

Critical mass

BY DOUGLAS COUPLAND MAY 12, 2001 (UPDATED APRIL 11, 2018)

Last month, I was in Cologne and Dusseldorf visiting the art galleries there.

When I was introduced to the dealers as being from Vancouver, conversation would stop for a beat. I was then given a quick squint, invariably followed by a variation of the question “Ah, Vancouver — please do tell me, what is it about your city and the artists it produces?”

“What do you mean?”

“So many artists. . . .”

These Germans were referring to the fact that a disproportionate whack of the artwork they exhibit, sell and resell is made by Vancouver artists. Art produced by Vancouver artists is almost a Made-in-Japan guarantee of quality. To paraphrase Jerry Seinfeld, I suppose these dealers were asking me, What exactly is the deal with Vancouver?

Lately the big deal is the CAG — Vancouver’s beloved Contemporary Art Gallery (known to the locals only as the Kagg) — which opened in its new Nelson Street location a week ago after a fairly standard amount of politicking and ruffled feathers. The crowd, composed of essentially everybody in the Vancouver art scene, was vast and sweating like a fire marshal’s most fevered imagining, and it fully clogged this beautiful new space, located along a strand of sparkling but unoccupied glass residential towers that bring to mind sci-fi visions of a depopulated tomorrow. The christening shows are by Vancouver’s Ken Lum and Toronto’s Germaine Koh, and with the opening of the CAG comes a dawning awareness within the city’s art scene that something new is indeed, for lack of a better word, happening — a sensation non-Vancouverites have been noticing more clearly in the past few years.

Fact: Vancouver is beautiful and charming and all of that, but it’s also, arguably, one of the remotest cities in North America not counting, say, Juneau. Seattle, a two-hour drive to the south, has a negligible art scene. They make software, jets and glassware down there, but they don’t really make, well . . . art. Most American cities, in fact, have small or non-existent art communities. Even Chicago. The American artistic soul flees to New York, Europe or possibly Los Angeles and that’s that. To our national credit, most Canadian cities, even small ones, have an art scene. It’s one of those subtle but potent things that spring to my mind, at least when I suck in some air and say to myself, I am so glad that I am not American.

The art dealers of Cologne and Dusseldorf are not wrong. Vancouver has a globally influential and connected art scene. It may be the continent’s 27th biggest city, but by *Dokumenta*, *Flash Art* or *Artforum* standards it is almost incontestably in the North American top five. This in spite of the fact that Vancouverites are not noticeably big collectors of contemporary art.

It was amusing to read the diaries of Andy Warhol, where, on the very first page dated in 1976, he says point blank about Vancouver, “I don’t think they collect art there.”

So then why am I even writing this? Because as mentioned before, there is this buzz emerging in the art world that Vancouver has reached some sort of critical mass and has now become the epicentre of a new kind of (oh God) scene. As I’m a Vancouverite and have been in and around the art scene since entering the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1980, this newspaper asked me what this might be about.

Run for the hills.

I know. A manufactured hot new scene. Who wouldn’t shudder? But at the same time, I remember going down to Seattle in early 1991 and sensing the energy there, and then saying to myself, Hey this feels kind of like something’s going on here. Half a year later Seattle was, well, *The New Seattle*. This is a bit of what I’m feeling in Vancouver’s ocean-rich air right now.

Or am I?

Is it all a crock? Is it delusional? Is it hype? And even if it is true, why is it happening? Why there? And why now? Does it have a name? If it does, I’m not going to be the one to name it.

The funniest thing is that if you ask any artist working within the Vancouver art scene if the scene is as hip as it’s cracked up to be, you’ll get a blank look followed by, You’ve got to be kidding. Art in Vancouver is a soberly undertaken vocation, which decades ago shed any remaining molecule of West Coast hippie earthiness. Its artists are neither decadent nor indulged. And it’s precisely these characteristics — coupled with the city’s isolation — that can partly explain the vitality of its art scene. While the rest of the world was busily postmodernizing and spinning off into fevered tangents, Vancouver’s program remained, and remains, purely modern. It chose to skip postmodernism altogether, with the exception of some truly ghastly residential architecture. One might call Vancouver’s scene transmodern. In this city, postmodernism is approached rationally, as a business, in the form of the TV and film industry.

