

**Infrastructures
of Power and
Resistance:
Holly Ward and
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The term “infrastructure” brings to mind the material structures of our societies. It includes the buildings where we live and work; the bridges, roads, and railway lines on which we and our stuff travel, and the dams, grids, and pipelines that power us. Emmeshed within these physical structures are forms more ephemeral — the microwave and signal paths that carry information to our phones, the software that animates our digital devices, and the internet protocols and codes that standardize and control the flow of information. Infrastructure can also be applied to the framework of legal and policy documents, rules, and norms that control our political systems and working relationships. Seen this broadly, infrastructure becomes a potent lens through which to examine our current moment and the network of actors and agents that control our public and private spaces.

In the current neo-liberal era, major infrastructure is often privatized, resulting in a hybridized mix of public and private administrative control and financial accountability. In her 2014 book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, the architect and theorist Keller Easterling lays out the intertwined set of conditions created by these public-private partnerships and gives it a name:

Large-scale spatial organizations like infrastructure projects (e.g., US rail in the nineteenth century, or global submarine cable networks) have long created the need for an administrative authority comparable to that of the state, and they continue to require direction from new constellations of international, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental players. As a site of multiple, overlapping, or nested forms of sovereignty, where domestic and transnational jurisdictions collide, infrastructure space becomes a medium of what might be called **extrastatecraft** — a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft.¹

Easterling’s concept of extrastatecraft and its “nested forms of sovereignty” provides a frame for understanding the evolving relationship between these systems of power and the individuals, organizations, and communities that navigate them.

The domain of extrastatecraft is where we can locate much of Holly Ward’s art practice, including her new body of work on view at the Kelowna Art Gallery, *Fluid States*. The exhibition scrutinizes the highly contested Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project (TMX) — a federally owned project which twins an existing oil pipeline that runs 1,500 kilometers, from the tar sands of Alberta through unceded Indigenous territories to a Chevron oil refinery in Burnaby, BC. *Fluid States* interrogates a number of factors at play in the jurisdictional overlaps of the TMX pipeline project. The corporate appetite of energy companies has been adopted by a federal government focused on jobs and the economy, while the land on which the pipeline runs is unceded territory. Federal rhetoric about Indigenous sovereignty and reconciliation is bluntly negated by the government’s insistence on pipeline expansion, as are government promises to reduce in greenhouse gas emissions. *Fluid States* delves into TMX and its contradictory existence, and points to the multiple sites of resistance and potential that emerge through an exploration of sites of power and sovereignty.

Throughout her practice, Holly Ward has looked for points of friction within the physical structures of our society and the systems of power

