CONTINGENT CONVERGENCES
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In 2003, it was announced that Vancouver would host the 2010 Winter Olympic games, but protests against the spectacle started long before. Opposition was declared against the anticipated displacement of low-income residents, civic debt in the face of extraordinary corporate gains, and infractions of Indigenous sovereignty. These criticisms focus on the dark side of neoliberalism, according to which the boundaries between private and collective expressions are recoded in favor of commercial interests. For urban theorist Miguel Robles-Durán, public space is no longer a place available to all for social gatherings, debate, protest, or retreat without specific purpose for the simple reason that these uses do not "meet the requirements of the private investors, private corporations, and of public-private alliances to extract land rent and most importantly, to develop new spaces in which to re-invest their accumulated surplus."

As preparations for the games mounted around Vancouver, these tensions were predictably aggravated.

Mega-events mobilize a microcosm of practices that drive social, economic, and political transformations in service of neoliberal agendas. Long before the events arrive, and even before a host is assigned, cities compete to offer the most lucrative benefit packages to the mega-event overloads, including significant tax breaks and other infrastructure developments. Little if any democratic input is sought from local citizens, but the cultural and economic costs are subsequently downloaded onto them, through rollback of social services, increased surveillance of public spaces, and gentrification of neighborhoods.

Responding to these effects—well documented elsewhere and anticipated in Vancouver—the artist-run centre VIVO took an institutional stance of resistance. Since its founding in 1973, VIVO Media Arts Centre (then known as Satellite Video Exchange Society, and later Video Ita) has served as a meeting point between artists and activists, fostering both complementarity and tension between them. Hoping to preserve this practice of encounter, the decision was made early on to VIVO to refrain from applying for Cultural Olympic funding, a rollout of over $20 million to arts and culture organizations in Vancouver to realize the cultural programming mandate of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Over the three-year lead-up to the Olympics, other cultural organizations across the city competed for this funding to realize projects to stoke the fever of sports on the horizon. When economic support for many of these organizations was revoked without warning due to drastic cuts made by the province of British Columbia in the face of the RC Arts Council's budget, cultural workers were outraged, but not surprised. In the official narrative, overreaching on Olympic infrastructure and security was, of course, unrelated to these arts cuts. However, the general feeling within the cultural sector was that the two events—cuts to the RC Arts Council and over spacings on the Olympics—were causally related. Culture, as an expression of the public, was sacrificed for urban development under the guise of future-tense economic growth, and the claim that the games would "pay for themselves," despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary.

In the glow of imminent spectacle, the terms of Cultural Olympic funding became more sinister: accepting Olympic money prohibited artists from speaking critically of the event by virtue of a clause in their funding contracts: "The artist shall at all times remain from making any negative or derogatory remarks respecting VANOC, the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Olympic movement generally, and/or any other sponsors associated with VANOC."

VIVO was the only artist-run centre to expressly abstain from seeking these funds, operating outside of the sanctioned frame of participation, and therefore within the parameters of free speech.

And then, suddenly, even the rights of citizens at large were compromised. The City of Vancouver attempted to legislate against expressed dissent through the passage of temporary bylaws that banned leaflets, posters, advertising, and graffiti that "did not 'celebrate' the 2010 Winter Games and 'create or enhance a festive environment and atmosphere.' The ordinance criminalized anti-Olympic signs and gave Canadian authorities the right to remove them from both public and private property." Public space, broadly understood as the entire visual realm, was thought to belong properly to the IOC and their sponsors, rather than the residents of Vancouver, especially those residents who did not embrace the Olympic vibe. In this equation, free speech was less valuable than the façade of absolute conviviality and sponsorship coherence.

Against these threats of censorship, citizens and activists deployed a diversity of tactics: the RC Civic Liberties Association mounted a successful legal challenge against the temporary bylaws (the sole exception being that Anti-Olympic sentiment could not be covered by the logos of sponsors or the IOC). Some artists and artist-run centres accepted Olympic funding and mounted projects that obliquely addressed the political, social, and economic repercussions of playing the role of host city. At VIVO, a public space was created, through the rejection of public funds.

