

PED.TORONTO

MILLIE CHEN, ANDREW JOHNSON,
JOAN LINDER, WARREN QUIGLEY, PAUL VANOUSE



June 23 to August 21, 2016
Koffler Gallery
Curator: Mona Filip



TORONTO THE GOOD

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TORONTO THE BEST

Monday 11:00 - 12:00
Tuesday 11:00 - 12:00
Wednesday 11:00 - 12:00
Thursday 11:00 - 12:00
Friday 11:00 - 12:00
Saturday 11:00 - 12:00
Sunday 11:00 - 12:00

BUFFALO



TONAWANDAS



FAST

CHONGQING

RIO DE JANEIRO



IN SEARCH OF TORONTO THE GOOD

First coined as a rallying cry in support of moral crusader William Holmes Howland's 1886 mayoral campaign, and subsequently popularized as a phrase connoting propriety and civility in Victorian Toronto, "Toronto the Good" has long captured many of the contradictions of a city preoccupied simultaneously with do-gooding and getting away with whatever it can.

An 1898 book called *Of Toronto the Good*, published in concert with "moral purity" conferences in Baltimore and Toronto, purports outrage about extremes of poverty and excesses of drinking, gambling and sexual promiscuity, but reads nonetheless like a tourist guidebook to locating licentiousness. A 1965 song called "Toronto the Good," released by folk band The Brothers-in-Law, satirized the city's image as a place of peace and order – but suggested that repressive police presence was required to keep it that way. In the 1970 book *The Underside of Toronto*, sociologist John Seeley critically observed that although the city has thought of itself as "a bastion of British moderation and Calvinist right-doing," its urban narrative has, instead, rationalized "dullness, mediocrity, self-righteousness" alongside "cut-throat competition and mutual antagonism." More recently, Andrew Moodie's Dora Award-nominated 2009 play *Toronto the Good* challenged the city's smug self-image by interrogating the racialization of crime in its court system.

Produced for the Koffler Gallery and inviting visitors off site, into the city, PED. Toronto delves directly into the contradictions of Toronto the Good. Through three audio-accompanied self-guided bicycle tours – "Toronto the Good," "Toronto the Better," and "Toronto the Best" – participants visit some of the specific locations where Toronto the Good's carefully scripted narrative cracks open. The audio tours are narrated by a snapping turtle, a potent reminder of the city's history of Indigenous settlement and its geographical position in the centre of a continent. Aboriginal narrative still refers to as Turtle Island.

On the "Toronto the Good" tour, which plays with notions of presence and absence in the urban landscape, participants encounter a long brick wall looming over the grounds of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). The wall was built between 1888 and 1889 by inmates of what was then known as the Provincial Lunatic Asylum, literally (as the tour points out) "walling themselves in." A symbol of the stigma against mental illness, the wall has been retained as a memorial to psychiatric survivors. Its brutal presence exemplifies the lengths Toronto the Good was prepared to go to preserve its upright image. In contrast, a nearby tour stop in Trinity Bellwoods Park confronts participants with something that is no longer there: Garrison Creek, which by the early twentieth century had become so polluted with untreated sewage and industrial effluent that the creek, its ravine and even the bridge that spanned it were buried. One of several "lost rivers" sacrificed to sanitary engineering and the imperatives of Toronto's infamous grid network of streets, the ghost of Garrison Creek nonetheless gets its revenge on Toronto the Good whenever the combined sewer system overflows after a heavy rain.

The second tour (“Toronto the Better”) does not follow a prescribed path, but instead invites participants to “find yourself in people city,” the words taken from a well-known 1972 Tommy Ambrose song used for more than a decade as the musical sign-on for iconic Toronto television station City (then known as Citytv). Using a mix of media – song snippets, interview clips, recorded literary excerpts – the tour explores spatial, social and temporal tensions between Toronto the Good’s centre and periphery.

