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Crystal Underbelly Nathan Crompton

Rodney Graham

Forthcoming Public Artwork

*Vancouver House
1460 Howe St.*

Like so many aristocratic objects, the chandelier moves in and out of fashion. At the turn of the twentieth century this fixture was hung with the nostalgia of a declining class. By the time of Walter Benjamin's trip to Moscow in 1926 the chandelier figures as a pitiful remnant "hanging from the trashily painted ceiling." In another text of Benjamin's, *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*, the telephone replaces the chandelier as the privileged object of the domestic interior. For Benjamin the telephone of his family house was a new means of communication but it also figured as an ornamental and architectural supplement, thus condemning the chandelier to obsolescence.

At that moment in history the chandelier threatened to become the bearer of an altogether different death. Like the artifice of the falling chandelier in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909),

it enacts revenge on those reposed below. In the film version of *Scaramouche* (1952), the revolutionary protagonist narrowly misses being impaled by a falling chandelier. The scene is absent from the original novel by Rafael Sabatini, *Scaramouche: A Romance of the French Revolution* (1921), yet the novel features a fight scene in which “chairs are being smashed to provide weapons, and parts of chandeliers are being used as missiles.” It is the film version, however, that Rodney Graham references in his forthcoming public artwork at “Vancouver House” a 52 storey condo tower at the foot of the Granville Street Bridge to be completed sometime in 2018.

Graham’s rotating chandelier video—*Torqued Chandelier Release* (2005)—is to be reworked as a kinetic sculpture and hung from the underbelly of the Granville Street Bridge. Over the course of 24 hours, the chandelier slowly rotates in an upward climb until once per day the chandelier is released, quickly descending to its original position in a simulated act of falling. As in *Phantom*, this malfunction is deployed at the expense of the audience, who become the subject of a morbid ruse.

In this effect, there is a much more important role for Graham’s chandelier. English Bay, traversed by the Granville Street Bridge, bisects the city as a threshold. What we have in the chandelier is a mediating object between metropolis and suburb. The chandelier-clad

interiors of colonial Shaughnessey merge with the public spaces of Downtown Vancouver. The false opposition of single-family home and the condominium is collapsed under the sign of the urban *gesamtkunstwerk*, the “total work of art.” The small size of condos and high-rise apartments in Vancouver is often lamented. In reality, the microloft represents an expanded rather than diminished scale, coterminous with the city itself as a privatized totality. In the city as *gesamtkunstwerk* the street becomes the living room, the restaurant becomes the kitchen, and so on. All space is domestic space, as expressed in Graham’s ‘decoration’ of Granville Street Bridge. The city of glass expels ornament, but only as a means to carry the principle of ornament to the highest level, performing a perversion of Georgii Krutikov’s utopian rendering of the *Flying City* (1928).

Graham’s sculpture is therefore at home in the contemporary *gesamtkunstwerk*. It performs a kind of Wagnerian flattening precisely because it pronounces the hidden unity of seemingly opposed poles in the Vancouver landscape: aristocratic ornament and modernist transparency; heritage preservation and creative destruction. In short the chandelier asserts the founding constitution of the city itself, grounded in the dialectical unity of developer monopoly capital and petty homeowner capital.

Nathan Crompton