

## Richgate: Transforming Public Spaces through Community-Engaged Art

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The City of Richmond, British Columbia is a city that has recently come to represent East meeting West, the Pacific Rim meeting Canada, farmland meeting urban landscapes. It is a city that is on the edge of the continent, on the verge of a new beginning, separated psychologically from the rest of Canada by the Rocky Mountains, bordering on the American northwest, and poised on the Pacific Rim. In the constantly shifting definition of this place, the displacement of the native people, the history of settlement by Europeans and the immigration of people from non-European countries such as Japan and India, play key roles. In the past two decades, the source of immigration of people to British Columbia has shifted from Europe to Asia. It is within Richmond and its history as a gateway of welcome that our community-engaged art project is uniquely situated. Although many of the eight participating families are Chinese-Canadian, the study has evolved to include participants with ethnic backgrounds from Estonia, Japan, South Africa, Western Europe, and India, reflecting a micro ethno-demographic profile of Richmond's wealth of diversity.

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Richgate Banners, installation photographs. Richmond City Plaza, British Columbia. R. Beer, G. Ziong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2007.

Photograph by Gu Xiong

Our research involves community-engaged arts practices that explore issues of identity, place, displacement, community, and the changing nature of geography within the city of Richmond. It focuses on the expansion of processes and events that give landscape a sense of place in ways that resonate with lived experiences and cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup>

Multicentered communities are not simply denoted by the ethnic makeup of their constituents, but are multicentered because of their ever-changing relationships to people and place. Within the rapidly changing landscape of Richmond, a sense of place cannot be assumed as given and static, but is constantly created and recreated on an on-going basis. The aim of the Richgate project<sup>2</sup> is to redefine the city of Richmond by recording visually and orally the stories and images of its community members and thereby come to understand what it means to “feel at home”.

The artist educators involved in this project initiated several community-engaged arts projects working from the premise that the arts are powerful forces for rearranging and reengaging patterns of community through public art as public pedagogy. The artist educators<sup>3</sup> interacted with the community collecting personal stories of “home” and “away,” photographs and family

artifacts, and producing narrative videos from the perspectives of the participants in the study. In this paper, we examine these “texts” from the perspective of aesthetic cartography—a walking form of mapping and creating community. In what follows, we develop this concept of walking and cartography in order to investigate the relationship between public space, pedagogy, and community-engaged art.

### Transforming Public Spaces through Walking

In discussing public art and artists working with community, educator and activist Paulo Friere<sup>4</sup> stresses the importance of shifting power relationships through dialogue. When collaboration is done with “caution and respect” everyone becomes co-authors of actions performed on and in the world. He describes the dialogue involved as a process and not an end, and recognizes that public art creates a site for ongoing spaces of meaning-making. Extending this practice, public artist Ilya Kabakov argues that dialogue exists between the space of community and the art work(s) that are created for those spaces. This type of dialogue he claims is “silent” and offers “a more profound and intricate contact with the place where [the art] is located.”<sup>5</sup> The artist negotiates the sites between the space of community and the artwork and listens attentively for the “intervals, the voids, the spaces between objects.”<sup>6</sup> In the stillness of this in-between space the artist initiates a new conversation and thus, the art regenerates itself not as a product of representation, but as something that exists in relation to community, space, and the objects found in the environment.

Richgate Banners, installation photographs. Richmond City Plaza, British Columbia. R. Beer, G. Ziong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2007.

Photograph by Gu Xiong





Richgate Bus Shelters, installation photograph. Richmond City Plaza, British Columbia. R. Beer, G. Ziong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2007.

Photograph by Gu Xiong

Working through this understanding of a “silent dialogue” the artworks created for the Richgate project examine the relationships between people and place, and thereby the spaces of community.<sup>7</sup> Places of learning provide opportunities for people to feel the materiality of community and to open the future to new possibilities for living and working together.

