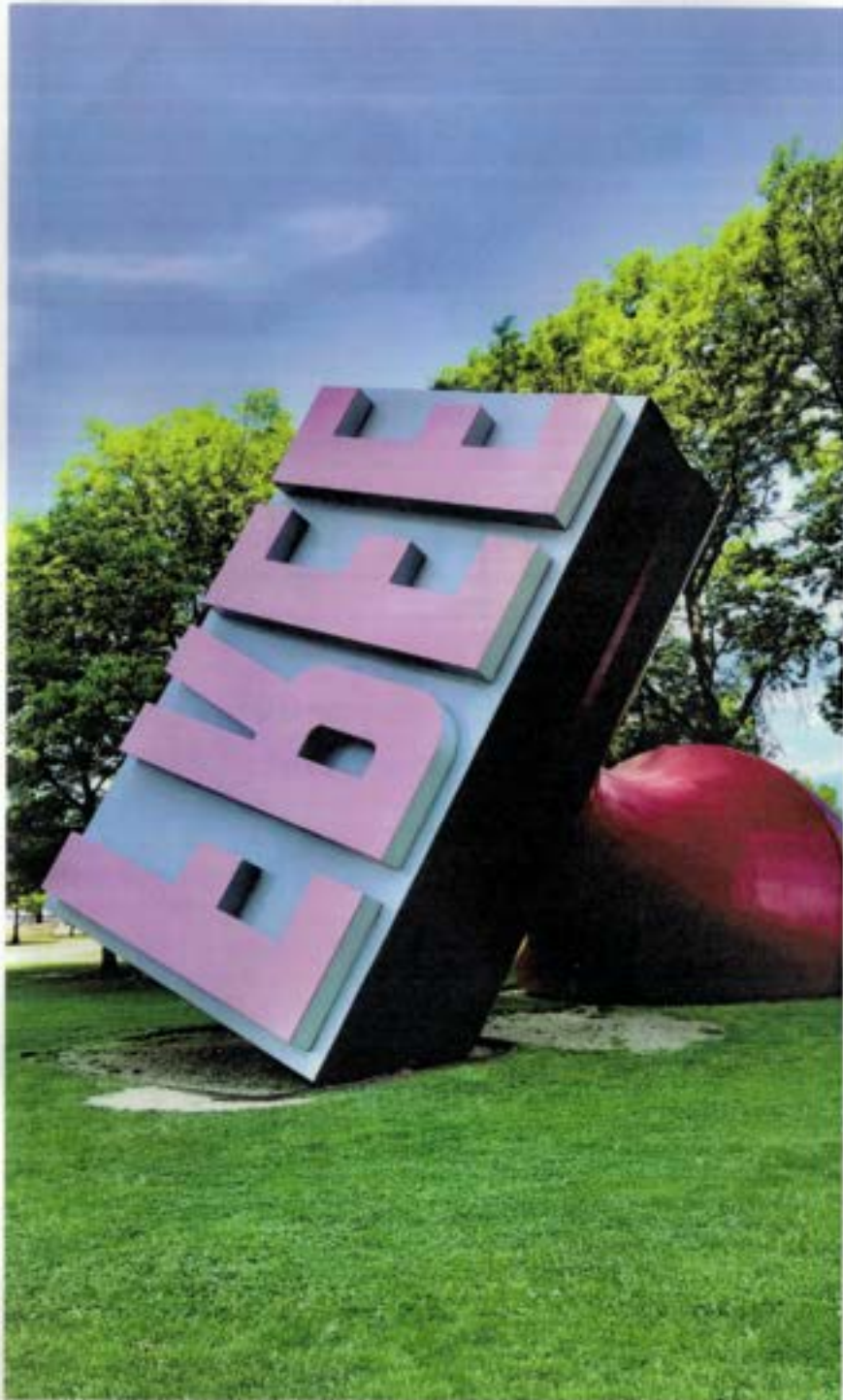


UNTITLED

A PUBLIC ART ZINE



"I am for an art that is
political-erotic-mystical,
that does something other than
sit on its ass in a museum."

