

# Talking Boulders: A Conversation with Maura Doyle

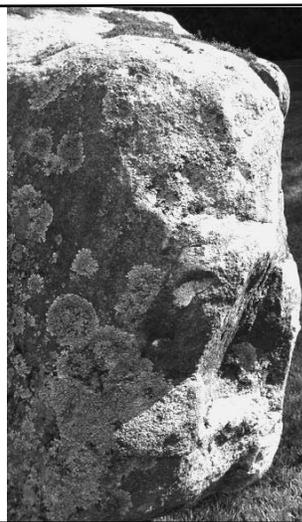
by Heather Hermant

*There's a New Boulder in Town* is Toronto artist Maura Doyle's latest installation. With the assistance of University of Toronto geologist James Brenan, Doyle mapped a walking tour of some of Toronto's 'erratic boulders,' and narrates their social-geological biographies through a guidebook. Among these boulders is the 10-ton piece of granite Doyle unloaded on the Toronto Sculpture Garden late in 2004. In addition to this 'sculpture,' Doyle's multidisciplinary practice has included music, videos, book works, and several small businesses. New video work had been shown at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery (Toronto) from March 25 to May 23, 2005. The next edition of the boulders project opened in May 2005 in Vancouver, in association with Or Gallery. In the following interview, Doyle talks with UC Collective member Heather Hermant.

HH: Let's talk about 'ephemera' as a descriptor of your projects. I'm struck by how in collecting unnoticed things, you generate a genealogy for them, recover them and thus give them currency. Your Money Collection web site is perhaps the most explicit connection between collecting and currency (Doyle 2002-2004b). You've also made a flow chart of all sorts of potato chips, in order to trace diverse brands to Pepsi Co. (Doyle 2004c). You've made a poster campaign for a proposal to dump 10,000 empty chip bags over Toronto (Osborne 2003). Things that would go unnoticed suddenly become glaring. And there's your series of Annual Buttons, one produced each year, depicting the current year's date. Is there a connection between collecting and monumentalizing?

MD: I don't really think about these things while in the act of art making, at least not in a clear way. But I do think about current projects in relation to what came before, and about how my entire body of work may eventually be catalogued, likely chronologically. It has something to do with my interest in context, at what point in time we are looking at these objects or artworks, and how we see them as belonging to a history. I think I play around with some of these ideas in every project. The annual button project, more a series than a collection, was

**After spending thousands of years in the forests of the Kawartha Lakes, this 10-ton boulder has acquired a gentle beard of lichens and moss, and now rests its weakly foliated structure on the grounds of the Toronto Sculpture Garden. (Doyle 2004: 8)**



started in 1997 and has continued until now. It has expanded to include dates up to 2104. I like that collections happen over time and that the process of collecting can determine the objects collected.

With this in mind, boulders that are not true 'erratic boulders' by the geologic definition, and boulders that are not even boulders, angular blocks of limestone for example, can be included in the Guidebook to Toronto's Erratic Boulders (Doyle 2004). And boulders that are not art can become art for a geologic while. I guess these projects do give currency, as you said, to otherwise forgotten objects. It can be extreme, like turning a chip bag from garbage to an integral part of a stadium style sports event, big enough to be noted in Guinness Book of World Records. Empty chip bags are NEEDED, NOW! I've always rooted for the underdog, so it's natural for me to take note of these 'worthless' everyday objects. A chunk of worn out limestone that has chewed gum stuck to it and is missing its plaque can mingle with a piece of 'conceptual' art.

HH: Your boulder is considered a sculpture, but you've actually done no sculpting per se. It's a conceptual art intervention—oooo, scary. But the project has been written about in all the big papers. Why the attention?

MD: Maybe because it's a city guide, there is that element of accessibility. The Toronto sections, not the Art sections of all the newspapers covered the piece (Agrell 2004; Heath-Rawlings 2004; Reinhart 2004). It was the Toronto history that seems to have gotten the most attention. But I think it also refers to the history of modern sculpture, especially big minimalist work. I think Carl Andre even did a piece with glacial boulders (Andre 1977). It in some way diffuses this history of sculpture work by proudly associating it with 'just rocks', other random pieces around the city. The boulder in the garden is many things: it's a sculpture, it's a monument, and it's 'just a



rock'. Mind you, it is also a beautiful piece of rock with moss and lichens, which many people can appreciate. I guess what I'm trying to say is that there are many points of appreciation, through the history of art, through love of nature, or interest in our landscape and its history.

*HH: Why did you notice the rocks?*

MD: I first heard the term "erratic boulder" in a book by Immanuel Velikovsky called *Earth in Upheaval*, which pieces together geological and cultural evidence to offer a ludicrous account of Planet Earth's catastrophes (Velikovsky 1965). His catastrophic theory was at first embraced and then rejected by the scientific community. I think he claimed Venus approached Earth several times, at one point parting the Red Sea. I think the term was first used scientifically in referring to stars that didn't have a fixed path and seemed to wander the night sky. They were later discovered to be planets in orbit. Erratic boulders were also quite mysterious until end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was agreed that they were put into place by glaciers. For this project I stretched the definition to include rocks moved by backhoes, tidal waves, strong winds, meteor impacts, flat bed trucks, and mini front-end loaders. I started noticing erratic boulders around the city. Some were obviously put in place in the last 100 years, as part of foundations, or as monuments, etc. Others seemed to be randomly placed, their weight as an anchor, and then the city sprouting up around them.

