

Video Proposal: 48 Abell^P t Street Ice Rink

W
e
a
t
h
e
r

r

S
c
a
p
e
g
o
a
t
8

c

o

e

j

Adapted from the site-specific installation "Word Count," completed in April 2013. The original 5778-word text was pasted onto the existing plywood hoarding surrounding the condominium construction site at 48 Abell Street, Toronto.

The following text is a proposal for a video documenting an ice-skater gliding across a naturally formed rink that existed for the day of 15 January 2012 at the bottom of an earthen pit left after the demolition of the 48 Abell Street factory building in Toronto. This landmark had stood there for 124 years. Since December 2011, I had been monitoring the post-demolition site daily, observing as groundwater and rain began to fill the base of the void left after the building's foundations were excavated. Experience told me that several days of rain followed by a sharp drop in temperature, without snow, could result in perfect ice-skating conditions on this emerging pond. As I live in one of the buildings that border the site, I wanted to both skate on this "backyard rink" and make a video documenting it as a poignant moment in the area's redevelopment. On 12 January 2012, enough rain fell to cover most of the remaining dirt patches poking through the water's surface. On the evening of January 14, a cold snap plummeted temperatures to -12°C , quickly turning this shallow pond into an ideal rink that would last through the next day. I was unprepared to seize this brief opportunity to shoot the footage necessary for the video already taking shape in my mind. Warmer temperatures and rain resumed on January 16, melting the pristine expanse of skateable ice. For several weeks I returned daily, hoping for the reappearance of the vanished ice rink and another chance to document it. By the time it reverted to freezing temperatures, much of the accumulated pond water had evaporated, resulting only in small patches of ice that were broken up by larger areas of snow and dirt. Soon after, construction recommenced on the site, rendering the "48 Abell Street Ice Rink" video forever unrealized and unrealizable. The video can now exist only in writing. This text constitutes my retrospective attempt to describe this video and my conception of it as a poetic memorial to this building's past as embodied in the elemental, accidental, and fleeting sheet of ice that froze over its open grave on 15 January 2012. The video detailed in this text focuses on an ice-skater endlessly looping across an unusually situated frozen pond. Shot in a documentary style using only available daylight, a fixed-focal-length lens, and in-camera sound, the ice-skater remains unaware of the presence of the camera. Clips of her continuous circuit, which runs from corner to corner to corner of the L-shaped rink, are shot from fifty-five locations surrounding

the rink. These clips are then edited into eight scenes that progressively ascend from ice level to the eighteenth-storey balconies of the condo towers that border the rink. The video's first scenes suggest an idyllic, rural rink, but with each higher vantage point more of the urbanity of the site is revealed. The real subject of the video is not the fluid movement of the ice-skater but rather the recent history of the 48 Abell Street site within the unrelenting condo boom that is currently reshaping Toronto's cityscape. The video is structured according to the site's existing buildings, which together form a massive Roman-style amphitheatre perfect for watching and hearing the ice-skater at its centre below. As such, the video's point-of-view progressively climbs, in Fibonacci series, from floor zero (below ground), to one (ground floor), and on through floors two, three, five, eight, thirteen, and eighteen of the Artscape Triangle Lofts, the Westside Gallery Lofts, The Curve building, 180 Sudbury Street, the Bohemian Embassy, and 1155 Queen Street West. At each of the video's eight shooting heights the camera circumnavigates the site, primarily from these six buildings' balconies, in a decreasing number of increasingly longer video clips that are edited together to comprise eight equally long seventy-five-second scenes. With each scene documenting the skater from further above the ground plane, her dynamic action increasingly cedes to static aerial views of the development site. Each of the video's eight scenes, composed of three to twelve clips that range in length from six to twenty-four seconds, show the skater making a seventy-five-second-long tour around the ice. Temporal continuity between these fifty-five clips, which jump from one camera position to another, is created by panning to keep the skater in the centre of each shot and editing the video to reconstruct her movement as a continuous circuit. In plan view, the naturally formed rink is the shape of a bulbous, backwards letter L, roughly following the footprint of the last remaining sections of the 48 Abell factory building. The length and width of the rink's east-to-west section measures about 330 by sixty feet (1.65 times the length and 0.7 times the width of a regulation NHL hockey rink). The shorter section of the L-shape is situated at the rink's eastern end, running north to south, and forms a cul-de-sac in front of the Artscape Triangle Lofts at 38 Abell Street measuring about seventy by eighty feet. The ice-skater's circuitous route around the rink remains