Claes Oldenburg

Dear Mr Kapoor:

We appreciate your studio assistant for replying to our email.

We are an art critic and art historian, about to publish a zine in Toronto in order to draw attention to the importance of public art at a time when legislative changes are in danger of putting the process at risk.

As a writer, I have interviewed Marina Abramovich, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Coupland, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Gaetano Pesce and the wonderful Carolee Schneemann among others. I published a popular Canadian art blog, *View on Canadian Art*, 2005 to 2015.

We have experienced your work often, including the debut of *Vantablack* at last year's Venice biennale. We were especially interested to revisit your *Mountain* in Toronto from 1995. We love how its humble nature reflects the Canadian spirit, and how it brings the Rocky Mountains within view of the CN Tower!

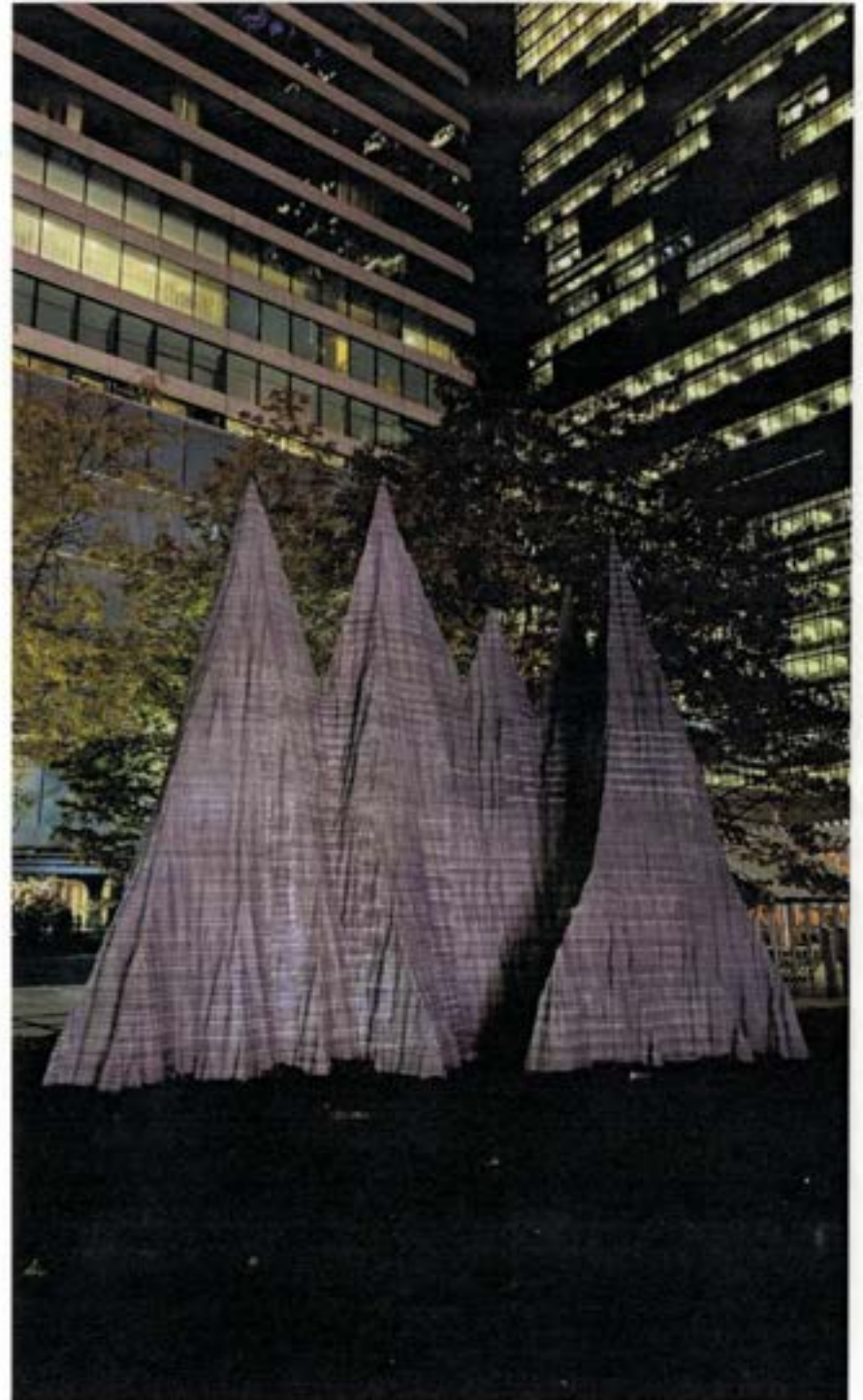
Needless to say, it would be a game changer for our little zine if you were to find some time to answer the following three questions. Or failing that, to just share your thoughts on the importance of art and/or public art:

1. Your work seems to keep growing in ambition. Would you ever design something functional like a bridge? If so, where would be your ideal location and why?
2. Would you consider putting a piece of art in outer space? Why or why not?
3. Your experiments with material run from the most basic to the most advanced. We loved the ice hut you did in Winnipeg in 2017. What new opportunities does a nanotechnology colour like *Vantablack* offer?

Thank you for your time.

With the utmost respect and admiration,

Andrea Carson Barker & Janos Kereszturi Toth



REBRANDING DISASTER ON THE 3RD FLOOR

Kent Monkman (as his drag queen alter ego, Miss Chief) is standing, wearing Christian Louboutin heels and a tulle gown, trying to defend himself with an épée de combat in his hand. Liberals, conservatives, homophobes, even some Afro-Canadians have attacked him from all sides. They haven't seriously hurt him yet, but they've already forced the Indigenous painter to apologize at least once for his art. An artist should never apologize. Those who don't understand and appreciate his art either don't have a sense of humor, take politics too seriously, have never read a history book or simply don't recognize quality art. Whether you see him as Cree, Canadian or as an LGBTQ artist, the fact remains that he is a great painter, a genius with the utmost global importance in the art world. He is a trickster, a provocateur, an art historian - an artist mixologist blending second and third grade nineteenth century influences (Kane, Bierstadt, Caitlin) with better quality dramatic 'ingredients' (Géricault, Delacroix) and his own culturally-derived spirits. The final result is a cocktail we badly need. After the third one, we will see Canada and the world more clearly.

So how did things go so horribly wrong on the third floor at the Royal Ontario Museum? The ROM's new director—a past branding expert, incidentally, with experience in museum education & interpretation, exhibition planning, zoology, botany, mineralogy, and paleontology—approached the artist in 2017 asking him to curate his own exhibition. One wonders if the painter was used as a tool to help rebrand the museum. Hail ROM IMMORTAL! Not finding any appropriate

colonial artefacts to include—as was seemingly the original plan—they came up with the questionable idea to insert items from the ROM's collection: dinosaur bones, moccasins, meteorites, botanical specimens. What we are seeing here is not just a "slipping from the tightrope" as claimed by the Globe and Mail's Kate Taylor, but a disastrous, confusing, cheaply made mess of an exhibition, unfortunately (or perhaps thankfully) presented in a tight corner of the third floor of the museum.

Evidently, Monkman was trying to be everything all at once: an artist, a paleontologist, a cosmologist, an archeologist, a botanist and of course a curator. It's as if the goal was to show the evolution of his own alter ego in parallel with the origin, history, suffering, creativity, achievements and vast knowledge of the indigenous people in these fields. A far too ambitious plan and one that confuses the role of the artist with that of a 21st century museum: bringing in audiences, being family-friendly, appropriately inclusive and educational.

