

**Counter Clouds:
Rolling Coal to Protest the Protestor**

**by
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Abstract

Counter-Clouds (CCs) is a sculptural exploration of the cultural phenomenon of “rolling coal” or “coal rolling” in contemporary North America. This technique of counter-protest relies on modifications done to fossil fuel vehicles (mostly diesel trucks) that can be used as physical manifestations of disagreement. Coal rolling trucks are capable of issuing large black clouds of smoke from their exhaust pipes, which is deployed against social justice protestors, electric cars, and any target the driver desires. These acts are recorded and posted online to be circulated in modding, car and counter-protestor communities. This multi-media sculptural piece explores the relationship between protestors, agitators, the climate crisis and collective action. With the use of video and audio elements of rolling coal, the viewer is positioned as the dominant value in the space, as the sculpture is primed to enact its anti-value (both visually and sonically) against the observer.

Keywords: Coal Rolling; Protest; Fossil Fuel; Carbon Economy; Sculpture

Dedication

Thanks goes to all of my parents, who have shaped me in their own individual and unique ways, and to my partner Warren for helping me make it through.

Forward!

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Counter Clouds on display

Introduction

Everything is art. Everything is politics. – Ai Wei Wei (2012)

Throngs of people holding up protest signs line a roadside. They are chanting, standing shoulder to shoulder together as a large lifted truck approaches. The camera is shaky, and the already grainy footage makes it difficult to discern the faces of the group of protestors and the blurry messages on their signs. A laughing voice behind the camera mentions white people attending a “Black Lives Matter” protest. The truck ahead revs its engine despite maintaining a slow pace, and a thick cloud of black smoke cascades out from the tailpipe to whirl around and engulf the people clad only in shorts and T-shirts. They duck out of the way and recoil from the curb back along the sidewalk. Laughter from the cameraperson, and the clip cuts.

Self-proclaimed “Coal rollers” have found a way to unite in the form of social media as a large part of their protest is not only to act counter, but also to display and share their consumer grade trucks they have modified in order to emit large clouds of fumes on command. This is layered upon car culture’s inherent flashiness, and like a great decentralized digital car show, diesel engines roar and clatter and belch greasy smoke to an adoring audience. These mostly illegal modifications come at great cost to the owner, and while the software and hardware customizations are mostly concealed, the smokestack pipes or exhaust system can be customized to fit the theme and build of the rest of their truck. The showmanship and media production side of the act of rolling can be just as critical as the agitation of the present targets.

An Affective Inquiry

Engaging through affective and material process I examine coal rolling as an assemblage of cultural and media practices, as well as political identity as performance. I

engage with this unorthodox and niche practice through the research creation of an art object, and with a sense of what Kathleen Stewart calls “ordinary affects” – by tracing the surge of my own reactions, and following the paths of performative reaction and response.

The affect is a sympathetic one, we all have intuitive reactions in defiance of the different or what is identified as harmful or unjust. My inquiry lies at the subdivision of reaction: why is one group or individual compelled to purposeful collective action, and another to individualized and seemingly aimless agitation with no clear and desired outcomes. Coal rollers’ performance exist firmly in the bounds of the affect, something increasingly embraced by the new conservative movement in North America.

“Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows to the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation” (Stewart, 2007, p. 2)

Coal rolling is rich with the affect-based identity politics present in the new conservative movement, where gender, class, nationalism and other intersections bind up together to create a reactionary form of politic and public. Embraced by politicians like Trump, who brand themselves a “non-politician” leader, lack of content or precise goals is reimagined as a benefit for those in control. As long as one is moving away from the status quo, that in itself is enough to constitute a direction. Polarization at its core is about deflection versus alignment, countering versus cooperating. In this material and political landscape, how do we ever access the actions and cultural attitudes needed to tackle enormously important issues like the climate crisis, or global social justice?

This deflection that constitutes the foundation of counter-protest means that many can unite around coal rolling itself, while never having to align on the signification of the act to one another inside of the subculture. Given that coal rolling is an almost exclusively male dominated activity some may see it as re-establishing masculinity in a culture of loosening gender roles (Balkmar, 2020), others a defense of failing resource extraction jobs, as well as a display of skill and mastery over analog automobiles that are rapidly becoming more difficult to modify with the introduction of technologies meant to bind

consumers to corporate entities and keep owners from repairing or maintaining their own possessions.

