

# Have you left the American Sector?

## Ron Terada's Adventure in the "City of Roses"

by Lee Rodney

Windsor is a city without definition. The approach from the Canadian side whether by plane, train or automobile is flat and dull: hazy in the summer and grey in the winter. Closer in, the streetscape is taken over by the density of billboards and signs. Directions to one of the two Canada-US border crossings compete with ads for plastic surgery, sex shops, and nightclubs. The endless signage indicates that Windsor is transitory affair, a quickie on the way to another place. What it lacks in terms of a distinguishing landscape or architectural intrigue, it makes up for in the visual noise along its major thoroughfares.

While its nickname is "The City of Roses," Windsor is more accurately a city of signs, both literally and symptomatically. Ron Terada isn't from Windsor, but he seems to intuitively understand what Windsor's penchant for signage means. It often takes a rank outsider to sense a community's insecurity, and Terada hit a sore spot with



Ron Terada. *You Have Left the American Sector*. Courtesy: Lee Rodney

his most recent public art project for the Art Gallery of Windsor last fall.

Terada seems to revel in presenting the obvious in his work. But often what's said to be obvious is anything but clear in terms of its implications. *You Have Left the*

*American Sector* (2005) was a road sign Terada had installed in Windsor's waterfront sculpture park on 23 September 2005. Even though the sign was standard in all its properties (kelly green, white text, both official Canadian languages) it looked slightly awkward though generally



innocuous. It was most likely only legible from the Windsor side of the Detroit River, which is also to say on Canadian territory.

Terada's sign was conceived as an allusion to the once infamous sign that stood in Berlin at Checkpoint Charlie. The Cold War

relic was worded in present tense — You Are Leaving The American Sector — in Russian, German, French and English, and now has taken on a second life as a museum object. Terada's sign, by contrast, was worded in past tense — You Have Left The American Sector — and lacks two of the four languages that constituted the political territory symbolized by Checkpoint Charlie.

By September 28 the sign was gone, removed by City of Windsor grounds and maintenance workers who were dispatched by City Council to dismantle it. This unilateral decision was made swiftly by Council, and thus excluded any consultation with the AGW, Bob McKaskell (the exhibition curator) and Terada himself. On Council's part, the decision seemed paranoid, desperate and illogical given the conditions under which all parties had been made aware of both the sign's content and its placement: it was tucked far away from the roadside, visible only to those strolling along Windsor's waterfront who were inclined to search it out. The project had been conceived and submitted to the city nine months prior; it was prepared in the City of Windsor sign shop by their own employees a month before the exhibition. Finally, it was erected on September 23 by the same grounds and maintenance workers who were sent out to dismantle it five days later.

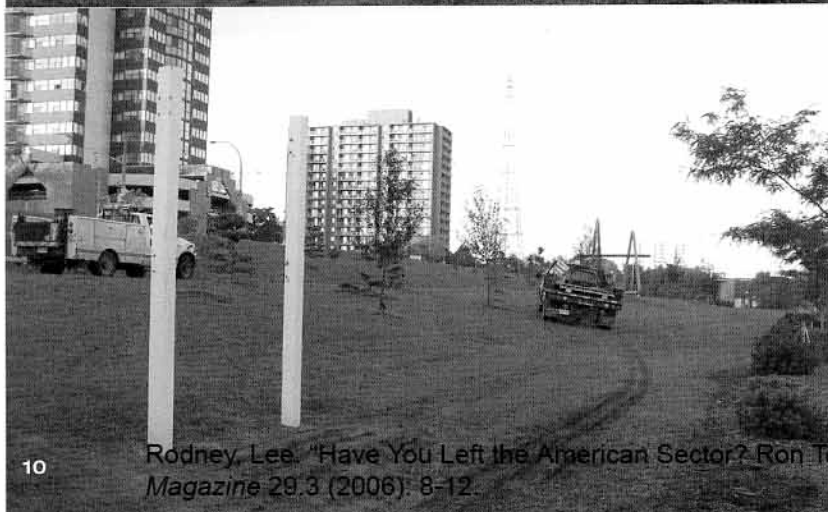
While it is impossible to know precisely what motivated City Council's decision, there were a number of statements made by Mayor Francis and City Councillors in the *Windsor Star* prior to the removal of Terada's sign. Francis alluded to complaints from local area businessmen who anticipated that the sign might offend American tourists. Additionally, Councillors Alan Halberstadt and David Cassivi were exceptionally vocal in their condemnation

of Terada's piece, suggesting at one point that it should be relegated to a broom closet in the Art Gallery of Windsor. Councillor Halberstadt got his wish, as Terada's sign has remained in storage there since the end of September.

