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Chris Chambers
1(416) 504.0274

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PO Box 5, Station B,
Toronto, ON, Canada,
M5T 2T2
+1 416 539 9495
cmagazine.com
info@cmagazine.com

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A SEA OF CONTINGENCIES: DURATIONAL PROJECTS

Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber's
public artwork *A Sign for the City* and
Cate Rimmer's curatorial project *The Voyage,
or Three Years at Sea*

by Jesse Birch



"In the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows—a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again."

—Vladimir Nabokov

"You can't date the sea, it's timeless."

—Tacita Dean

Let's start with an explosion.

Perhaps the most visceral experience one can have is an encounter with a bang. In Vancouver, we have one every evening, which can be heard all across the city, and most of us think nothing of it. It has been echoing out from a cannon at the eastern edge of Stanley Park since 1898. It is said that this cannon, better known as the "Nine O'Clock Gun," was originally set off at six o'clock to warn salmon fishermen in the nearby harbour that it was closing time. Later, it was rescheduled to fire at nine, with the idea that city residents would use it to set their clocks. But in the digital age, its blast seems useless: a relic maintained for tourists and tradition. Throughout its existence, this odd monument has been occasionally repurposed. One of the stories circulating around the Nine O'Clock Gun involves a supposed intervention by the University of British Columbia's Engineering Undergraduate Student Society in which members reportedly carved a rock into the shape of a cannon ball and inserted it in the gun on top of the usual blank charge. It is said that this rock then shot out the "O" in an illuminated ESSO sign atop a gas barge floating in the harbour. Rendered simply "ESS," the adjusted sign was meant to read as an acronym for the Engineering Student Society, but it could also be read as an onomatopoeia: the sound of a large multinational corporation deflating. Regardless of the engineering students' intent, or the accuracy of this story, the point is that it

reminds us of the potential of the imagination to shift the way that we experience the city.

It may seem strange to look to the testosterone-induced interventions of UBC engineers for examples of civilian-driven change, but the extreme nature of their alleged prank points towards the challenges faced by citizens wishing to shape the urban experience in the face of the corporate domination of what is ostensibly public space. Geographer and social theorist David Harvey asserts that the ability to enact transformations within the urban experience is vital to the wellbeing of citizens; yet it is increasingly unattainable. "The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city," he writes. "The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."¹

Vancouver- and Vienna-based artists Sabine Bitter and Helmut Weber, who have long been interested in the politics of the urban sphere, saw potential in the fact that the cannon's blast had largely lost its signification. They were reminded of *A Sign for Rosa Luxemburg*, a project involving a daily cannon blast that was proposed (but never realized) for the city of Berlin by Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, who wanted to commemorate Marxist theorist, philosopher, economist and activist Rosa Luxemburg.

While citizens are increasingly alienated from decisions around architectonic changes in their cities, there is potential in re-imagining pre-existing structures. In Vancouver, a daily cannon blast existed already, but it was lacking in any overt significance. Bitter and Weber realized that this cannon could commemorate a whole range of events in the city's history, and used its latent meaning as a focal point for a new work titled *A Sign for the City* (2011).

With the help of a team of researchers, the artists compiled a chronicle of under-represented events from Vancouver's history that they felt should be commemorated. From May 2011 to May 2012, *A Sign for the City* presents a new historical index for each firing of the Nine O'Clock Gun: every day of the year-long project, the cannon's blast is linked to a particular event that happened on that day in history.

APRIL 14, 1975

Vancouver's Co-operative Radio CFRO-FM 102.7 signs on with community based programming. It operates as a non-profit, community-based radio station, and to this day continues to be run by its members.

MAY 7, 2009

Vancouver City Council approves a bicycle lane trial on Burrard St. Bridge as part of its sustainable city philosophy.

JULY 15, 1952

Lumberman's Arch is installed at Stanley Park on the site of Khwaykhway, a First Nations gathering place for trade, supplies and ceremonies such as the potlatch. The arch, made from logs obtained through the logging of old growth in the park and erected on First Nations territory, is meant as a monument to the logging industry.