Naturally the final product is a mess. It's four or five exhibitions in one. Let's walk through together: The first two large-scale paintings are powerfully grand (too bad the space is tight and you can't back up enough to enjoy them). Nearby sits a horned dinosaur skull fossil in a case, set beside *The Rocks Hold Their Stories*, a painting of the Mimikwisiwak climbing the same fossil—a weak painting just like the next one, of rainbow-colored flying prehistoric winged lizards, *Battle of the piyewiwak and the misipiwak*. Further down the wall is

REBRANDING DISASTER ON THE 3RD FLOOR

a small painting of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle's stilettoed feet presented next to—incredulously—a contrived 'fossil' of the same stiletto. What is going on here?

Compositional Study For Song Of The Hunt is a painting that doesn't seem finished, certainly not good enough to be a part of any future painting. This is followed by a series of fossils in cases, and again paintings of Mimikwisiwak climbing those same fossils. The museum is trying to insert its collection into Monkman's work. It's a marketing scheme!

Finally: *Constellation of Knowledge*, a large glowing blue painting, is a quality piece. This is followed by *Study For The Sparrow*, a good, sombre scene, thankfully set apart in its own alcove away from the previous playground paintings. And yet the marketing exercise continues, with a series of moccasins from the museum collection organized together with eight cute paintings depicting Mimikwisiwak climbing those same moccasins. *I am nipy* is a pretty weak canvas, while *Compositional study for The Going Away Song* is powerful. After a few more forced botanical paintings in the final room, we find a collection of appropriately large-scale beautifully painted canvases showing Indigenous everyday heroes. This last room is great and feels like a mini exhibition in its own right.

Wedging this potentially important exhibition into a corner of the museum's 3rd floor is really unfortunate. The walls are constructed from cheap, badly assembled plywood and painted in far too many ill-fitting colors

that detract from the work. Unfortunately, the ROM mistakenly deemed this exhibition important enough to publish a catalogue, and had the sense of humor to place it, in the museum shop, next to Adrienne Mayor's *Fossil Legends Of The First Americans*, a controversial book that examines the understanding of fossils and dinosaur bones by Indigenous cultures for centuries before the discovery of North America.

Nonetheless, (despite the amateurish nature of this show, and its not-so-subtle marketing intentions) I am full of hope. Not for this exhibition to go on tour, as Caitlin did with his own paintings, but I hope that Monkman will continue producing his provocative, large-scale, occasionally x-rated paintings (which were frustratingly excluded.) I hope he will also continue to make provocative photographs and stage edgy happenings and installations. I hope for future triumphs on the scale of the Metropolitan Museum's Great Hall commission. Most of all, I feel that what Toronto needs now is a monumental piece of public art from Monkman. Let him place his true vision - that powerful, larger-than-life female spirit presence of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, right in our midst.

Janos Kereszturi Toth



WHAT WOULD MONKMAN DO?

THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC ART IN TORONTO IS AT RISK

Over the years, Toronto has accumulated a significant amount of public art. Snowman sculptures, larger-than-life toy soldiers, an elephant made of sofa parts and pops of bright pattern and colour surprise us at almost every turn. Art of every description is found in subway stations, around condo towers, in office building lobbies, down alleyways, courtyards, on construction site hoarding...After the city's Year of Public Art (2021-22), which saw a resurgence of art in the public realm, big changes have come, thanks to the provincial government's Bill 108. But while these changes may be developer-friendly, they're no good for public art.

Like many cities, Toronto's public art history dates back years, if you count the now-nearly invisible 20th century bronze monuments set among the city's parks. Private interest has played a key role, in fact Henry Moore's *The Archer* was the subject of a fraught 1960s crowdfunding campaign in which the then-mayor stood up for the architect's desire to see Moore's sculpture take pride of place beside city hall in Nathan Phillips Square. The public, meanwhile, through their ward councillors, rejected it as frivolous and costly. In the end, private donations managed to raise the funds.

Today's contemporary public art program has become much more assertive and has evolved into municipal

initiatives like StreetARToronto and the Percent for Public Art program, which invites developers to dedicate 1% of their construction costs to public art. Nonetheless, the value of art in the eyes of council remains a delicate matter.

