

It would be easy to tell this story of public art's movement from the modernist artistic autonomy of "plop" and "plonk" art to the more recent emergence of site-responsive public art as a teleological progression toward more socially and politically engagement. But what happens when we shift our progressivist understanding of the orientation of public art toward critical engagement with the ideology underpinning this shift. One way to do so would be—as other critics on social practice have done—to note the conjunction between the erosion of the welfare state and support and the rise of such support being taken up by artists both as a legitimating function of art practice in the 20th century and also as a compensatory structure where we must question how / how much actual action takes place through social arts practice (in lieu of social support). Related questions arise regarding how the artist may not have the capacity/skills to offer the same primary support as someone working directly with urban development, housing, social work, and other civic official. To what extent—asks this critique of social practice—does such work in fact elide substantive social-political change? These are not my central focus here today, but have been written about cogently by performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson, and art historians including Grant Kester, and Clare Bishop.

Instead of a critique on the limits of social arts practice, then, I confine my work here to the ways in which public art practice's engagement with social and political relevance of place is not only representative of ideology, but more significantly a site of subjectivation, that is, a primary site for the constitution of the settler subject. As part of this work, it is also important to respond to the critique of interpellation as deterministic and eliding the agency of the viewer to refuse the hail of ideology—examine the role of refusal in this construction of settler subjectivity. I will limit my discussion of in this section of the book to an even smaller cross-section of public art in Lhq'alets / Vancouver that reproduces tree and forest as forms that are a

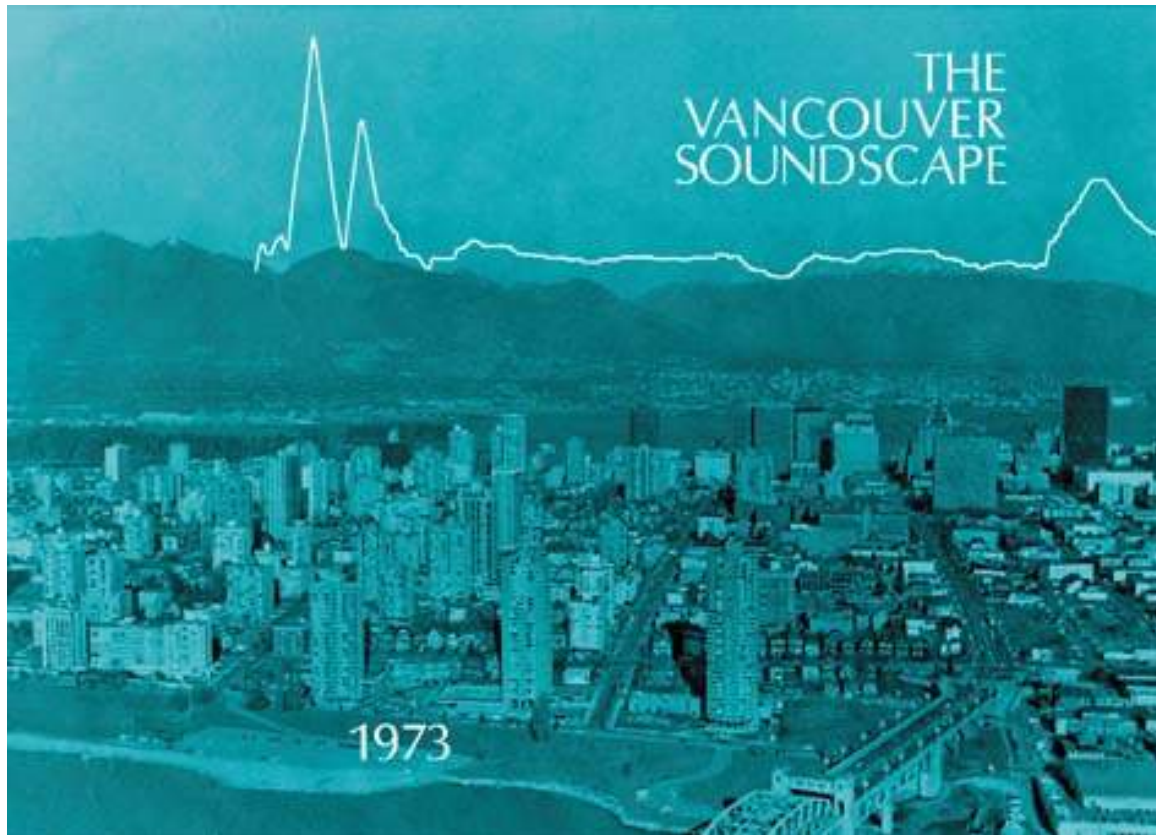
ubiquitous representation of west coast exceptionalism. While many would consider tall trees and dense forest as a part of the unique identity of Vancouver, and mark its distinction as a place, the rapidly increasing prevalence of public tree-form art raises questions as to the “site generic” nature of such work.



