



What about the ethics...

# FROM HERE?

By: Chrissie Arnold

My project uses artistic intervention to address practices on the UBC campus that beg ethical consideration. Specifically, I propose a re-working of the UBC "From Here" campaign to bring attention to these issues in public space. For the purpose of this project, I have focused primarily on the relationship between the University and large corporations, troubled by the lack of a UBC policy with respect to the acceptance of large corporate donations. I consider this issue through an examination of the \$5 million donation to the new UBC Earth Systems Science building by Vancouver-based mining company, Goldcorp. Given Goldcorp's questionable human rights record abroad, I question why the University accepted this donation without any attention to the corporation's practices, and in turn forfeited the possibility of using its position of influence over public opinion to draw attention to the problematic practices of transnational corporations. Given the complexity of corporation/university relationships, especially in a time when North American universities are increasingly reliant on private donations due to cuts in government spending, I believe this is an issue that requires attention from the ethical witness.



**M**y interest in the corporate university has been relatively long-standing. I began to personally question the ways in which North American universities are structured as an undergraduate student in the department of geography. As I drew international comparisons, I was troubled by the ways in which large class sizes, heavy course loads, and limited government support led to students in North American universities to take a somewhat un-critical approach toward their studies (personal observation). It became evident to me that the function of a university education (for many people) was less about the development of critical thinking skills, and more about obtaining a degree as a pre-requisite to entering the job market. The high cost of university (resulting in large debts for students) understandably increased the appeal of completing one's degree as quickly as possible, in a discipline that would assure access to well-paid employment upon graduation. This shift away from developing students as critical thinkers, to preparing them for the workforce, became even more salient to me when in 2008, the human geography department at UBC removed the graduation requirement for all undergraduate students to complete a course in critical theory. Anecdotally, my memory of the conversations around this decision surrounded issues of the subject matter being too abstract and not practical enough to require that students take the course. It is decisions like this, combined with student attitudes surrounding education, that have made me seriously question what purpose the university is meant to serve in the present day. Is it a public institution serving to push

boundaries, raise ethical questions, and (hopefully) better the human condition? Or has it become yet another cog in the neoliberal, globalized, corporate machine? I do not claim to have an answer to this question, but I do contend that this dilemma needs to occupy space in the consciousness of those of us who work and study here.

The consideration of this dilemma has led me to think about the ways in which UBC engages directly with corporations. As an undergraduate student, I participated in Juanita Sundberg's class on the politics of North-South solidarity (GEOG 495). In this class, we partnered with the organization BC CASA that aims to develop solidarity-based relationships between people in Vancouver and Guatemala surrounding issues that impact both groups of people. Our class culminated in putting on an event called "Opening Minds to Canadian Mines," which was aimed at raising awareness about the human rights abuses being committed by Vancouver-based mining company, Goldcorp, against Mayan people in the San Miguel and Sipakapa regions of Guatemala. The ethics of Canadian mining corporations have maintained my interest in years since. In the context of ethical witnessing, they are a particularly relevant and complex case.

Goldcorp has drawn the greatest deal of public attention for its practices that violate human rights at the site of their Marlin mine in Guatemala. Lawyers for the communities resisting the mine have cited violations of the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and ILO Convention 169 Concerning the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (Yagenova & Garcia, 2009). Community members claim that the mine has



EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS, TODAY YOUR HOST IS

*Public art is not new to the UBC Campus, Edgar Heap of Birds uses signage to provoke responses to queries around history, public space, and land claims, as well as to notions of generosity and sharing.*

“generated serious internal community conflicts and problems involving the presence of security forces, assassinations, intimidation, threats, health problems, structural damage to homes, and the legal persecution of those who have fought the company” (Yagenova & Garcia, p.164), and caused huge environmental concern due to the contamination of water as a result of massive use of cyanide. When I first learned about the human rights record of Goldcorp, I began to question the ways in which I am implicated in this issue, ultimately finding two direct connections. First, the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB) is a major investor in Goldcorp; as a Canadian who contributes to the Canadian Pension Plan, I found this problematic. My connection to the issue was made more intimate by the fact that at that time, my sister was working in investments for the CPPIB (imagine the family dinners. . .). When I approached her about the ethics of these investing practices, I was answered with a refrain that millions of Canadians rely on the investments of the pension plan, and that as an organization they saw their responsibility being to the Canadian people. Thus their mandate was to invest in the companies that were the top performers in the economy. I was struck by the complexity of the issue, recognizing her point of view, even if dissatisfied by it. Several weeks after our initial interaction,