AUGUST 1, 1981

The first Vancouver Gay Pride Parade was held.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2003

Insite, North America's first legal supervised injection site, opens on Hastings Street. Operated by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, Portland Hotel Society and the City of Vancouver, the facility comes after years of lobbying by the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). Despite widespread local and federal criticism, studies show a 35 percent reduction in fatal overdoses within 500

metres of Insite. Clients of Insite also have access to harm reduction and housing assistance.

Events are presented every month on bus stop posters and in the *Georgia Straight* newspaper, and a more personal engagement with the indexes can be had in the form of a free dayplanner produced by Bitter and Weber. The planner has 365 mostly blank pages, each one containing a description of a historical event and the day of the month. The calendar is not attached to any particular year, and so has the potential to be perpetually and randomly activated.

It's worth remembering that whenever time is marked publicly, it has the potential to enact a form of social discipline. Michel Foucault showed that, by the 20th century, schedules had become a common means of control and were employed across Western society, thereby facilitating the commodification of time itself. With this in mind, the Nine O'Clock Gun is a really strange monument. A doubling down on discipline; a violent, spectacular articulation of the end of the day that, through repetition, becomes normalized and fades into the background where power and ideological apparatuses work best.

A Sign for the City twists both the meaning attached to the Nine O'Clock Gun and the very form of the schedule, transforming it from a disciplinary structure, devoid of overt significance, into a forum for the articulation and discussion of contested histories. While each day's blast is linked to a particular historical event, one can remember any

event on any day—or just remember that when the gun blasts, it is now doing it for a reason.

One of the first pages I noticed upon opening my calendar returned my attention to the cannon itself with a description of its inception that I did not know:

OCTOBER 15, 1898

The Nine O'Clock Gun is fired for the first time—at noon. Placed at Brockton Point, the site of an important squat, the gun serves to displace squatters, while at the same time providing a time signal for local populations and assisting in calibrating the chronometers of ships in port.

A gun that was originally put in place to discipline a section of the population by negating their right to the city now marks dates that are important to those who struggle to have their voices heard. Every day.

I read this excerpt, dated October 15, 1898, on September 13, 2011. When I heard the gun go off that evening, it was this marker that my imagination attached to its blast, not the one linked to September 13th. This is not exactly how the project is designed to work, but it is through this flexibility that *A Sign for the City* really succeeds. The calendar's book-like format, along with the monthly bus stop posters and newspaper pages, provides an open indexical system that allows for the contingencies of the encounter and yet still anchors each event, helping to facilitate its presence in a larger public consciousness.

Walter Benjamin reminds us that

"A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."² While all events have the potential to be historically relevant, public articulation is crucial to their redemption; to mark an event is to keep it alive. Benjamin points out that during the first skirmishes of the July 1830 revolution in Paris, revolutionaries shot out clock towers around the city at precisely 7 o'clock. By symbolically stopping the time, they created the potential to look at *their* time as a moment that could interact dialectically with other times; with *A Sign for the City*, the Nine O'Clock Gun does the same whenever its blast echoes out across Burrard Inlet.³

But what of encounters with spaces so vast and events so slow that they seem impossible to mark? You have to return to them again and again, looking from different angles for long periods of time. It could take years. On January 18, 2011, the Charles H. Scott Gallery at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design embarked on a three-year-long art exhibition. Curator Cate Rimmer's project *The Voyage, or Three Years at Sea* makes the same durational commitment as Ishmael did when he set out with Captain Ahab and crew as part of their single-minded quest for

the great white whale. Yet this voyage is anything but myopic. The exhibition encompasses at least six gallery iterations, screenings, performances, public readings, a blog, a pirate radio station and an ongoing collaboration with the Vancouver Maritime Museum, as it navigates through the vast subject of the sea.

The sea has long been a subject of myths and lore, but no matter how calm the wind, reflections on the sea cannot be trusted. Images constantly twist and distort as they sparkle on the surface, shrouding an unfathomable depth. Even in Vancouver, surrounded by the Salish Sea, it is easy to lose sight of the impact of the watery world on every facet of life in this city. Filmmakers Allan Sekula and Noël Burch call the sea "The 'forgotten space' of our modernity" and note that even though it seems that "Investment flows intangibly, through the ether, as if by magic," more than 90 percent of the world's cargo still moves by sea.⁴ In an era of instant communication, it is easy to overlook the steady flow of colourful metal boxes that keep the globalized economy afloat. By casting a gaze from the gallery towards the oceanic horizon, *The Voyage* explores how offshore life supports existence back on land.

