



Lee Ruiter
AlBeta Canada
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LAX, Kerry Tribe

Somewhere Else

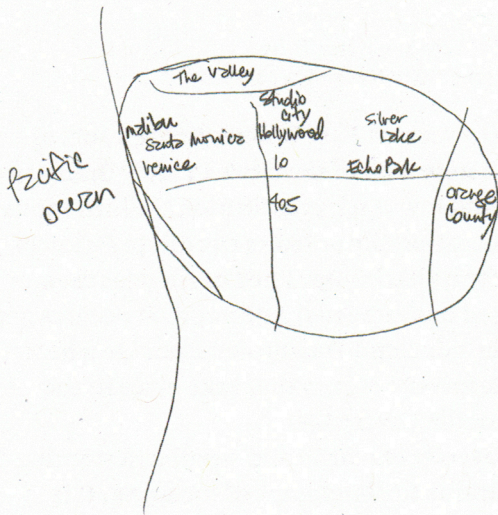
Anne Lesley Selcer

2048 km: Kerry Tribe
October 16 to November 13, 2004

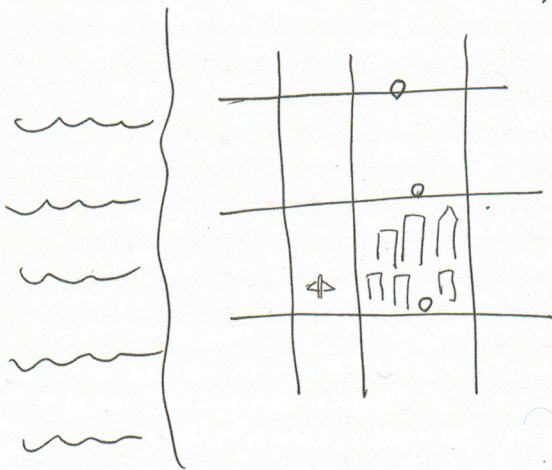
The hidden industrial streets of East Vancouver are a sort of non-place of the city. There, two of the city's shadow industries flourish: sweatshops and low track prostitution. A third industry, Hollywood film, occasionally borrows the dilapidation of this neighbourhood for its backdrop. The Los Angeles crew of the TV show *Dark Angel* has recreated a decrepit city centre just blocks from Vancouver's decrepit Downtown Eastside where actors recreate the sex-for-sale scenes that take place in the neighbourhood in actuality, everyday.

This overlay of reality and simulacra simultaneously imbues and drains the landscape of meaning. It is only one of the features Vancouver has in common with Los Angeles. Both sprawling, newish West Coast cities, they are each the last major point south for their respective country's West Coast. Concepts like "frontier"¹ and "last stop" have suggested utopian possibilities from their settlings. Their identities have always been plural and in flux, created and recreated as waves of immigration, building booms and cinematic representation shift their actual and imagined geographies.

The work of LA's Ed Ruscha has been thought of as the convergence of the terribly real and the totally unreal. The tone of his serial photographs and laconic text works fall dead centre between LA's utopian ether and its pop culture paved streets. In 1966, Ruscha represented his then "backwater"² West Coast city with *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. In contrast to New York, which could be unified visually from the top of the World Trade Center (Michel de Certeau asserted the view from its heights "makes the complexity of the city readable"),³ LA in the 1960s had no such unifying perspectival point. In Ruscha's street level gaze, the buildings of the Sunset Strip stood in for this sort of unification. They became consequential and monument-like, the Strip taking on cultural gravitas for



Debbie ☹️
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the sprawling, ephemeral city. When Stan Douglas offered *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, 2001 in response, he unified Vancouver similarly around a horizontal, inverse monument.

The palm trees at the intersection of Vancouver's beachfront Davie and Denman intersection embody the relativity of direction.⁴ What could a southernmost West Coast big city look like if not like a sun, spa, and rollerblade resort? Meanwhile, the *northernmost* city of Bellingham, just one hour south, can be characterized by mittens, flannel, hot cocoa, and stands of pine. Dreams and desires can landscape space—LA itself is a recreation, a Mediterranean paradise in the desert with imported palm trees. These shifting psychogeographies inform the work of Kerry Tribe, whose book work *North is West/South is East*, 2002, was the jumping off point for the “2048 km” exhibit. Tribe stopped strangers at LAX and asked them to draw a map of Los Angeles. The results vary from a diagonal line with a dot labeled “airport,” to a graceful sketch abstracting LA's freeway system. The range of representation reflects the plurality of the constructions of perhaps the most frequently costumed city in North America.