The suggestion that Terada's sign would offend Americans and hurt the local economy is, I think, an imaginative one. It is true that the local economy is almost entirely contingent upon what happens in Detroit and its environs. Windsor is many things to Detroit (its illegitimate child, its concubine); but the people sitting on City Council must know somewhere, deep down, that most Americans don't give a toss about a sign in Canada that says: "You have left the American Sector." It is a long stretch to the conclusion that a temporary (four month) art project would hurt the local economy.

This was a power play, a clear-cut case of censorship, and one obviously not without precedent in Canada. But what is most disturbing here is that Council took draconian measures to wipe out something that they didn't like, and that the interests of big business were construed by Mayor Francis and the *Windsor Star* as public opinion. Public opinion at the best of times is difficult to pin down, but in most cases it takes longer than five days to arrive at a conclusion that might accurately reflect something that could conceivably be called public.

Council's decision to take down Terada's sign rests on a number of presumptions about Americans that are hardly sustainable. The stereotype that Council holds onto is that Americans are by and large stupid and incapable of interpreting Terada's sign on a number of levels: as political irony, as historical comparison. Council failed to recognize any of these



distinct possibilities and the *Star* followed suit in drumming up predictable responses that positioned Terada as the obstinate charlatan, a shit disturber. In the second of a handful of articles that followed the controversy, Terada was quickly cast as irreverent: "Artist shrugs off critique" ran the headline for the article of 23 September.

The controversy was immediately pitched as a question of artistic merit in order to derail the issue of censorship. Within days, the Terada piece was lampooned as "bad art," an eyesore worthy of a lynch mob. As one might expect the *Star* had no trouble finding ready subjects to denounce its value as art. In one particularly comical moment worth quoting in full, the *Star's* Dalson Chen called upon the authority of a proverbial average Joe:

Out for a stroll in Riverside Park, 30-year-old Ron Mercer wasn't impressed by the sculpture garden's newest feature. "I don't see how it's a piece of art. It doesn't have any shape but the shape of a sign," said the baffled Hamilton native, "I just don't like the look of it to be honest."

Comments such as these are laughably familiar. The stupid-but-proud ethos that is coming to stand for public opinion is largely one manufactured and maintained by the interests of neo-conservatives everywhere. Arguments based on the logic of artistic merit are dubious at the best of times. For the sake of playing devil's advocate, I'll go out on a limb and say that Terada's piece does indeed lack creativity. It's an entirely predictable Vancouver school, neo-Conceptualist response to the conundrums of Canadian identity. We've seen a lot of it before. But even if we could conceivably establish that Terada's piece is bad art (there's plenty of bad art

City workers dismantling the sign. Courtesy: Lee Rodney

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on the Windsor waterfront already), this doesn't justify its removal given that the City had fundamentally approved the project in advance of its installation.

If Terada's piece was a litmus test for the corporatization of the Canadian media, the tragedy is that he proved the extent to which CanWest Global has infiltrated the last bastion of the public sphere. The tiny amount of public space given over to art in the Windsor Sculpture Garden is at least symbolically linked to a tradition of public culture that includes debate as an integral part. I don't need to go through a lesson in the history of democracy to point out the inherent contradiction between the ideal of free speech and the way silence was imposed when the subject of national autonomy was raised.

The controversy was carefully controlled by City Council and the *Windsor Star*. Together they seemed to claim majority shareholder status in the business of manufacturing public opinion. The voice of the average Joe has come to stand for something called public opinion, and the system works because everyone wants to agree with average Joe. Average Joe is pitched as honest, working-class and simple; he is both a victim of industrial capital and a subject who perpetuates its values. As a mascot for sensationalist politicians and the media entities that sustain them, average Joe works to muster consent because he drinks beer and loves hockey, and this alone makes him lovable. To disagree with him puts you in the camp of a mean-spirited freak, or even worse, an intellectual. But average Joe has become a tyrannical force when it comes to quickly sketching out the contours of public opinion because as a trope of familiarity he can be used in lieu of public opinion or as a catalyst to engineer consent.