Riding outward from the Koffler Gallery in the direction of their choice, participants are invited to conduct psychogeographic – or cyclegeographic – tours of a city whose streetscapes they may previously have taken for granted. Their journeys are accompanied by a soundtrack with commentaries about Toronto’s wilfully forgotten Indigenous history, racial tensions, “boutique multiculturalism,” and socio-economic divide. It asks riders to consider the risks immigrants take in coming to Toronto, the divides between city and suburb, and the need for a narrative of multiculturalism that makes room for negotiations across seemingly insurmountable cultural differences. One clip invokes the Filipino concept of *Kapwa*, the notion that we are all connected souls. But if we are all connected, how do we reach one another? How do we bridge the differences that separate us? The tour does not supply answers, but the implication is implicit: we have to learn how to navigate; the direction we choose and what we make of the journey is up to us.

The consequences of our choices—of how well or poorly we navigate—are the focus of the third tour. “Toronto the Best” imagines a future city undone by conceits already visible, its edifices already crumbling around the edges. This tour engages directly with Toronto’s post-gentrification West Queen West corridor, arguably the epicentre of all the contradictions Toronto the Good implies. While participants pass the converted factory lofts, exposed-brick start-up offices and hipster hotels along Queen Street—perhaps the ultimate symbols of production and consumption in the urban Anthropocene—the tour asks when and how Toronto’s fetish for “world-class” status will prove its undoing.

Just around the corner from this area and beyond the nearest expressway, destruction looms. Tour participants, ascending the long slope of land toward College Street, are invited to contemplate what Toronto might look like in a century or two. Climate change, rising sea levels, wars over oil and the decline of species will have their way. The accompanying soundtrack describes Toronto as a dystopian city patrolled by security forces keeping uneasy citizens in line, the iconic CN Tower – formerly a source of world-class pride as “the world’s tallest tower” – toppled into the lake. Near the end of the tour a child, whose voice sounds like an old man’s weary whisper, speaks lines from Samuel Beckett’s time-bending novel *Molloy* in which the narrator recounts in the midst of so much ruin the rediscovery of his bicycle, described with such loving nostalgia that it borders on despair. “I never promised you a happy ending,” offers the audio, laconically invoking French poet-philosopher Paul Valéry’s observation that “the future, like everything else, is no longer quite what it used to be.”



By the time the third tour guides participants down Shaw Street back to the Koffler Gallery, the city may feel disconcerting to riders; the lines and edges of its grid street network no longer quite lining up. This is, of course, by design. The only way to shake loose the received meaning of Toronto the Good – the smug, complacent, self-satisfied city – is to upend it, to tilt the familiar landscape sharply enough so that everything feels as if it might slide in a great jumble into Lake Ontario. Only then will Torontonians be in a position to see the city as it is – divided by difference, its resources unevenly distributed – and as it could be, for better or worse: Toronto the Good, the Better, the Best.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau considers the problem of the urban planner perched (literally or figuratively) high above the city, whose position “transfigures him into a voyeur.” He describes the city envisioned from such a perspective as “a fiction [...] a ‘theoretical’ (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short, a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices.” De Certeau’s inference seems aptly summed up by Seeley’s observation in *The Underside of Toronto* that “every city has a self-image, and every city’s self-image is almost precisely a representation of what it is *not*, what it is *least*.”

To access the real city, de Certeau argues, one must join “the ordinary practitioners of the city,” who live out their lives at street level, “below the thresholds at which visibility begins” and whose motions comprise a choreography of “moving, intersecting writings” defined by improvisation and a complex grammar of beginnings, endings, interruptions and turns. The everyday movements of ordinary people, he adds, comprise a “wandering of the semantic” that liberates the city from the “geometrical” and makes possible what de Certeau calls “the poetic and mythic experience of place.”

