouver's historic Ironworks building and virtually at www.moveablecity.squarespace.com, marks a significant juncture for Cineworks as a centre negotiating its place in an ever shifting artist-run milieu, and for Brown as an emerging cultural producer.

Under the centre's supervision and mentorship, Brown acquired a set of experiences and skills invaluable towards the further development of her professional career and ambitions. In return, Cineworks remained receptive to the influence of Brown's propositions and actions upon Cineworks's own operating processes and practices. In addition to the Moveable City exhibition, Brown facilitated an out-loud reading group, using Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining—The Chiasm" as a lens through which to view ideas about the mutability of city spaces. She also organized a cinematic salon with Moveable City artists Sean Arden, Ross Birdwise and Holly Schmidt, moderated by Adrian Sinclair, to engage her audience in a deeper understanding of the works themselves and of the whole they comprise when situated together.

This practicum and internship project contributes to a broader conversation about the presentation and reception of media art in Vancouver by engaging with an emerging arts professional who has provided Cineworks, operating since 1980, with a fresh perspective on what media art is and how it can be presented. In many ways, Moveable City—which includes installation, sound-based and looping works—is a departure from what Cineworks's programming has been historically. Brown's vigour as an artist and intellectual is evident in her curating, and it has been exciting to incorporate her perspectives into the functioning of Cineworks as a media arts centre.

The exhibition was physically presented in Cineworks's newly acquired annex space: no small feat, to be sure. In this regard, sincere gratitude is extended to Cal and Astrid at the Ironworks, and the incredible team of Cineworks's board who have been steadfast in their renovation efforts, especially Jack Beatty, Kathleen Hepburn, Rob Simpson and Stephen Wichuk.

Thank-you to the Canada Summer Jobs program for making this practicum and internship a practical reality.

As the Programs Manager and Curator at Cineworks, I wish to thank Vanessa Brown for her dedication and vision in the mounting of this exhibition, and for seriously taking me on when I asked for wildly creative and audacious perspectives towards the support and exhibition of media art in Canada.

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CURATORIAL STATEMENT

There is a certain kind of amnesia particular to urban dwellers. Commonly it occurs after a corner in town under construction is resurrected in its new incarnation and the people once familiar with the spot lose their ability to recall distinctly what was there before. The city, or urb, is a throbbing confluence of movement, change and clash. This pulsation is visibly noticeable in instances such as building demolition and construction, rush hour traffic or lunch break line-ups. However there is another kind of movement that takes place: a slow creep toward something unknown. This movement does not often appear as movement by virtue of the relative duration of change. Just as the mountains move in inches by the year, so do the great behemoth-sized buildings disintegrate, so does the ground push up from beneath the asphalt, all the while appearing still. So what is the nature of change in the built environment? And what movements, along with that spot of town we were once familiar with but can no longer recall, lie latently behind a corner of our conscious? Moveable City is an exhibition of works that look at the capacity of the city to become something other from what is familiar, or in some cases examines the possibility that the city is already less familiar than one would grant it.

Installed at the entrance of this exhibition is Jamie Ward's soundpiece *Wall Street Trains, Movements 1, 2, and 3*. The exhibition attendee must move through this piece in order to access the rest of this show. With the railway, which Ward sampled from, less than 100 feet away from the speakers, one is on a constant precipice of witnessing the sonic interaction between the actual trains and Ward's virtual ones. The listener may be discombobulated and confused as to the true sources of the sounds. Each moment, pregnant for potential confluences between art and environment, is its own doorway where the virtual and actual may meet and blend.

Like Ward's piece, Sean Arden's *Bridging the Gap* relates to the surrounding infrastructure in subject matter as well as through its installation location. This video is a still shot of a bridge at dusk. Arduously worked over, Arden has removed the images of the vehicles passing over the bridge frame by frame so that the relative stasis of the shot is compromised by the stripped-down, ephemeral movement of shadows splayed from the apparently nonexistent traffic. In an almost pre-nostalgic but foreboding sense, we are left with a ghostly passing of traffic that conjures a projection of an unsustainable future. For Moveable City, this piece is projected on the side of a building and at parallel height to the Crab park viaduct. This same building itself, at the dusk hour, happens to capture the shadows of cars and foot passengers from the viaduct. The surfaces of buildings and bridges in the city become witnesses to the world around them. Like a screen, they display images of each other, of humans and nature, and are layered with marks, touches, smears and other evidence of life.

Because their work is installed in physical juxtaposition from the subjects their work treats, in Ward's case trains and in Arden's case a bridge, we are left with a schism that pries open the potentiality of the subjects to be something radically more than their function. Ward's

soundscape grows more and more distorted, incrementally, over the course of three movements. The relentless yawn of sounds depart from the directly recognizable and bustle down the tracks toward enveloping the listener with musical absurdity. The absurd is also at play in Arden's piece wherein shadows are splayed from invisible sources. However, unlike Ward's piece where the absurd functions to move the listener toward a haptic and psychedelic experience, Arden's absurdity functions to bring us to focus on a socio-political and environmental reality. The absence of the cars propels us to consider the wherefore of their disappearance until we realize that this piece is not about logical causality. Instead the cars are absent from the frame by virtue of their own unsustainability.