Boundary Objects

Not only do these trucks symbolically tie these young men to the fossil fuel economy through their heightened consumption of the fuel in the oversized tanks, but their outlandish spending (as encouraged by their peer group and aggressive marketing from local dealerships) often means they are bound by high payments that can only be met with incomes from risky and difficult manual labour offered in the oil fields. These modified trucks are then readily transformed into “Boundary objects: They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation.” (Star, 1995, p. 393)

The personal automobile has become one of the main contemporary sites of focus for climate change action. Carbon heavy emitters have successfully deflected focus from large scale systemic issues to onto individual car purchases. Addressing the climate crisis by moralized consumption on the individual gives those at the top of the carbon emitting economy free reign to dodge criticism and accountability. Personal automobiles produce a small percent of emissions when compared to almost any other form of transportation, including the massive and mostly unregulated emitting done in international waters by cargo ships hauling goods back and forth across vast oceans (Zheng et al, 2016). We cannot perceive those long ships perched on the horizons of our intervening oceans, but we can count the electric cars on the roads around us.

While we recoil in horror at the great expulsions of burned diesel, Martha McMahon challenges us before we assign blame (2017) to ask *who* consumed the fossil fuel. In a situation where oil persists as a leading fuel, who or what is the source of the emissions it creates? Is it the individual that drives their 90’s sedan to the grocery store, the company that shipped and refined the fuel for sale, the country under which the fuel was allowed to be extracted? Just as declaring having children to dramatically increase ones’ “carbon legacy” (Murtagh and Shlax, 2009, p. 15) we demand scapegoats be made of each other, and not the industries and policies who have restricted our options to the

total exclusion of all else. This limits our ability to imagine a collective future as we are paralyzed by fear of making an individual choice that may be seen as against the collective imaginary already deeply captured by the industries we seek to challenge.

Coal rolling in Canada takes place predominantly in Alberta, a province that relies on fossil fuel products to power its economy. Alberta at one point had one of the lowest royalty rates of any oil-producing state in the world, and contemporarily subsidizes its oil production through tax discounts, royalty decreases and direct transfers to the sum of \$1.32 billion in 20/21 alone (Blocking Ambition, 2022, p. 6) meaning that the tremendous economic activity that oil and gas produces comes at a fantastically reduced payment to the government. Despite the relatively low return on investment in Alberta's oil sands back to public coffers, nationalist identities are reinforced and strengthened. The President & Chief Executive Office of the "largest energy bank" in Canada (Royal Bank of Canada) declares while speaking in Edmonton about lending: "We're speaking out because Canada will not succeed if Alberta does not succeed, and Alberta will not succeed if its energy sector does not succeed." (McKay, 2016) Alberta's refusal to diversify its economy has meant that through booms and busts, the workers of the province have had to suffer the mercurial nature of demand for fossil fuel. These high-paying jobs offer income to young men that would be simply unattainable in other markets without years of specialized training. With so much capital on offer many young men assume the physical and psychological risk of remote work camps or oil rigs in exchange for far above average pay, presuming the demand for products like the crude oil that Alberta produces is high. The instability of the need for the low-grade product (it requires the most refining of any petroleum product) means when the market turns, young men without much formal education can be bucked from their posts en masse, servicing payments on their customized trucks that are suddenly far too expensive to maintain on average wages.

Countering Protest

Large corporations have largely abandoned the hope of disproving climate change's inevitability and have embraced greenwashing openly. Fossil fuel funding and lobbying

efforts are being diverted through more and more elaborate filters to become untraceable. Simultaneously, many solutions to climate change are cast in terms of individual responsibility (e.g. drive less, fly less, eat less meat etc.) and so-called silver-bullet solutions like electric vehicles or carbon capture fees compound a consumer-focused perspective. This diffraction and reduction buttresses protest-counter protest conflict as individuals and their own buying choices are perceived as ideological statements. They are “voting with their dollar” and are declared to be backing the wrong party.