“Liz Magor’s *Ninth Column* comprises a 97-foot high structural steel column clad in custom cast panels which bear an exact replica of mature Douglas-fir bark...Whether Magor’s concrete tree is a support or a decoration is unclear. Whether there were ever living trees like this one (a Douglas fir?) in False Creek is debatable.” (Michael Turner).

5. Speaking for Forest and Trees

R. Murray Schafer’s book, *The Vancouver Soundscape*, finds its form through an orchestration of voices – “earwitnesses accounts” as Schafer calls them, implying an accounting of immediate



experience that has the potential to serve as evidence of the soundscape from their historical standpoint. These short accounts, meant to describe the presence of place through sound, but given Schafer's work as a composer, I hear their intonation, the way they give colour and texture through individual voices. Their voices are used to represent the soundscape, yet like the World Soundscape project more generally, Schafer treats them for their objective authority. These voices speak to us not as a choir, but alone (they aren't "songs" nor "arias"). As individuals, they address us.

A certain sense of absence and oppressiveness permeates these earwitness accounts, as, for instance, when Emily Carr states how the forest's silence "was so profound our ears could scarcely comprehend it." Or, in another passage, George Green states the presence of "no sound, not a cry, a whisper, not a rustle of a leaf" is "almost painful." As Schafer presents it, again in

Carr's words, this vast and uninhabited territory inspires a certain claustrophobia: "It seemed as if the forest were so full of silence that there was no room for sounds."



Here, Schafer's "earwitness accounts" do not merely present a composite document of the silent forest as it is but, instead, actively silence it. We may begin to recognize how Schafer's document works in concert with Emily Carr's paintings as well as those by the Group of Seven: they present the land as emptied of Indigenous life. They dis-place the sounds of Indigenous presence. In another earwitness account from the Vancouver Soundscape, Emily Carr attests that, if you spoke in the forest "your voice came back to you as your face is thrown back to you in a mirror."

As if taking this page directly out of Schafer—or Carr’s—writing, as I walk through Edgemont Village in North Vancouver one day, my face is thrown back to me by a mirrored tree. Or rather, I walk by you at first, your presence barely registering, except my attention is snagged by a brief moment of shine and high gloss. I slow down, approach, and see my image thrown back to me by this mirror, placed on the cross section of the tree. This artwork called *Dendrochron* by Cheryl Hamilton and Michael Vandermeer of *Ie. Creative* reflects me. Implicating me in the form, distorting my image alongside the image of the city.



As I look more closely at the work, I come across a didactic panel. Here another voice becomes present – the voice of the artist or curator explaining the work. Although intended to help the viewer along, to provide context, and rationale for the work, such voices are also coercive, channeling experience toward intention. I read the artists’ words below, telling me how

I should think about this moment: “standing by the sculpture, viewers will be reminded of that heroic tradition of landscape photography, featuring loggers posed next to giant trees they had felled” (didactic plaque, located under artwork). Because it tells me I will be reminded, I am reminded of these photos. I am also reminded of the use of such photos in a nearby public artwork in Lynn Canyon, North Vancouver.

6. Historic Trees and the Settler Sublime

Eight unassuming poles painted brown stand together in a circle at the Eastern parking lot trail entry to Lynn Canyon Park in North Vancouver, British Columbia. At a distance, they almost blend in with the forest that surrounds them. Each pole features a black and white photo recessed into the wood, wrapped around the circumference of the pole and placed at human eye level. The photos document moments from the site’s history, and in particular from the site’s transformation from a forest of towering trees to a place for human dwelling. They display settlement. Such displays are ubiquitous in public art as attempts to inform the public of site’s past, a past that often bears little if any trace in the hyper-development of the city, or in the case of Lynn Canyon, the domestication of an impassable chasm into a site of tourism via a suspension bridge, stairs and boardwalks. ‘Just, imagine,’ such images announce, ‘this place was once only forest.’ Or ‘Wow! Look at the size the trees here used to be!’

These photo-declamations seek to interpellate me — a member of public art’s public— as a settler subject who has benefitted from the labour of those depicted in the photos, those who cultivated (tamed) the land through settlement. The public this display addresses is presumed a public in support of the inherited ‘now’ from which we encounter this history.



