



Talking Poles

Lorna Boschman, Victoria Moulder, & T'Uy'Tanat-Cease Wyss



Serpentine Greenway, north and south of 68 Avenue

Unveiled in 2009

The *Talking Poles* public art installation, located on both sides of 68 Avenue at the Serpentine Greenway in Newton, Surrey, commemorates a community dialogue project that transpired over the spring of 2009.

The exterior of the two poles is emblazoned with symbolic imagery and words, denoting “peace” and “love” respectively, in languages used throughout the Newton community: Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, Korean, Punjabi, French, and English. Also included are iconic First Nations symbols representing these terms, and their translations into binary code, in order to represent the role digital technology plays in contemporary human life.



Details of the vinyl wrap design for the *Talking Poles*





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The artist team in front of the poles during their fabrication.

The language and imagery of the poles evokes the learnings and knowledge disseminated through the activities of an artist team consisting of Lorna Boschman, Victoria Moulder, and T'Uy'Tanat-Cease Wyss. These artists came together in late 2008 to propose a dialogue-based art program as a response to the City of Surrey's designation as a Cultural Capital of Canada in 2009. The practices of each artist are oriented specifically toward the relationship between the arts, community, and technology: **Lorna Boschman**, an interdisciplinary artist and researcher, has focused much of her research on how artists can use technology to better the health and well-being of communities; **Victoria Moulder**, an instructor at the Simon Fraser University Schools of Interactive Arts and Technology, studies the role of design, digital interfaces, and site-specific art in community engagement; and **T'Uy'Tanat-Cease Wyss** is a Skwxw'u7mesh media artist, activist, educator and ethnobotanist, whose practice focuses on the use of site-specific, culturally focused teaching through storytelling.

Together, these artists conceived of the *Talking Poles* project as a means to galvanize a sense of community in the particular area of West Newton in which it is situated, by inviting local residents to express themselves via storytelling. This ethos lends itself to the name

of the project, which refers to the talking stick, an item used in Indigenous speaking traditions in order to impart importance and respect upon whoever holds it.

Talking Poles was composed of multiple dialogic processes, which were undertaken in collaboration with other arts professionals and specialists. Much of the project transpired on the path of the Serpentine Greenway itself. In Spring 2009, Vicki Moulder and Cease Wyss conducted artmaking sessions on the pathway, where they were joined by translator and artist TJ Grewal. There, they invited local residents who were walking along the path to join with them and share personal insights, poetry, and cultural histories. Questions that the artists asked the residents included: "Why do you like walking on the greenway?", "How can you tell the seasons are changing?", and "What message do you have for future generations?" People expressed feelings of well-being from walking outdoors, and spoke of love and respect for the environment. Other messages encouraged people to maintain inner peace and non-violent behaviour, and shared ideas about universal sisterhood and brotherhood, being part of a global family, the experience of



Kwantlen University Fine Arts students experiment with creating designs for the poles during one of the project's community workshops.





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living as a new Canadian, bullying prevention, and compassion. In all, over 75 people participated in these sessions.

This process was supplemented by activities and dialogue sessions hosted at other locations throughout the area. Sibéal Foyle, an artist and Fine Arts instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University, conducted collaborative artmaking sessions with a group of 15 second-year Fine Arts students. The artworks produced during these sessions were used by the artist team to help develop concepts for the imagery placed onto the final poles: one group of students produced images inspired by the famous cut-outs of French artist Henri Matisse, while the other made more symbolic images related to culture and natural beauty.

At Tamanawis Secondary School, the artist team also trained 25 design students to conduct the interview exercises used at the Serpentine Greenway location with their own friends and family, providing further insight into how local residents relate to their neighbourhood. These workshops were facilitated directly by the students, and held in the language most familiar to the speakers.



Local residents and community members joined the artists during International Drumming Day at the Kekinow Native Housing Centre.

Lastly, a drumming session and feast was held outside of the Kekinow Native Housing Centre, in correspondence with both World Drumming Day and the international *8000 Sacred Drums* ceremony. These sessions brought together Indigenous and Indo-Canadian musicians, spiritual advisors, and other community members, in celebration of cross-cultural knowledge sharing and traditional protocols. Combined, these exercises helped to reduce the distinction between artist and community, allowing participants to develop ownership over the project.

The *Talking Poles* art installation serves as a monument to this series of activities. For local residents, it functions as an iconic marker, designating a moment in time and the shared stories that create their sense of place. Simultaneously, for those who were not present during the project, the poles are a provocative means of activating the Serpentine Greenway, inviting a sense of inquisition into their history, while drawing attention to the area itself. They prompt a brief moment of pause for the pedestrians and cyclists who may be making their way through the Greenway, or for the motorists who stop to let them pass. This interruption encourages a way of looking at the environment that transcends its use as a means of movement from one place to the next, instead suggesting a history of lived experience.

About the Artists:

Lorna Boschman, Victoria Moulder, and T'Uy' Tanat-Cease Wyss have each worked with communities creating public art projects. Their practice supports both collective and individual expression and seeks to encourage community interaction. Graphics for the poles were created by Akash Murgai; sound mixing by Take5; fabrication by ie creative; and electronics by Bobbi Kozinuk.