consistent throughout the video. Starting near the entrance of 38 Abell Street, she arcs diagonally to the rink's northwestern corner close to the Bohemian Embassy's main entrance. Then she makes a wide, 180-degree turn around the western end and heads back towards the rink's northeastern corner. Once there, she turns 270 degrees and heads south into the iced-over cul-de-sac in front of the Artscape Triangle Lofts. Cutting a wide U-turn along the rink's perimeter, the skater then doubles back to repeat this course ad infinitum. Each tour around this approximately 300-metre-long circuit takes about seventy-five seconds. In terms of audio, the "48 Abell Street Ice Rink" video opens to the distinctive sounds of steel skate blades slicing across the rink's frozen surface, vividly evoking memories of Canadian winter outings. Initially the acoustics of this video's bounded, arena-like location amplify the sounds of the lone skater and carry them upwards where they are captured mixing with the otherwise ambient hum of the city. However, as the in-camera sound recording reaches its highest points on the eighth, thirteenth, and eighteenth floors, wind increasingly dominates the soundtrack, accentuating the isolation of the ice-skater below. Taken together, the fifty-five audio/video vantage points of "48 Abell Street Ice Rink" evoke the collective eyes and ears of hundreds of occupants whose balconies function like private box seats overlooking the demolition of the 48 Abell building and construction of the Epic condominium building in its place. By granting permission to film my proposed video from their balconies, these tenants would be participating in the creation of a historical document capturing the site in its transitional state from past to future. As the completed ten-minute video will appear to progress in real-time once edited, its fifty-five clips must be shot within several consecutive hours in order to avoid obvious changes in lighting conditions. Logistically, shooting must take place on a clear or overcast day that will grant the visibility necessary to capture the ice-skater and site from as high up as eighteen storeys. Given that the 48 Abell construction site is oriented along an east-west axis and is surrounded by condominium buildings on all but its eastern edge, recording must begin in the morning when uninterrupted daylight first floods the site from the east. Ice and weather conditions permitting, the video should be shot on a Sunday when construction work is not underway. This would also leave the site

free of disruptive human presence, both within the chain-link fenced construction site and in the forecourts of the surrounding condo buildings. As Torontonians know, those who venture out on a Sunday at daybreak are blessed to find the city at its most peaceful. Shooting during these magic hours will set an idyllic tone for the opening scenes of the “48 Abell Street Ice Rink” video. The first scene frames the ice-skater from mid-calf down, focusing only on her skates, the materiality of the ice, and the dynamic movements that propels her forward. Composed of twelve clips, each about six seconds long, this seventy-five-second-long scene captures the solitary ice-skater from twelve different locations spaced equidistantly apart along the edge of the ice. Nothing of the rink’s context is revealed, leading viewers to assume the rink is part of a purpose-built leisure site. In the video’s second scene, composed of ten shots taken from the upper edge of the earthen pit bounding the rink, the skater’s whole body is framed from about ten feet above the ice, thus establishing the size of the rink in relation to the human figure. Glimpses of the dirt and random debris comprising the embankments surrounding the ice can be seen in the background. The ruggedness of these embankments, marred by the heavy equipment that has dug this void, contrasts with the pristine surface of the ice. In the third scene of “48 Abell Street Ice Rink,” the camera’s vantage point climbs to the two-storey Woolfitt’s building and the second-floor balconies of the six residential buildings that border the site. The scene is edited to eight unimpeded panning shots, each about nine seconds long, which encircle the rink in a clockwise direction: two shots are from opposite ends of the Woolfitt’s roof at 1153 Queen Street West, two are from balconies in the Artscape Triangle Lofts at 38 Abell Street, followed by single clips from The Curve building at 170 Sudbury Street, the 180 Sudbury Street affordable housing building, the Bohemian Embassy complex at 1171 Queen Street West, and the condominium complex at 1155 Queen Street West. Now revealing the chain-link fence that surrounds the ice rink, this scene may lead viewers to suspect the site is industrial land undergoing soil remediation. Scene four continues to exclude indications of the rink’s prime urban location, portraying the rink as an oasis within a desolate landscape. Composed of seven clips, each about ten seconds, this seventy-five-second-long scene is shot from the third-floor balconies of the five residential