While the concerns of Ward and Arden are oriented toward issues of transit, transition and infrastructure, and are installed so as to create a meeting point between the work and that to which it refers, the works of Katrina Elvèn, Holly Schmidt, and Ross Birdwise present a more intimate connection between the viewer and the built environment. Moving into the interior gallery component of this exhibition, the proximity between the viewer and the city's potentiality narrows.

Elvèn's *The 2 and a Half Minute Hallway* is a Super 8 loop of a modernist interior. Though it may visually appear to be a life-sized room, what we are looking at is actually a miniature. This built space seems to collapse and expand through Elvèn's extreme manipulation of the contra-zoom technique—a method in which the camera moves closer or further from the subject while simultaneously adjusting the zoom angle to keep the subject the same size in the frame. In this instance, the room has been shot with optics from 24mm up to 400mm in order to offer a maximal range of perspective of the room. We begin to understand that the breathing quality of the room does not come from this static miniature model but rather from the palpitations of the mechanical eye of the camera. This representation of the modernist interior enhances our awareness of our own subjective experience, as the room which does not change in its inherent qualities shifts between appearing cramped and flat, to long and extravagantly spacious. We are necessarily made to recognize that this shift is all in the function of the mechanical eye. An eye, in this case, capable of standing in metaphor for the subjective "I." In *The 2 and a Half Minute Hallway*, the potentiality of the built environment is not generated by the model but rather it resides within our personal and varied encounter with our surroundings.

Similarly, Birdwise uses lighting and editing techniques in his *Stillness and Movement Studies* to reveal the multiple and simultaneous impressions we have with one another. This piece comprises a series of portraits that appear to float somewhat eerily in a dark, atemporal space. The individuals seem somehow both static and moving at once. Their features shift in accentuation and shadow as the position of the light sources change. What we are in fact seeing is not one but many portraits of the same person, made translucent and layered on top of each other all at once. Potentiality is in full operation in this work as each moment of the video's individual portraits are in a constant state of becoming. The multiple impressions of the individual exist softly and at once, each moving in its own direction, and meanwhile participating in a composite

of the person; the many collapse into one. Yet somehow despite the constant flux of being, an identity is maintained. The city shares this quality for like these individuals, the city too has some through-thread upon which change hangs itself.

This activity of constant becoming is a central component in Schmidt's *Laboratory for Living*. Based on Kisko Kurokawa's 1971 Nakagin Capsule Tower in Tokyo, Schmidt has constructed a miniature replica out of dough. The original tower is a rare example of a completed structure from the Metabolist Movement. The principles of Metabolist architecture are to design and build spaces that are mutable and flexible in order to meet the needs of a moveable and changing society, and to reflect the dynamics of reality, which are not considered fixed or static. The Capsule Tower was designed as a series of separate compartments attached to a central core. The single room compartments were prefabricated to include all the necessities of life such as a stove, bed and TV. The arrangement of the compartments was flexible so they could be added, taken away or reconfigured to meet people's changing needs. Since its construction the building has not been altered nor well maintained. There is water and mildew damage and the concrete is beginning to crumble. The future status of the building is uncertain.

Schmidt's *Laboratory for Living*, made of dough, accentuates the uncertain condition of the Capsule Tower as mould begins to grow and slowly envelop the structure. Carefully positioned miniature plastic figures give the sense of a dramatic narrative unfolding as the Tower transforms and decays. A camera connected to a monitor, mounted at a 45-degree angle where the wall meets the ceiling reveals a surveillance shot of the scene. The viewer is beckoned to come close by the size of the model in order to see the work. Once one steps into an intimate distance from the model the surveillance camera captures the viewer on screen. This miniature built space is in the constant flux of biodegrading, however it is only once we witness the visible cues of such a process that we understand what change is taking place. The *Laboratory for Living* then also speaks to the constant changes we are surrounded by but do not perceive and how they yet carry on regardless of our acknowledgment.

The works of Elvèn, Birdwise and Schmidt explore the relationship between stasis and change, the locus of the latter shifting in each. For Elvèn, the source of movement is the mechanical eye offset by the stasis of the model. Birdwise's movement is a combination of lighting techniques and a playful approach to representing time and duration. The stillness we perceive is that created by our own minds in an attempt to thread the constant fluttering of visual information into one coherent picture. Stillness is not present in Schmidt's piece, though the duration of the mould overtaking the dough structure moves so slowly so as to fool us into seeing stasis. The movement is organic and growing. The potential is manifest.

Change is constant in a city; it is through the limits of our sense perception that the world can appear still. The work of Arden, Birdwise, Elvèn, Schmidt, and Ward reveal to us the city we may not perceive but that moves all the same. It is through our imagination that we can make it play.

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Vanessa Brown