

let's heal the divide

Don Richardson // Street Photography by Denis Bouvier // Volume 15, Issue 16 - March 24–April 14, 2015

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“We are here to awaken from the illusion of separateness.”
Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk

Gently lit with neon, *let's heal the divide* is a recent installation on the wall of the Vancouver Community College (VCC) Downtown Campus at Hamilton and Pender, part of the 2014-2016 Vancouver Biennale Open Air Museum supporting public art. It's by Toni Latour, a queer, feminist Vancouver artist pictured here with Biennale founder, Barrie Mowatt. The current theme is Open Borders/Crossroads Vancouver.

The installation is specifically located where there is a geographic divide between the impoverished Downtown East Side (DTES) and the business and financial district of the city. It's meant to spark discussion on the socio-economic, political and cultural disparity that exists between these two areas and beyond.

Latour's use of neon in her sign is an appropriation from its more typical commercial use to one that promotes social change. It's also energy efficient and only costs \$100/year to light. Although the sign does not shout at you, it's message is clear and persistent, much like its creator.

VCC was chosen, not only because of its location, but because it represents accessibility to an incredibly diverse student body, many of whom find themselves in a challenging economic situation. 2015 marks VCC's 50th anniversary of providing excellent educational services to the community.

Latour's inspiration is deep felt and comes from many sources. Close to home was the death of her father several years ago when she felt personally devastated, divided and in need of healing. She drew from many sources: Buddhism, yoga, meditation, authors like Louise Hays and Alice Walker, poets like Rainer Maria Rilke and Rumi as well as her art and teaching. But Latour was also inspired by political activism. After attending rallies such as Idle No More, she was moved by the need for healing, not only for Aboriginal peoples but for all peoples and situations where disparity exists. Her purpose is to explore art as a catalyst for change to produce healing.

Accompanying the installation was a panel discussion inside VCC which posed the question: Is public art a commodity used to promote gentrification, or does it have the capacity to transform, change and heal what divides us. Latour used the quote at the beginning of this article during her presentation at the discussion. It was moderated by Gordon Price, urban planner, former city councilor and now director of The City Program at SFU. Panelists included: Michael Geller, architect, planner and real estate developer; Romi Chandra Herbert, co-executive director of PeerNet B.C. and Sandra Seekins, an instructor of art history and women and gender studies at Capilano University.

After listening to the panel discussion, it became clear that Latour, through her installation, had achieved her purpose in engaging people in conversation about the disparity that exists in the DTES and the means "to heal it," as well as the disparity that exists on many levels in society, not just in this city but nationally and worldwide. Certainly her art does not contribute to gentrification, but there was discussion on the positive and negative aspects of building development in the DTES.

Latour is a multi-media artist working in sound, video, photography, drawing, text-based art and public and performance art, employing various of these techniques in her installations. She has been exhibited nationally and internationally and also has an installation for the 2009-2011 Vancouver Biennale, currently at Richmond Brighthouse Canada Line Station.