Prius and Tesla cars are often targets of coal-rolling, as they have become indelibly ascribed with moral tones through the electric car industry’s green-washing efforts. As boundary objects themselves EVs produce and reproduce “ordinary affects” of their own— their quiet, futuristic tones punctuate the highways and city roads, standing in bright opposition to the racket made by large trucks and other service vehicles. Their clean lines, large screens, and odorless transmission have over time produced “public feelings” that are conflicting and contradictory. Larger than life CEOs like Elon Musk further complicate the public imaginary of EV politics, as he publicly switched political alignment and declared his alignment with US Republicans in 2022, and continued to create spaces for more radical far-right action after his acquisition of Twitter (Kern, 2022). These moralized automobiles which have become inscribed by the technology contained within, but also their accompanying ordinary affects become a focal point for counter-protest; like Luedikes’ Hummer owners, the coal rolling community “ascribe[s] moral redemptive meanings to their consumer identities through implicit (and sometimes explicit) confrontations with other consumer groups that they ideologically construe as deviating from an inviolate normative order.” (2010, p. 1018). There is also a critical class dimension to these counter-protests. As Taylor explains, “the class resentment expressed in coal rollers’ digital online culture reminds their audiences that it is working-class people, often using dirty diesel engines, who do the physical labor that makes possible the self-congratulatory consumer lifestyles of more entitled Americans.” (Taylor, 2019, p. 80). The purchase of an electric car that is seemingly independent of the fossil fuel economy is therefore an attack on the very livelihood of those who rely on the tar sands and other extreme fossil fuel projects.

The assumed “non-violent” protest of rolling coal on a group of people is but a technicality. Though coal rolling may not directly harm those on the ground, it is doing

deliberate harm to air and environment, albeit a small scale. Though BLM is blamed with property damage and other violent representations of their protest, no such harm is assumed of coal rollers. Burning down a symbol of capital investment like a fast-food franchise location is deemed inappropriate and harmful, but belching petroleum product into the air has no monetary and therefore no measurable effects. Violence against people and property is tantamount, and since there is no “ownership” or representative singular life of the environment, there is no observed harm as a result.

Protestor vs Agitator

We are familiar with the concept of a protestor, or group protests that congeal around a site of power or significance, a legislature building or logging site, to target those who are perceived to have the power of change. Coal rollers however protest the protestor or even the individual: coal rolling a single car on a highway. What good might this dissent do? How targeted is its impact? There is no chance for dialogue, as coal-rolling counter protesters quite literally attempt to silence opposing opinions with clouds of char, choking out the ability to speak or respond entirely. When it is individuals who are responsible for this perceived threat against your own identity, then targets are scattered in amongst the day to day, as “Unlike the reformer or revolutionary the agitator makes no effort to trace social dissatisfaction to a clearly definable cause. The whole idea of objective cause tends to recede into the background, leaving only on one end the subjective feeling of dissatisfaction and on the other the personal enemy held responsible for it.” (Lowenthal and Guterman, 1970, p. 7)

The coal roller uses their trucks not only as boundary object, but simultaneously as a physical shield. While BLM protestors or climate activists put their literal bodies on the front lines, the coal roller is encased in tonnes of metal and plastic, a well-engineered and out-sized stand in for their own biology. Like the convoy protests during COVID lockdowns, the size of the vehicles creates the spectacle of filling space, occupying many hundreds of times over the bulk and visual impact of the people who take part. Often we encounter social amplification in the form of an over-representation in the ideology of a group of people on the news or in a “both sides” debate style presentation of information. During the convoy protests and coal rolling events the vehicle becomes a

physical amplification of the ideology, inflating not only visual presence but filling the auditory realm and even intruding into other senses with the reek of smoke and grit left behind on the skin. Every part of the protestor or bystander target is invaded with the force of the coal roller's agitation, as Lowenthal and Guterman explain "The agitator's solutions may seem incongruous and morally shocking, but they are always facile, simple, and final, like daydreams. Instead of the specific effort the reformer and revolutionary demand, the agitator seems to require only the willingness to relinquish inhibitions. And instead of helping his followers to sublimate the original emotion, the agitator gives them permission to indulge in anticipatory fantasies in which they violently discharge those emotions against alleged enemies" (1970, p. 9)

Sculpture as Exploration

The art making process like coal rolling, interferes with existing objects, remaking the material world to suit a specific goal and be "performed" for some sort of audience. Without an audience or a viewer, art makes no demands of anyone but the artists. Without a target, coal rolling requires nothing of the driver. Given the affective nature of coal rolling, and the materialism embedded in the act of hacking and modifying one's vehicle, I would posit that such a performative act requires a performative response in order to grapple with this issue. By constructing my own coal rolling vehicle, I am attempting to "...fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form; to find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate" (Stewart, 2007, p. 4). In other words I am "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) of contested, conflicted, material-semiotic cultural flows that make up our contemporary public sphere (and media publics).