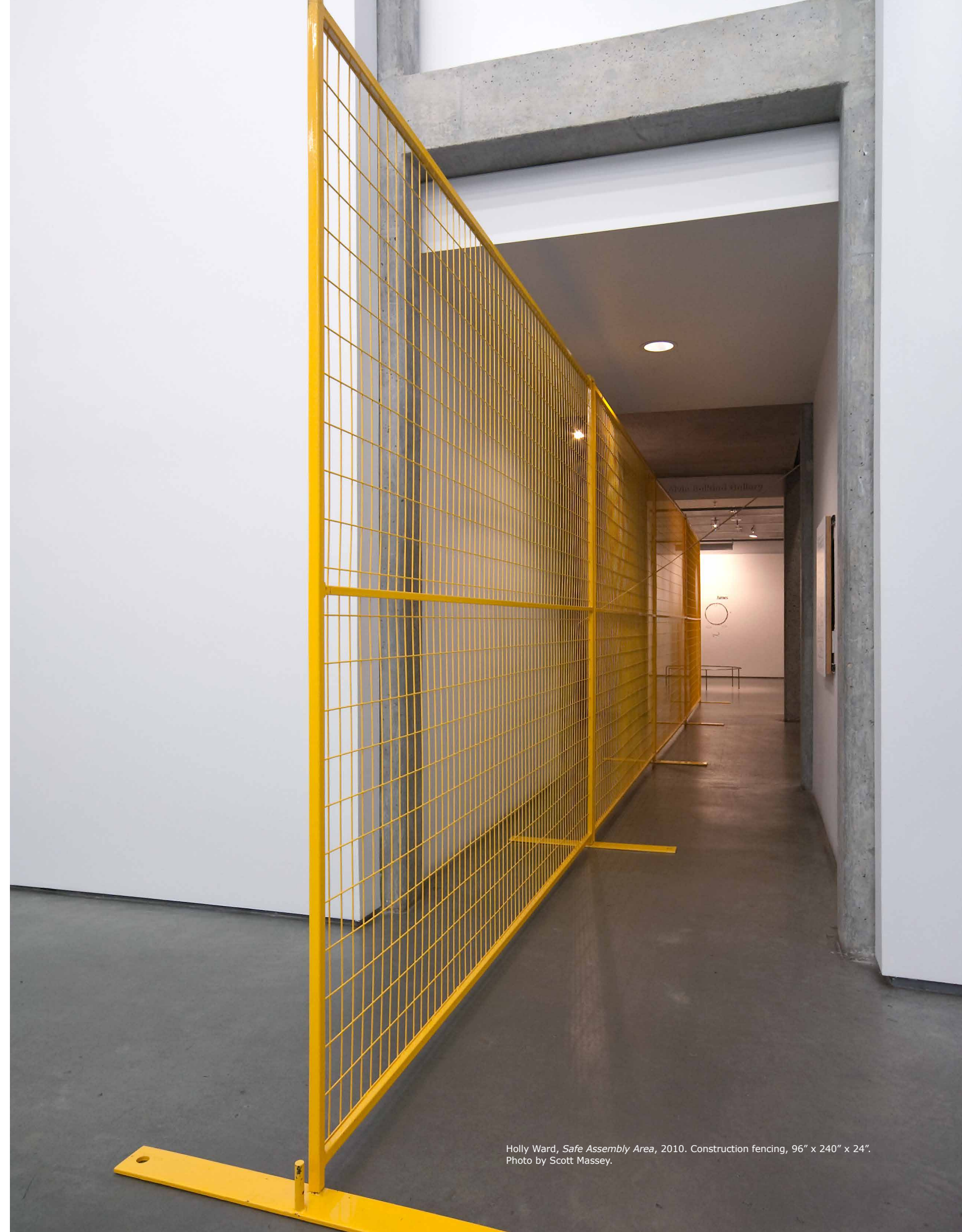
they uphold. Often situating herself directly within these systems, she uses her own subject position as an artist to probe her (and by extension her audience’s) role within them. In 2010, the Winter Olympics and Paralympics were hosted by the City of Vancouver, the city of Ward’s residence since 2000. At the time, the city was at a tipping point in regards to the housing affordability crisis that has defined the city over the past decade. The massive capital investments necessary to host this “mega-event” at the expense of much-needed affordable housing and services were hotly contested across the city. The physical infrastructure of the games — ovals, ice rinks, and ski jumps — was overlaid with a set of public-policy infrastructures demanded by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Agreements with the IOC and all levels of government, as well as temporary bylaws enacted by the City, created the financial and administrative framework necessary to implement an event of this scale. This framework, however, also included clauses that increased surveillance of citizens in the name of security, and curtailed free speech in order to protect the IOC’s corporate sponsors from protest and criticism, essentially enforcing a temporary suspension of certain basic civil liberties under the auspices of the international corporate mega-event.

