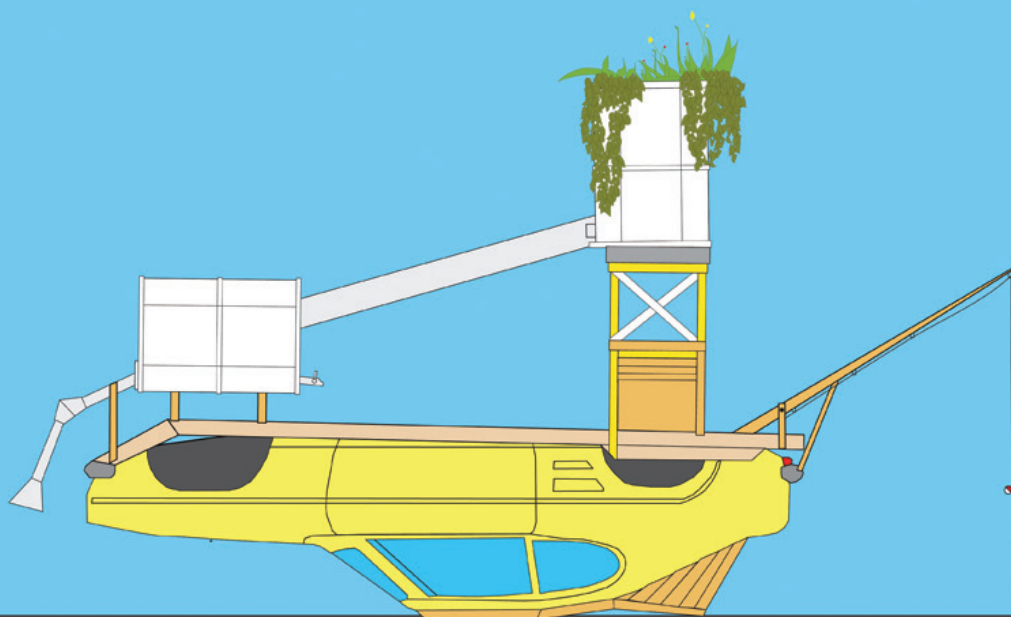


Other Sights for Artists' Projects

Commissioned Texts



False Creek

T & T (Tony Romano and Tyler Brett)

Essay by Jordan Strom

Foreword

This essay by Jordan Strom was first published in the handsome catalogue that accompanied the T&T: False Creek exhibition curated by Patrik Andersson for the Pendulum Gallery. Presented during the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, the exhibition consisted of 3 sculptural assemblages formed from adapted car, boat, and bicycle parts; a large panoramic print that imagines the future of the Southeast False Creek site; and a children's colouring centre.

T&T: False Creek was the first of the 3-part series *When the Hosts Come Home*, organized by Other Sights to address issues of sustainability in relation to Vancouver's Olympic Village. Part 2: *The Games are Open* was constructed on the western edge of the Village during the summer of 2010 by artist team Köbberling & Kaltwasser. The Bomfords, a collaborative team interested in exploring the waters of False Creek, will present Part 3 in 2011.

Other Sights would like to thank Jordan Strom for allowing us to re-present his insightful essay as part of our commissioned texts series. Copies of the exhibition catalogue as well as a children's board book are available through the Pendulum Gallery, pendulumgallery.bc.ca.

Barbara Cole
Executive Director

In summer of 2007 a banner was proudly unfurled from one of the upper stories of a newly erected condominium tower on the north footing of Vancouver's Cambie Street Bridge. Printed on it was a picturesque image of False Creek complete with knock-off geodesic dome and striated, pinky-orange sky. The vista approximated the view from the apartments on the opposite side of the building; as the building itself prevented the viewers of the ad, mainly commuters driving, biking or walking southward on the bridge, from seeing the actual vista, the image, in effect, stood in for the view. Below the picture was the phrase, "Who needs art?"

The picture-phrase combination rested on at least three propositions. Like some concession-stand barker the phrase hails the viewer with the question, "Who needs to own this view"? Who needs this real authentic piece of art-of-life at a distance, this art of living, this blending of architecture and man-made landscape that has been carefully constructed as the future of this place? The second connotation questions the aesthetic and/or cultural value of works of art as we know them; when at the end of the day you can own this view, who needs works of art on the wall, or even further afield in the city? The third level of meaning emerges from the frenzied, speculative, seemingly recession-proof Vancouver real estate market: art is a poor investment when compared to this view, which is the primary asset of the property (the sunset warns the viewers that time is nearly up).² The view of False Creek—the view of Vancouver's view of itself—supplants the work of art. In this inlet, the mirror of the city's own image is intensified.

