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# BALLOONS AND KITES IN PARTICIPATORY OUTDOOR SCULPTURE

Joyce Ozier\*

## 1.

The Royal Canadian Aerial Theatre (RCAT) is a Vancouver-based company that is developing a form of outdoor sculpture using balloons and kites [1, 2]. It was formed in 1972 by Frank Masi, Robert (Bob) Cook and me. We sought a theatrical mode for communicating ideas considered to be of social import that would be direct, technically simple and inexpensive and that could be offered free to the public. In particular, we wanted a mode that would permit onlookers to participate in the events presented. While some of the 20 events produced since 1972 were primarily of artistic interest, others stressed a specific social message. We believe that the arts should be directed to bringing about social improvement. To this end, we established RCAT as a resource for local activist groups interested in using our form of sculpture to spread their ideas among a wider audience. Both Masi and Cook, who were active in the RCAT in its initial years, have left. Now working with me are Catherine Hahn and Christopher Knight.

Our first piece (1972), called 'Overpopulation Event', was performed with kites on a Vancouver beach. We individually tethered about 50 small paper kites to stakes within a defined area (approximately 7.5 × 7.5m) so that their lines eventually became entangled and the kites pulled each other to the ground. Significantly, a view of the spectacle included the city's skyline in the background.

Another event devised to convey an ecological message was 'River Piece' (Fig. 1). This was performed in 1974 at the World's Fair in Spokane, Washington, U.S.A., in keeping with the Fair's theme 'Man and His Environment'. Two long strips of dynamite fuse supported along their length by helium-filled balloons, were tethered to represent a flowing river (Fig. 1 (top)). This sculpture was assembled with the help of hundreds of fair-goers and took approximately three hours to complete. Kites representing pollutants were then flown in close proximity of the 'balloon-river' as it waded in the wind (Fig. 1 (middle)). Separate fuse leads that hung loosely from the upper end of the 'balloon-river' to the ground were then lit. These ignited the dynamite fuse, which caused the 'balloon-river' to burn slowly downwards from the top. The balloons smoked and popped until the configuration was completely destroyed (Fig. 1 (bottom)).

In 1974, we developed an event together with a group of mental patients with the purpose of calling attention

to some of their problems (such as poor housing and inadequate medical care). The piece involved a very large brown paper bag (3.5 × 4.5m) covered with



Fig. 1. Royal Canadian Aerial Theatre (RCAT). 'River Piece', balloon and kite sculpture, (top) a pristine river, (middle) its pollution and (bottom) its destruction. Spokane, Wash., U.S.A., 1974.

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graffiti expressing their grievances. Participants stuffed the bag with hundreds of helium-filled balloons of different colours and shapes to represent mounting social pressures of discontent. More and more balloons were added until the bag burst, ripping across the graffiti and releasing the balloons into the air.

One of our balloon sculptures that did not stress a social message was 'Dome', which was performed on Bastian Square, Victoria, British Columbia. This was a canopy consisting of 1500 orange and yellow balloons (diam. 28 cm) assembled with the aid of passers-by by tying the balloons onto fish netting. When completed, it was fitted over the historic lighthouse beacon that once greeted ships passing Trial Island off the British Columbia coast, but since 1967 has reposed in this downtown square (Fig. 2, cf. colour plate). In the evening when the beam from the light swept round and round, a weird illumination of the square was produced.

A technically similar use of balloons has been described by Howard Woody in an article in *Leonardo* [3] and by Otto Piene in his book [4]. Similar kite experiments done by the American Playground group of New York City are discussed in Ref. 5.

## 2.

Each event involves three distinct phases of work: (1) Decisions on how kites and/or balloons are to be used and what other materials are required. Generally, RCAT takes care of this initial phase unassisted. In some cases, as in the mental patients' piece mentioned above, RCAT has provided the technical knowledge and artistic interpretation while the others provided the specific message. We are convinced that cooperation with active groups enables more meaningful presentations of issues than we would be able to generate by ourselves.

(2) Operations such as acquisition, storage, preparation and transportation of materials. We try to use inexpensive, readily available materials and, whenever possible, to re-use them. Our balloon events tend to be more costly than those involving only kites, since a helium-filled balloon can be used but once. When possible, we offer free coffee or fruit juice to all who participate and evening events sometimes include bonfires to contribute to a feeling of informality.

(3) The execution of the event. Most of our events are produced unannounced in places where many people congregate. They are intended to surprise people, which, we are convinced, encourages them to participate in the event. We generally post a sign at the site introducing us and outlining the stages of the event. The sign not only acquaints them with what to expect but also provides latecomers with an idea of what is happening. Sometimes our conception of the

event is changed by input from the participants, sometimes it is changed by an unfavourable turn in weather conditions. Our 'Abortion Piece' (performed at the University of British Columbia in 1974 with the collaboration of the Vancouver Committee to Legalize Abortion in Canada) was literally aborted by a sudden rainstorm.

The feeling of originating something cooperatively is usually generated among the participants. The tasks of an event are made clearly apparent and they are easily performed. We attempt to assign tasks such that people work in pairs or in small groups in order to stimulate a relaxed friendly atmosphere.

We have found that the public's familiarity with kites and balloons is an important factor in arresting their attention and in arousing them to participate in our events. Those who, as children, have felt the wind tug against a kite string seem to yearn for another chance to experience their childhood pleasure. Similarly, most people seem to be fascinated by balloons filled with a gas lighter than air and often ask whether they may buy some to take home.

We have found that our balloon sculptures arouse more interest than our kite sculptures. This seems to be so because the construction of the balloon sculpture takes place on the site and is an integral part of the event. The developing balloon sculpture, while on the ground, is perceived in terms of familiar objects against the expanse of the sky.

An important part of a message-bearing event is the informal discussion that is stimulated between us and the spectators. This, of course, is aided by the informality of the coffee and fruit juice. In the case of 'Abortion Piece', a rainstorm forced us to cancel our plans for the event, but the non-event was highly successful, because it led to a heated discussion.

The RCAT is developing a range of scenarios for balloons and kites, some of which convey a social message, using the approach discussed here. We would be glad to provide further information to anyone interested in the scenarios that we have developed up to now.

## References

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