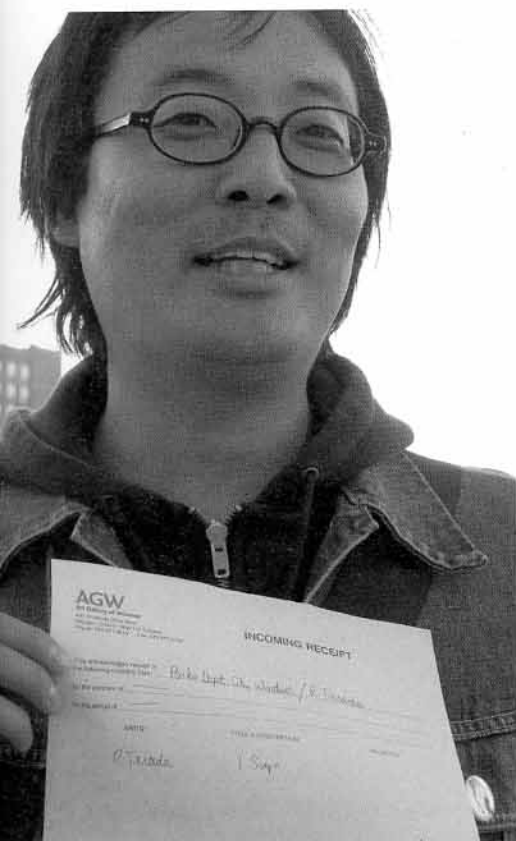
The supreme irony in the events that took place last fall is that the dismantling of Terada's sign comes after Richard Florida's whirlwind tour through Detroit last winter. Florida is a sociologist-cum-urban planning guru whose best-selling book *The Rise of the Creative Class* had apparently inspired Mayors Francis (Windsor) and Kwame Kilpatrick (Detroit) to think about ways of reviving their fledgling industrial economies though making the inner cities of Detroit and Windsor more attractive places to live in. The immediate answer to the woes of urban blight came in the form of "Car-tunes on Parade," the Detroit-Windsor version of Toronto's painted moose and Chicago's cows, trinkets of community spirit and goodwill that have little to do with creativity or a sustainable commitment to the improvement of urban decay.

While Detroit has worked miracles over the past couple of years propping up its urban core in preparation for the 2006 Superbowl, Windsorites have been busy prepping their strip clubs for the hordes of football hooligans that will drift over the border in search of a party afterwards. Eddie Francis seems to have missed the point of Florida's creative cities paradigm. If you're serious about fostering a creative class, it doesn't make a lot of sense to start off by alienating the artistic communities that are already in place. Francis' horizon of creative industries seems to reach its limit at exotic dancing, perhaps the only creative economy that is actively promoted here.

Dark clouds are often silver-lined and the Terada affair has at least served to galvanize a fractured arts community. The intervening months have seen a well-attended forum on public art and the adoption of a public art policy that is officially recognized by City Council. The

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Ron Terada with a receipt from the City of Windsor.  
Courtesy: Lee Rodney

recognition of a policy on public art comes after nearly a decade of lobbying from members of local arts organizations in anticipation that the city's hands-off, laissez-faire stance would eventually result in conflict. The success of the Green Corridor project along the heavily trafficked Huron Church Road has worked to convert City Council to the principles of "good design." Whether we can expect to see these new initiatives translated into a more vital notion of public sphere will remain to be seen.

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ture of fear and loathing that was once limited to the Fox network alone. It has been pointed out on a number of occasions that the response to Terada's sign is specific to Windsor: no other major Canadian city (or border town for that matter) would respond so anxiously to such an innocuous statement. I am certain that most people living in other parts of the country who caught wind of the Terada controversy will dismiss it as a local affair, yet one more point for Windsor as the bingo capital of Canada.

In order to point out just how unusual Terada's case is it seems instructive to look back to 1991 when Jamelie Hassan's billboard project, *Because there was & there wasn't ... (Baghdad Billboard)*, was installed near the Ambassador Bridge during the first Gulf War. While this project also drew controversy over anti-American content, the billboard remained up for the duration of the Artcote organized exhibition. The course of events that lead to the dismantling of Terada's sign last September was more a product of time rather than place: political climate rather than locale alone. However the strong reaction ensured that Terada's sign worked as a demonstration piece, a public performance to show up the climate of intolerance that has been steadily building in Canadian news media over the last decade. For a few short weeks there was at least something nominally interesting going on at home. But for the rest of the country and the world, Windsor, Ontario will go down on record as a conservative, reactionary place that shuts down debate before it can happen.

In many ways Canada still remains sandwiched between the two vast empires that dominated the political landscape of the previous two centuries. Canadians seem to be perpetually stuck in the state of being

neither/nor. Not really American, but certainly not British either. Indeed, Canadian culture is premised upon self-reflexive quests in the void of Canadian national identity, which is defined more by what it isn't rather than by what it is. In *Why I Hate Canadians*, Will Ferguson likens the search for a uniquely Canadian spirit as one akin to having a fine lantern without a resident genie. *You Have Left the American Sector* may baldly point out the obviousness of Canadian territory, but it also serves as a poignant reminder that there is increasingly little to distinguish it from that which lies across the river.

Windsor seems to be in the unenviable position of having to perform its Canadianness while never having wholly joined the quest for identity that so preoccupies other parts of the country. However in one small respect the players on Windsor City Council behaved in a uniquely Canadian manner in so far as they subscribed to the belief that we have the capacity to offend Americans. Canada is rarely on the American radar screen. Short of global terrorism, and the misguided idea that Canada is a gateway for terrorists to enter the US, they're not bothered one way or the other by their beige (dull) or pink (watered-down left) neighbours to the north. And it is this continual condition of ineffectuality that really disturbs those aspiring to whoop up a right-wing vision for Canada in the twenty-first century.

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