

thestar.com

City parking wins battle over art

Art gallery's attempt to turn roadway into grassy oasis clipped short by city

September 20, 2008

FRANCINE KOPUN
FEATURE WRITER

In Toronto it seems, art is okay, as long as it doesn't interfere with parking.

A Forest Hill art gallery taking part in an international art project yesterday turned a parking spot on Spadina Rd. into an oasis of green, using grass, Muskoka chairs and lemonade, only to be shut down in the afternoon by the city.



LUCAS OLENIUK/TORONTO STAR

Artist Liz Pead (in striped jersey) cheers after an officer tells her she can keep her installation on Spadina Rd. Sept. 19, 2008 after initially ordering her to remove it.

"They took up a parking spot and placed objects on the roadway without a permit or insurance," said Dennis Dionyssiou, supervisor of street events for Toronto transportation services. "Basically we were just not aware of it."

Whoops. It's hard to think about paperwork when engaged in an essentially subversive act. National Park(ing) Day, launched in San Francisco in 2005, encourages city dwellers to temporarily transform parking spots into works of art and post the pictures to flickr.com.

From modest beginnings it has grown into an annual event, drawing people from Albuquerque to Austin and Amsterdam, Brisbane and Melbourne. This is the first time Toronto has participated.

"We're shocked by how rapidly it's grown over the past three years," said founder Matthew Passmore, amid much background giggling yesterday during a cellphone interview from Amsterdam where he and his partner in art, John Bela, were attending a conference on art and design.

"Cities around the world are all facing the same problems," said Passmore. "There's a lack of open space, there's a lack of parks. We find our urban situations increasingly dominated by commercial interests. There's precious little space for people to get together and share a moment and not have it mediated by any commercial interests."

Lonsdale Gallery owner Chad Wolfand said he learned of Park-(ing) Day just three weeks ago, and decided to participate in the hopes of sparking interest among artists and other gallery owners in the city. He hopes to generate enough interest to require a walking map of the event next year.

"This is our test model," said Wolfand. "I like to do projects that encourage people to think of doing things in different ways, and in this case, to rest during their busy day."

Most people walking by seemed to love the idea, resting in the chairs for a minute or five to chat and have their picture taken. It didn't please everyone.

Acting on complaints, police arrived around noon to close the exhibit, but backed off after learning the gallery wasn't selling anything outside. The transportation authority was more insistent. Dionyssiou said it was a matter of safety.

After dismantling the installation, artist Liz Pead parked her 1993 Jeep Cherokee in the spot and covered it with sod and flowers.

Local resident Debra Zucker said she supports the idea of an oasis in a parking spot, even though parking in the district is a problem.

"Absolutely ... for today."