As a research process, sculpting and media making both require dedication to the raw source material. Digital audio and video are gathered from all corners of both internet and material world to be re-authored through mixing and mastering to create a new document. Raw materials like foam and vinyl are reworked and inscribed with another compounded shape, but importantly:

Rather than being a production that objectifies itself into a material 'finished' product, the art-making embedded in a new condition of immaterial labour finds its own purpose in problem-solving and research activities, which bring something into the world that is not there: an alternative mode of knowledge coded in a way that discerns itself from the common scientific methods. (Strehovec, 2008, p. 246)

By constructing and customizing my own vehicle as exclamation of my ideals, lavishing my labour on my own version of a coal rolling vehicle I too proclaim my ideals in borrowed phrases and techniques from the coal rollers. The embodied practice of the work allows me access aspects of the subjects of study I would not experience only viewing the events that the coal rollers themselves curate and create. While they remake their automobiles into vehicles for performance, expanding beyond the usual and expected uses of a work truck as purely utilitarian, I too create something that exists not for its own sake or even my own, but for the sake of our audience. This research cycle, or “Soliloquy” as Vallack puts it, is “intuition then iconic representation of meaning, then articulation of meaning.” (2021, p. 4) My soliloquizing will result in a vehicle akin to the functional versions – a performative piece that asserts itself only when commanded.

Technical Execution

Counter Clouds consists of a smaller than life size sculptural representation of a consumer grade pickup truck. The body is a lightweight frame constructed of ABS plastic tubing and Styrofoam insulation panels that act as a support structure for layers of multicolored vinyl. True to its roots, materials made with petroleum products are prioritized to incorporate as much fossil fuel in the trucks bones and guts as possible. This piece would not be possible without the contribution of the industrialized fossil fuel industry.

The “bed” of the truck acts as a sounding board through which the audio mix passes. Speakers are mounted to the underside of the bed inside the sculpture (Figure 1) so that the flat panel amplifies and distorts the soundtrack. The reverberation through the bed

panel creates a more intense vibration than could be achieved with a speaker system alone. The interference of the material in the clarity of the sounds muddle the source and location, creating unnerving tremor and frequency that relies heavily on bass frequencies to more closely mimic the rumblings of a real diesel engine.

The audio mix (entitled “delete tune” in honour of the software used to bypass electrical emissions monitoring software) is a sampling of collected sounds from field recordings of car engines, exhaust system noises, traffic and other automobile sounds. Audio recordings gathered from media coverage of protests like Black Lives Matter are sourced from social media and traditional news media. These sounds are distorted and layered in audio software to produce a transitional soundtrack, sometimes quiet and full of crowd mumblings, at other times overwhelmed with the sounds of modified engines.

The “windshield” at the front of the sculpture acts as a video projection surface, upon which a looping video is displayed. The truck carries in its bed the projector that drives the media installation, as a critical component of coal rolling is the resulting media that the performers create in order to post online. The video is are gathered from field recordings of traffic and vehicles from around British Columbia, including the tank farm on Burnaby Mountain BC, close the University where this project was undertaken. Self created film is mixed along with clips from social media accounts dedicated to coal rolling, news coverage of protests, and footage of coal rolling events pulled from YouTube and other online sources. Videos are of varying fidelities, ranging from high end resolution to grainy cell phone footage that is difficult to discern (Figure 1). The variety of these sources, qualities, and even orientations as they are filmed lends to a discombobulated and aimless series of attacks. These videos are displayed asynchronously from the audio track, further obfuscating the source (and therefore target) of the act being performed. The video is projected at a relatively low resolution onto the acrylic “windshield” of the truck, which has been coated with a film in order to function as a projection surface for the digital image.