The first gallery iteration of *The Voyage, or Three Years at Sea* starts at the shoreline. Taking the lighthouse as their

Rodney Graham, *Lighthouse Keeper with Lighthouse Model*, 1955, 2010, Installation view, painted aluminum light-boxes with transmounted chromogenic transparencies, 286.1cm x 368.8cm x 17.8cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND 303 GALLERY, NEW YORK





point of interest, works by Tacita Dean and Rodney Graham are set in relation to archival objects and documents from the Vancouver Maritime Museum. The first room one encounters is darkened and contains Dean's 16mm film installation *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), one of the many manifestations of Dean's long-term engagement with the last, ill-fated voyage of British engineer and amateur sailor Donald Crowhurst. A projector chatters and flickers light towards a screen, which produces an anamorphic image of a lighthouse's bulb and lens mechanisms in daylight, waiting to be activated. As the sun goes down, the lighthouse mechanism begins to emit a rotating beam of light. The projector is itself both origin and reflection of light. It becomes a lighthouse, and the lighthouse becomes a projector. This endless cycle of mimicry, along with the title *Disappearance at Sea*, casts the work as a kind of reverse metaphor, using the beacon's endless toil to suggest a sense of disorientation, the main condition that lighthouses are meant to remedy.

As part of *The Voyage*, Rimmer organized a screening of *Deep Water*, a documentary about Crowhurst's participation in the 1968 *Sunday Times Golden Globe* non-stop, singlehanded, round-the-world sailing race. His endeavour was precarious

from the start: Crowhurst was unprepared, inexperienced, and was relying ostensibly on the superior engineering of his trimaran, the *Teignmouth Electron*, to get him by. However, before he even made it to the really difficult southern seas, his chronometer stopped working and his boat started to crack and leak. Without hope, and out of time, he began reporting false times and positions, all the while floating around in the Atlantic. Living in the constructed reality that he was presenting to the world, and in extreme isolation, Crowhurst withdrew into himself, adrift for months, occupying a zone of atemporal bewilderment. Dean proposes that in situations like this, "space and time become interwoven into a single fabric."⁵ According to Crowhurst's final log entries, this experience was destroying him. He began writing a personal philosophy that asserted: "By learning to manipulate the space time continuum man will become god and disappear from the universe as we know it."⁶ His final log entry was dated July 1st, 1969; eleven days later, the *Teignmouth Electron* was found drifting on the Atlantic, unmanned.

The story of Crowhurst's disappearance has captured the imaginations of a number of artists and he is referenced in both of the first two gallery iterations of *The Voyage*. In Part II, Bas Jan Ader's photograph of the onset of his own ill-fated voyage, titled

In Search of The Miraculous (a project influenced by Crowhurst's story), shares a room with the Australian collective Slave Pianos' *The Strange Voyage of Bas Jan Ader* (2011). This work, a chamber opera broadcast from a radio placed alongside prints of the opera's score, conflates the stories of Ader and Crowhurst in one encompassing epic. The curator's choice to include artists who evoke Donald Crowhurst twice in succession encourages a reading of *The Voyage* that suggests a collapse of time and space between gallery iterations, and emphasizes the singularity of the project as a whole.

Along with Dean's *Disappearance at Sea*, the first iteration of *The Voyage* also included a backlit photographic diptych by Rodney Graham called *Lighthouse Keeper with Lighthouse Model, 1955* (2010). This large, glowing image depicts the keeper as a figure with a great deal of time on his hands. By 1955, many lighthouses had been automated, and it appears that, like Crowhurst, the lighthouse operator has become extremely self-reflexive over time. With his feet up on a hot stove, he reads a book about lighthouses while taking a break from detailing the outside of a model lighthouse, which in turn mimics the attention to detail that was paid to the set as a whole, by the artist who is also the eponymous character in the image.

