

Can't Get No Satisfaction
Michael Darling



Ron Terada's work has for many years structured its weighty conceptual concerns on some pretty flimsy pop cultural foundations. The serious and sober canvases from the *Grey Paintings* (1996-97), for instance, laid vulnerable texts from high-school yearbooks on waffly, indeterminate fields of non-black, while the *Jeopardy Paintings* (1998-99) require the viewer to supply a question-as-answer to the trivial clues stenciled on color fields as if in a one-on-one with Alex Trebek. As *lite* as these sources appear, however, their effects within the rigorous seriality of the artist's practice are anything but insubstantial, making fresh contributions to a rich tradition of text-based art while also participating in the age-old discourse of painting and the only slightly younger (or maybe not) critique of images. The same goes for the artist's related *Ad Paintings* (1993-96), of which my museum owns a great one, *Untitled (Ad Painting, On Kawara)* (1996). *Artforum* advertisements – the source of paintings such as this – are about as ephemeral as it gets, but this work likewise gains conceptual strength from the canny references it makes and the numerous art historical echoes that bounce back from them. Our painting is bound together by a twisting loop of circumstances that implicate it in the complex history of the institution even though the artist could hardly have imagined it ending up that way. The work was given to the museum by Patrick Painter, a Los Angeles gallerist with ties to Vancouver and a record of supporting its younger artists, as a tribute to another Los Angeles gallerist, the late Stuart Regen, who took out the advertisement that Terada painted on the canvas. The Stuart Regen Gallery ad was for an On Kawara show, whose work Terada's spare, text-only painting apes, and who is also represented in the museum's

collection. Also in the collection are other works which provide both historical and contemporary context for Terada's gesture, including one of Robert Barry's invitation pieces from the late 1960s, Dave Muller's hand painted gallery announcements, and a work by Matthew Antezzo that belies a shared interest in the archival arcana of art magazines. Suffice it to say that I'm bidding my time until I can mount a show that connects these dots and a host of others.

While all of the above-mentioned series by Terada flirt teasingly and alluringly with nothingness, they are nevertheless still paintings on canvas and therefore still hard for collectors, institutions, and galleries to ignore as fine art. As a devoted follower of contemporary painting and its continual struggles to reckon with its long history and time-tested conventions, it is difficult for me to suggest that the most significant growth in Terada's work has coincided with a recent abandonment of painting and the further subversion of his art's conventional materiality. As paradoxical as it may sound, the less art-like Terada's work has become, the stronger it has gotten, using its dematerialization as a vehicle for still more stimulating complexity. Projects like this exhibition and catalogue for the Contemporary Art Gallery, his *Defile* magazine project (2003), the posters he has created for other exhibitions, and neon title signs and musical soundtracks for still other shows, further undermine his audience's location of conventional artistic residue, which has forced a sharper focus on art's core ideas. In particular, I think that Terada has taken up what may be one of the most subtle and nuanced ripostes to Walter Benjamin's lamentation of the loss of art's aura in the face of mechanical reproduction. Terada's earlier paintings can be seen as the beginning of

Untitled
(Ad Painting: On Kawara)
1996
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 36.5 inches
Collection of The Museum of
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

ON KAWARA

MARCH

STUART REGEN GALLERY

619 N. ALMONT DRIVE LOS ANGELES CA 90069 TEL 213 276 5424 FAX 213 276 7430

this exploration, as they both broadcast a palpable sense of loss and serve as evocative markers of the displaced subjects and networks they address.

The work performs still more with less as the artist has moved to such ancillary art world effluvia as signage. In pieces such as *These Days*, or *Promises* (both 2001), both created by industrial neon subcontractors, there is a Benjaminian elimination of the artist's hand (but not mind) that is pushed further by the conditions of display. Placed near the entrances to the respective institutions in which they were shown, these works flaunt their banality by almost melting into the institutional context, serving real functions as the title signs for exhibitions, while just barely hanging on to their identity as art objects. As in earlier works, the filmsiness of the vehicle is in inverse proportion to the effectiveness of the piece, as these signs carry the memory, content, and aura of the exhibitions with them long after the galleries have been deinstalled. In situations such as this, Terada's delicate gestures have mightily wrestled away the curator's title, claiming it as his own, as well as taken on the role of auratic historian, either bearing or erasing the history of the exhibition in perpetuity, depending on one's perspective.

