The Final Frontier

A visiting artists' project in a remote B.C. mining town redefines the notion of site-specific art

by Richard Rhodes

On a map of British Columbia, Wells is a dot in the centre of the province, half-way between the American border and the Yukon. In real life, reaching this dot translates into a twelve-hour drive — either from Vancouver or Calgary — along a route that, when it turns north, follows the old Cariboo Road that opened up the interior of B.C. more than a century ago. Nearing Wells, the road passes through forests and marshes where black bear and moose can suddenly come into view alongside the car. Then it descends through a narrow canyon and the view opens onto a lake. The town is at the far end: a cluster of western buildings that looks like the last place one would expect to see contemporary art.

Bill Russell

Since last year, however, Wells, a town of 250 people, has become a venue for just that. Local members of the Island Mountain Arts Society have developed a public art program funded by an Explorations grant from The Canada Council. Plans at the moment call for bringing half-a-dozen artists into the town from Europe, Vancouver and Toronto over a two-year period. While in Wells, the artists will stay at the local hotel with the prospectors and loggers who make up the usual clientele or, if it is in the summer, alongside the European tourists who travel in on week-long wilderness excursions. During their stay, the artists will make work to show in the Island Mountain Gallery — converted from the town's old butcher shop — and participate in a public forum. Last summer, Dutch-American artist Nan Hoover came for three weeks to inaugurate the first of the projects. The other artists scheduled include the German media artist Jochen Gerz, Toronto sculptor Noel Harding, Vancouver sculptors Mowry Baden and Joey Morgan, and Vancouver photographer Jeff Wall.

The idea for the program came in large part from discussions between the organisers — Judy Campbell, Marilyn Rummel and Amy Melmock — and Harding, a friend of Campbell's from university. Impressed by the look of Wells, and by the optimistic energy of the people who

live there, Harding encouraged Campbell and the other Island Mountain members in the belief that a contemporary public art program would attract serious artists happy to work in such surroundings. In the back of the organisers' minds was the thought that a program featuring visiting artists with national and international reputations could not hurt their ongoing pursuit of official "cultural or historical site" status from the provincial government, opening the way to money for the restoration of the town's vernacular, western-style architecture.

Ulterior motives aside, Wells' public art program — remote as it is — reflects the mainstream curatorial inclination towards site-related exhibitions that has been growing since the mid-1980s, largely because of the influence of projects like Jan Hoet's *Chambres d'Amis* in Ghent (1986) and Kaspar Konig's public sculpture exhibition in Münster (1987). In these exhibitions, "eccentric" venues became alternatives — even correctives — to the traditional museum setting. For *Chambres d'Amis* Hoet, the director of this summer's *documenta IX* in Kassel, put art into the homes of collectors and friends who, in turn, opened their private homes to tours by the public, offering a glimpse of a humanised art functioning outside the usual institutional framework. Konig, for his part, assembled a score of works in public sites in a provincial German town, orchestrating a sense of both the dissonance and resonance between the new Germany and the Third Reich. Current efforts like the Grazer Kunstverein's public art series in Graz, Austria, go to even more assertive lengths to explore the history and culture of public space. Like the earlier projects, this series makes manifest the belief, widely held within the art world, of art's special but neglected relevance to the wider social sphere. The curator demonstrates this by placing art in the public domain itself. Here, there is no safety net.

With no bona fide art institution within a day's drive, the attraction of this approach to Wells is obvious. In a sense, the organisers have nothing to offer but the town's heroic, unbuttressed smallness. No large, walk-through audiences are about to descend on the butcher shop; nor is there any access to media coverage unless the TV reporter in the pulp town eighty kilometres west takes an interest. In Wells, the art has a very real vulnerability, a vulnerability born out of isolation on a grand scale, grand enough to make the radical openness of the European curatorial projects seem somewhat genteel and theoretical by comparison. In Wells, there is no buffer between art and the world it represents. Immediacy to the context is not something that has to be constructed; it exists in a natural state. The place is small enough to seem almost transparent. It is the kind of place where Rousseau might have imagined the Social Contract, or where de Tocqueville might have speculated on the foundations of democracy. The structure of things seems open to view, negotiable, changeable. Wells is a place with the possibility of starting over.

These may seem like romantic thoughts for a romantic venue, but the poignancy of Wells lies in how it cannot help but wear its history on its sleeve. The location of the town, its layout, its architecture, all beg for a social interpretation, down to the trees in the forests and the water in the lakes. For all its picturesque allure, Wells is no Eden but a dying mining town. The mine closed twenty-five years ago and, ever since, the town has had to cast about for an economic reason to be. This reason was once obvious. In the 1930s, Wells was a site of Canada's gold rush. At first only a mineshaft and a bunkhouse on a hillside claim staked out by an American prospector named Fred Wells, the town came into being when the financing partners decided that a settlement would be the answer to finding a more reliable and stable work force. They thought that men with families would generate a peaceable social atmosphere instead of the disorder of a boisterous boomtown filled with young men working only long enough to have the means to move somewhere else. So to protect their capital investments, a professional planner was hired to survey the land and draw up sketches for sewers, streetlights and housing. Two expert Swedish carpenters were brought in to build houses, a school, a theatre and eventually a town hall with a gymnasium. In the summer, a drained marsh flat was groomed into a racetrack and a golf course as other mines opened on the slopes of the nearby hills. By the end of the 1940s, Wells had become a town of four thousand people.