buildings closely bordering the rink on three sides. With the permission of willing residents, footage of the ice-skater is taken from third-floor units at 38 Abell Street, 170 Sudbury Street, 180 Sudbury Street, 1171 Queen Street West, and 1155 Queen Street West. From this height, several large garbage dumpsters and piles of scrap building materials can be seen on the rink's periphery, further puzzling viewers trying to reconcile how an ice rink could exist within such a post-industrial landscape. The video's fifth scene, shot from the fifth-floor balconies of the same five buildings, provides the first glimpses of these structures standing behind the rink and skater. While revealing only the first floors of these buildings, the six twelve-second-long clips comprising this seventy-five-second-long scene show an unmistakably contemporary material palette of glass, brick cladding, and pre-cast trim. Juxtaposed against otherwise barren land, this construction seems to be situated at the leading edge of new suburban retail expansion. The sixth scene of the video offers more inclusive views of the buildings and site surrounding the ice rink. Composed of five clips, each about fourteen seconds long, this scene is shot from the eighth-floor balconies of the Westside Gallery Lofts, The Curve building, 180 Sudbury Street, the Bohemian Embassy, and 1155 Queen Street West. From these vantage points, footage shows that the buildings opposite each shooting position are taller than typical one-to-two-storey suburban retail outlets and completely surround the otherwise undeveloped plot of land where the rink inexplicably lies. These revelations will implore viewers to again revise their conception of the rink's location, perhaps concluding that it is an infill project on a university or college campus. In the video's seventh scene, shot from the thirteenth-floor balconies of the three high-rise towers that ascend above the 48 Abell Street ice rink, the location is first revealed as unmistakably urban and residential. In this seventy-five-second-long scene, comprised of four clips each eighteen seconds long, viewers first see the unembellished glass curtain-wall construction reserved for floors five to eighteen of these buildings. From this height, the lone ice-skater appears only as a miniature figure, as if placed on an architectural model of the Queen West Triangle development zone for human-scale reference. The eighth and closing scene of the proposed video, shot from the uppermost balconies of the three eighteen-storey towers that bound the site on its south and east sides, offers the

highest and widest views of the ice rink's location. While these three clips, each twenty-five seconds long, still remain centred on the lone ice-skater below, she is reduced to a moving point on the equally diminutive rink. In this last scene the buildings beyond the Queen West Triangle first become visible, allowing viewers to locate the site within the larger context of downtown Toronto. Over the course of the ten-minute "48 Abell Street Ice Rink" video, the rink is progressively revealed to sit within a desolate construction site, bounded on all sides by tall buildings, at the epicentre of one of Toronto's most contentious development sites.