Figure 1 Still from video projection

The vinyl wrapping the frame is custom cut to be reminiscent of bumper stickers or protest signs with bright colors and graphic logos, large enough to wrap around the frame itself (Figure 2). The side panelling which would otherwise be metal is instead constructed of a thin layer of petroleum products morphed into slogans, maple leaves, and other bold iconography of the pro-oil and coal rolling movement. There are a mix of real slogans/movements imagery and imagined or abstracted elements of the same theme all layered up on top of one another, overlapping and interrupting. These vinyls are custom cut from raw vinyl sheets instead of purchased, to refrain from financially supporting the movements with which they align.



Figure 2 Vinyl branding on exterior of truck

The viewer is able to examine the “vehicle” from all sides, moving around the piece as it grumbles and exclaims in both human and mechanical amalgam. It carries with it the evidence of coal rolls performed by others like it, fulfilling its objective as a memento and simultaneously a response. The viewer adopts the role as “protestor” or “bystander” in the presence of the “agitator,” though the threat is diminished in its less than life-size stature. Whatever the viewer’s values may be, the vehicle shouts its defiance, cloudy and unfocused as its goals may be.

Coal Roller as Performance Artist

As the creation of a multi-media artwork is meant to be consumed by an unspecified audience, so too are the coal roller's performances. By posting online to large public repositories like YouTube, Facebook and TikTok, coal rollers can disseminate their activities to not only their fans but also those who may be horrified or disturbed. Unlike their ultra-nationalist far-right counterparts who post in exclusive online echo chambers, this "democratization" of access is precisely the point. Posting the acts of coal rolling is often done from a first-person viewpoint, so while we often don't see the drivers or passengers, we can hear their voices and are invited into the private spaces of their cabs, privy to conversations missed by the receiving end of the coal roll. Like political commentators or sports announcers, we hear play by plays of the events as they approach, smoke out, and flee the scene to a roar of overtaxed machinery and often laughter.

The algorithm does not discriminate between joy or disgust at seeing a BLM protestor shrouded in thick smoke on the roadside. Coal rolling is not just an insular self-referential in-joke full of jargon or dogwhistles, but instead, I would argue, a performance of damage and defiance at the expense of another that does not need specific language or politics, and cannot be explained away as ambiguous or a misunderstanding. This backlash against political correctness or traditional political dynamics institutionalized by characters like Trump (Thompson et al, 2007) embraces and maintains the visually theatrical aspects of the political sphere and amplifies them over and over into abstraction.

The result is then performative expressions of blowing black smoke onto unsuspecting individuals from the comfort of a souped-up truck cab and posting the outcome on social media for maximum reaction and therefore perceived impact. As Stewart notes, "Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things" (2007, p. 9) These acts leave no room for interpretation and thus stand in contrast to the usual pandering or otherwise "performative" features of status-quo conservative political actors: characteristics that are often seen by the working class person as lacking in content and conviction. In this new

affective politic of coal rolling the message is so far divorced from content as to be declarative for declaration's sake.

Performing stereotypically male behaviours like modifying cars, and enacting coding around labour and blue collar work is a way for the coal roller to reclaim a masculine identity perceived as threatened by eroding cultural definitions of "men" and "family." (Reeves, 2022) To be seen as a "real" man one must double down into more extreme versions of what is traditionally masculine, to counter what is perceived as the new masculine that is more flexible and therefore more feminine.

While coal rolling may appear a brief and niche culture-hack, we have a much more recent example of adjacent "performance" that garnered international attention and positioned itself at the heart of a political geographic. The convoy protests in Canada in early 2022, also known as the "Freedom Convoy" relied heavily on conventions of traditional cultural affect, and the new conservative political theater, once again materially grounded in the presence of massive gas powered personal vehicles. Both commercial and consumer grade, these trucks and semis were so overlarge compared to their occupants that they rendered any possibility of police intervention such as towing moot. Occupying large portions of the Ottawa downtown, protestors were able to physically dominate in a way that traditional means of gathering individuals in the street are unable to do. Heated cabs of trucks dozens of feet long offered not only comfort and safety to an individual during brutally cold winter months, but also they ate up and imposed themselves on a footprint many magnitudes the size of the body driving. Like similar political theater, leaders of the convoy protest could declare that they had successfully occupied and choked off an entire downtown, something that would have taken many hundreds of times more people than those using their trucks as props to extend their impact. Occupation in a case of steel and diesel meant that otherwise normal means of dislodging the protestors would be untenable, even if the political will had existed to do so.