In his examination of two popular panoramic photographs—one taken in 1978, the other from 2003—that capture views looking eastward from the Cambie Street bridge toward the east end of False Creek, the writer Derek Simons asks if the "undeniable pleasure of looking at False Creek" through the lens of this double panoramic moment "may be linked with the ordering of space in False Creek, False Creek in the image of False Creek as

an image.”³ These two photographs have been posted on the Vancouver Planning Department’s website for several years and share a striking resemblance to the eastward vista in Concord Pacific’s ad campaign.⁴ Simons claims that the two panoramas of the Creek, describe Vancouver as an “impressive city”, or a place “where the trace of human effort is so precisely and ubiquitously fixed and eliminated” by the extensive world of molded and abstracted concrete that locks it into place. While the article’s main focus is the materiality of the plazas and walkways, the tall, gleaming, white steel towers of Concord Pacific Place are as much a part of this impressive concrete matrix as the geometries of grey material that buttress their edges.

If the phalanx of gleaming towers resembles so many up-ended cruise ships it’s because north False Creek itself has become a cruise ship: private, cabin-sized rooms, expansive promenades and antiseptic mega-yacht club-like aura.⁵ As one writer puts it, the promenade is “the sine qua non of all waterfront development in Vancouver.”⁶ Perhaps this is why we are so astonished when this lawn fringed concrete girdle of seawall and its attendant lapping tide, are literally drained away in Tony Romano and Tyler Brett’s False Creek panorama. In fact, most of the beloved elements of “Vancouverism” are washed away from the artists’ large print, like so much kelp from a beach. Gone is the podium architecture with high pointed towers; gone are the beach side bistro and Holland Cruise handrail. In their place we witness a topology of ghosts.

The exhibition False Creek presents a post-podium carnivalesque, where the life in the gaps of False Creek’s history emerge after the site’s utter reordering. The compact smile slides into the toothless grin. False Creek, the print, depicts a triple hybridization which fuses the early post-contact history of this site—the cooperages, sawmills and factories—with the spectacle of transportation encapsulated in the World’s Fair known as Expo 86—the pavilions, fair rides, and transportation art—and remnants from early twenty first century’s Olympic moment—the athletes’ village, stacked condos and nature reserve-like green spaces.⁷

The link between False Creek, the vehicular and the squat is fundamental to False Creek’s character.⁸ Regarding the vehicular: significant portions of the False Creek’s landfill (and the fill of False Creek Flats more generally) is made up of junked automobiles from Vancouver’s earlier modern period. The stack of cars on the right of Romano and Brett’s image suggest the 217 metre-long uniformly grey sculpture Highway 86 which “rose out of the sea like a giant undulating serpent” during the world exhibition.⁹ That the marketing material for Highway 86 suggested that visitors use it as seating anticipated Romano and Brett’s own interest in the vehicle as furnishings for the Creek.



False Creek

Image: Patrik Andersson

In Romano and Brett's post-calamitous world, paddle wheels, conveyor belts and exterior drainage systems marshal in a different type of verticality. Here is a verticality of the old supplanting the new through a permanently stalled architecture of development. The industrial warehouses return to where they once stood, but are now sutured several stories up, on the backs of heron-like construction cranes whose hulking shapes form a top-heavy canopy, the world-turned-upside-down. In *Coal Harbour* (2007), the artists' other explicitly Vancouver waterfront related print, stacked warehouses have been installed on top of one high-rise tower and joined to a neighbouring tower at a slightly taller elevation. Both towers are submerged an indeterminate number of floors by what appears to be the rising sea.¹⁰ In the False Creek panorama, spruce forests and hybridized clapboard housing have taken root where interlocking brick plazas once stood. The modular towers of the past are replaced by the 1970s through 1990s architectural idiom of the "festival market" boat city: sails, stanchions and stays. False Creek anticipates a post-calamitous city of mobilized rigging.¹¹