she re-visited the issue with me, and was ready to have a more open conversation about the ethical considerations involved in her work. Evidently, our first conversation had proven to rupture her way of thinking about the issue; whether or not the practices of CPPIB would be significantly changed was not necessarily the issue here, it was rather the shift in the moment that my sister decided to start thinking about these ethics. I became aware that a role in which I could be effective as an ethical witness was in these small conversations that perhaps sparked people to think differently about the systems of which they are a part.

### **Goldcorp at UBC**

Recently, Goldcorp has become a visible player in the post-secondary landscape of Vancouver, making large monetary donations to capital projects at UBC (\$5 million toward the Earth Sciences Building) and SFU (\$10 million toward the Centre for the Arts). With respect to its donation to UBC, Goldcorp states, “The University of British Columbia (UBC) holds an international reputation for excellence in advanced research and learning. To assist in the development of these characteristics, Goldcorp made a commitment to donate \$5 million to support the Earth Systems Science Building (ESSB) over the course of five years. In recognition of this noteworthy

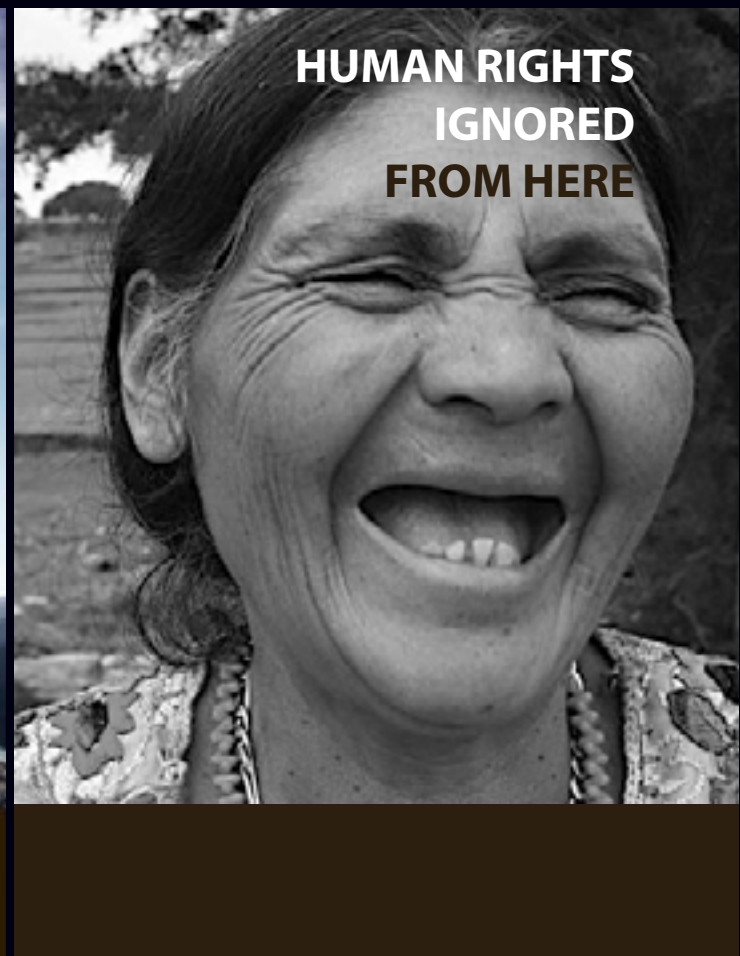
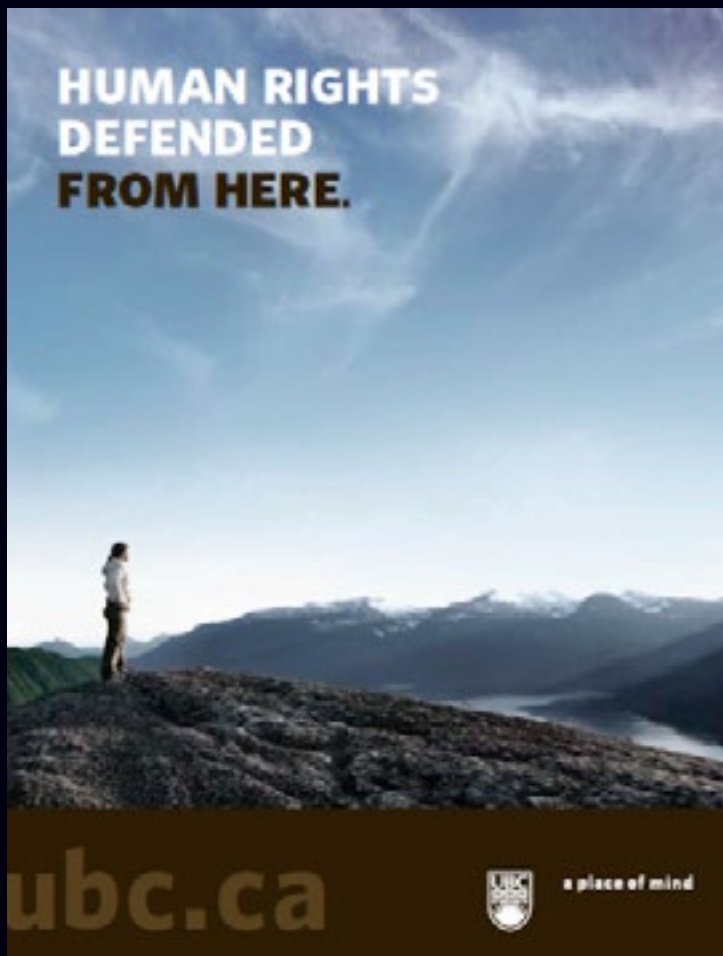
**Community members claim that the mine has “generated serious internal community conflicts and problems involving the presence of security forces, assassinations, intimidation, threats, health problems, structural damage to homes, and the legal persecution of those who have fought the company”**