Various public art policies have been in existence throughout Europe and North America since the 1930s, and Toronto's 1% program, established as a result of the city's endorsement of public art policies in 1986, is certainly not perfect. As a member of Toronto's Public Art Commission, which reviews many art plans, I believe it's too building-specific, not evenly enough distributed across the city, nor welcoming enough to diverse artists, and it's part of a complex process that is notoriously difficult to change - one major issue being that the art plan is introduced too late in the approvals process, resulting in art squeezed into place as an afterthought. Maintenance & display has also become a major issue, as responsibility for the art changes hands over time. (I'm referring to the need for education on how public art is meant to be displayed: given enough space, maintained as the artist intended etc., but that's a whole other conversation.)

Still, the amount and overall quality of publicly accessible art throughout Toronto is quite impressive. Among renowned names like James Turrell, Mark Di Suvero, Alice Aycock, Zhang Huan, Henry Moore, Dennis Oppenheim Julian Opie and Douglas Coupland, our city features fantastic artworks by talented local artists Katharine Harvey, Micah Lexier, Steve Driscoll, Jyhling Lee, Michael Snow, Fastwurms, Dean Drever, Paul Raff, Daniel Borins & Jennifer Marman, Derek Besant and many, many others.

The process used to go like this: Developers who wanted to exceed permitted density or height, would negotiate directly with city planning staff under Section 37 of

the planning act. These discussions, which happened behind closed doors, were part of a development agreement that saw funds directed toward public art among other community benefits in exchange.

Now, under Bill 108, Section 37 negotiations have been replaced by a process whereby funds based on up to 4% of the land value are pooled and divided into eight categories of community benefits. Public art is part of one of these and, it seems, may need to vie openly and directly with other community benefits for attention. This is concerning because the public's—and council's—perception of the value of public art seems tenuous at best. It doesn't seem fair to position daycare centres, or affordable housing in opposition to a piece of public art. Certain community benefits are of course vital. But public art, I would argue, is also, if not equally, vital. Consider the following:

- Public art provides opportunities for local artists. It **empowers our creatives** when their work is shown to the world.
- Art in the public realm **develops cross-cultural understanding**. The more equitable the public art process, the greater diversity of artists producing work.
- It **enlivens our environment**, bringing necessary humor, colour, scale and visual interest to city streets.
- It is **positive for mental health**. Colour, shape and unexpected imagery can affect mood, encourage understanding and empathy for others.
- It becomes part of our **shared cultural heritage**. Early public artworks speak to the history of Toronto.
- Public art **opens minds**. It brings the backdrop of the city back into view, it encourages citizens to notice and care for their environment.

- It directly **enhances the understanding of the visual world**, especially for young people.
- It **engages people**, inviting controversy, curiosity or great joy. Public art can be a talking point.
- Large scale pieces greatly **enhance the pedestrian experience**, providing a focal point for gathering spaces.

Imagine the Distillery District without its monumental centrepiece, *Still Dancing* by Dennis Oppenheim. Described by the artist as “a combination of sculpture, architecture and theater,” it visually ties itself to its industrial backdrop, referencing both Toronto's history and its future. Zhang Huan's complex and majestic *Rising* dominates the façade of the Shangri-La hotel providing an elegant introduction to its spectacular collection of Chinese art. My personal favorite is B.C. Johnson's *Rainbow Tunnel*, which captured my attention as a child in the 1970s whizzing along the DVP in my dad's Volvo station wagon. (This image was later immortalized in *Country Rock*, a painting by Coburg-born artist Peter Doig.)

Public art provides an important marker of place. The best of it sticks around, while businesses come and go and cityscapes change. *The Archer* remains a powerful reminder of our history and brings an earthy, human scale to Nathan Phillips Square, dwarfed as it is by that tacky TORONTO sign. If we want to avoid a repeat of the brou-ha-ha that clouded the purchase of that sculpture over 50 years ago, we would do well to appreciate the value that public art brings to our city.

