

# Kunsthalle Wien



## Ron Terada. Seeing the Other Side

JOHANN GRÖBNER, 09/09 2016

Ron Terada and Johann Gröbner are both Canadian artists that originally met in Vancouver a number of years ago. The pair crossed paths again while Terada was in Vienna for the opening of the exhibition *Béton* at Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier. In this interview Gröbner talks to Terada about his practice and the new billboard piece *Concrete Language / See Other Side of Sign* (2006/2016) realized within (and outside of) the context of *Béton*...

*Johann Gröbner (JG): When I first saw the billboard I thought it was one piece. It sort of could be, or it plays into being one piece. See Other Side of Sign (2006) and Concrete Language (2006) were originally part of a larger group of sculptures that you presented for the exhibition "Territory" (June 10 - August 6, 2006) for the Presentation House Gallery in Vancouver?*

Ron Terada (RT): Yes, but I don't view that manifestation of the work as being "sculpture". Of course, I don't want the work to be viewed as "interventions" either... Very simply: the works were texts placed upon low-budget, moveable commercial signboards placed in non-commercial or derelict spaces. The point wasn't to have the encounter of these signboards immediately viewed within the usual discussions around art.

*JG: The inspiration for See Other Side of Sign came from a sign that you saw on your way to Portland? One of those green highway signs that tell you where you are?*

RT: Yeah, I first came upon the sign on a road trip through Washington state, but it wasn't one of those official highway signs; it was one of those tacky, mural-type signs that reads "welcome to...so and so place". It made me think of the town Punxsutawney in the movie Groundhog Day starring Bill Murray. The sign was made out of logs, yet on the back of that sign was this ridiculous message which read: "See Other Side Of Sign".

*JG: When I first went to see it I almost split my gut laughing because it just seemed so dumb (I don't mean dumb as an art strategy) but just like "what?!", why would you even put that on one side of a sign?!*

RT: Exactly! You can't make this stuff up! That's why I don't feel the need to come up with my own texts... The best texts are those that are found in real life.

*JG: How did Concrete Language come about? Was it commissioned for the exhibition Concrete Language (Sept 8 - Nov 5, 2006) which you participated in that same year at the Contemporary Art Gallery (CAG) on Nelson Street?*

RT: *Concrete Language* is part of a larger on-going body of work; it continues my interest in adopting ancillary aspects of exhibition-making. In this case, I would simply take the curator's exhibition title, "Concrete Language," and make it the signage—or my work—for the show. However, there's the added twist that I used the occasion of the "Territory" exhibition to display and promote "Concrete Language" which would open a couple months later. Of course no one knew this at the time, nor was it readily apparent within the work. It was simply a fortuitous circumstance that enabled me to stage a signboard reading Concrete Language on the City's storage site for concrete barriers/dividers. In fact, the site was almost too perfect for the title! A photograph was then taken of the signboard and this ended up being my work for the Contemporary Art Gallery exhibit. It was also used as the promotional image for the show in the form of a poster and exhibition brochure.

*JG: Perhaps at this point you could say a few words about your current work within the context of Béton? How do you feel it relates to the exhibition, and how it functions in other ways too? For instance, do you believe it acts as a satellite for the exhibition on the one hand and yet that it is also independent from the show on the other? How would you describe in your own words the precarious nature of the work as it stands now?*

RT: I see it as a continuation of the work that originated in the exhibition "Territory" that then morphed its way into the exhibition "Concrete Language." In using various exhibition titles turned into signage as a series of work, I like to think it could carry the memory, content and even aura of these shows long after the shows are over, as if it were a kind of pseudodocumentation or relic. The inclusion of *See Other Side of Sign* on the

reverse side could be seen as an added prompt to recall these previous exhibitions. As for its role in *Béton*, I like to think of *Concrete Language* as acting as a kind of subtitle to the show. Like you said, it is part of the exhibition and not, due in large part to being offsite. Maybe these ridiculous images of signboards serve not only as an oblique advertisement for the show at the Museumsquartier, but slyly instigate some of the ideas at play within *Béton*?

*JG: Yes of course, and certainly abstract concepts too. I'm curious to know how you view your piece on Karlsplatz, as a sculpture or as a photograph?*

RT: I don't see it as either. Of course there's a sculptural dimension to it, and of course it's a photograph, but ultimately the work operates more within the demands of signage.

*JG: It becomes part of the public space?*

RT: Yeah, it recedes into the background because billboards are already too familiar.