Staying with the Trouble

At the core of this practice and research for Counter Clouds lies many deeply troubling aspects. Identity, political polarization, the climate crisis, death and rebirth of traditionalism and rubbing shoulders with the extreme alt-right: coal rolling both subsumes and denies it all. That is the real trouble of something that does not proclaim what it is in agreed upon language but instead in nebulous action, and like obscenity may be outwardly indefinable but you do “know it when you see it.” The public affect of these performers is indeed one of obscenity, to be shocking and troubling on its face, though its deeper meaning may begin and end with this perceived “edginess.”

While I investigated the online culture of coal rolling to gather raw materials for the video and to understand the process by which their trucks are modified, I was both empathetic of and appalled by what I encountered. Some of the clips of these young men depict unadulterated glee and pride as they fine-tune their automobiles, testing the capabilities of their rigs which sit stock-still in an open field, belching columns of smoke against a cloudless blue sky. They coo over the work they have done, and treat the truck both as an extension of the self but also a living creature upon which to heap praise. In these moments I can relate to their sense of accomplishment, and with no bodies against which they are leveraging their dissatisfaction, I too can enjoy and admire their efforts. When it came time to deal with the outcome of what those trucks were modified for, I found my empathy waning. In order to approach this project and synthesize a response however, I had to “stay with the trouble” I found therein. Haraway proclaims that:

“staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (2016, pg. 1)

So I stayed with the images of unarmed protestors driven back from sidewalks coughing and staggering to safety, to electric cars swerving unnervingly across highway lanes as they are enveloped in black smoke, the aggressive and often obscenity-laden slogans I waded through to find the ones I would be remaking and covering my own truck in. Reproducing the slogan “Black Smoke Matters” in the recognizable block letters of the Black Lives Matter logo was perhaps the most disturbing moment of my production.

Who is this phrase for, what kinds of feelings does it engender in a coal roller or someone critical of the events of the BLM movement? Does my manufacture of this iconography justify itself, or am I too complicit in a reactionary moment, capitalizing on shock value for my own imagined audience?

There then may lie the division between a true blue coal roller and myself, in staying with this contemplation, in entwining myself both with their affect and my own. I make the work with a hope I am inviting others to understanding and reflection of these broader systemic issues, not to point at the individuals who have chosen this method of expression but at the circumstances and intersections of troubles that have landed them there.

The climate crisis does not seem to have a clear and outlined enemy, nor a solution to confront and defeat the nebulous specter of looming ecological apocalypse. There is no framework for a plan that could lead disenfranchised young men back to the perceived prosperity and elevated status of the good old days. If there is no reasonable solution to the myriad issues that critics and protestors decry, then how could we expect a reasonable response? It is at this nexus that we seem to divide, in the face of troubles that demand our response, we can stay with it, explore and inhabit and internalize some of what ails us in order to keep present and to try to alleviate the symptoms for ourselves and our communities. If it is too much to take on, then we can meet it with a surge of affect to match what the trouble brings, shout back and answer with energy as explosive and expressive as it is, find our communities with others that resist for the sake of resistance, and find strength in the performance of our defiance.

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Appendix A. Schematics for installation