Graham's character is reminiscent of Captain O., an important figure in a story called "The Handkerchief," conceived by Walter Benjamin as he sailed into exile from Hamburg to Barcelona and then onward to the Spanish island of Ibiza in 1932. In this work, Benjamin links the storyteller's craft intrinsically to the experience of boredom. As he states, "When I thought back to the many hours that Captain O. spent walking back and forth on the afterdeck, looking up idly from time to time and gazing into the distance, I realized that people who are not bored cannot tell stories."⁷ For Benjamin, the most productive kind of boredom for the fecundity of storytelling is encountered through labour. In this sense, with the mechanization of lighthouses, the keeper no longer accrues new stories, and so he keeps repeating the same story over and over—to himself. As Benjamin explains, "The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—the rural, the maritime, and the urban—is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again."⁸

This yielding to work and its lessons appears in both gallery iterations of *The Voyage*. For Part II of the exhibition, the room where the Graham work was mounted has been painted grey and now hosts a series of large graphite drawings by Los Angeles-based artist Karl Haendel. These drawings, based on photographs, depict Ernest Shackleton's infamous doomed 1914 expedition to the Antarctic. In their extremely fine detail, they suggest a nearly unfathomable amount of production time. The drudgery of slow and intricate mark-making must share something with Shackleton's experience of waiting that he and the crew endured when they were stranded on the ice. Large drawings in glass frames are set next to each other and even overlap in different formation. An image of men hacking through deep ice leans upside down against the wall, facing the viewer, and creates a feeling of disorientation, like the one associated with the timelessness of the sea.

The only video work in Part II also engages with challenges faced by the Shackleton crew. In Nina Katchadourian's video *Endurance* (2002), which takes its title from Shackleton's ironically named boat, the artist's mouth struggles to maintain a smile while 10 minutes of an archival film of the Shackleton expedition is projected on her front tooth. Eventually we hear distressed breathing as saliva builds up and overflows, emphasizing a kind of immediate discomfort that takes the epic disaster and makes it personal. Near the front of the gallery, a small textile work also encourages viewers to engage in a bodily relationship with disaster. *Titanic Breakfast Sampler* (1996), an embroidered canvas by Matthew Benedict, humanizes the spectacular by simply presenting the last menu from the most famous of doomed voyages.

The objects from the Maritime Museum carefully chosen by Rimmer remind us that the experience of the sea is a profoundly local one that accrues more and more narrative sediment all the time. Small photographs, books, newspaper clippings and archival objects index stories often ignored by those of us who live inland but who are still surrounded by the so-called Graveyard of the Pacific's dangerous waters, which stretch from northern Vancouver Island to the northern coastline of Washington State. A piece of wood stands out in a display about the S.S. *Pacific*, a ship that went down in 1875 near Cape Flattery, WA. Scrawled across it in pencil are the words ALL LOST, S.P. MOODY. Seawell Moody was an important local industrialist who

lost his life in the S.S. *Pacific* disaster but who first thought to leave what would be a final message. Not only did this piece of flotsam reach the shore, but it also reached 136 years into the future, still resonating through the handwriting of a doomed man.

An old hand-operated foghorn sits in the corner of one room, a kind of anti-Siren, which when cranked would have sent ships away from the rocks rather than towards them. Rimmer leaves it alone and unlit on a plinth in a corner, as if to accentuate both its auditory nature and the fact that the value of the human lighthouse keeper has too, over time, been forgotten. In the late 19th century, William D. Jones, then Brockton Point lighthouse keeper, would light off sticks of dynamite over the water every night to warn salmon fishermen that their day was done. This job was eventually replaced by the Nine O'Clock Gun. x

→ Jesse Birch is a curator, artist, writer and educator based in Vancouver. He has always lived near the sea.

ENDNOTES

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- 2 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings Vol. 4 1938–1940* ed., Michael W. Jennings, trans. Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Allan Sekula and Noël Burch "Notes For a Film" at <http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/notes.html> Accessed September, 29, 2011
- 5 Tacita Dean, quoted in Jean Christophe Royoux "Survey," in *Tacita Dean* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 89.
- 6 Louise Osmond and Jerry Rothwell, *Deep Water* (video recording) London, IFC Films, 2006.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, "The Handkerchief," in *Selected Writings Vols. 2 part 2 1931–34*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 658
- 8 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" in *Selected Writings Vol. 3*, eds. Marcus Paul Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings, trans. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 151



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Theaster Gates, *Memento 1*, 2011, 48" diameter, decommissioned fire hoses and wood. Courtesy of Kavi Gupta CHICAGO | BERLIN