Time-space compression is a critical part of False Creek's mode of display. An early 20th century industrial taxonomy is fused with elements from a glasnost era urbanism.¹² The structures within the panorama recall the tubular truss-frame pavilions of the World's Fair and their logical heirs, the mobile condo showhomes (complete with mobile hedgerows) at the turn of the century. In False Creek, Romano and Brett willfully combine the intent of two other waterfront art projects: the historical salvaging of a rustic pre-history in Liz Magor's *LightShed* (2004), with its resurrection of early Coal Harbour industry, and Jerry Pethick's *Time Top* (2007), which proposes Vancouver as some cartoon-like Atlantis.¹³ The children's book-style rendering of the illustrations and sculptures—with their vibrant reds, yellow, and blues—and the storyline based on a post-apocalyptic future creates an affiliation with Larissa Lai's *Saltfish Girl* (2002). In this novel Lai incorporates Hans Christian Anderson's *Little Mermaid* and traditional Chinese stories into a broader narrative about a city, called Serendipity, built on the remnants of an entropic 20th century Vancouver, complete with a partially submerged and decrepit Pan Pacific Hotel. In contra-distinction to this version of societal rebirth and childhood struggle is Ernie, the Expo 86's mascot, whose dark NASA-like visor and silver lamé suit seemed to anticipate the shimmering reflectivity and blank optimism of False Creek's steel and glass facades.

Essential to Romano and Brett's sensibility more generally is the utopian possibility suggested in the blending of folk with futurism. British Columbia is no stranger to utopian communalism and the reimagining of life post-calamity. The province was a hotbed of utopian communities in the





False Creek

Image: T&T (Tony Romano and Tyler Brett)

latter half of the 20th century. “Against the sparse backdrop of Canadian utopianism,” Justine Brown asserts that “B.C. is a glaring exception.”¹⁴ The elevated structures of the panorama recall the Post-War Dollarton Mudflats colony of squatters who clung to the stilt houses; “in the disputed territory below the high-tide mark, the crablike squatters constituted a form of intertidal life.”¹⁵ Yet, the east end of False Creek is a most uncanny and fraught site for the fusion of folk and future.

The narrative of futurism and folk underwrote the site in the original buddy movie pairing of Expo Centre (whose structure of which now houses Science World) and Folklife (on the site of what is now the eastern edge of the Olympic Village). These two buildings were the pride and joy of Expo 86. “Just a short walk away from the futuristic Expo Centre,” the Exposition program guide explains “Folklife is an elegant horseshoe-shaped complex of natural cedar buildings, boardwalks and a grassy village common, a warm intimate atmosphere permeates Folklife.”¹⁶ The main buildings included The Barn, The Big House and The Common and featured Caribbean music to Doukhorbor dances. In Romano and Brett’s rendering, the Olympic Village becomes the basement for more important social spaces/activities floating high above it. Science World is reduced to its partially dismantled latticework structure—an image that evokes the very first performative experiments with the ‘bucky ball’ domes performed by Intermedia artists on the shores of False Creek in the 1960s.

The False Creek exhibition also includes a series of sculptural elements that resemble scenes from the panorama. The three distinct sculptures are modular and vaguely familiar as automobile forms, though reconfigured and incorporate what appear to be vernacular architectural materials: upturned corrugated siding, wood-framed pitched roofs. One of the automotive forms turns out to be that of a Chevy Colt. The chassis has been turned on its back and a bicycle frame placed on top; the hood is covered with the kind of plastic siding found on the exterior of cheaply constructed houses. Another car—what appears to be a mid 1980s Porsche—has an A-frame structure sutured onto its back end; the original sunroof has been mounted on the steep side of a pitched roof growing out of its frame. Like many of their reimagined vehicular dwellings, the artists have found new uses for old forms. In this second assemblage, the wheel wells function as planters. The third car, a Pontiac Fiero, has a paddle wheel and siding built out of its front. Each pod is mounted on large plastic spheres that resemble exercise balls or ocean buoys. The late-Mondrian geometric colour scheme—which matches the official Olympic colours, not accidentally—combines with a monstrous, paddle boat architecture to propose a vanguard Rube Goldberg-like utopianism.



One of three sculptures at Pendulum Gallery

Image: Patrik Andersson

The angular diagonals of Romano and Brett's rafts recall, what was referred to as the "motion wedge" of General Motor's Pavilion.¹⁷ During the World's Fair in Vancouver, General Motor's promised that their 2000 square foot pavilion would be a "highly entertaining attraction" and would present "leadership in automotive technology". The event was commemorated with special editions of the Pontiac Grand Am, Olds Calais, Chevy Astro and GMC Safari van. Romano and Brett are interested in the high tech obsolescence built into the vernacular automobile of the late 20th century. While the futurism might quickly fade as these vehicles role "off the lot," their unanticipated characteristics point to ways of living in the future.

