Acknowledgments

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WHAT’S YOUR NAME?

The Republic at Yonge and Eglinton, North Toronto Collegiate Institute

70 Roehampton Ave., Toronto, ON Canada

Installation date: November 1, 2011

Commissioned by Tridel and the Toronto District School Board

4.2 m high stainless steel sculpture
ILAN SANDLER’S WHAT’S YOUR NAME?
sits at the south end of the campus of North Toronto Collegiate Institute, angled in relation
to the sidewalk of Roehampton Avenue so as to
gently deflect the visitor towards the main face
of the school building. Over four meters high
and made entirely of marine stainless steel, What’s Your Name? is a passageway formed
by two enormous sheaves of paper that rest
against one another. The scale here is carefully
calibrated: the composition is big enough for
one to pass through, and intimate enough that
one is compelled to touch the inside faces of
both sheaves simultaneously. One becomes
immediately aware that the two sides are in
dialogue, just as they are mutually sustaining.
They are also covered with arrays of names.

The issue of what, in the broadest sense, is
a name, has been a recalcitrant problem
for linguists and philosophers since Aristotle.
There is general agreement that names point
to things or people, but what meanings
they carry are hard to pin down. We value
our names for the way they seem to trace a
definitive boundary around the self, defining
us as discreet, independent beings. Certainly,
too, names are one of the most effective tools
for the assimilation of an individual: the roll call,
the alphabetical list, and the chronologically
arranged archive of names can be instruments
of social control, or more benignly, practices
through which collectives and communities
are constituted. What’s Your Name? joins other
works of contemporary art that list names and
draw on their signifying potential. Maya Lin’s
Viet Nam Veteran’s Memorial, like Christian
Boltanski’s catalogues of faces or personal
belongings, seeks to recover those potentially
subsumed within bigger forces of history.
Douglas Gordon’s List of Names portraits a
single person, the artist himself, by means of
the names of all those he remembers having
encountered. Sandler’s piece also lays the
stress on the individual, but it grants equal
due to shared identity. Its lists invoke the life
of North Toronto Collegiate over the years,
while also giving form to the multiple signifying
powers of names.

One sheaf bears a list of names, while the
other is covered with signatures. On both, the
names are punched through: the steel and
these present-absent names together speak of
the dual nature of memory, of permanence and
ephemerality. The list gives the proper names of
everyone who attended North Toronto between
1912 and 2010, these dates spanning the life
of the school building that previously occupied
the site. These 2,053 names begin at the left top
of the inside face of the sheaf and conclude at
the bottom of the outside. Names appear only
once and are placed chronologically, according
to when they first appear in the school records
(which Sandler and his assistant painstakingly
sifted through), but each also potentially
refers to one or more later students with the
same name. History is indeed shaped in this
manner—that is, not simply linearly, but folding
in on itself to connect present and past.

The second sheaf resembles its printed
counterpart, with names on its inside and
outside faces, but these are signatures.
Signatures are typically embellished, and these
display calligraphic marks of all kinds—wide
flourishes, tightly packed loops, multidirectional
letters, and so on. We are drawn to their artful
singularity in the same way we are to portraits: in
each, we perceive the workings of an individual
will or intention. These marks nonetheless also
summon various associations with collective
history. In one way, these pages recall signed
yearbooks, those souvenirs of our years and
days at school, authenticated by the autographs
of others: “you and I were here together.” One
can also discern generational differences in
the styles of the signatures, given that Sandler
gathered them from students who attended
North Toronto between the 1930s and 2010.
Furthermore, signatures in Korean and Chinese
script bear witness to waves of immigration to
Toronto over the decades. This history is visible
in the proper names on the opposite sheaf,
which begin as predominantly Anglo-Saxon, but
reflect significantly greater diversity further on.

The materiality of What’s Your Name? in
itself makes palpable the potency of names in
the creation of identities. The buffed steel offers
a complex of impressions that vary according
to the time of day and weather. In the flat light
of an overcast sky it affirms the heaviness
and monumentality that is innate to metal.
At twilight, there develops a palimpsest-like
effect that underlines the historical dimensions
of the work: the grey steel becomes solid shadow, and the lace-like transparency of the layered sheets of printed and cursive names is especially apparent. Later, in full darkness, when the piece is lit internally, the names come alive, written in light.

Sandler’s pieces often involve enlarging common objects, but unlike, say, Claus Oldenberg’s more laconic approach to this conceit, Sandler typically eschews naturalism. There is wit in this, because the result is always a deeper integration of the piece with its site and subject matter. With What’s Your Name? the sheaves arrange themselves in a fanciful, playful manner that is not entirely physically possible for actual paper. They are animated, as if by a sharp wind blowing across the adjacent school playing field, yet there is also an energy from within. The sheaf of signatures is curved in the horizontal plane, while on the vertical, it bends out to meet the stack of printed names, which bows towards it. Both are fanning apart at their tops, and individual sheets are skewed, slipping and sliding out of alignment. Sandler’s composition is massive and rooted, while also open and dynamic. It affirms the contradictory and yet complementary impulses held within names: if our own names are precious to us as the chief emblems of our self-fashioning, we nonetheless also gladly place them among others, testifying to the desire to partake of something larger.

