

## WOW Westminster

**José Resende (São Paulo, Brazil)**

*“Is gravity your friend or your enemy?”  
“Neither,” Resende answered, “or both.”*

### WHO MADE THIS ART INSTALLATION?

Brazilian artist José Resende (b.1945) sees sculpture and expressive possibilities in everyday gestures and materials, emphasizing tension and instability that seems to defy gravity. His monumental installation *WOW Westminster* can be seen on the shores of New Westminster, in the startling formation of shipping containers reaching for the sky. The work is 140 feet long and weighs 34,000 pounds. The 4 containers form a W, seeming impossibly light as air but the fear of their fall is ever present.

Born in 1945, in São Paulo, José Resende has a rich background that informs his practice, includes a degree in Architecture, a Masters in History, studies in art and engraving and a long career in teaching as a professor at institutions across Brazil. In 1970, along with Carlos Fajardo, Frederico Nasser and Luis Baravelli, he founded the Centro de Experimentação Artística Escola Brasil [Brazil School Center of Artistic Experimentation], where he taught until 1974. This school emphasized



teaching non-traditional, unconventional approaches to art. Still in the 1970s he edited with other artists and art critics the art magazine “Malasartes” and in 1980 was one of the editors of the periodical “A Parte do Fogo”.



Beginning in the mid 1980s and well into the 1990s, there grew a movement in Brazil that moved away from traditional styles of painting or sculpture, and became more experimental with materials and form. José Resende, along with Waltercio Caldas, Ceirido Meireles and Tunga were major figures in this movement. Resende was among a number of Brazilian artists exploring new possibilities in terms of

materials, and the expressions and forms that could be made with industrial and raw materials included lead,

## VANCOUVER BIENNALE EDUCATION

# BIG IDEAS



copper, paraffin, leather, stone, wood etc. Resende's work has also been influenced by the Post-Minimalist movement in the United States. Post-minimalism was a reaction against the impersonal, formal, geometric sculpture of the Minimalists in the 1960s. Instead, Post Minimalists began to use unconventional materials for art and sculpture, and expanding to include Conceptual Art

and the use of the body in performance art. Resende's use of non-traditional material for his sculptures and installation, and his expression of everyday form in new ways builds on that movement. Over the decades his work has ranged from small works in metal, latex, glass intended for gallery exhibition, to larger urban interventions with his public works as seen here with his contribution for the Vancouver Biennale.

### WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS ART INSTALLATION?

José Resende has a deep interest in the gestures and forms in the bustle of everyday urban life, and so he explores and investigates the sculptural quality of materials and objects that go unnoticed or that are taken for granted every day in the rhythm of the city. Through his smaller works and his larger monumental sculptural installations, the ordinary can be seen as artistic gestures and sculptural objects. With this work in New Westminster, Resende draws from the long history of shipping that has a rich heritage in this city dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the busy port that once thrived here and the shipping trucks that continue this tradition today.



Throughout the city's history cargo containers would have been ever present in the industrial port, and today are seen every day on the backs of trucks that transect the city to destinations across North America. Resende is inspired by the clustered formations of such shipping containers, stacked or arranged as part of the shipping industry. He and Vancouver Biennale curator Marcello Dantas were "flabbergasted by the site" in New Westminster with the constant movement of people, trucks, trains and the river of this city, and Resende wanted to contribute a work that reflected the industrial robustness of the site. To create a public work, Resende feels strongly that the work must connect with and reflect the roots and community for it to succeed. He also felt the history of transport, trains, and movement of people and goods in this city was a strong connection with the theme Open Borders/Crossroads for this Biennale.

This work offers the public a startling alternative experience with these familiar, giant containers, and suggests we consider in a new way the daily movement and form of shipping trucks that transport day and night, transecting the city. Resende didn't want to create a monument on a pedestal as a tribute to the past of the community, but opted instead to jar and to surprise, to push the viewer outside of their comfort zone and to disrupt their expectations. The work is intended to incite curiosity, surprise, wonder, even confusion at first as the viewer tries to make sense of the gravity defying structure that is at once familiar and yet completely unfamiliar. The precarious balance, the tension of the containers and feeling of looming danger as the viewer looks on and moves closer, stands under or walks around the structure, and the desire to make sense of the unexpected are all part of the intention of the work. The form and containers themselves are only part of the work—we the viewer must engage, question, and experience and actively make sense of it for our participation is key.