One of Expo 86's many public artworks, the work called Centrepiece, located on the Land Plaza, included a life-size replica of a 1970s Datsun in its rainbow of transportation forms. One of many suspended elements in a sculptural narrative that spiraled up and around a large centre pole, the Datsun's component parts were on the verge of exploding outwards like the illustrations found in auto mechanics magazines and glove box manuals. Romano and Brett's blue-skied verticality is not so neat, and never so linear. While Expo 86 did, in some cases, consider human powered transportation, Romano and Brett's pedal-powered structures propose something different. They are visual puzzles or devices as much as prescriptive vehicles and/or dwellings.¹⁸

While these reconfigured vehicles are set upon brightly coloured carpets within the exhibition space of the Pendulum Gallery, these forms suggest a water environment.¹⁹ The artists call them "rafts", which conveys a sense of nomadic drift. False Creek, like Coal Harbour, has provided berth for many a raft-like structure.²⁰ Over the years, many temporary dwellers and marginal visitors have lived at the water's edge in makeshift watercraft and floating residences.²¹ Expo 86 also showcased "Canada's first floating McDonald's restaurant", a structure that would later become a floating ruin—and sometimes squat—stranded adjacent to North Vancouver's Deep Cove. The centrality of the squat to False Creek recalls Simons's claim that the interstitial is constantly being repressed, though always re-emerging in False Creek.

The relationship to the raft and the squat departs from a survivalism long associated with Canadian culture.²² Like the figures in the Situationists 1960s comic strips, Romano and Brett's human figures cut a hip and mechanically rendered profile that evokes both the language of fashion spreads and revolutionary agitprop.²³ Yet, in False Creek these counter-cultural hipsters are put to work as often as they celebrate through music and rebuilding the world. Their reuse of materials recalls the work of Canadian industrial designer Donald Lloyd McKinley.²⁴ Romano



and Brett combine a mixture of wonder and reconfigured irony found in Kim Adams's "mock vending wagon" Squid Head (2001) with the raw found material feel of Ant Farm's Cadillac Ranch (1974). But more so, because Romano and Brett's work is attuned to the playful-critical adaptive logic of Andrea Zittel and Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL). Witness for example, Zittel's A-Z Escape Vehicle (1996) which turns an Alfa Romeo into a chicken coop. As with the work of Atelier Van Lieshout, in Romano and Brett's images and objects, "form follows fate... the inherently social dimension and design [goes] one step further."²⁵ Yet while the "rafts" of False Creek share some affinity with Atelier Van Lieshout's anarcho-water vessels like AVL Suisse (2002) and Sonsbeek Raft (2001), they are imbued with a utopian playfulness and deliberate graphic design sense more akin to Archigram than the sado-masochistic meets Survival Research Laboratories thrust of AVL.

As the story goes, the body of water and shoreline known as False Creek was named by Captain George Richards in 1859, before Vancouver existed on any map. According to author Catherine Gourley, "On entering the creek [Richards] expected to discover a water link to coal deposits he had noticed in Burrard Inlet. When he met a dead end he gave the basin the mundane – though anticipatory – name of False Creek."²⁶ This theme of a place that is not quite what it claims to be reoccurs throughout the area's recent history. Rather than a dead end, Romano and Brett propose that False Creek's spectacular mundanity will harbour new inlets into the future. If False Creek's condition is the constant attempt to rid itself of the interstitial, Romano and Tyler's False Creek inverts this situation. Here the interstitial becomes the dominant mode; while the master narrative of False Creek emerges in the gaps. The post-podium carnivalesque of False Creek rids itself of an awards ceremony-style urbanism and aura of high performance that continues to dominate its multiple moments.

¹ The motto of General Motors Expo 86 pavilion.

² This reading could propose another: that real estate for a limited few can be a primary means for affording art, as it has been for several of Vancouver's most prominent art collectors. The 2007 ad campaign for Concord Pacific's Cooper's Quay Waterfront Neighbourhood claimed that exquisite taste could be purchased for a mere \$1 to \$7.25 million: "A showcase of exquisite taste ready for occupancy in 2008. Who Needs Art? Here the entire horizon is your canvas. A personal panorama of water colours stretching skywide, framed by city lights..." <www.vancouver-real-estate-direct.com/blog/2007/10/concord-pacific-presents-coopers-quay.html>

³ Derek Simons, *Impressive and Interstitial Space of False Creek.* "Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955 to 1985, West Coast Line 39.2 2005, p.145.

⁴ At the time of this writing these panoramas have now been updated with newer ones from 2006 and 2007: <http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/fade/fadepanorama.htm>

⁵ The architect Gregory Hendriques's rejected design for a 400-ft tower that resembled a ship turned on its end, a project that had been proposed in 2007 to be built beside North Vancouver's Sea Bus terminal, would have been a most apropos icon for this cultural and urban condition.