The artist stopped one group who she described as “tan and perky girls going to a volleyball tournament”⁵ and asked them for a map. When they wanted to know “where to,” she told them to any place they found interesting. In the margin of the neatly drawn map to their high school, we see the bubble letters of the teenage hand and an earnest, determinedly helpful set of directions. Irreducibly personal markers such as this crop up in much of Tribe's work. In this case, the idiosyncrasy adds charm—but it does more than that, it functions as a fracture that makes the point that the map is always relational, unable to be divorced from who is making it, from who is asking to have it made, nor from the use to which the map will be put. The open model of creation (strangers or friends always participate in her pieces) shifts the emphasis in *North is West/South is East* from a Situationist style subversion of the city grid, which favours individual subjectivity, to the relational. Tribe does not suggest that beyond the grid there is some wondrous “elsewhere,” but only *people*, chains of connection. She writes, “These chance encounters begin to describe a place real and imaginary. The project hopes to disturb the instrumental logic of the airport,

itself a non-place, when the only reason you visit is to get yourself somewhere else.”⁶ In the very space designated for flight, she wants to talk about the city streets; in the place where people give control over to huge, regulated spaces, she wants handmade maps.

This “somewhere else” is also described and renounced in *Double*, 2001, a video which started with a casting call for actors with the artist’s physical characteristics. It depicts a series of young female actors auditioning to play the young, LA artist. As we see the actors struggle to convince and impress, the video begins to be a satire of the seduction, self-promotion, and networking required of young artists. Because it is not an actual audition, it becomes a send up of the starry-eyed LA dream, ironically, on the very flat screen to which this dream aspires. Tribe leaves in several “cuts” during which the actors break character to address her. This is the most simple level of the video’s consecutive and multi-layered interruptions of representation. As we see the artist’s identity acted out by several similar looking women, identity becomes denaturalized or exchangeable. If subjects and objects are bifurcated through visuality, the camera here has filmed both ways. In one instance a buxom, dark haired actress stops in the middle of her screen test to offer a faux self-deprecating on-screen critique, “I’m just too sexual, I have this pouty lip,” and she pushes out her pouty lip and makes big, blank fawn eyes in a filmic kabuki of hyper-sexuality, letting the camera see what she thinks casting directors want to see. This lapse in the acting reveals only more artifice, evoking Marianne Doanne’s notion that the filmed woman is not *really* ever there.⁷ More than the aporia however, what comes across is humour and the tenderness of personal exchange. The woman has revealed what she thinks of herself, what she thinks Tribe thinks of her—in some ways the camera acts as a double mirror reflecting from the front and from the behind. “The tendency of artists to set up the camera and perform in the space before it and to use the monitor as a mirror caused art critic Rosalind Krauss to label video as inherently narcissistic,” says Martha Sturken,⁸ and in fact Eleanor Antin used the camera lens in her 1971 *Representational Painting* as a mirror to apply her makeup. While Antin went

from “natural” to made-up, Tribe starts with high artifice and lets the video camera do the deconstructing. The hot pink background—flattering, false, and dynamic—contributes to this sense that reality is blown up like a shiny Mylar balloon. It makes self-obsession seem self-effacing—neurosis in neon, narcissism in drag. The “confession” and “personal narrative” of the *personal is political* era are re-enacted by aspiring starlets against a hot pink backdrop. But if all of it is satirized, it is also held securely in the sense that the artist and the actors are playing—that they are in the game together. In this way, a content structured by a multi-leveled dissolution of the real manages to reflect the opposite.

In a conversation with Mary Kelly, Leslie Dick, and Sharon Hayes about the place of 70s feminism in contemporary art practice, Tribe says, “sometimes [feminist] articulations come in places that you don’t necessarily look for them.”⁹ She gives Annlee as an example, the Anime character created by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno and copyrighted in 1999 in the character’s name. Annlee is “open-source” art, a shell that several artists were invited to breath life into. “I do think they’re here as long as we open up the term to include the notion that work can be structurally feminist insofar as it interrogates the systems of identification, power, knowledge, and cultural value,” says Tribe. Conversely, the theorizing of what has come to be known through Nicolas Bourriaud as “relational aesthetics” wholly omits its debt to feminism, though feminism has deeply altered methods and theories across disciplines with its explorations of intersubjectivity.¹⁰ Tribe’s own practice of multiple or absent authorship, which always bears the mark of relationship between the artist and the subject, manifests this politic. *Double* is deadpan and indeterminate like Ruscha’s work, but the flat, ironic affect is filled back out by the social. The real is nowhere, yet everywhere.

1. Neil Smith, *New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London: Routledge, 1996.
2. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Random House, 1990.
3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1984.
4. For more on this see Sallie Ann Marston, "The Social Construction of Scale," *Progress in Human Geography* 24, June 2000, pp 219-242.
5. Kerry Tribe, Artist's Talk, Or Gallery, October 16, 2004.
6. Kerry Tribe, "North is West, South is East," Kerry Tribe, <http://www.kerrytribe.com/projects.html> (accessed December 13, 2005).
7. Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen*, issue 23, 1982, pp 78-87.
8. Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History," *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer. New York: Aperture Books, 1991, pp 101-21.
9. Leslie Dick, Sharon Hayes, Mary Kelly, and Kerry Tribe, "Something Like a Bridge," *X-Tra*, vol 5, issue 3, http://www.x-traonline.org/vol5_3/bridge.html (accessed December 13, 2005).
10. This essay originally discussed the "relational" without use of *Relational Aesthetics*. Since the book is pertinent to Tribe's work, in revisions I chose to address Bourriaud within the terms I had already set forth.

A shorter form of this writing was previously published in October 2004.