**HOW DOES THIS PIECE OF ART CONNECT TO THE ARTIST'S PREVIOUS WORK?**



Over the past 20 years Resende has created a number of monumental sculptural installations for public space, often expanding on and connecting with themes and ideas in previous works, emphasizing their concrete physical presence before the viewer, and often seeming to defy gravity. His installation for the Sydney Biennale in 1998 also involved shipping containers, but for a different purpose and arrangement than for the Vancouver Biennale. The theme of the Sydney Biennale that year was 'Everyday', and the 6 containers there were stacked and balanced in different way, anthropomorphizing them as though they were limbs of a body and using the industrial cranes as tools to move them. In 2012 the installation *Canteiro de Operações (Construction Site Operations)* made for Sao Paulo was in fact an evolving installations, with the arrangement and angles of those shipping containers shifting and moving three times a day. In 1994 he worked with granite blocks, creating unstable arrangement that changed and evolved as a performance, changing the arrangement 3-4 times a day with cranes over one month. Inspired by the way the public often stop to pause and watch condo and urban construction sites, perhaps with a voyeuristic eye in case something dangerous or tragic should happen, that is part of his draw to create



monumental work with such tension, as though it could fall at any moment.

## VANCOUVER BIENNALE EDUCATION

# BIG IDEAS

Other public works by Resende have become livable fixtures of the urban environment of their communities. In 2005 he installed *Olhos Atentos (Attentive Eyes)* in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Along the shores of Lake Guaiba Resende installed a 30 meter, 22 ton suspended sculpture resembling a portion of a bridge for the public to walk on, jutting out from the shoreline facing the setting sun. The work invited people to see the landscape from a new position while testing and experiencing the tension of the structure with their own bodies.

In each of these urban installations, Resende draws on common materials from urban everyday life, always in an effort is to create relationships of instability and tension between and with the materials, seeming to test the force of gravity. For the viewer, he aims to create unsettling, strange arrangements using common objects and materials that go unnoticed in everyday life. With his public works he wants to incite reactions of surprise at the unexpected use of materials that at first glance don't look like recognizable art. That desire to surprise and disrupt expectations of monuments and sculpture is present in each of his public works. This installation for the Vancouver Biennale continues the themes and ideas he has been exploring over the past 20 years.

### **HOW WAS THIS ART INSTALLATION MADE/INSTALLED?**

Resende created drawings and renderings for the artwork, then All-Span engineering finalized the plans for the artwork based on his design in order to meet local seismic, wind and load requirements. The containers had been used and therefore were repaired of any damage or rust, then painted in a red oxide color chosen by the artist. The containers are also coated with an anti-graffiti paint to reduce maintenance.

The pier where the work is situated is over 100 years old and there are weight restrictions and large industrial equipment like cranes cannot be on the site in addition to the 34,000 pound art work. Therefore, the 2 sets of Vs were welded and assembled in two parts at Amix Heavy Lifting in Surrey artwork. The 2 Vs were then loaded onto a spud barge that can anchor itself in the Frasier River and the barge transported the containers along the river, docking next to the pier. This was a special barge that also has a crane on it, making it possible to hoist the 2 'V's from the barge and then lower them one at a time onto the pier. The installers completed the final weld of the 2 'V's onto a metal frame based installed on the pier. Finally, a wooden deck frame covered and completed the metal frame for safety.

### Exploring With Your Students:

- Resende's work connects easily with units in Math, Geometry, basic Physics, and especially themes of tension and balance
- What objects or materials can students think of that would be difficult to balance, how could they solve these challenge? Brainstorming can include items from the home, school, or building materials. In groups, try to think like Resende and create temporary sculptures in class with everyday objects, balancing them together in unexpected ways.
- Learn about the history of transport in this region including trains, seaports and today the shipping trucks that comes through Vancouver and New Westminster. Plot out a possible journey these

## VANCOUVER BIENNALE EDUCATION

# BIG IDEAS

shipping containers have taken around the world by water and land. Students may not realize what kinds of food, items, and materials that we use every day in fact come through this shipping network, or where they go. Today, the ports of Vancouver are still some of the busiest in the world, receiving and exporting goods throughout the world every day.

When visiting this work:

- Standing below and look up – what does it feel like to stand under it, beside it, or far away? How does each perspective look or feel different? Students could write or discuss their responses in small groups, unpacking the feelings of experiencing these common structures in a new way.
- Does it look or feel dangerous or unstable? Does that make it more or less interesting to you and why? Why might an artist want to explore those feeling or ideas in a public work?
- How would you solve the problem of attaching these containers together if you were Resende?

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