The memory of such complex operations was still strong in my mind when I came upon another sign piece by the artist, his *Entering City of Vancouver* (2002) installed at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver. Here again, a redundant banality threatened to negate Terada's maneuver altogether, as I and every other gallery visitor were already positioned in Vancouver, and had likely seen a roadside sign identical to the one Terada installed

in the storefront space the last time we traveled near the outskirts of the city. Where was the art in this? Despite the sign's imposing physical presence, manufactured to the exact scale and material specifications as actual highway markers, bearing the same text as its title, and looming ten feet high by ten feet wide, it is the invisible aura of history which weighs the most heavily on its audience. Terada's Duchampian sign relies on its unexpected context to crack open its discursive potential, inviting another look at a common object, and in so doing, bringing forth a powerful reckoning of a city's growth into a sophisticated center of contemporary artmaking. In one outwardly simple gesture, *Entering City of Vancouver* brought forth for me a pocket history of contemporary art in the city, while possibly also addressing a broader civic emergence on the world stage. In contemporary art circles, the city of Vancouver has an almost mythic status, synonymous with the rigorous work of Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, Roy Arden, and Ken Lum. Younger artists working there – like Terada – are all too aware of the reputation, legacy, and importance of these figures, and *Entering City of Vancouver* begs our acknowledgement of this perception, while also slyly poking fun at the easy cliché. One of the important roots of the Vancouver school is also made an unmistakable part of the equation, as the sign recalls works such as *1/4 Mile Landscape* (1968) by Iain and Ingrid Baxter's N.E. Thing Co., which also used road signs to mark off conceptual territory. Terada even toyed with naming the piece with the current population of Vancouver, something consistent with information found on such signs, but also directly referencing an important exhibition of conceptual art at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1970 curated by



Entering City of Vancouver

2002

3M diamond-grade vinyl on extruded
aluminum, lights, galvanized steel,
wood

120 x 120 x 48 inches

Collection of The Museum of
Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Purchased with funds provided by
the Curatorial Discretionary Fund

Lucy Lippard titled *955,000*, reflecting the number of inhabitants at that time.

All of this embedded cultural information thrilled me when I saw it, and got me thinking about the additional meanings that would accrue once the work was shown outside its eponymous city. I was happily able to buy the work for MOCA, although there was a little head scratching about why we would want a highway sign in the collection, let alone one pertaining to another town. The work has not been shown yet, but I am excited about its potential. Still more head scratching (evidence of a productive confusion) is bound to ensue when gallery visitors are faced with a disorienting marker of another place, momentarily questioning their global positioning. With so much Hollywood filmmaking having migrated to the north, and with an international image bank so shaped by movies, the preconceptions people have about this place may be increasingly based on pictures shot on Vancouver streets, rather than L.A. locales. The ambassadorship that *Entering City of Vancouver* assumes when shown outside of its city of origin will also be fascinating to track, as I have the feeling that its curt, direct address will still summon the Canadian photo-conceptual lineage in the arid, art-rich climes of Los Angeles. Like an imperial art gangsta, it could also come across as a boastful claim to physical or art historical territory: "Yo L.A.! Vancouver's in the house!" More likely, it will find resonance in the cryptic texts and roadway attractions of Ed Ruscha, the promotional posters of Al Ruppertsberg, and early canvases of Baldessari painted by sign painters (note to self: add these artists to exhibition concept mentioned earlier). The work's in-between status as an object will also prove

challenging for those who like their art easily boxed into categories, as 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. More proof, I think, that as Terada has moved his art out of the comfortable confines of conventional morphologies, the more far-reaching and broadly stimulating it has become.