Bernice iarocci
Independent Art Historian
2012
What’s Your Name? identifies NTCI students past and present by reproducing their proper names and handwritten signatures on the sculpture’s stainless steel surfaces. One sheaf shows all the first names of students who have attended the school since 1912, beginning at the top of the inner page. Each name is present only once, and at the moment it first appears in the school record. The chronological list includes new names through to 2010 with a total of 2053 different names. The names of the last students to occupy the original NTCI building appear at the bottom of the outer page. The second sheaf creates imprints of the students’ public and private identities by contrasting the names of those who attended the school over the past century with a selection of signatures from alumni and current students. What’s Your Name? is often the first question we ask someone, and by answering we announce ourselves to each other and to the world. During adolescence our relationship to proper names tends to change; a name is no longer something given but something made, crafted and personalized through the deliberate art of the signature. Schools, and particularly high schools, are where the proper name and the signature intersect.

Paper and print, which are the core tools of education, become dynamic sculptural forms on which an imprint of students’ public and private identities is inscribed. —IS, 2011
URSA MAJOR’S VISIT

The Halifax Citadel, Nocturne Art at Night

Installation date
October 15, 2011

Commissioned by Parks Canada and the Halifax Regional Municipality

12 m × 5 m steel cables, polycarbonate and LED lighting
On October 15th, 2011 viewers entering the Halifax Citadel’s Parade Square saw the glowing outline of a large bear suspended in the east corner of the courtyard. The sculptural form was made from a combination of LEDs marking the star points of the constellation Ursa Major and light-weight polycarbonate acrylic components.

Both western and First Nations cultures identify this constellation as The Great Bear. In the Greek myth, Zeus protects his lover in bear form from a hunter’s arrow by placing her in the sky. Here her trials are far from over; in Mi’kmaq and Iroquois stories Ursa Major must contend with a set of hunters in hot pursuit: seven in the spring when the constellation is fully visible in the night sky, and three by October when four stars have dropped below the horizon.

Many civilizations have projected stories onto the constellation and this installation imagines another. In *Ursa Major’s Visit*, the Great Bear peers down at the earth from the northern sky and is intrigued by the unusual star-shaped form of the Citadel. A meeting point of the earthly and the celestial, the Citadel appears to Ursa Major as an invitation to resume her terrestrial form. For this special Nocturne event, she drops one foot into the courtyard. While Ursa Major visits, she may shed some light on the transcultural interpretations of her past.

—IS, 2011
THE VESSEL

Taddle Creek Park 40 Bedford Rd., Toronto, ON Canada

Installation date May 2011 Commissioned by The City of Toronto

5.7m high stainless steel sculpture with a water feature
This sculpture of a water-carrying vessel is made from 4 kilometers of stainless steel rod. The rod measures the approximate length of Taddle Creek, which ran from what is now Taddle Creek Park through downtown Toronto to Lake Ontario. The piece reconstitutes a memory of the buried creek by referencing its length through steel rods that function as water-carrying arteries.

The sculpture’s surface is porous, allowing one to see light slicing through the stainless steel rods that create its volume. Water flows from the rim of the vessel and over its surface before cascading to the ground, creating sound that drowns out the noise of traffic. The piece is like an over-flowing pitcher, evoking the creek’s long history as a source of sustenance.

The piece is like an over-flowing pitcher, evoking the creek’s long history as a source of sustenance. Water from The Vessel is stored in an underground cistern and used to irrigate the park. Vessels have accompanied all peoples for millennia, and are often seen as a surrogate for the body. The desire of all civilizations to anthropomorphize water-carrying vessels is evidence of their importance to our survival as a species. The ability to harness the flow of water both for physical and imaginative nourishment has been an inseparable part of the evolution of all societies.

The Anishinaabe Nation or Ojibway-speaking people of the region would have drawn water for sustenance from many sources, including Taddle Creek. They also drew inspiration from water in the development of their creation myths, one of which says, “the rivers that run underground are the veins of Mother Earth and water is her blood, purifying her and bringing her food. Mother Earth implies reproduction, fertility and life.”

Although The Vessel represents a container, it also acts as a fountain, linking the creek’s historical significance as a life-sustaining water source to the future pleasure of the community. —IS, 2011
Ilan Sandler has shown his sculptures, installations, and videos internationally and across Canada and has completed public art commissions in Toronto, St. Louis, Philadelphia and Busan, South Korea. He installed The Vessel in Toronto in 2011 and the public sculpture A Departure in Lethbridge, Canada in 2009. He also produced a large public art work called What’s Your Name? for North Toronto Collegiate Institute and is currently producing The School Chair for the Halifax Regional Municipality and Under the Helmet for the City of Calgary. During the summer of 2011 Beach Chair was installed in Aarhus, Denmark for the Sculpture by the Sea exhibition. In 2012 his new series of Urban Artworks called Stolen Parts will be premiered in Stockholm. He has received numerous awards, including grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Nova Scotia Department of Culture.

Born in Johannesburg (South Africa) in 1971, Ilan Sandler immigrated with his family to Toronto six years later, in 1977. He studied at the University of Toronto, where he received a BSc in Physics, and at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where he completed an Honours Fine Arts certificate. In 2000 he was awarded an MFA from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He then went on to teach at the University of the Arts and Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, and most recently at NSCAD University, where he held a SSHRC Research/Creation Fellowship until 2011. He is currently running Sandler Studio Inc. in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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