*-Yagenova & Garcia, 2009, p.164*

donation, UBC will name the Teaching and Learning Wing within the ESSB the Goldcorp Inc. Teaching and Learning Wing” (Goldcorp, Responsible Mining, 2013) In response to this donation, Stephen Toope, president of the university, exclaimed that he was “absolutely delighted with the participation of Goldcorp” in the project (The Vancouver Sun, 2007). As an institution that holds a position in

public space that would allow it question the unethical practices of corporations, I wondered what UBC’s policy was for accepting corporate donations. I was surprised to find that no such policy exists. While the UBC senate has developed an extensive policy to with respect to corporate

01.

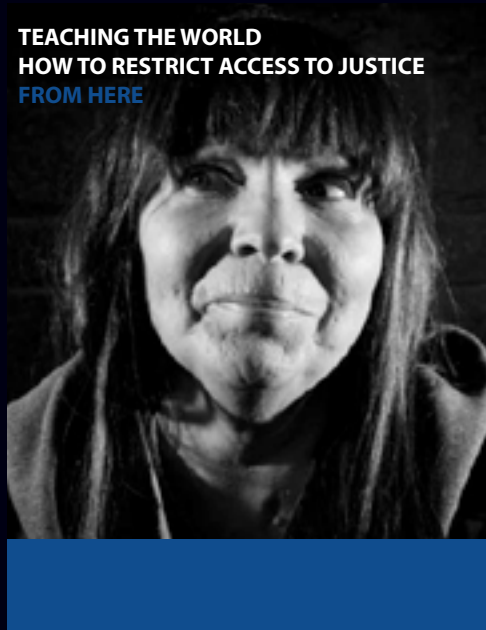


## 01. HUMAN RIGHTS IGNORED, FROM HERE

*This image, around which I have conceptualized the project, seeks to bring attention to the lack of a UBC policy surrounding the ethics of accepting large corporate donations. Specifically, I consider this case in relation to the acceptance of a \$5 million donation from Goldcorp, a company known for its human rights abuses abroad.*

NOTE: Images found here are for mockup and conceptualization purposes ONLY. They will not be reproduced in any way.