This unnamed, uncredited work in Lynn Canyon Park is just one example of a larger genre of Canadian public art and civic beautification that re-materializes and naturalizes the colonial history of its site.ⁱⁱ The work aspires to make settler viewers, as Adria Imada writes, “eye witnesses to, rather than participants in, colonization and extermination” (2013: 40). The artwork here centers settler futurity — a future built from Indigenous erasure through the history of the land’s settlement and ongoing development — that visually hails the public through Lockean narratives of property through labour. As with Althusser’s concept of interpellation, I am arguing that the ‘hail’ of public art is not merely a passive appeal affirming ‘this is for you’; interpellation is not merely an address intent with drawing our attention or interest. Rather, I am arguing here that public artwork in general takes part in interpellation as a primary site of subject formation,

and in this kind of public artwork's materialization of settlement, the formation of a settler subject committed to upholding a western concept of property.







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I feel interpellation's force here, but also recognize the limits of its power. There is something absurd about the ways these photos are inlaid into perfectly planed poles, stained in brown, supported by concrete. As objects, their power is stunted by their emaciated form. They are merely the support structure for archival display, awkwardly imbricating museum logic within the forest. Facing each other, they commune through variations on their colonial theme of forest decimation. As such, they cannot see the forest nor the trees: Red Cedar, Douglas-fir, and Hemlock draped with moss. Huddled together, they do not see the mist as it rises from the canyon and the creek. They are oblivious to the rushing waters of X̱á7elcha, used for kw'ayatsut – our purification. In spending time with the work, I also feel the hum of what Renato Rosaldo calls imperialist nostalgia.

When I was 12 years old my family moved to from across the suburbs of Surrey. We moved from Whalley to Fleetwood, to a house across from a neighborhood called Halzelwood Grove. The neighbourhoold was called such because, with no sense of irony, a grove of hazelnut trees were demolished in order to build the houses that now occupied the place where the grove of trees once stood. In this gesture, Hazelwood Grove at once affirmed the history of place, without any measure of reflexivity on the reconstruction of a site without a single hazelnut tree. The sign stands in for the material history of the place.

Imperialist nostalgia, says Rosaldo, is “a pose of "innocent yearning" used both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination.” One form imperialist nostalgia takes, claims Ronaldo, is where “people destroy their environment and then worship nature.” ‘the curious phenomenon of people’s longing for what they themselves have destroyed,’ (Rosaldo, 1989: 87) I am not a member of the desired public such images address. As a xwélmexw (Stó:lō/Skwah) viewer, I feel the hail of the settler sublime as it grazes

off my body; I recognize the speed of its desire to fold me into relation with property. I recognize its desire to address me in as much as I recognize its intention to constitute the viewing subject as a collaborator in cultivation and property-affirmation. I am a viewer whose ancestral lands, located not far from this display, have been subjected to similar cultivation: the removal of the massive Sumas lake in order to create hectares of productive farmland, a productivity that re-routed and removed entire waterways, and with this removal erased the supposedly less productive habitats that xwélmexw have always subsisted from.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rebuilding the land on a massive scale is a modern instance of the work of property-making that is celebrated in the Lynn Canyon work. Not far from the Lynn Canyon site, the area of downtown Vancouver now called False Creek was created in 1918 when a total of 27 acres of lagoon was filled in with 20,000 cubic yards of soil (moved from S'olh Temexw, Stó:lō lands). This large-scale infill project created a park and a place for the primary historical conveyor of settlement: the Canadian Pacific Rail terminus station. Later in the mid-1980s this site would again be transformed by the World Expo '86, which literally paved the way for multi-million-dollar condo developments.

ⁱ Patrick Wolfe, *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, 4 (December 2006), p. 388. Wolfe's statement, draws on his earlier statement (1994) that "invasion emerges as a structure, not an event" Notable here is the way in which this statement is often mis-quoted or paraphrased to "settler colonialism is a structure, rather than an event." (Wolfe, "Nation and MiscegeNation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, October 1994, p. 96). In this conflation, invasion becomes the equivalent to settler colonialism, rather than one structure of settler colonialism among many that may also include property, teleology, and mutual exclusion.

ⁱⁱ For further examples of such work, see Robinson D and Zaiontz K (2016) Public Art in Vancouver.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of writing this in November 2021, massive flooding has taken place across British Columbia, one result of which has been the return (revenge) of *sema:th xótsa* (lake sumas), effectively submerging the Trans-Canada highway and cutting off the west of Vancouver and other communities on the west coast of British Columbia from the rest of Canada. The historical irony of the removal of this lake as 'unproductive' is that it always served as a drainage basin for several waterways, effectively keeping flooding away from other areas of British Columbia.