The Richgate project<sup>8</sup> has given particular attention to the concepts of mapmaking and walking as forms of aesthetic cartography. Contemporary theories of mapmaking argue that it is a creative activity that focuses on the process instead of the object of maps.<sup>9</sup> The creative activity of making a path recognizes the ways in which our bodies define a set of fundamental spatial relations that orient us within spaces of community and in relationship to objects and places.<sup>10</sup> When we consider mapmaking through the concept of walking, cartography shifts from being a “point” or fixed location to an encounter between people and places. Such encounters recognize that we are always interdependent with others.<sup>11</sup>

Corporeal mapping within the arts has its roots in the early 1900s. A group of artists called the Dadaists began to explore the reuniting of everyday life and art through walking which they describe as “lay pilgrimages.”<sup>12</sup>

The Surrealists also engaged in the aesthetic practice of walking, naming their corporeal journeys “deambulations” and

described their walks as art in “space and time, rather than on a medium.”<sup>13</sup> In the early 1950s, the Situationists expanded upon prior movements and further developed what they called “Situationist Cartography” where they mapped the impulses and affective sentiments of the pedestrian in the city.

Contemporary artists continue to explore walking within their art practices as ways of investigating how we use and are transformed by spaces and places.<sup>14</sup>

The community-engaged Richgate project enlarges the historical “artist walk” by inviting the participant families<sup>15</sup> to guide the artist educators on walks within their community. Through walking, a path or a space is opened up in which the everyday rituals of coming and going are retraced. Participant families took the artist educators to three different locations in Richmond that had significance to them. On these walks, family members told stories while leading the artist educators along the pathways of their weekly rituals which included: their homes, the library, parks, the leisure center, their favorite coffee shops, shopping, and daily commuting by car and bus. The walks also navigated through places of worship and memorials, as well as to places that no longer physically existed but remained graphic and significant in the participants’ memories. The walks as an aesthetic practice became a symbolic mapping of their experiences of moving to and living in Richmond.

### Meaning from Mapping

As “places of learning” the walks retrace the ways in which the families create meaning out of their movements—both literally (immigration) and conceptually (within a community). The

Gill Family  
Video Narra-  
tive Map,  
video still.  
Richmond,  
British  
Columbia.

B. Bickel,  
G. Xiong,  
R. Irwin,  
K. Grauer,  
S. Springgay,  
2006.







Hong Family  
Video  
Narrative  
Map,  
video still.  
Richmond,  
British  
Columbia.

B. Bickel,  
G. Xiong,  
R. Irwin,  
K. Grauer,  
S. Springgay,  
2006.

walks, although through everyday spaces such as the library, suspend and disconnect prior assumptions and meanings, and through these shifts or displacements recreate new points of connection and meaning.

The spaces of navigational experiences were documented through digital photography, video, and voice recording by the artist educators. In recording these walks particular moments were captured, interrupting “the flow of time,” creating a “stable place” to “dwell in and return to.”<sup>16</sup> For those that have lived in Richmond for an extended period of time these symbolic walks became “memory maps”<sup>17</sup> where conversations centered around places that were no longer there, and what was missing in the landscape appeared more vivid than what was presently there. Paths are usually understood as modes of access to future relationships but are also records of previous pathways and interactions. Memory mapping allows for an expression of loss for what previously was. Mapping as pedagogical cartography is a constant negotiation of past and future in the present, thereby creating an awareness of constant shifts in identity as it is reflected in place.

### Community-Engaged Art in Motion

Incorporating the concept of walking into various community-engaged projects, one artwork—a series of six photographic “Gates”—was installed at two universities in China: Southwest Normal University in Chongqing, and Beijing Normal University in Beijing. These “Gates”, created from family photographs, narratives, and “memory maps” address the implications of living between cultures.

Returning and reintroducing the art to the community that it originated in, the “Gates” were installed inside the Richmond City Hall. In addition, the series titled “Side by Side” was mounted in conjunction with the “Gates” and museum cases that contained archival objects from each family’s personal collections were collaboratively compiled. The “Side by Side” series consists of historical images of “home” juxtaposed with recent images taken in Richmond. Similar community-engaged art works that include photographs and “memory maps” were mounted in eight bus shelters in the city of Richmond, and banners representing each of the families were installed on eight poles in the Richmond City Hall Plaza. The resulting intercultural viewing experience can be compared to that seen through a stereographic viewer, exhibiting a three-dimensionality of place and culture.

Extending the community-engaged art process, students at a number of Richmond schools were invited to image and write about their favorite places in Richmond. “Postcards from Home”, the resulting exhibition, was displayed at the Richmond Museum.

Situating each of these community-engaged artworks in various public spaces invites the larger community of Greater Vancouver into a walking pedagogy where stories, memories, and

Richgate Exhibition, installation photograph. Beijing Normal University, China.