02.



03.



02. This image draws attention to hiring practices at UBC. It is inspired by the hiring of Geoff Plant, former BC Attorney General who cut BC's Legal Services Society by 40%. He is one of the teachers for a UBC law course about public access to justice.

03. This image is inspired in consideration of ethical research practices, and urges viewers to consider how and why they go about their research. Particularly, it is in response to the "over-researching" of First Nations Communities and the Downtown Eastside that happens from the UBC campus.

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-Goldcorp Website, 2013



JR. M.S.I.D.E.D.U.T.P.R.O.J.E.C.T

JR uses portraits to develop a connection between the viewer and the photograph, and in turn, the social issue.

partnerships, requiring that the university does due diligence to ensure that the company abides by the local laws in the jurisdictions where they operate; this does not apply to corporate donations. The message is clear, if you want to give us money, we'll take it (no questions asked!).

Corporate donations and relations are issues that require attention from the ethical witness due to the dilemmas inherent in navigating them. At a time when the university receives reduced funding from the government, it must come up with money through other avenues.

Outdated facilities can be cause for concern, and thus corporate donations to address this need seems

**UBC President Stephen Toope said the university is “absolutely delighted with the participation of Goldcorp” in the project.**

-The Vancouver Sun

to fill an obvious gap. Yet, how can the university justify accepting money that is directly implicated in the abuse of human rights around the world? How is there not so much as an indication that the university has considered this problem? Perhaps most alarmingly, where is the student and faculty resistance to this issue?

### ***The Potential of Art***

Over the past months, I have become interested in questions of what makes a citizen more thoughtful, what makes the public engage with social issues, and what kinds of processes encourage the imagination of alternatives. Two major themes have emerged for me; (1) we must move beyond didactic understandings of the world; the world is too complex to consider an issue/person as good/bad, right/wrong etc. We must open up a space in which complexity is fostered and the public is encouraged to consider the nuances of the issues they seek to understand, and then position themselves in relation to that; and (2) the moment of rupture is of critical importance. When for some reason or another, our habitual modes of understanding are disrupted, we are forced to imagine things in a different way, if only for a moment. I see these as moments of intense possibility. Whether they lead to further introspection, conversation, or even action, the moment at which that rupture takes place, and the connection to some kind of new possibility, is where I believe lies the potential for change. The first step is understanding things in even a slightly different way.

I am particularly interested in the potential of artistic

intervention to foster these moments of rupture. The interaction with a piece of art produces a moment of introspection and reflexivity. The viewer must consider how his or her own experience intersects with the piece of work presented, which in turn produces a confrontation with what we believe ourselves to be. If the art calls into question what we had previously assumed, we are moved to thought. For this reason, I have become particularly interested in Simon O'Sullivan's (2006) conceptualization of objects of recognition (affirming our place in the world, stymieing thought) in comparison to objects of encounter (calling our assumptions into question, moving us to thought). If interventions in public space can serve as objects of encounter, they hold significant potential to open up spaces of possibility and imagination.

### **Taking it Public**

Considering the possibility for art to subvert traditional notions of public space, I have been particularly inspired by the work of artists Alfredo Jaar ([alfredojaar.net](http://alfredojaar.net)) and JR ([jr-art.net](http://jr-art.net)). These artists share similarities in their approaches insofar as they disrupt public space in an attempt to draw the audience into conversation. In Jaar's case, that conversation is often centered around certain issues, urging us as an audience to *pay attention*; in JR's practice, he draws attention to the people who inhabit the spaces we have written off as Other, drawing the audience into an encounter with them. Both artists are so effective, in my opinion, because they are not prescriptive; neither artist would cite a particular outcome that they hope to achieve with their work, nor do they claim to hold some kind of higher knowledge about their subjects. Rather, they see themselves as interested people looking to *start a conversation*.

In my consideration of the issue outlined above on the UBC campus, I have also noted a lack of public action and resistance concerning social justice issues from the student body. While students with such interests do certainly exist, it seems that we do so in silos. I believe attention to social justice issues requires presence in the public domains of the University, facilitating conversations among students, faculty members, and staff across faculties. The first step to facilitate this conversation is to provoke people to ask questions, to consider their deeply held assumptions, and then to begin to position themselves.