w Following suit, viewers' initial perception of the skater's solitude
e and freedom in an idyllic leisure space are superseded by the
a reality of urban density subject to intense real-estate speculation.
t My personal struggle as an artist perennially seeking suitable
h housing, despite the difficult economic reality of downtown
e Toronto, intersects with the recent history of the 48 Abell Street
r factory building. This building had served as artists' live/work
space for over thirty years. In February 2010, I applied for a live/
work studio there, thinking that a converted industrial space
would suit the needs of my artistic practice. Many friends had
lived in the building over the years, and I knew that it was well
organized and maintained. My application was not accepted and
s I regrettably ended up moving into a repurposed industrial
c building at Niagara and Tecumseh, where artists have also
a resided for decades. There, in my top-floor living space, the roof
p leaked after every rainfall, which was the likely cause of the
e lingering smell of mould and mildew. In my wing of the building
g the service elevator had been broken for over a decade,
o necessitating the difficult carriage of furniture and sculpture
a materials through a haphazard maze of narrow, interlocking
t hallways to my fourth-floor studio. Within six months I moved
8 out, and Toronto's historic artist live/work spaces no longer held
any attraction for me. In September 2011, I moved into the
newly built 180 Sudbury Street building, which stands at the
southwest corner of the 48 Abell Street construction site,
following an application process and yearlong wait. From the
balcony of my new third-floor live/work apartment I was able to
watch the demolition of the 48 Abell Street factory building
when it began in November 2011. I felt as if I was witnessing the
closing of a chapter in Toronto artist housing and the beginning
of a new one. That I now live in the most secure, suitable, well

maintained, and reasonably priced space I have had in my fifteen years as an artist in Toronto can be attributed to the efforts of community activists and developers. Together with the City of Toronto, they reached a Section 37 agreement to create new space for artists and arts organizations in the Queen West Triangle. Artist live/work units now populate the ground, second, third, and fourth floors of the Artscape Triangle Lofts at 38 Abell Street and the affordable-housing building at 180 Sudbury Street. Several non-profit media arts organizations, which have banded together as the Toronto Media Arts Centre (TMAC), have been planning to relocate to an adjacent condo development at 36 Lisgar Street. This is directly across the street from the former location of Mercer Union centre for contemporary art, which resided at 37A Lisgar Street from 1999 until 2008, before that building was demolished to make way for another of the twenty Queen West Triangle building projects proposed or completed in the last eight years. As an artist intrigued by and subject to the processes of Toronto's urban development, these forces have inspired both past artworks and my proposed "48 Abell Street Ice Rink" video. Productive ideas have emerged from my otherwise negative experience of housing eviction and relocation. For example, my 2003 "Swingsite" project, consisting of a playground swing installed in a disused lightwell between two buildings, was originally conceived for private use in a domestically scaled lightwell between my home at 26½ Glasgow Street and my adjoining neighbour's house at 26 Glasgow Street in Toronto. It was not until I was evicted from there and moved to 543 Queen Street West that I proceeded with the project when I discovered an ideal installation site half a block away in the space between 505 and 507 Queen Street West. While still living at this location in 2004 I became fascinated by the perennial flooding and freezing of water on a neighbouring building's flat rooftop. It was then that the idea first came to me of making a video about an unconventional urban ice-skating rink. Like "Swingsite," the idea was not realized in the location that gave rise to it but was to travel with me for many years. When I settled at 180 Sudbury Street in 2011, the seedling of my 2004 idea blossomed when I discovered the potential for an ice rink to naturally form in the 48 Abell Street construction pit within view of my new apartment's balcony. However, my interest in this subject matter can be traced much further back to

the winter of 1991 on my first trip to New York City. When I arrived the city was experiencing a spell of extremely cold weather. Towards the end of my trip it warmed up significantly and rained for a couple of days before abruptly returning to well below freezing temperatures. On my last evening in Manhattan, I made a trip to Battery Park, and found it entirely covered in several inches of ice. To walk through the park would have been treacherous, but my innate desire was to ice skate across its boundless expanse! If only I could find ice skates to rent, on short notice, at night in New York City. I automatically recalled the Rockefeller Center's ice rink, made famous as the location for many Hollywood movie scenes, and briefly considered going there to steal away with a pair of rental skates, jumping onto a southbound subway train, and having a fantastical night skate through Battery Park. That evening in 1991 set in motion my long-term, as-yet-unconsummated relationship with unconventional urban ice rinks. My next encounter with such a phenomenon came more than nine years later. In the summer of 2000, my friend Paul, who had just moved out of an artist loft in the 48 Abell Street building, showed me a series of photos he had taken of the adjacent Woolfitt's building roof covered in a sheet of ice in the winter of 1995. I was captivated. When my own "backyard" urban roof rink materialized three years later atop the large, flat-roofed, single-storey warehouse directly across the alleyway behind my apartment at 543 Queen Street West, it was as if I'd willed it into being. Each winter between 2003 and 2006 I would observe from my third-floor kitchen window as rainwater flooded 520 Richmond Street West's roof, then froze into large patches of ice. My dream was to skate on this secret rink, situated in the midst of the city, yet discretely elevated above the purview of the masses. On an extremely cold winter night in 2004 I returned home from work to find what looked to be the best ice-skate-able conditions I had ever seen atop this neighbouring building. Compelled to take a closer look, I climbed a tree next to it and shimmied out to the end of an overhanging branch to access the rooftop. Once there I could see that too much of the roof's protective gravel cover was still poking through the surface of the ice to safely skate on it. To rectify this I imagined flooding the roof with additional water by running a hose from my kitchen sink to the top of 520 Richmond Street West, a span of only about fifty feet. Extrapolating on this