The PED Collective’s artistic practice, refined in audio-guided cycling interventions in Buffalo, Belfast, Chongqing, Rio de Janeiro and St. John’s, may achieve its ultimate expression in Toronto, a city with a complicated relationship with the geometrical. Toronto has been defined by its grid street network ever since colonial surveyor Alexander Aitkin laid out ten oblong blocks running north and west from what later became Front and Berkeley Streets in 1793. Although in *No Mean City* architectural historian Eric Arthur famously denigrates Aitkin’s plan as “indescribably mean and unimaginative,” noted urbanist Jane Jacobs was an admirer, seeing in Toronto’s grid network the fulfilment of her views about the balance between order and informality they enabled. The city’s rectilinear streets have also stimulated much poetic attention, perhaps most notably the psychogeographic excursions that define bpNichol’s *The Martyrology Book V*, which turns the city’s familiar streets into spatial mythologies evocative of literary scholar Steven Winspur’s depiction of streets as textural invitations that enable travel between “the city here and now” and the “elsewhere.”

Like metaphors, which de Certeau describes as a kind of “spatial practice” because of the ways they connect and thereby “locate” semantically distinct ideas, bicycles are particularly useful vehicles for navigating between “the city here and now” and the “elsewhere.” Unlike walkers, whose feet are rooted primarily in place, and drivers, whose focus on destinations distracts them from the journey, cyclists are concerned most directly with the meanings that emerge from motion itself. On a bike one is preternaturally attuned to subtle shifts in the landscape and the direction of the wind. The ebbs and flows of streetscapes are felt in the body like invisible currents necessitating gear changes or a subtle shift in body position. The city encodes itself in the rhythms of a rider, making the bike a perfect vehicle for navigating – even perhaps resolving – the contradictory narratives of Toronto the Good.

Amy Lavender Harris

PED Collective: Millie Chen, Andrew Johnson, Joan Linder, Warren Quigley, Paul Vanouse.

Millie Chen's installations, audio-video works and interventions are intended as sensorial experiences that prod the perceptual and ideological assumptions of the audience. Her work has been exhibited across North and South America, Asia and Europe, and is included in several public collections including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Roswell Park Cancer Institute, Art Bank of Canada Council for the Arts, and the City of Toronto. She is a Professor in the Department of Art at University at Buffalo, SUNY. Chen is represented by BT&C Gallery in Buffalo, NY.

Joan Linder is known for drawings packed with thousands, even hundreds of thousands of tiny, energized marks. Her large-scale images of quotidian subjects find inspiration in Linder's immediate surroundings. Past exhibitions include the Kunsthallen Brandts, the Gwangju Museum of Art, The Bronx Museum of the Arts and the Queens Museum. This summer Linder's work is featured in a solo exhibition at the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY. She is an Associate Professor of Art at University at Buffalo, SUNY.

Andrew Ellis Johnson has addressed topics from the apocalypse to animal nature, the disasters of war and economic disparities. His work has appeared in venues and publications in the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA where he is Associate Professor of Art. Residencies include those at Korean National University of the Arts in Seoul, University of the Arts London at Camberwell, Fayoum International Art Center in Egypt, and Sites of Passage in Jerusalem/ Ramallah/ Pittsburgh.

Warren Quigley's work manifests our perceptions of the unseen in relation to impending disaster. He has exhibited across Canada, the U.S. and China, as well as France, Brazil and Japan. He has realized a number of permanent public art commissions, including ones for the City of Toronto and the Toronto Transit Commission, and his work is part of private and public collections in North America and Europe. He has taught at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China and is a lecturer in the Department of Art at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

Paul Vanouse is an artist working in emerging technological forms and a Professor of Art at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Interdisciplinarity and impassioned amateurism guide his art practice. His biological and interactive media projects have been exhibited in over 25 countries and widely across the U.S. His recent projects use molecular biology techniques to engage issues surrounding DNA fingerprinting, particularly the idea that the most authoritative image of our time, the DNA fingerprint, is somehow 'natural.' Vanouse has a BFA from the University at Buffalo, SUNY and an MFA from Carnegie Mellon University.

The PED Collective thanks David Dressner, honorary member of PED.Toronto.

Amy Lavender Harris is the author of *Imagining Toronto* (Mansfield Press) which was shortlisted for the Gabrielle Roy Prize in Canadian literary criticism and won the 2011 Heritage Toronto Award of Merit. Her next book, *Wild City*, is forthcoming.

koffler gallery

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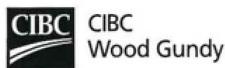


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