In Wells there is no buffer

This fifteen-year upward curve brought Wells to its peak. But in the 1950s, production at the mines slowed as the price of gold fell. People began to move away, partly because of poorer prospects at the mine, partly because the town's children had grown up restless about the future in such a remote place. Eventually, the mines became uneconomical and the last one closed in the late 1960s, leaving behind a company town abandoned by all except those who could make a living from the summer tourists or the growing forest industry. With every winter, more houses disappeared, destroyed by fire or by the weight of the snow. Large gaps began to appear in the street grid. The town slowly began to lose its form, becoming a ghost held in trust by old diehards and a few young people who came north with the

enthusiasms of the counterculture to discover a beautiful place where the lake water, crystalline to see, turned out to carry poisons from the leftover mine tailings.

Last summer, when Nan Hoover flew in from Düsseldorf it was apparent that Wells was in the midst of another land-use problem. On the flight from Vancouver, her plane passed over enormous tracts of clear-cut forest logged in recent years by B.C.'s lumber industry. The clear cuttings and the follow-up slash burnings had left massive geometrical scars snaking over the land, scars that, as the local newspaper showed, were visible in satellite photos taken from outer space. Hoover had come to Wells to make drawings. To her surprise, she discovered that she was in the middle of one already.

Hoover, who is sixty, had been invited on the strength of a reputation based on the elegant performance works and videos that she has produced over the past twenty-five years out of Amsterdam. Recently moving to Düsseldorf to take up a teaching position at the art academy where Joseph Beuys once taught, Hoover has converted the lessons learned in her own practice into a course called "Light," which attempts to teach students multimedia techniques with a renewed respect for patience and long-term scrutiny instead of the jump-cut gaze of popular culture. In her performances and videos, this extenuated appreciation of time shows itself in slow, evolving revelations of form which are seen under different passing sources of light. In the past few years, she has experimented with small charcoal drawings that pursue similar concerns. In the drawings, compound shapes read as interlaced fingers or as mountainous rock formations, a fluctuation that blurs distinctions between animate and inanimate, organic and geological. The prospect of doing more of them had brought Hoover to Wells. She had planned to track the transient light passing over the surrounding hills in new drawings that would abstract the process into a pictorial shorthand applicable to virtually any landscape and any light.

After the flight in, however, the new drawings took on a distinctive character that set them apart from Hoover's earlier work. Where in the past, the forms were white shapes acting on top of a black ground, the new drawings reversed the emphasis. The curved white shapes were fixed within an active black field that intruded on the whiteness, dimmed it so that it seemed as if the drawings represented a failing light. In the dozen drawings made in Wells, this dimming became the theme. An animated blackness pushed in over the paper, filling it out to the edge as if the drawings had become black holes sinking through the gallery walls.

between art and the world it represents

This sombreness in Hoover's work in Wells was hard to read as anything but a response to her experience of seeing from the plane farmed forests stretching to the horizons. Wells gave the work a context in which a simple black-and-white drawing seemed a meditation on the invasion of the landscape by the lumber industry. There was even a crude approximation of materials between the charcoal in the drawings and the blackened stumps in the slash-burned land. These tracts were an oppressive weight on the landscape, their ruined emptiness more a vision of things to come than a record of recent history, during which a hundred lumber trucks a day would travel through Wells to load the wood from the nearby Bowron Lake cut and take it back to the mill. The evening before Hoover's opening, an immense cloud rose behind a mountain in the direction of Bowron as one of the oil-fed slash fires was lit to burn off the remnants of the harvested forest. As the fire grew and the unseen wood burned, a heavy, black haze blurred and darkened the sunset sky.

This conjunction between representation and reality is at the core of the Wells experience; it seems possible to trace the creative path of the work. There is a revelation of art's capacity not only to describe but to subsume its social space. This would not be a normal response to Hoover's drawings. In her canal-side studio in Amsterdam, her work would seem like an exquisite landscape fantasy, more dream world than real world. But in Wells even this subjectivity cuts a sociological profile. The work documents an anxiety about the landscape. It traces what we could call an ecological unconscious, a sense of threat that ultimately finds representation in the image of a dark, encroaching veil. Hoover's drawings can be seen as notes on the secret paranoia of our age. There is a sense in them of a sequential collapse: a collapse first of the outer world, then of the inner one.

For small-scale art of more or less conventional format, this is no small achievement. Ultimately the promise of Wells is that it can make room for an understated, unrhetorical art like Hoover's without diminishing the fact that the art remains an anomaly for a contemporary public-art program. In this sense, Wells demolishes delineations of style. It is a place where one can walk into a butcher shop and see a small drawing on the wall resonate with metaphoric vigour about the view out the window. In this it enacts our deepest expectations about what art should do, regardless of where it's found. ■