R. Beer, G. Xiong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2005.





Richgate Exhibition, installation photograph. Richmond City Hall, British Columbia. R. Beer, G. Xiong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2007.

Photograph by Gu Xiong

images mingle. Rather than understanding each of these artworks as individual objects, the public installations, both inside community spaces and outside along the streets, intersect with each other and are threaded together with the personal images, memories, and stories that viewers bring to the encounter. Within this complex intersection of aesthetic mapping, different assemblages create new understandings, identities, and spaces of learning.

## Notes

1. Working with a “multicentered” community forces us, as art writer Lucy Lippard (1997) suggests, to question the construction of place in ways that a “monocentered” community ignores. See Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997): 240.



Richgate Exhibition, Museum case installation photograph. Richmond City Hall, British Columbia.

R. Beer, G. Xiong, K. Grauer, R. Irwin, S. Springgay, B. Bickel, 2007.

Photograph by Gu Xiong



2. We wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support of our research program entitled "The City of Richgate: Research and Creation into Community-Engaged Arts Practices" (2004–2007).
3. These artist educators are working as public or "organic intellectuals." See Antonio Gramsci, as cited in Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon, 1994): 4.
4. Paulo Friere. "Interview: Paulo Freire: Discussing Dialogue." Tom Finkelpear, *Dialogues in Public Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000): 277–293.
5. Ilya Kabakov. "Public Project, or the Spirit of a Place." Florian Matzner, ed., *Public Art: A Reader* (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004): 175–187.
6. Kabakov, 180.
7. Artist and educational scholar Elizabeth Ellsworth describes public art as "places of learning" where personal memories reach into "public spaces and events" and extend "social histories and events into personal experience." See Ellsworth, *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2005): 53.
8. For specific information on the Richgate Project, please visit <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/Artography/richgate.pdf>
9. Stephanie Springgay, "An Intimate Distance: Youth Interrogations of Intercorporeal Cartography as Visual Narrative Text." *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 3(1): 107–122.
10. It is where the "here" of the map intersects with the "now." See Stephen Hall, "I, Mercator," Katharine Harmon, ed., *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004): 15–35.
11. Visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff (2004) suggests that by shifting our navigational orientations from "over there" to "over here" the contingent nature of spaces and communities is emphasized. She sees this remapping as a way to develop an understanding of "emplacement" within culturally diverse, multicentered societies like Richmond. See Rogoff, "Of Fear, Of Contact and Of Entanglement," Maud Belleguic, Mario Rossi, and Judith Stewart, eds., *Strangers to Ourselves* (Hastings: Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, 2004).
12. They performed what they called "driftings"—a process in which they remapped and reinterpreted walks to everyday, often overlooked sites in Paris—and documented these driftings through photographs. See Francisco Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002): 70.
13. Careri, 74.
14. For instance, Vancouver artist Kirsten Forkert (see [www.visibleartactivity.com/Kirsten/walking.dwt](http://www.visibleartactivity.com/Kirsten/walking.dwt)) invites members of the public to join her on walks throughout the city, giving away personal and no longer usable objects (such as old toothbrushes) in the process creating alternative narratives and arranging encounters between individuals not normally brought together. It is these encounters that create a space of community. Moreover

artist educators, such as Alex de Cosson, have examined aesthetic cartography in relation to pedagogy suggesting that it provides a non-hierarchical and non-linear understanding of texts, which according to Umberto Eco are multileveled and open. See de Cosson, “(Re)searching Sculpted a/r/tography: (Re)learning Subverted-knowing through Aporetic Praxis,” (Ph.D. Diss, University of British Columbia, 2003) and Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

15. We wish to thank our families for their participation in this project. Their contributions have been incredibly important. 1) Mei Lin, Tam Wang, and Crane Wang; 2) Bob Duan, Linda Gu and Ying Duan; 3) Yuzhang Wang, Hong Yang, and Steven Wang; 4) Gu Xiong, Ge Ni, and Gu Ye; 5) Gabrielle and Brian Ailey; 6) Kit Grauer and Carl Grauer; 7) Margaret, Pauline, Mike, Cameo, and Madison Sameshima; 8) Betty and Charan Gill.
16. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Place, Art, and Self* (Santa Fe: Center for American Place, 2004): 26.
17. Katie Davis, “Memory Map,” Katharine Harmon, ed., *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004): 130.

*Postcards from Home*, installation photograph.  
Richmond Museum, British Columbia, 2007.

Photograph by Valerie Triggs