⁶ Lance Berelowitz, *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005, p.166.

⁷ Between May 2nd and October 13, 1986, Vancouver celebrated the "hallmark event" known as Expo 86. The theme was transportation as evoked in the world fair's motto "Man in Motion."

⁸ The focus of this essay will be with the north and eastern edges of False Creek.

⁹ Expo 86: Program Guide, Vancouver, 1986 p.29.

¹⁰ See T&T Onward Future. Patrik Anderson, ed. Vancouver: Trapp Editions/ Oakville Galleries, Museum London, 2008, p.69.

¹¹ One thinks here of the way canvas and stretched polypropylene grafted the architecture of the sailboat into the rim of the city. The late 20th century growth of nautical architecture, such as Bing Thom's stanchion and forestay-heavy Anderson's Restaurant (1990)— an actual extension of a yacht club— collapsed back into the construction site in the work of Romano and Brett.

¹² What is less clear in Romano and Brett's image is the aboriginal settlement history of this rapidly transforming landscape. Christos Dikeakos, an artist with a longheld interest in the prehistory of False Creek, has repeatedly used panoramic photography to bring that earlier past into the present.

¹³ Jerry Pethick referred to his bulbous kelp shaped sculpture as a "relic of reality" See Jerry Pethick Time Top Project, Vancouver: Concord Pacific, 2007.

¹⁴ Justine Brown, *All Possible Worlds: Utopian Experiments in British Columbia*, Vancouver: Transmontanus/ New Star, 1995. p.12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁶ Expo 86 Program Guide, p.23.

¹⁷ In one full-page advertisement printed on silver paper, the General Motors Pavilion was described as "a metal clad motion wedge." p.85.

¹⁸ In the Specialized Period program of the fair, there was a "Human Power Transportation" section that included the 12th International Human Powered Championships.

¹⁹ On one level the polychromatic colours of Romano and Brett's images and sculptures summon the 1964 children's story Chitty Chitty Bang Bang where Commander Pott can transform his "magical car" into a boat with the flip of a switch, yet this allusion dissolves away with the closer inspection demanded by the image and sculptural forms. The often barren and inhospitable landscapes and labour intensive scenarios engaged by the artists' cast of characters signal that this is not Ian Fleming's debonair future.

²⁰ During the Depression "several hundred squatters unable to afford other accommodation, resided in houseboats and shacks along the waterway's shoreline." Birkinaw, p. 42.

²¹ Jacob Gleeson's installation *Survivor* recreates one particular vessel that resided on the shoreline at the foot of what is now the Olympic Village, along with a vitrine of hypothetical tools that this vessel's owner may have used. The exhibition was held at the Helen Pitt Gallery in 2003.

²² There are other works by Romano and Brett, and other artworks made in Canada that more closely hew Margaret Atwoods' *Survival* thesis, such as Liz Magor's *Burrow* (1999), Adriana Kuiper's *Capsule* (2008) and *Snackbar Fallout Shelter* (2007) Leigh Bridges's paintings *Outpost* (2008) and *Hinterland* (2007) and Kevin Schmidt's *Survivor* (2009). Yet, this is no longer a strictly Canadian sensibility as work by many other international artists suggests.

²³ See comic strip leaflets such as "In Our Spectacular Society" produced and circulated by the Situationists in the 1960s and reproduced in an endless passion... an endless banquet: the Situationist International Selected Documents from 1957 to 1967, Iona Blazwick, ed. London: ICA/Verso, 1989, p.42.

²⁴ McKinley had been one of the first industrial designers to use found materials. He created tin can tables, cardboard chairs, and pvc lamps.

²⁵ Jennifer Allen, "AVL for Dummies," Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2007.

²⁶ Gourley, Catherine. *Island in the Creek: the Granville Island Story*, Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1988.

The work of T&T reflects on ideas of sustainability, green architecture and technological progress. Their artworks frequently include elements of natural systems such as solar power and organic filters in conjunction with recycled and reconfigured technology. Over the course of their diverse artistic practice, they have developed a survivalist-informed aesthetic, creating whimsical, yet critically considered artworks that provide astute commentary on our historical moment.

Jordan Strom is a writer and curator who lives in Vancouver. He is a founding editor of *Fillip*.

Other Sights provides support to artists, writers and curators interested in creating temporary, critically rigorous work for highly visible locations. We collaborate and share resources with organizations and individuals in order to present projects that consider the aesthetic, economic and regulatory conditions of public places and public life.