*HH: Did you have any ethical pangs about speeding up the glacial/geological process to human time by relocating this 20,000 lb boulder overnight?*

MD: Yes I did worry about upsetting a natural environment. I had nightmares of sending a front end-loader into a quiet meadow, ripping up the ground, perhaps dropping the rock, doing three point turns, and leaving the space ravaged for the sake of Contemporary Art, which often disregards the consequences of materials used and waste created. In the end I used a boulder I found pushed aside at a quarry north of Peterborough. The quarry was interested in other dug up stuff, and so they were happy for me to take this one. I think ultimately my project reveals the process and the absurdity of monumental sculpture pieces, as well as the effort and resources in such a gesture. My disruption for the sake of art is actually quite small in contrast to, and in fact sheds light on, the urban development happening all around us.

*HH: What kinds of questions did you ask geologist James Brennan about the rocks you found around Toronto?*

MD: James helped me identify their type, age and origin. I gathered a list of about twenty and we went around with some of his students. I gave James a clipboard with the list of boulders as I had titled them for the guidebook, such as Boulder for Student Housing or Paint Bombed Rock. I soon realized that the rocks I had selected were interesting to me for entirely different reasons than they were for the geologists. I was drawn

to the rocks in imagining their dramatic arrival, and how the city has accommodated them over time. I knew next to nothing about a rock's mineral content. At one point James and his students spotted a boulder down by the waterfront. It was covered in dirt and stones and sat next to an excavation site. We deduced that it was very recently uncovered. It's at the back of the book, titled *New to the Surface of Toronto – Just Uncovered!!!* According to the rock's mineral content it likely derived from the Central Metasedimentary Belt (north of here, Pembroke to St. Lawrence River) and we presume it was carried here by a glacier about 10,000 years ago. So we shared the same enthusiasm for rocks, and had something to offer the project despite our different backgrounds. I guess I can say the same about everyone I worked with directly, including the people I spoke to while doing 'community research'. I would ring doorbells and make telephone calls to the people living nearby, and for the most part they were happy to talk about their rocks, especially the ones that were handpicked by their owners. James and I stopped to check out a gabbro boulder under the Oak Leaf Steam Bath fire escape near the backdoor, when one of the owners came out. The exchange that proceeded really captured the project for me. James had made his speculation as to where the boulder was from, and the owner confirmed, giving a more specific location, near Sudbury. The Oak Leaf has been collecting them there for over fifty years. We put together that after one year in the sauna these billion year-old rocks meet their end by cracking up from the sauna environment. Anyhow our different interests in boulders could come together, the guidebook being the platform to document all of this.

*HH: You've placed your rock in the Sculpture Garden, in such a way that it encroaches on the walkway rather than sitting in the open space. It seems you wanted to make explicit the strangeness of these anonymous monuments around the city.*

MD: This boulder is a monument like other boulder monuments in public spaces: it has a plaque (which reads 'Erratic Boulder') and it sits in a quiet garden with trees, 'waterfall' and pigeons. So on one hand it is a very typical park monument. But it is different in that it is a monument to itself, and to a timescale beyond the age of human existence. It will outlive the SkyBowl, the CN Tower, The Toronto Maple Leafs, and the Toronto Sculpture Garden. It appears to have been 'naturally' placed, and this way it will be seen as an erratic, as a wandering rock. It could have fallen from the sky in the night, or it could have been dropped by a slow moving glacier. The guidebook links it to the many other boulders arriving to this area in the last 10,000 years. Perhaps it was the boulder that inspired the construction of the park!

*HH: What's going to happen to the boulder when the show is over? I hear you're trying to sell it.*

MD: It costs \$9,500 with free shipping within 200 km of Toronto and it must be delivered when the exhibition ends in April 2005. I don't want to have to move it twice! If using the guidebook and map after that point, one would find boulder #8

missing, which I think is a nice part of the project. It leaves some mystery. However, if someone with a lot of money offered to reprint the guidebook, (which was only printed in an edition of 500), I think I would include the boulder in its new location.

HH: *The next stage is to create a boulder map for Vancouver in association with the Or Gallery in May 2005.*

MD: Yes, we recently got the go-ahead from The City of Vancouver. It will be at Thornton Park at Main and Terminal, at the Skytrain station. There are other monuments there so I think an erratic boulder will feel quite at 'home.' I plan to tuck a Vancouver area rock under the Skytrain stairs. I'm working with an Earth Scientist from Simon Fraser University. It will be like the Toronto project, but with different geological terrain and of course different rocks. I like that in the contract with the City of Vancouver, it says the sculpture will be 'semi-permanent,' which better suits the inevitability of an erratic boulder.

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