

# Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak: Urban Renewal

WHARF, CAEN JAN 25 TO MAR 13 2010

by PEGGY GALE



Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak *City Studies* 2010 Installation view © Wharf/P. Capiemont

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[Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak](#) have produced two very different new video works featuring their Toronto home base: they can be read as commentaries on cultural values and the urban social environment, yet also as portraits that are oddly intimate and personalized.

*Speak City* enjoyed its European premiere in Caen this winter as part of [Steele and Tomczak's](#) six-year retrospective of photo-text works and video at [Wharf, Centre d'art contemporain de Basse-Normandie](#). Not exactly under the radar, this 30-minute projection was first seen at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) in September 2009, though as it was tucked into one of the ticket pickup tents, the work was undoubtedly missed by many.



Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak *Speak City* 2009 Video still

The piece has a modest structure and quiet intentions: a sequence of paired street signs recorded over a year and a half in each of the 140 “official” neighbourhoods of Toronto. Working from city documents, the artists record characteristic and evocative junctions as traffic roars in the background or leaves rustle in suburban settings. A train slides past; the seasons change. Each pair of signs overlaps and merges, while new units are indicated by a clean cut to a different location. The formal continuity of place names is offset by unexpected diversity: classic black-and-white steel signage on a skinny black pole contrasts with the stark green or blue text slabs of larger intersections and newer neighbourhoods. We find Finch Avenue West at Jane

Street, Crystal Crescent at Lake Promenade or Mondovi Gate at Tarragona Boulevard. As always for Toronto, hydro poles support tangles of overhead wires and are weighed down with warnings: no idling, no trucks, no left turn, do not stop on tracks. Some of the signs denote neighbourhoods—Cliffcrest, Guildwood Village, Cabbagetown Heritage Conservation District—though most are concerned only with streets. Surprisingly, this ongoing litany is calming and reassuring, with a quiet sense of place. This is home, with the names recalling both early communities and more recent development schemes.



Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak *Speak City* 2009 Video still

In the [Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art's](#) summer exhibition, "Empire of Dreams," which runs from June 19 to August 15, a further portrait of Toronto by Steele and Tomczak will appear in the trilogy *Becoming V...*, *Becoming B...*, *Becoming T...* These three screens offer views from Vancouver, Berlin and Toronto, three cities in the midst of radical architectural change. In each case, the traditional city fabric is juxtaposed with strikingly different new construction in towering glass and steel. Once again, Toronto's characteristic maze of wires and signs is foregrounded ironically, with sly jokes about town planners appearing as intertitles throughout the sequence. (For Berlin, the jokes are about philosophers; for Vancouver, economists.)

Steele and Tomczak have had a productive streak recently: new photo series, a residency in Stuttgart, [a public LED installation in downtown Toronto](#), exhibitions locally and internationally. The city works are a notable high point.

- [www.wharf-art.com](http://www.wharf-art.com)



Lisa Steele & Kim Tomczak *Speak City* 2009 Video still

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