*JG: The sign is situated in a particularly "public" place – a high traffic area where cars and bikes drive past and many people are walking around, either tourists, people going to the large subway station or students of the nearby art academy. I can imagine if I was a passing by I would be very curious to see what's on the other side of the sign...*

RT: Well, it's somewhat dependant on which side of the billboard you encounter first. But should one view "See Other Side of Sign" first, I don't think it makes one want to immediately see the other side of the billboard. Hopefully the humour alone would stop the viewer dead in their tracks because it's so unexpectedly stupid! Should one choose to view the other side, I don't think reading "Concrete Language" is particularly useful, although the dialogue it sets up I hope is still funny. After all, it's a sign in a graveyard full of concrete barriers! As a pairing, both texts somewhat short-circuit one another, or at the very least, creates a very blunt loop. Ideally it upsets viewers usual encounters with billboards or signage.

*JG: It's also interesting that it's a sign within a sign...*

RT: Indeed. Having the photographs of a previous staging (exhibition context) turned into billboards is pretty strange as "why not just re-stage the signboards?" Yet there's something funny about advertising or showcasing low-budget, changeable-letter signboards onto billboards. It speaks to different kinds of economies; these signboards are so *not* sexy, whereas the space of billboards are typically reserved for something a touch more high end. In North America, changeable-letter signboards are usually found on parking lots of dated suburban malls, used-car lots, or junk yards. That said, there's something home-made and unofficial about the Karlsplatz billboard that adds to the overall humour...

*JG: Your work is often considered to continue the legacy of other artists hailing from Vancouver such as The N.E. Thing Company. How do you feel about these connections, and the art scene in Vancouver in general? Do you think there's a lot of similar, let's say conceptual, humour-based art?*

RT: Well I think the art scene in Vancouver now is quite diverse. But when I started out in the mid 90's, it was certainly hard to ignore the "fab-four" (Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Stan Douglas)—they raised the bar for art in the city. As a side-effect, photography became the *it* medium in Vancouver; it got so bad that to be taken as a serious young artist, one had to make work using a medium-format camera! I knew I couldn't follow the trajectory of "photoconceptualism," despite my acknowledging and using this stereotype as a distinctly Vancouver brand of work in my own work! As for a humour-based art, I happen to almost always see humour in even the most serious art. Certainly N.E. Thing Co. is a very obvious Vancouver example, though I think their work coincides with other work made at that time—think John Baldesarri or Douglas Huebler—so humour-based work isn't strictly a Vancouver thing.

*JG: Aside from humour, you're almost exclusively using text and language as the basis of your work, and then you're using different materials depending on the situation, to articulate that into a piece of art. What's your relation to language in this regard, why do you often employ text in your work for example?*

RT: My use of text stems from trying to convey something as directly and as simply as possible. Because all my texts are found texts—with the occasional tweak—I try to replicate the integrity or spirit of my original encounter. By this I mean, the proof in finding a certain text—or it finding me—is proof of my own existence or relationship with the world (as corny as that sounds). At the same time, I like that the original context or use of the text has nothing to do with me. It has, or had, its own purpose and it exists to be re-purposed.

*JG: Your work often has the quality of camouflage in the sense that you use "normal" elements such as signs, text, and magazines that are already a significant part of our everyday visual landscape. Is this a sort of strategy for you? Having a more subtle point of entry for people to then decide what it is that they are looking at and thinking about?*

RT: I'm not so sure I'm comfortable with seeing this approach as a *strategy*, though I will admit I often favour the cloak of camouflage that this approach affords. I just recognized an area where I could make work; no one else seemed too interested in a gallery or institution's printed matter, signage, or other marketing paraphernalia—such as my instigating giveaway soundtracks for the duration of an exhibition—as a possible site for work, let alone what that might mean for an artist to have access to the packaging of exhibitions. I saw it not unlike how promotional material functions in other areas of the culture industry. It's an extension of secondary or supplementary elements to an exhibition and my trying to alter or heighten it's function or presence within a given context. However, I think the works sometimes flirts with it's own disappearance because often times it's too subtle.

*JG: Would you say that your work maintains an ambiguous relationship to authorship? (as you have discussed a number of times your use of found text or imagery, placing the authorship in an "in-between" zone in a sense)*

RT: Sure. I don't find authorship, or who it's attributed to in the end, all that pressing to me. I like that a lot of elements in my work are found and with very little alteration on my part (if I can help it). My activity is straightforwardly simple: I select or choose things. But what you choose and identify with—or reject for the matter—says a lot about you. I think the ambiguity that arises in the work is more in its predicament as having

to be viewed as art or as something other, or more than, the original point of reference. It really boils down to what the viewer makes of the source or reference in relation to its new context, the degree of familiarity with the back story, or whatever else the case may be.