In the often opaque art world, Vancouver is largely known for the Vancouver School of photo-conceptual work. The Vancouver School often uses photography to make its point, but is by no means limited to it. Its signature artwork is Spartan and wipe-clean, and it rests on a strong critical foundation with triple-A production values.

The school’s founders include Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas. Locally they’re known as the Boys’ Club, which, maybe 10 years ago, was considered a witty putdown, but now it’s become a put-up, because rather than be insular and cliquish as the nickname first implied, the Boys’ Club has been quite the opposite. They carefully mentored and nurtured the next wave of artists emerging in the city’s front ranks — among others, Jin-Me Yoon, Arni Haraldsson, Brian Jungen, Damian Moppett, Ron Terada, Myfanwy MacLeod, Derek Root, Howard Ursuliak and Steven Shearer. And these offspring, in symphony with the Boys’ Club, have gone on to produce a third wave of Vancouver artists — one might call them the grandkids. Front-runners include Chris Gergley, Jamie Dolinko, Karin Bubas, Scott McFarland, Shannon Oksanen and Geoffrey Farmer.

These younger artists and others work through a solid network of artist-run galleries and have time to distill their views and voices without fear of cannibalism. In a few cities where I’ve spent time with people in the local art scene, I’ve noticed that in restaurants, when one artist hops off to the bathroom, back at the table the knives and claws come out. In Vancouver, there are no knives or claws. If anything, those at the table will talk up the absent artist. It’s almost sweet that way.

Of course the borderlines aren’t as crisp as this 1-2-3 tier might imply. Some artists straddle the generations, and then there are some artists such as Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Chris Woods and Liz Magor who are *sui generis*. Other schools of art coexist and hybridize with the Vancouver school, most notably the Young Romantics school of the of the 1980s — Angela Grossmann, Mina Totino, Graham Gillmore, Charles Rea and Attila Richard Lukacs.

But underlying nearly all the work produced in the city are the issues of history, identity, landscape and authenticity. This comes as no surprise given that Vancouver is one of Earth’s youngest cities, uncursed with much European history and its ultimate gestalt as yet unattained. Vancouver’s landscape is awe provoking but never far from a mall, and its citizens deeply aware and deeply suspicious of the global economy’s penchant for erasing personal and regional voice. It is this specific and unique convergence of factors that has been consciously addressed as such since the early 1970s.

In Vancouver, a self-strengthening cycle has been put into motion; the bar is set very high for both conceptual and artifactual purity. Work gets better and better. Youngsters look at their elders and assume that working internationally is the way things work and matter-of-factly get on with it.

Last week at a dinner party of seven Vancouver artists, the subject of airlines and air-mileage programs came up — as it usually does with creative people, all myths aside. It emerged that two artists present had taken Cathay Pacific flight No. 888 non-stop from Vancouver to New York within the past week. One guest was to take it the next day. Everybody there was intimate with the flight, its timetable, its vagaries and its many pluses and virtually no minuses. (It is the second half of Cathay’s eerily empty Hong Kong/New York run, and it leaves Vancouver at the civilized hour of noon and gets into JFK around 8:30, just in time to get to the hotel, wash up and go out and make the scene.)

Myself, in 1984 I graduated from what was then known as the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, although it is only really ever referred to as Emily Carr. For the next 15 years, whenever anybody asked me where I went to college or university, I’d say, The Emily Carr College of Art and Design, whereupon I would receive a smirk — as if I couldn’t read the cartoon thought bubble over top of their heads: Oh my God, he went to a school of cosmetics and hairdressing!

Since 1990 or so I’ve been involved with the literary world, but the dark secret of the literary world is that it, well, doesn’t really exist. The art world gathers almost every week in its openings and lectures and is friendly and supportive.

The literary world essentially never gets together, and nobody in it ever agrees on much. I’ve always felt much more at home putting what written work I do in the context of the art world — Jenny Holzer’s early truisms were the first place I ever realized that words could be art supplies.

Finally, the Emily Carr smirk and thought bubble seem to have vanished. The Vancouver scene is not imagined. There is something very real and very new taking place here. But it’s hard to christen a scene without looking self-serving, and besides, the notion of a scene is abhorrent to whatever scene there is taking place. It’s a loop.

So I hope this new moment goes unnamed. Things in Vancouver work best when they’re left to happen on their own.