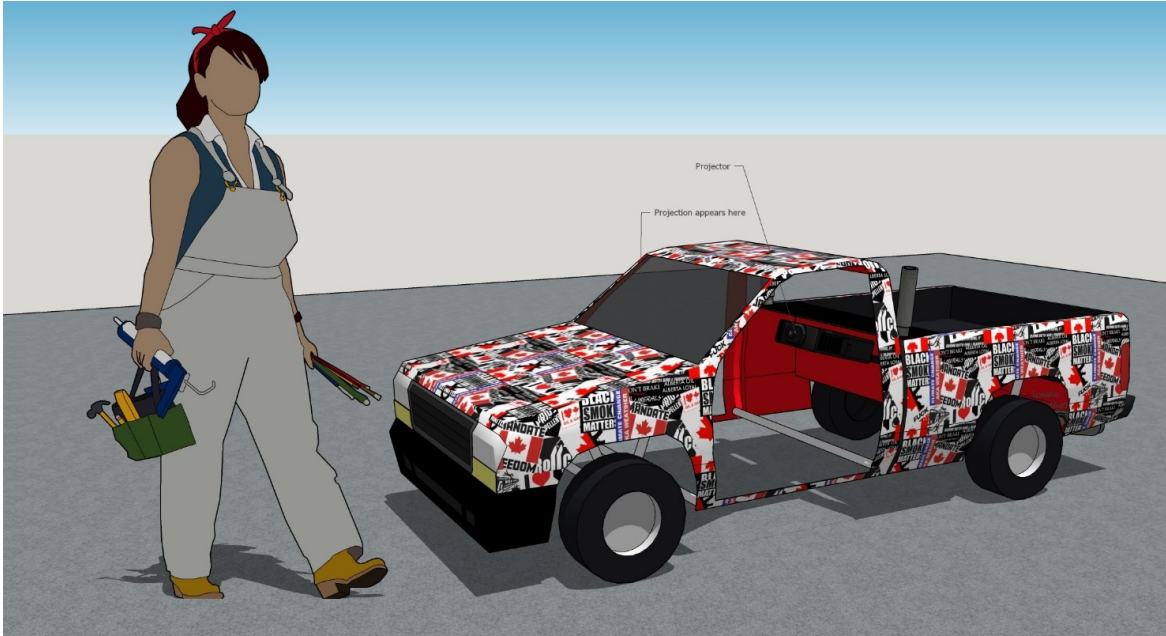


Figure A.1. Overview of sculpture for scale



Figure A.2. Closeup of paneling constructed from vinyl decals

Appendix B.

Photos of Installation *in situ*



Figure B.1. Overview shot of installation with projection display

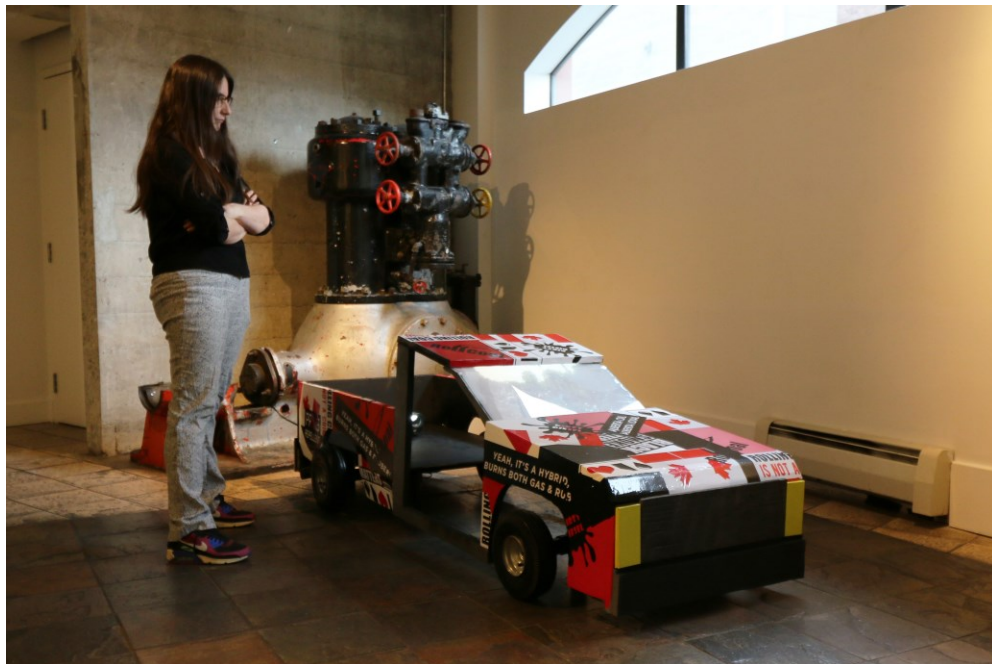


Figure B.2. Counter Clouds with artist for scale