

BC Hydro Dal Grauer Substation

KAPWANI KIWANGA

APRIL 2020–MARCH 2021

Counter-Illumination

944 BURRARD ST, VANCOUVER

SPONSORED BY THE DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Counter-Illumination*, 2020, digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

Kapwani Kiwanga will be giving a talk as part of the Capture Speaker Series on Sun. April 26 from at 1 pm at The Polygon Gallery (p. 111).

CURATED BY KATE HENDERSON
CAPTURE PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL

For the 2020 Capture Photography Festival, Franco-Canadian, Paris-based artist Kapwani Kiwanga has created *Counter-Illumination* (2020), a site-specific commission. This work is featured on the façade of the Dal Grauer building, a modernist power structure, partly obscuring its dominant glass façade.

Kiwanga's practice queries embedded power structures and encourages what she describes as "exit strategies" in order to visualize alternatives and negotiate a different future. In her recent work, Kiwanga has been interested in surveillance and how it manifests itself in legislation and architecture. She is equally interested in ways individuals and groups counter forced visibility and reconnaissance through cloaking techniques whether physical, behavioural, or digital. Kiwanga's still life photograph, *Counter-Illumination*, comprises objects and materials that are related to seeing and obscuring: curtains, blinds, mirror, and glass. This image, covering a major portion of the building's façade, is in direct dialogue with the edifice which is supporting it, evoking questions of visibility, transparency, and their use in surveillance and control.

Completed in 1954, the BC Hydro's Dal Grauer Substation was designed by the young architect Ned Pratt and artist B. C. Binning. The building was commissioned by the B.C. Electric Company, under the helm of then-president Edward Albert "Dal" Grauer, to bridge functional design and public art. The substation would go on to serve as a three-dimensional "canvas" that was said to resemble a Piet Mondrian or De Stijl painting.

The modernist philosophy with which the building was designed emphasizes the link between art, architecture, and everyday life. With this in mind, Capture Photography Festival has commissioned artists annually to create new site-specific works to be installed on the Dal Grauer Substation's façade. Drawing on the building itself, these projects temporarily emphasize the substation in the streetscape and reassert it as an architectural icon.

Through Windows As Through History

DEAN DADERKO

Kapwani Kiwanga's studies in anthropology and comparative religion are the backbone of her work, and her commitments to these interests are revealed in vibrant ways through her research-based projects. Over the past decade, Kiwanga has created sculptures, installations, photographs, performances, and moving images that delve into issues like materiality, social asymmetry, and perception. By combining scientific rationality, a poetic sensibility, and a commitment to social justice, Kiwanga gives form to the previously inchoate. By coming at topics from multiple and unexpected angles, Kiwanga illuminates surprising conjunctions: her works often act as loci for momentary, memorable connections, marking points of connection between moving information streams.

Counter-Illumination (2020), Kiwanga's contribution to the 2020 Capture Photography Festival, is no different. With this work, Kiwanga braids together relatively recent local histories in Vancouver with temporally and geographically distant narratives, and timely present concerns. Light and visibility are the locus points around which these stories intersect and to which Kiwanga brings depth and focus.

Inaugurated in 1954, the Dal Grauer Substation is a three-story facility located mid-block on Burrard Street in Vancouver. Designed by the celebrated British Columbian architect Ned Pratt in collaboration with iconic local artist B. C. Binning, the industrial structure's resolutely symmetrical concrete and glass façade epitomizes modernist architecture's push to merge function and form with streamlined aesthetics. B.C. Electric Company's then-President Albert Edward "Dal" Grauer took a chance when he commissioned the project: the building he greenlighted was the first visible public example of modernist architecture in its community. Notably, its edifice incorporates a glass curtain wall; this suggestion came from Binning, who challenged Pratt to create a design that would reveal its interior structure and activities. At Binning's suggestion, the building's interior walls were painted in a variety of colours that emphasized its symmetry and established distinct visual zones. Visible through exterior glazing, stairwells to the far left and right of the building zigzag between the Substation's three floors. Following its inauguration, this germinal example of modernist architecture was a local beacon. As historian

Abraham Rogatnick noted, "Binning created a composition of brilliant colours to enhance the meticulously arranged architectural and industrial elements that...slowed traffic on the street as people prolonged the moment to observe and enjoy it."¹

What remains of modernism's promises of efficiency and a better life? In hindsight, some of its experiments fared better than others, while previously unrecognized blind spots and limitations were revealed. It's now clear, for instance, that there is not one modernist narrative, but many.

At Binning's behest in 1956, the building's original colour scheme, featuring a palette of colours drawn from California constructions, was updated. Red, yellow, and blue-painted walls were replaced with colours that were locally resonant for Binning. They included woodsy greens, maritime blues, and a variety of greys inspired by foggy skies.

From our current vantage point, staking claims for progress on how closely one adheres to a set of stylistic precepts seems blindly aspirational, if not totally misguided. Limiting modernist ideologies have been expanded through the recognition of local vernaculars. Challenging the geographic primacy of so-called centres opens new horizons: the centre is wherever we are. With this recognition comes the ability to ask broader questions about how and why particular ideological regimes gain force, and how they attempt to retain it.

