

ACTING OUT

AM JOHAL ON SPEAKEASY: TERRITORY

Rethinking how civic space is defined, Speakeasy: Territory was a series of talks that addressed the mutable definition of "territory." Questioning whether "territory" is a spatial, geographic, political, economic, or social construct, urban space was taken up as a contestable subject. Speakeasy: Territory included presentations by Jamie Hilder, Am Johal, Thomas Kemple, Germaine Koh and Kara Uzelman.

The Downtown Eastside is Vancouver's original racist hub. One of the city's first bylaws was to place a geographic restriction around where Chinese residents could live. It became present-day Chinatown, home of the 1907 anti-Asiatic riots, the setting of Communist rallies in Oppenheimer Park and near where Japanese residents were taken to be interned. As global capital washed into Vancouver, driven in part by Hong Kong immigration in the 1990s, Chinatown was left with a new Millennium Gate and an identity crisis as Asian consumers left the neighbourhood for Richmond. Enter marketer Bob Rennie, "condo madness," the 2010 Olympics, the Woodward's redevelopment and Gordon Campbell's "tough love" social policies. The Downtown Eastside has become the Rocky Balboa of North American neighbourhoods and is looking for a scrap.

In these circumstances, acting out is nothing new. "Acting out" is a psychological term meaning to perform an action to express (often unconscious) emotional conflicts. The acting is usually anti-social and may be impulsive or addictive (drinking, drug taking or shoplifting), or to garner attention (throwing a tantrum or behaving promiscuously). It may involve a housing squat or a riot.

If the defining features of contemporary politics have to do with coming to terms with trauma, fear and liberty as ideas, it is also about negating death by acting out. One viable response to a trauma is to act out. At some point one must decide whether to deal with the trauma or simply to wipe it from memory. Acting out is a legitimate way to deal with the limitations placed by an apparatus of order. Expressing liberty and other attempts at achieving freedom within this context is the natural reaction to this politics of fear, a defining feature of contemporary democratic life.¹

The Downtown Eastside carries these global political phenomena affecting territory, space and power into the politics of the local. Even if the

Downtown Eastside was a constructed identity built around reimagining the neighbourhood in response to the meaning of "skid row," it has become synonymous with all the things associated with its former name. While it certainly is more authentic than the constructed nostalgia of Gastown, the naming of the Downtown Eastside in the early 1970s was a political response to the same powers in the planning department that have attempted to balkanize the space ever since. Sociology professor Thomas Kemple makes the argument that skid row was not originally a negative term and that reimagining the neighbourhood through its original name may now be relevant again.²

The narrative of any complex, conflicted space inevitably suffers and benefits through distortions and, sometimes, even outright lies. With such a proliferation of media savvy non-profit and religious organizations attuned to the acute issues in the neighbourhood, it is an open question what the "marginalized" narrative really is. Traumas occurring within a specific territory are often shared, but the wounds are more deeply inflicted on those at the margins.

The Downtown Eastside, whether static or in a state of resurrection, is a distorted but revealing reflection of contemporary political fashions. Public policy has the lethal power to kill, maim and disfigure a human life either through action or inaction. Acting out is not that far from the idea of non-conformism in the public place—an idea that is rooted in a democratic tradition as old as social life itself. Being a dissident within any political or social system requires some form of acting out in order to be noticed. Acting out confronts the legitimating exercises and charade of political value formation. No one can act in the margins or the periphery without having to confront powerful interests, officialdom, some form of unwritten social convention, or even the commerce that exists and is embedded within its subculture. Acting out is, by its very premise, a form of liberty and an attempt to articulate freedom.

Whether initiating conversations with strangers on the bus, taking out personal ads or flirting with anarchist ideas in her work, artist Germaine Koh provokes bystanders and raises serious questions about the passivity inherent in public life and our own complicity in upholding the narrow bandwidth of the contemporary public sphere. In Koh's world, businessmen strip down

from their suits, don boxing gloves and shorts in the public colosseum of urban space. They engage in three rounds of boxing in the Toronto business district at high noon, with each round kicked off by a cyclist's bell. When it is over, everyone goes back to their conformist lives. The bravado and playfulness with which Koh takes over territory and space in the sanitized world of power is a creative force more persuasive and relevant than any predictable political protest. In fact, it is a type of public orgy we should all get into a little more often. After all, there's nothing wrong with going into the corners, getting mud on our faces or being a little embarrassed by our social probing.

The politics of territory and space as defined by political activism and artistic practice require some formal border-keeping to remain authentic and free from the duress of politics to ensure that it not merely become a form of propaganda. Change and reinvention are inevitable historical processes—both in their relationships to death and in the act of decay itself. The meanings of space and territory change over time and wars over them are fought by many means: private security, beautification, planning measures, policing, surveillance, bull dozers and cranes.

The freedom of movement can at times be built upon infringing on the basic freedoms of those without the ability to defend their own interests. Isaiah Berlin argues that there are basic freedoms about living one's life as one wishes (positive liberty), and the other (negative liberty) requires collective adjudication to maintain an enhanced freedom for all. The Downtown Eastside has been constructed and perpetuated by public policy that has ineffectively attempted to balance freedom with intervention. The saturation of compassion with the influx of property speculation is a dangerous thing. In basic terms it means the permanent displacement of the long-term, low-income community.

Alain Badiou has argued that inequality can be understood by the system of relations between people that both create and perpetuate social dynamics. The construction of knowledge and the politics behind it remains a central question in defining the narrative of conflicted space. Jacques Rancière has observed that, "Society no more holds the solution to the state's problems than the state holds the solution to social problems. The folly of the times is the wish to use consensus to cure the diseases of consensus. What we must do is repoliticize conflicts so that they can be addressed, restore names to the people and give politics back its former visibility in the handling of problems and resources."³

Who has the right to territory and space? People reside in the Downtown Eastside for longer than any other place in Vancouver. It has also has the highest HIV/AIDS rate amongst injection drug users in North America and more people have died of overdoses here than anywhere else in the western world. It is home to the only safe injection site and heroin prescription trial in North America. It is a place of creativity and social experimentation that flies in the face of Vancouver's usually patrician and parochial reality. But a very real threat to its identity as a low-income neighbourhood is being carried out on a daily basis. 800 units of Single Resident Occupancy housing has been lost since the Olympics were awarded to Vancouver in 2003, and homelessness has more than doubled in the region since 2002. Neighbourhood revitalization projects like the Carrall Street Connector/Greenway, the Silk Road Project and other city planning department PR projects have never really critically investigated their own role in the process of displacement. Public policy failures such as selective policing, poorly planned deinstitutionalization of mental health patients, the Safe Streets Act and Project Civil City have only proven to show the disconnection between political language and the blunt reality of front-line displacement.

The politics of this place is a kind of soap opera—characters get killed off and come back to life through processes of resurrection and redemption. Here in Vancouver, we live in the unfashionable reality and economic laws of real estate and 99 cent pizza. Everyone knows the feeling of just getting by on rent day. It is a city living on the edge and, increasingly, a place to leave behind, rather than set down roots. But the really sad and pathetic thing is that most people really don't care, nor are they willing to do anything about it. A transient city has transient politics.

In this type of game, the faceless bureaucrat wins every time—which is the real story of Vancouver. Ding ding. Global capital wins round one.

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¹ Slavoj Zizek, from a lecture entitled "Politics Between Fear and Trembling" at the University of British Columbia, November 1, 2006.

² From a lecture given by Thomas Kemple at Artspeak, January 25, 2007.

³ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995): 106.