idea, I fantasized about organizing all the residents who lived in the surrounding buildings to run water lines out of our apartments to its roof. We would have a truly amazing ice rink in no time! By sheer coincidence, CBC was running a “Hockey Night in Canada Backyard Rink Contest” that winter, leading me to postulate that entry into this highly publicized competition would help persuade the building owners into granting permission to use their roof, as well as rallying the community into action for what surely stood to be a winning project. Alas, my rooftop rink idea remained a fantasy each winter I lived there. In March 2006, forced once more to move, I packed up my urban-ice-rink video idea and took it with me to my new home at 117 Sheridan Avenue. There the idea remained in storage, as several winters passed without providing any new urban ice rink phenomena. In 2010, I was evicted from this house when it was sold, which eventually led to my move in September 2011 to my present quarters at 180 Sudbury Street overlooking the 48 Abell Street building. From the east-facing balcony in my newly constructed artist live/work unit I watched the demolition and excavation of the last remaining sections of that artist live/work building in November and December 2011. When the earthen void left behind began filling with rain and groundwater I started to monitor the site daily, knowing from first-hand experience that an ice rink could naturally form under the right weather conditions. On the night of 14 January 2012, all factors aligned, turning this shallow pond into the latest in a series of natural urban rinks that I’d encountered over the previous twenty years. But I was ill-prepared to document it, and the elusive urban rink escaped my artistic grasp once again. Within twenty-four hours of coming into being, the ice was already melting. Only with extensive planning, for an opportunity that was highly improbable, would I have been able to shoot the raw footage for the “48 Abell Street Ice Rink” video as I’ve described it in all its cinematic ambition. Months of preparation would have been required. Merely to secure permission from tenants and landlords to shoot from the roofs and balconies facing the site would have taken weeks. To accomplish the video’s fifty-five-location shoot within a continuous period of several hours would have required four-to-six fully equipped camera crews to expedite the work. The organization and briefing of multiple crews of production assistants, videographers, and location

sound experts would also have taken weeks. If and when suitable ice, weather, and site conditions aligned, video production crews would have had to arrive prepared and equipped with only a few hours' notice. Astoundingly, the single day when the 48 Abell Street construction site ice rink was frozen solid and clear of snow—15 January 2012—was also a perfect day for shooting my proposed video, given the stable weather, lighting conditions, and the attendant quietness of that day being a Sunday. The sun rose at 7:48 AM, illuminating the site with daylight from the only side not obstructed by another condo building. Tempered by overcast skies that prevailed until around 1:00 PM, this direct light was even and free from strong shadows, providing relatively constant lighting conditions throughout that morning. Excellent visibility that day provided the clear views needed to capture the ice-skater from as high up as eighteen storeys. As it was a Sunday, construction crews and passers-by were nowhere to be seen, making it the ideal day of the week for uninterrupted video production on the site. I was unprepared for this ideal but far too brief opportunity. As a result, my idea for the “48 Abell Street Ice Rink” video will forever remain an unrealized and unrealizable proposal. If a picture is worth a thousand words, can a video be reduced to 4,008?

June 2015