### **The Project**

In 2009, UBC launched the "From Here" campaign; the campaign consists of a series of advertisements proclaiming the things that one can do "From Here" at UBC. On the campus itself, the posters



ALFREDO JAAR, RWANDA RWANDA

*Jaar uses art in public space to draw attention to largely ignored issues happening throughout the world.*

are massive and impossible to miss. At present, the posters operate as objects of recognition (O'Sullivan, 2006). They are self-congratulatory in nature and draw attention to a multitude of positive things happening from the UBC campus (as presented on the previous pages). I propose re-working the posters such that they operate as objects of encounter (O'Sullivan). Inspired by JR's practice of elucidating issues through photographs of faces meant to create a personal connection to issues on the basis of shared humanity, I propose to work with members of affected communities to create massive photographic portraits akin to those in the UBC Campaign. Each poster will draw attention to an ethical issue on the UBC Campus. In the context of the issue outlined above regarding corporate donations, the tagline will read "HUMAN RIGHTS IGNORED, FROM HERE," and would ideally feature a photo of a Mayan woman affected by the actions of Goldcorp (the photos would be taken in collaboration with partners at BC CASA). Occupying similar spaces to their counterparts, these images will draw public attention to some of the questionable practices engaged in by UBC without telling them what to think. In the moment of encounter, the audience will need to consider how they

position themselves in relation to the statement and the poster.

My assumption is that there will be many different reactions to this. Some people will likely be extremely offended and think they are inappropriate; angry that such work is occupying public space. For some people, the images will affirm their prior beliefs, but the moment of encounter will come in the display of that belief in public space. And for yet another group I predict it will be confusing. It may be difficult to conceptualize how human rights are being compromised from the UBC campus. This will either lead to a further conversation or investigation about how this is happening, or it may lead to no further action, and a mere feeling of unsettledness in the audience. I do not position any one reaction as inherently better than another. The objective of the work is to create a moment of opportunity to think differently; how that opportunity is taken up by any given person is up to them.

### ***Dilemmas for the Ethical Witness***

Several dilemmas have arisen for me in conceptualizing this work. The most salient is the tension inherent in the desired outcome I outlined above. To not provide the audience with any specific information about the issue at hand is a major decision. Throughout this process, I have shown mockups of the posters to several people, and the reaction is always the same: they want to know “what it means.” They have questions about what issue is being addressed, and how they can learn more in order to understand it. In a discussion with a friend of mine, he said, “The imagery is really amazing, but if I saw that, I would just want to know what you’re talking about. I want to be able to connect to the issue. To learn more about what is obviously important enough to you to be willing to do this project in the first place.” I have put a great deal of thought into this consideration, thinking about ways in which I might provide a “non-prescriptive” link through the artwork to allow the audience to explore the specific issue at hand further. I have come to realize through this process that providing that link would compromise the purpose of the project entirely. The idea is not to recommend readings to the audience or to have them become involved in a specific cause or area of interest; if that were the purpose, it could be achieved through direct advertising and marketing tools. Rather, the purpose of the project is to have a person begin to think about an issue that was perhaps not part of their consciousness before. The issues that are important to me are very likely not the same issues that may be important to another. By providing a moment of rupture, my purpose is to allow the

viewer space in which to reconsider an issue of interest to them, and perhaps pursue it in a new way. Ultimately, I believe this openness to interpretation has greater potential to produce ethical witnesses than drawing attention to a very specific instance of an issue otherwise would.

I believe the ethical witness is someone who is constantly asking questions. They seek to understand how things have come to be the way they are, question systems of power and domination, and examine their own subjectivity in a reflexive fashion at each encounter. The job of the ethical witness is to do everything they can to understand the complexity of an issue, without “reproducing suffering” (Alfredo Jaar, Art 21) in the process. Finally, the ethical witness must work to develop more ethical witnesses. To get more people to ask questions, and to provide avenues through which further conversation can take place. With these principles in mind, I believe this project holds true to the practice of ethical witnessing, and provides new spaces in which the work of imagination can be fostered.

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