

## Engagement

Dennis Oppenheim (New York City, USA)

**WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE?** *Engagement* is one of several versions American artist Dennis Oppenheim has produced referencing the traditional engagement rings. He was born in Electric City Washington in 1938 when his father was an engineer on the Grand Coulee Dam project. He received his B.F.A. from the School of Arts and Crafts, and an M.F.A. from Stanford University. Dennis Oppenheim has had a recognized career as a conceptual artist working in sculpture, photography, film and video since the 1970s. Oppenheim's conceptual work first came to realization through the use of film and video, performance and the



1



2

body and he was one of the avant-garde artists of the 70's. Oppenheim has been constructing large-scale sculptural works since the 1990's and is one of the most influential and respected artists working today. His work was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Vancouver Sculpture Biennale in 2007. Residing in New York City, Oppenheim continues to exhibit internationally in galleries such as the Tate Gallery in London, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Whitney Museum of American Art and The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Galerie Pro Arte, Germany; and the Joseph Helman Gallery, New York. He has been commissioned by many venues internationally.

**WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS SCULPTURE?**

The diamond ring, reflective of romantic unions and celebrating commitment and tradition, is re-conceptualized here in this monumental sculpture. Oppenheim seeks to incite thought and engage dialogue via exaggeration and overstatement.

Engagement, is in a “Pop Art” form where everyday domestic objects are taken out of their familiar environment and re-conceptualized as monumental sculptures. This version of Engagement rises nearly 30 feet. Sitting on top of the rings where the diamonds would be traditionally, there are two translucent houses of Plexiglas and aluminum, illuminated and precariously tilted away from each other. As a commentary on the precarious balances in marriage; that of the romantic, traditional, economic and the illusions inherent in the institution, the meaning of Engagement is intentionally open-ended. Oppenheim often declines to interpret or explain his work, leaving the interpretation to the viewer.

The initial installation of this piece in 2005 coincided with same sex marriage debates taking place in Canada. The work was subsequently acquired by the Vancouver Biennale Legacy Foundation in 2007 as a gift to the citizens of Vancouver. The artwork was on loan to the Port of San Diego for one year.



3

**WATCH ITS INSTALLATION CLIP AT:**

[http://weblog.signonsandiego.com/multimedia/utmedia/071130\\_publicproject](http://weblog.signonsandiego.com/multimedia/utmedia/071130_publicproject)



4

**ARTIST'S DESCRIPTION OF HIS ART MAKING PROCESS**

Dennis describes his entry into works is often mental not visual. It comes from something he can almost write down. Some artists say that their works erupt from a dream or a vision. With Dennis, this is not the case as he finds works are usually extremely difficult to pull out into visibility. Many of the pieces are driven by the specifics of the location, the site and certain conditions that require the artist to often lift away from the connective strand

HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT WITH THIS ARTIST'S OTHER WORKS? Dennis Oppenheim can make the claim as a key figure in three major movements: Earth Art, Body Art and Conceptual Art as well as an important innovator in video and performance art.

In the late sixties he created projects such as Annual Rings (1968), where using a shovel, he created tree rings in the snow on the U.S./ Canadian border; and Cancelled Crop (1969), which involved transforming a gallery into a storage room for grain. Oppenheim stated at that time he almost had an addiction to working in areas that were remote from the museum and gallery support system. But he knew it would come to an end, simply because he was pushing so hard intellectually at the parameters of art to find where its faults lay.

In a series of works produced between 1970 and 1974, Oppenheim used his own body as a site to challenge the self: he explored the boundaries of personal risk, transformation, and communication. In the mid-70s, he experimented with surrogate performers (puppets) and began making elaborate machine works meant as metaphors for the creative process. By the mid-eighties his sculpture was based on the transformation of everyday objects. Since the mid-nineties his work has become larger in scale and permanent, fusing sculpture and architecture.

Oppenheim is an innovator who never stays still; one who constantly shifts his artistic tack as his basic psychological characteristic. After his work has been created, it does not want to be executed again.

which would create more of a continuity of a style. There are some belief systems that feel that that ingredient, call it comedy or whimsy, has a very delicate balance within the matrix of the substance of the art. An ingredient that has to be carefully finessed. If one's work is too heavy or too tragic in content, it can trip something in one's sensitivity. This is a description of the kind of apparatus or operation that occurs when you make an artwork.



5

TO LEARN MORE:  
[www.dennis-oppenheim.com](http://www.dennis-oppenheim.com)

**WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER?** This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

**TO LEARN MORE** you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at [www.vancouverbiennale.com](http://www.vancouverbiennale.com)

**IMAGE CREDITS:**

- 1 *Engagement*; Dan Fairchild
- 2 Artist portrait; Dan Fairchild
- 3 *Arriving Home*; Dan Fairchild
- 4 *Device to root out evil*; Dan Fairchild
- 5 *Reading Position for Second Degree Burn, 1970*; Artist website

Author: Katherine Tong  
Editor: Debbie Berto  
Designer: Julie Rudd