Since its opening, the Substation's presence has undergone a series of changes. As previously mentioned, Binning updated the building's interior palette. In the 1980s, B.C. Hydro replaced the plate glass windows with panes of shatter-resistant plastic. While it's said that this decision was motivated by public safety concerns, the new windows visibly deteriorated over years of exposure to the elements. The interior life of the building was obscured by foggy, greying panes. One critic noted that it seemed "disengage from public life."²

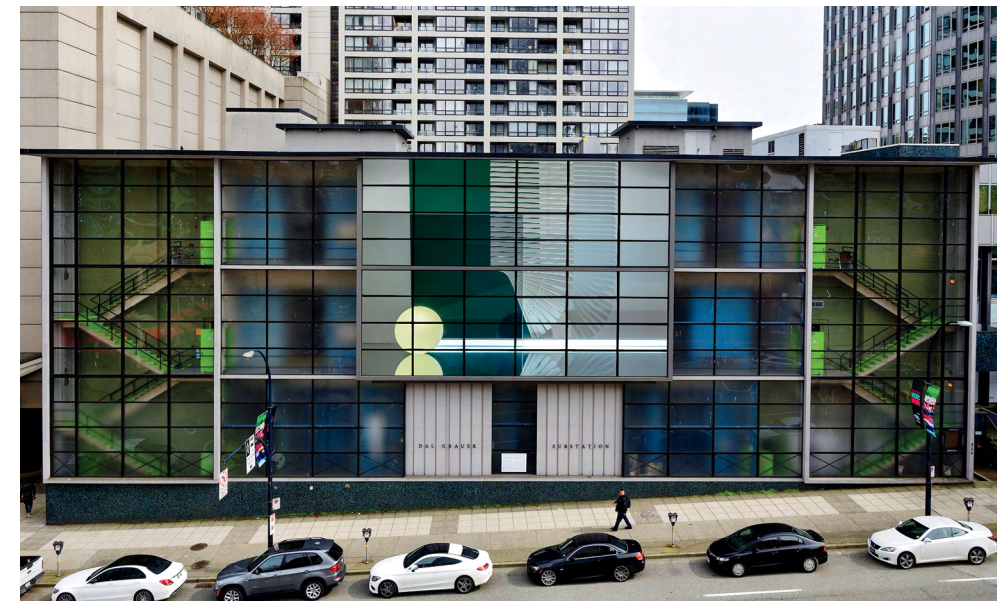
Clarity can be experiential, metaphoric, or both. The ability to "see into" a structure suggests both visibility and systemic transparency. Conversely, the adage "what you see is what you get" has been spectacularly hollowed out by the

praxes of digital life, where narratives of self-presentation are moulded to suit particular subjectivities.

Kiwanga's *Counter-Illumination* steps into these confluences. For her commission, Kiwanga has created a two-story tall photographic image—the first unique photograph of its kind in her storied career. Shot in the artist's studio, a handful of elements—a globe light and lighted rod, sheets of two-way mirror glass, and a Venetian blind—coalesce in an elegant and dynamic composition which toggles effortlessly between abstraction and familiarity. Plays of reflection and shadow reveal the compressed depth of Kiwanga's photographic composition. The image and the building play a game of concealing and revealing. Kiwanga's image may function like a curtain, but it also acts like an X-ray, coaxing us to peer inside.

Deep looking can be thwarted or encouraged by the surfaces and systems we encounter. Mediation is a mitigating factor. Surveillance and sousveillance—acts in which participants record their activities via personal portable technologies—inspire Kiwanga. *Counter-Illumination* is a clear descendant of a recent series of the artist's sculptures in which she affixes lighting elements to geometrically-solid stone plinths. Kiwanga's sculptures—and *Counter-Illumination* by extension—come out of her research of lantern laws. Enacted in New York City in the eighteenth century, lantern laws demanded that enslaved black, mixed-race, and indigenous peoples were required to carry lit candles if they were moving through the city after dusk and were unaccompanied by a white person. "Lantern laws made the lit candle a supervisory device...that marked these people as security risks after dark."³ In lantern laws, visibility is a structure of monitoring and control exercised by invisible legal and civic power structures.

Kapwani Kiwanga's work considers the phenomenology of vision. Also, and importantly, it considers the notion of vision within a broader frame: "What is invisible?" "What is made invisible?" "How can we avoid being seen?" Kiwanga shows us that transparency and perceptibility are intimately linked; they are contingent and subject to blockading. It is up to us, as *Counter-Illumination* suggests, to open the blinds as we assess what the future brings.



Kapwani Kiwanga, *Counter-Illumination*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist. Installation mock-up: Alina Ilyasova. Photo: Nelson Mouëllic.

¹ Abraham J. Rogatnick, "A Passion for the Contemporary," in *B.C. Binning* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 2006), 18–21.

² Adele Weder, "City Abandons Its Heritage Gems," *The Tyee*, November 5, 2007, <https://thetyee.ca/Views/2007/11/05/NoHeritage/>.

³ Simone Brown, *Dark Matters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 78.