Andrea Carson Barker



Artist CWells undertaking a painting performance at Industrial Arts
Photography : Don Li

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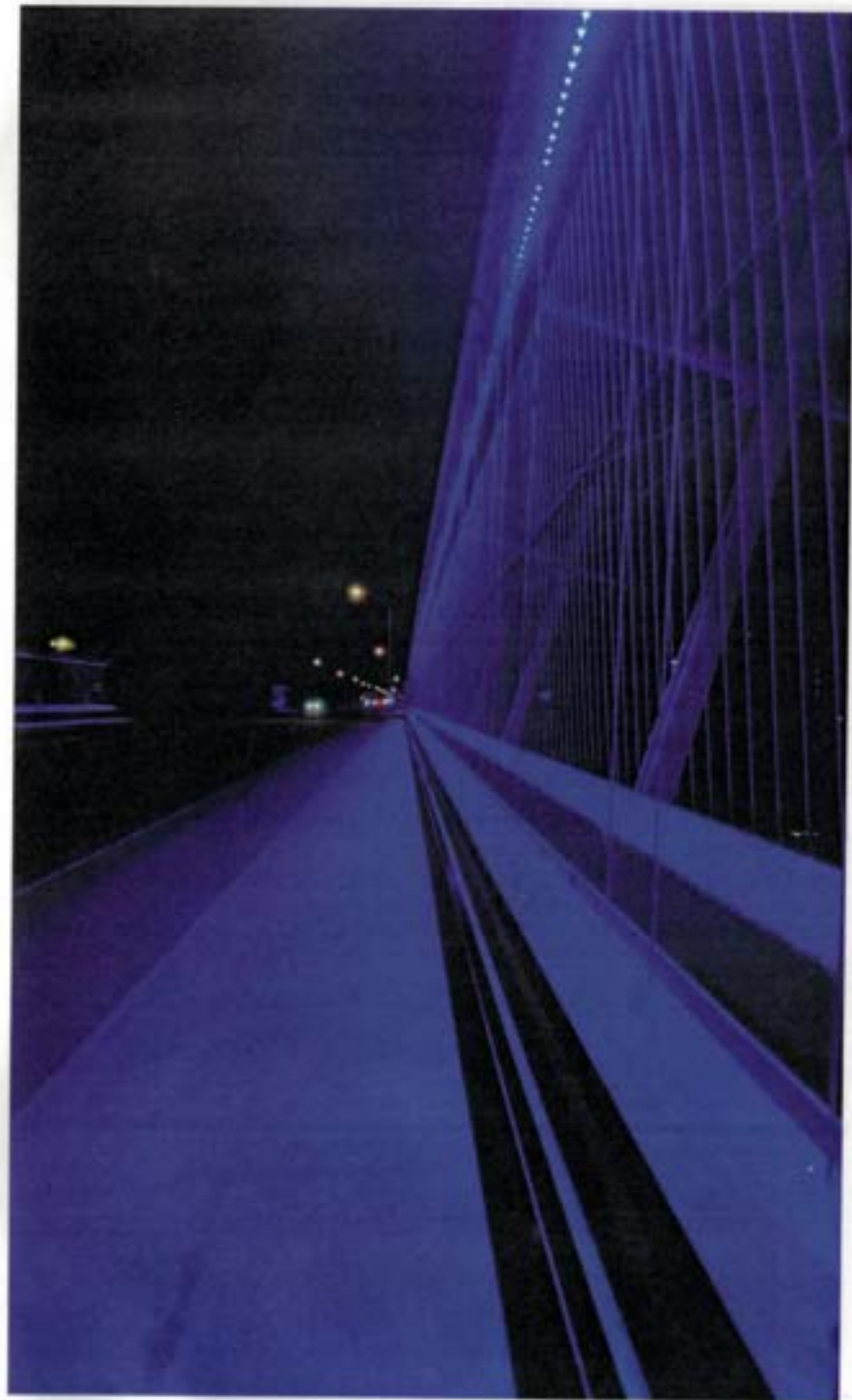
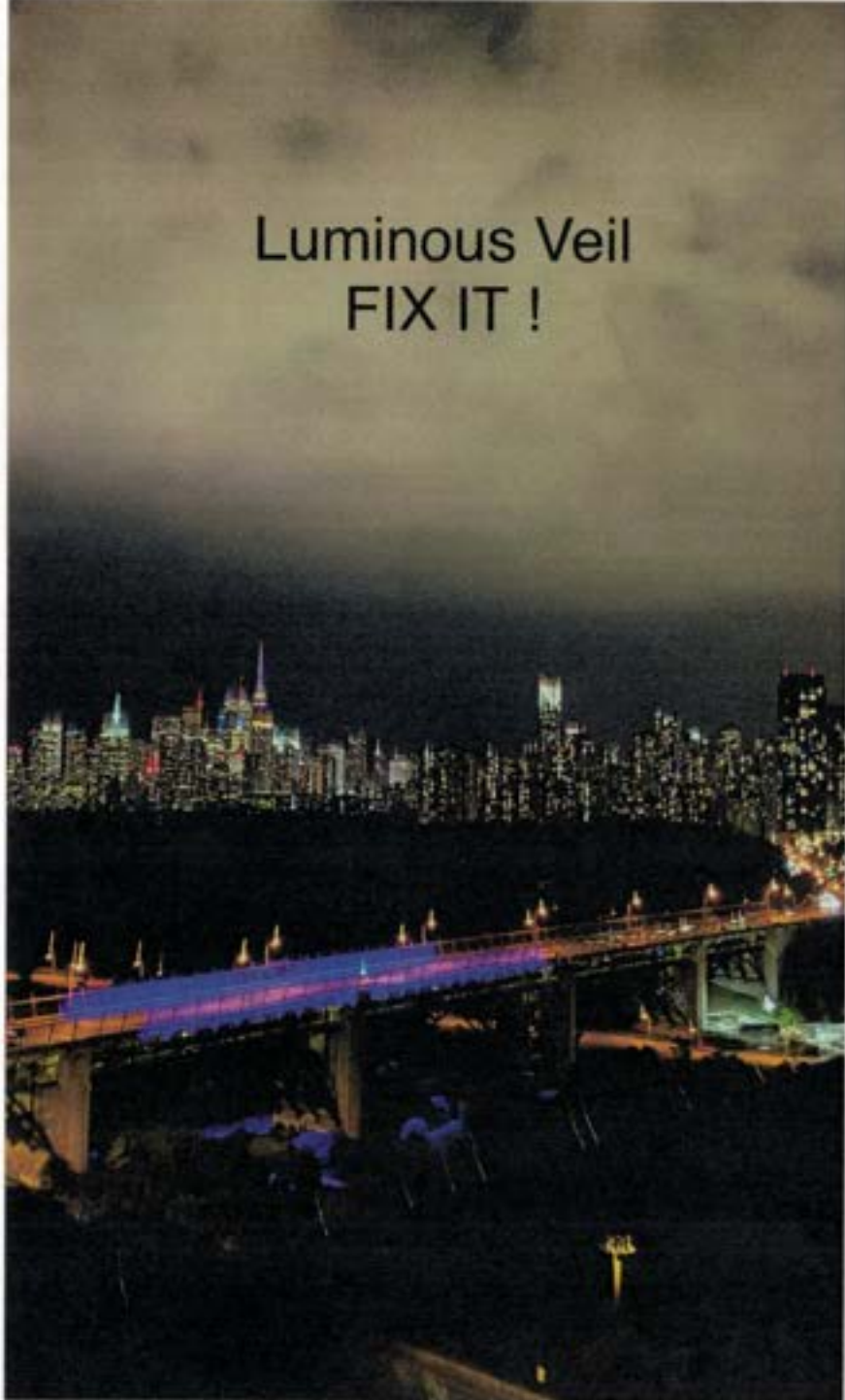
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