

Olympic Village discards recast as public art

Berlin-based artists reclaim abandoned public space with biodegradable bulldozer

By Katherine Monk, Postmedia News August 7, 2010



Husband and wife artists Martin Kaltwasser and Folke Koebberling with their kids Clara and Jan Gregor are ecstatic about their full-scale bulldozer near the former athletes village that's designed to decompose over eight years.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, Vancouver Sun, Postmedia News

It's really the last place you'd look for art: Behind barbed wire, on the back corner of an abandoned industrial lot, tucked in behind a big pile of dirt and gravel sprouting scrappy clumps of grass.

In the movies, this would be the place to dump a body. In Vancouver, this generic strip of half-paved wasteland next to the Olympic Village has become a piece of interactive public art. The transformation is coming at the request of Vancouver curator Barbara Cole and at the hands of Folke Koebberling and Martin Kaltwasser, two Berlin-based artists who've gained international attention through their conceptual approach to public spaces. From reconfiguring the former viewing platforms that once looked over the Berlin Wall into "negative steps" that lead downward on the same ground, to transforming cars into working bicycles, Koebberling and Kaltwasser are now turning the discards from the Athletes Village into a full-scale bulldozer that will eventually decompose. They are using Microstrand, a material made from compressed wheat chaff, a greener alternative to fibre-board or MDF that uses no formaldehyde binder. Hundreds of boards were used to protect the interior spaces of the Village -- now market condos for sale by the city -- and over the next few weeks, they will be shaping what was once wheat,

then garbage, into faux heavy machinery. At the moment, it's the forward track and wheel that gives the structure meaning, prompting even more passersby on the South side of the False Creek seawall to stare through the shiny chain-link fence and ask: "What are you making?"

"We hear it all day long. Sometimes, you feel like an animal in a cage but I think this also adds to the work," Koebberling says. Koebberling says the whole point of the work she and her art/life-parenting partner Martin make is to prompt questions about the way we live by recreating the spaces around us. "It's also about communication. You have to show [and tell] people you can use a car park for something other than cars, for instance," says Koebberling, who, with Kaltwasser, has created portable living spaces in parking lots and public squares throughout Europe. The central key to these creations is the material: It's all reclaimed and recycled. "We want to show how these materials still have value," Koebberling says. Material reclamation is a concept that's finding plenty of fans and followers in art circles in London, Berlin, Paris and Barcelona, where the movement has spawned everything from "trashion accessories" and "trashion shows" to a celebration of Mash Ups -- movies, videos and film work that use found footage and soundbytes to create new work -- at the coming European Media Art Festival in Osnabrueck.

Cole, an established curator and leading expert in the field of public art, says she monitored the Koebberling and Kaltwasser website before including the team in *When the Hosts Come Home*, a series dedicated to exploring the space surrounding the former Olympic Village and its transformation from venue to neighbourhood. It's all part of the Other Sights For Artists project, an organization that works to match cutting-edge artists with original public spaces. Cole says she had seen some images of what Koebberling, a former Emily Carr student, was working on in Europe with Kaltwasser. She liked the esthetic and she liked the thought process, so she cyber-watched them for two years. "We (the board at Other Sights) were really interested in creating temporary platforms around the city, and were interested in artists who were working with architecture in public spaces," says Cole, who invested countless hours filling out the requisite grant applications for funding. In the end, she found support from the Canada Council for the Arts, BC Arts Council, The Vancouver Foundation and The City of Vancouver, as well as Emily Carr University of Art and Design and Langara College, and UBC's school of architecture, which supplied support crew. "The clincher was the Olympics were coming, and the body of work [from Koebberling and Kaltwasser] used remnant materials. "We figured there would be a lot of material, and started to talk about a curatorial presence that would reflect on the Olympics, before, during and after the Games."

Koebberling says the compostable bulldozer is in itself a meditation on time, not only because it will biodegrade over the course of an estimated eight years, but because bulldozers are a symbol of massive and near-immediate landscape transformations. "We had the idea to create a machine that normally destroys," she says. "If you look at the way a bulldozer is used in war, such as on the border of Palestine and Israel, it just takes things away so fast. But it also can create, because it is used in construction. "The idea is always that you can make your own city. You can recreate the spaces, and this is a point Vancouver should be proud of, because not very many other places in the world would accept art that will decompose. For a time, this will look ugly." If all goes according to plan, the wheatboard bulldozer will be complete by September, at which point the public will be invited to plant seeds in its plant boxes (disguised as bulldozer

parts). After that, nature will take over and shape, and reshape, the entire sculpture through natural processes. They are hoping to install a web camera to document the entire transformation with time-lapse recording, but the main focus at the moment is finishing the monolithic "wooden toy," which has its set of challenges, not the least of which is the amount of material they were hoping to use. Originally, 5,000 boards were offered. They will make do with just under 1,000. Kaltwasser is confident he can make it work, because he can keep things simple. "Engineers think about how to make something," he says. "We use a Lego model and take our design from that. Using a tape measure, we can make it larger, and then we add up the cross-sections," he says. Despite the "simplicity" of the design, the bulldozer is guaranteed to elicit myriad emotional responses from the general public. "Because it is made from one material, it will look neat and nice, Kaltwasser said. "It will look like a giant wooden toy, which reminds us of our childhood. Children always see the world as gigantic, so really, it has this beauty, but it's also a meditation on childhood."

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