



Ron Terada, *You Have Left the American Sector*, 2005. 3M-reflective highway vinyl, extruded aluminum, galvanized steel and wood, installed 304.8 x 304.8 x 40.6 cm. Gift of Kenneth Bradley, Calgary, 2016. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Ron Terada Photo: NGC

## Border Divide: Ron Terada and the Power of Signs

Chris Hampton

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In some sense, it is astonishing that the sculpture was ever even made. Commissioned by the Windsor Art Gallery, Vancouver artist Ron Terada contracted the City of Windsor sign department to produce and then install a road sign at the foot of Church Street on the city's riverfront walkway, facing the Canadian-American border. In the white-on-green scheme typical of highway information and directional signage and appearing in Canada's two official languages, it would say: "You have left the American sector."



Ron Terada, *Removal of You Have Left the American Sector*, 28 September 2005. © Ron Terada Photo: Ron Terada

The sign was installed on Friday, September 23, 2005, and was due to remain there until January 2006 to coincide with an exhibition of Terada's work at the Windsor Art Gallery. Five days later, however, the same crew of city workers who had installed the sign were tasked by city council to de-install it. In its brief tenure, it had apparently raised the ire of some local politicians. The controversy was front-page news in the *Windsor Star*. The exhibition's curator told reporters that councillors voted behind closed doors to have the art removed, which the mayor disputed. The next time Terada saw his artwork, it had been returned to the art gallery and had been cut into pieces.

To memorialize the episode, Terada had the City of Vancouver's sign shop recreate the work shortly after – this time, as an edition of three made in black-on-white. The [National Gallery of Canada](#) acquired one of these in 2016 and it is currently on view in Gallery B205, near two of Terada's so-called "Jeopardy paintings."

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Ron Terada, *Untitled (Jeopardy Painting)*, 1999. Acrylic on canvas, 165.4 x 147.5 x 5 cm.  
Purchased 2000. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Ron Terada Photo: NGC

Exhibited today, *You Have Left The American Sector* holds new relevance, as discussions of borders, who they permit and who they restrict, are once again major campaign and policy issues. And not just in the United States – home of Donald Trump’s Mexican border wall, the much-publicized family separation policy and frets about “the caravan” – but in Canada, too, where the same right-wing populism and xenophobia regarding migrants and refugees have infiltrated our political discourse. (EKOS poll results released in April show 40% of Canadian respondents think there are “too many” immigrants coming to this country.) You may have “left the American sector,” as the sign notes, but that only means you have entered a different one. Without a significant change of course, we appear headed toward a strictly sectorized world.

Terada made the original sign after a short period living in New York (telling U.S. Customs and Border guards that he was an “artist-in-residence” in the U.S. frequently caused alarm, he says, because of the sanctity and status implied by the word “resident”). It was freshly the post-9/11 era. The Department of Homeland Security was not yet three years old. The War on Terror was being waged in Afghanistan and had just brought troops into Iraq. Terada had recently made *Five Words in Coloured Neon* (2003), responding to the colour-coded terrorism threat advisory scale. When he first visited the proposed site along Windsor’s riverfront, he remembers helicopters overhead, patrolling. The heightened sense of security, especially around borders, was conspicuous, and the anxiety that accompanied it, appreciable.





Ron Terada, *Five Words in Coloured Neon*, 2003. Red, orange, yellow, blue, and green neon, 170 x 127 x 8 cm. Installation view, WOOSH, Griffin Art Projects, North Vancouver, Canada, 2015. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Ron Terada

Terada was struck on that initial visit by Windsor's proximity to Detroit, and thus the United States, separated only by the Detroit River – "a very swimmable distance." The intervention he planned would greet those who had just left the U.S. His sign would invoke the warnings posted at Checkpoint Charlie, the Cold War crossing between East and West Berlin, which told travellers "You are leaving the American sector" in English, Russian, French and German. The reference reminds viewers that the U.S. is a global military power – a reality seldom reflected by American-Canadian crossings, though pronounced elsewhere – as well as a state entity extremely concerned with the control of borders.

It is maybe these connotations, surfaced simply by stating something very obvious: "You have left the American sector", that so bristled local government. The mayor told the *Windsor Star* that an email thread circulated among councillors regarding complaints from residents, visitors and area businesses. Some councillors questioned its validity as art, which caused a tangent conversation on the expectations and function of art in the public realm. One particularly outspoken councillor said the sign ought to be relegated to a "broom closet." (Windsor, interestingly, did not have a public art policy before *You Have Left the American Sector*, but within the year, a policy was enacted.) Terada, reflecting on the saga, feels the city

acted upon a fear – overinflated or not – of alienating American tourists and commerce partners on whom many local businesses depend.



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The reaction reveals a sensitivity perhaps special to border towns, where lands abut and, with it, more abstract notions like national identities. In such places, physical borders reveal psychic borders – a sense of what is "verboden" – that may remain unseen further upcountry. In a city like Windsor, situated along what we regard as a "friendly" border, foreign relations might be measured in hotel vacancies, sold-out lunch specials and shifts cut early because "it was dead tonight."

At the National Gallery of Canada, *You Have Left the American Sector* appears now as a more mobile sign, anchored upright by a small hill of sandbags, as if it were transported to Ottawa straight from Windsor. The sandbags suggest also another property of borders: that they move, they change, they grow or diminish.

Though it began here, the artwork is not just specific to Canada: it applies also to other borderlands. Variations have appeared elsewhere. At Mostyn in Wales, its message was translated into Welsh. At the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2011, it appeared in English and Spanish (this version will be installed again this summer at [Art Basel](#) in Switzerland). New iterations are always possible. This is the great potency of the artwork: it extends to borders past, present and future. The languages of the peoples

concerned can be inserted. The name of the imperial power can even change. But as long as there are sectors, there will be a sign.

## About the Author

Chris Hampton is a freelance writer based in Toronto. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Canadian Art*.