If public space is indifferent and radically open by necessity, the centre carefully constructed a void, as a space of potentiality. For many months prior to the winter games, VIVO facilitated meetings for an ad hoc group of community members to discuss ideas about the needs of the city, in order to discover how best to use the bare resources of the space. Provoked by the mega-event and aggravated by associated legislation, VIVO's refusal of Cultural Olympiad funding created the conditions for a counter-culture, cultivated from the will, criticality, and energy of whoever showed up. The constructed void was an experiment in embodied cultural negotiation.

What actually transpired at VIVO during the Olympics occupied the centre around the clock: it called itself Safe Assembly. According to VIVO's project statement:

In order to preserve our history as a place for artists to engage in a culture of critical action, VIVO has chosen not to participate in the 2010 Cultural Olympiad. We intend to keep the clarity of our position outside of the spectacles that operate as a hub of analysis, skill sharing, production, and collaboration. We want to create a space for artists to consider their own production in relation to the events and systems around them.

While a core group facilitated the space and the events, it is important to note that the structure was radically open; the programs were meant to accommodate whatever forms of expression or occupation they might be called upon to entertain. The people who worked as programmers acted as facilitators, not curators. Solidarities were thus built to produce a space that could register dissent.

Safe Assembly was many things. It was an Afternoon School, a free school that responded to the citywide disruption of post-secondary education. It was the Evening News, a series of forums for sharing experiences, observations, footage, and art in response to the coverage portrayed in major media outlets. It was the Vancouver Media Guide, a Google mapping project in response to the corporate sanitized version of the city offered to tourists by the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC). It was Safe Radio, a series of window works critiquing violations of Aboriginal and civil rights, in the face of the city's attempts to curtail expression. Safe Assembly was also a radio station, which was the only aspect of the project to be shut down by authorities. On the second day of the Olympics, people wearing VANOC jackets, armed with VANOC business cards, and claiming to be from Industry Canada—the governmental agency that oversees radio, spectrum, and telecommunication standards across the country—demanded that the very humble, short-range transmissions come to an immediate halt.

There were other ways that the Olympics redefined public space. It was now possible to take rapid transit from the airport to the city centre. The construction of Olympic infrastructure, including the widening of the Sea-to-Sky Highway between Whistler and Vancouver, involved extensive destruction to the traditional lands of the Lil'wat, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples on whose unceded territory the games were mounted (despite protests mounted by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people). Less obvious markers of the impact of the Olympics also remain, such as the surveillance cameras installed in public spaces that just didn't seem to get packed up at the end of it all.

By refusing public funding, VIVO used privately owned space to generate a temporary public space. Given the brutally clear relationship between power and space, Safe Assembly was able to transcend the use of social issues as subject matter for art to become a political act for sixteen days in February 2010. This fleeting, exciting confluence of energy and resources is what public space has become in our neoliberal present-tense, which thwarts investment in longer-lasting public spaces. Today, we experience a neoliberal political, a thing produced collectively through struggle. And so we make it.

This essay was informed by an interview with Iraka Thorne conducted on July 23, 2016, with additional comments by Alex Marr. This is the former General Manager at VIVO Media Arts (2007-2010). VIVO has worked at VIVO in various capacities since 2003.

NOTES

2 According to the Sport of the Games, "The U.S. Constitution, which allows for adherence to all known laws and regulations, except for those laws that clearly violate the U.S. Constitution, in accordance with the Ministry of State, Arts and Culture." (Note: A lawyer would argue that this must be read broadly to include all Olympic values, including but not limited to respect for the law, etc.)


4 An Assembly of Artists and Writers from the Olympic Movement, prepared for the Vancouver Sun, 2010, (http://vancouverobserver.com/2010/02/21/10-02-vanoc-sports-council-revealed-


6 Although the Cultural Olympiad's broadcast facilities were essentially in terms of their own size, the broadcast facilities were essentially in terms of the broadcast territories, such that the presence of space and the Olympic movement in Vancouver were administered administratively.

7 Artist residencies were enriched by a diverse range of arts organizations including the Native Constellation, Art Makers, the Canadian Olympic Committee, the Canada Council for the Arts, and a number of other organizations.

8 http://vancouverobserver.com/2010/02/21/10-02-vanoc-sports-council-revealed-

ALL SPACE IS PUBLIC
ALL LAND IS INDIGENOUS