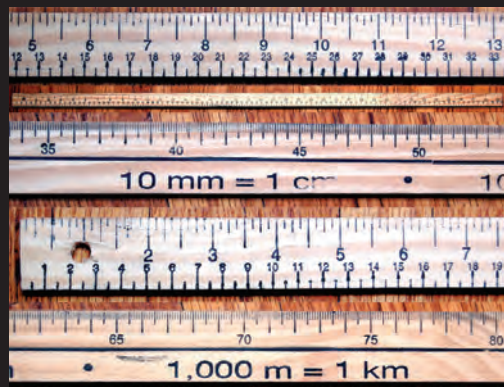


Duncan MacDonald White Picket Sound Fence

Special thanks goes out to Bob Johnson, without whom this project would not have been possible. Thanks Bobby.

For Lily.



Duncan MacDonald is an artist and assistant professor of Visual Arts at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. His work with diverse media often investigates relationships between visibility and sound—exploring what he calls the commodification of the corporeal sensorium. Duncan's art has been exhibited throughout Canada, the US, Europe and South America.

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Summer 2008

Duncan MacDonald

White Picket Sound Fence

Essay by Leah Sandals

The first time I went to the Niagara Region it was for love; the second time, for art. Unfortunately, it's not as romantic as it sounds.

That first time around, my boyfriend and I were just getting to know each other; we piled onto a \$5 casino bus in Toronto's Chinatown for a weekend trip. We'd called ahead to reserve a seat, but the fact was none was needed; many stood in the aisle the whole way to Niagara. After finding our way out of the Fallsview labyrinth, we strolled down to an actual falls view, and it was here that I understood—indeed, was swept away—by them. In the context of an affair, the falls become a symbol of something powerful, overwhelming and exciting, generating a sensation not unlike that of infatuation. They are a thundering, drenching thing, ever roiling, ever passionate, ever tumultuous—agony and ecstasy in geologic form.

The second time around, a year and a half later, I kissed my boyfriend goodbye (a comfortable, domestic, see-you-tonight peck on the cheek) and boarded a different, quite empty coach to St. Catharines. My purpose: to see artist Duncan MacDonald and view his most recent work, a “white picket sound-fence” installed at the Grimsby Art Gallery. The white picket fence, of course, has quite a different symbolic resonance than that of the falls. It conjures domestic relationships of a particular idealized sort, the kind that comes with home ownership in a green-grassed small town. It calls to mind the clichéd (and clichéd because it is true) proverb that “good fences make good neighbours”—that boundaries, and respect of them, are a necessary ingredient for peaceable coexistence. And in MacDonald's case, it is etched with a sequence of Grimsby's annual rainfall levels from 1930–2007.

The more I thought about Niagara, the more the fence and the falls became connected in my mind. It wasn't just their head-to-toe verticality that met the viewer on their own bodily terms, nor the fact that both compiled massive volumes of water into single gleaming sheets of brightness. There were a few other things that came to mind, affinities sonic, environmental and economic. It is these I hope to sharpen over the course of this essay.

First off, the falls and fence both possess a sonic as well as a visual presence. In the case of the falls, its roar, though often overlooked in reference to its appearance, is so iconic that its absence when the falls froze in 1848 reportedly caused some Niagara residents to become alarmed. In the case of the fence, MacDonald provides sticks for striking its scored pickets, turning it (and the phenomena it tracks) from meteorological data and architectural symbol into something else altogether: a sound, a plaything, an instrument, something beyond verbal articulation. It does not sound like rain, exactly. Nor does it sound like the falls, but plays more of a xylophone or glockenspiel to that massive, droning hurdy-gurdy.



Interestingly, this is one in a long line of MacDonald works in which nature and culture is made to sing in ways that it typically does not. For an earlier work, MacDonald copied the pattern of spots on a ring of birch bark and fed it through a player piano, generating a delightful sense of translating nature into sound waves, of making a tree speak. On a more human level, MacDonald, with artists Corwyn Lund and Janis Demkiw, also transformed a revolving door into an impromptu music box. Each mundane pass through the door generated a tinkling melody, a spritely announcement of perhaps-bleary workaday passage.

There are more examples, too many to mention. But in all of these instances, MacDonald finds some comfort or value in taking a non-sonic phenomena and translating it into sound. Here, he uses that trick to help us find enjoyment (or at least investigate) something quite disturbing—patterns of rainfall affected by climate change.

This leads to the second commonality between the falls and the fence: its presence as a malleable boundary between culture and the environment.

In terms of the falls, it is well-known to geologists, hydrologists and many in the Niagara region that they have a great erosive power—so much so that they have “eaten” their way upstream quite rapidly over the last thousand years. Rapidly, that is, until two things happened: (1) the falls hit a hard limestone “cap” and (2) flow-controlling hydro stations were installed just upstream. Now the riverbed is eroding at a much slower rate, and the falls' location marks a restive boundary between the needs of the river and the needs of the humans around the river.

The rainfall levels on MacDonald's fence form a similar kind of cultural-environmental threshold. In order for agriculture, energy and even tourism industries in the Niagara region to hold steady, a certain amount of rainfall is needed every year. Similarly, as climate scientists ever more insistently remind us, in order for precipitation patterns to remain consistent, it is key that human activity does not overly infringe on the environment. Symbolically, then, the earth and its human inhabitants survive only by virtue of a complicated global version of that “good neighbours” proverb. Though MacDonald found that Grimsby has been fortunate to date in having annual rainfall hold relatively steady—steady as a well-built fence, in fact—it's uncertain whether that will continue into the future.

Such interplay between nature and culture is another recurring aspect of MacDonald's work. In March, he and his partner Melissa Smith, along with artist Derek Knight, started a collective, the Great Lakes Institute, to address such issues. For their first project, held in conjunction with Lake Nipissing's Ice Follies festival, the GLI created an ice hut which resembled an iceberg on the outside and housed an office on the inside. There, visitors were surveyed about their views on the lake, including whether it should be named “great.” In another work, MacDonald videotaped the drive-in theatres in Thorold during a freak snowstorm, juxtaposing agricultural land with Hollywood movies to great eerie effect.

This leads to a final commonality to discuss between the falls and fence: pure, old-fashioned economics.

It's no secret that the falls are a huge moneymaker for the Niagara Region, with related tourist revenues reported at over \$2 billion annually. Yet the economic impact of the falls economically is also quite silo'd—and investors are forsaking traditional Niagara drivers like manufacturing and agriculture to pick up the slack. Instead, inspired by the theories of Richard Florida (who spoke in the area in February) they are turning to artists like MacDonald and his colleagues. After all, with local canneries importing fruit from China rather than buying local and GM laying off workers in record numbers, what hope remains for the region but tourism (the falls) and culture (the fence)?

In this context, MacDonald's fence speaks to the blue-sky optimism foisted not only on small-town life before but on the art life now. St. Catharines is seriously considering investing in a Niagara Centre for the Arts, and Grimsby finds itself with a newly renovated art gallery. As exciting as such developments are (particularly for the likes of yours truly) it seems city and town planners have forgotten, in their rush onto the Florida bus, that the jobs in tourism and culture are largely low-paying, precarious, seasonal and nonunionized ones. And when property values do rise, it is the holders of such jobs who are often the first ones driven out by rent increases.

Like I said at the beginning—it's about Niagara, it's about love, and it's about art, but it isn't all romantic. MacDonald's fence, like the region it delineates, gives realistic creators and citizens much to think about. Let's play with that wavering melody while we can.