Accompanying the Olympics proper was an exercise in soft power known as the Cultural Olympiad — a large pool of funding from the IOC that often accompanies the Olympics to support cultural activities during the games. This flood of resources was enthusiastically utilized by artists and cultural institutions, themselves always in a state of financial precarity, and supported a considerable amount of ambitious artistic programming during the Olympic period. One such program was *An Invitation to An Infiltration* at the Contemporary Art Gallery (CAG). This group show focused on the current state of “institutional critique,” wherein critique of the institution is itself a form of artistic practice. In the context of the Olympics and the Cultural Olympiad, the exhibition embodied institutional critique in a more immediate way. The catalogue for the show includes transcripts from an email chain between the artists, the show’s guest curator, and CAG leadership and provides a record of the anxiety around this shift in framing from abstract to urgent critique. On her own participation in the exhibition, Ward stated, “If I am to address the institution of the CAG during this specific exhibition, the larger context

of the Olympics is not a diversion away from this primary institution: a partnership has been formed, and this is significant. Any critique of the Olympics is also a critique of the institutions who accept their money.”² What follows is a long and spirited exchange about the impacts of the Olympics on the city and its citizens, and the impacts of the specific contract details upon the artists and their works in the show.

One of Ward’s two exhibited works, *Safe Assembly Area*, a ready-made sculpture created from 6 meters of yellow metal construction fencing, was created in response to the Cultural Olympiad policy that discouraged criticism as well as IOC-mandated “safe assembly zones.” These “zones” to be set up near competition venues were intended to be “lawful” protest areas away from athletes, guests, and, most important to the IOC, the media and the Olympic sponsors. By physically and metaphorically demarcating a “safe” zone within the CAG itself, Ward pointed simultaneously to the insidiousness and absurdity of the IOC’s containment strategy, highlighted the suspension of free speech for the duration of the Olympics, and made institutional complicity and responsibility (and by extension her own complicity and responsibility) in relation to the games and their funding the very subject of the work on view.

Questions of subjectivity and complicity in the face of forms of extrastatecraft were central to another group project Ward participated in, in 2015 — *Urgent Imagination*, at the Western Front in Vancouver. *Urgent Imagination* was a public-art exhibition and symposium that self-reflexively attempted to examine its involvement in the city’s development processes. The Western Front had just received money through a community amenity contribution (CAC). Through this opaque process, the City of Vancouver exchanges extra density (i.e., extra profit to developers) for a range of public benefits. While these CACs offer much-needed resources to many non-profits (in the case of the Western Front, the artist-run centre was able to purchase its own building), they do so in a way that binds the provision of public good explicitly to greater developer profits.



Holly Ward, *Safe Assembly Area*, 2010. Construction fencing, 96" x 240" x 24".
Photo by Scott Massey.

Ward's work for this project, *Monument to the Vanquished Peasants*, took as its subject a 1525 etching of the same title by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. Created in response to peasant uprisings in the sixteenth century, the etching is a schematic for a victory column composed of livestock, food, tools, and vessels and capped with "an afflicted peasant with a sword stuck into his back."³ Despite their economic enslavement, feudal serfs often had access to communal woodlands and pastures. Known as the Commons, these lands were crucial to peasants' sustenance and central to medieval social structures.

During the later feudal period, this open system was replaced by enclosures — the parceling off of this shared land into private land holdings. Ward's *Monument*, a site-specific installation on an empty lot (awaiting construction of market-rate condos), was a reproduction of Dürer's etching on a vertical banner attached to a lone flagpole amidst pre-construction rubble. Its presence connected the plight of the peasant to a contemporary context in which shared community resources, in this instance desperately needed affordable space, had become a transactional byproduct of rampant private real-estate speculation.⁴

Monument to the Vanquished Peasants became the basis for a larger body of work, *Planned Peasanthood* — a multi-faceted exploration of the ongoing concerns of the peasant/worker (i.e., "average citizen") in a neo-liberal context. Ward's aim with this expansive project is to understand how "the continued dissolution of the Commons (i.e., access to the shared resources that may provide the basic necessities of life, such as agricultural lands, clean air and water...) depletes individual and collective agency."⁵ *Planned Peasanthood* looks at this historical figure of the peasant worker and related examples of collective, land-based protest and uses them as a "speculative framework through which to examine our inherent self-determination, ingenuity and collective resilience."⁶

The idea of the Commons and land-based resistance takes on a particular resonance within the colonial context of British Columbia; what is the Commons on unceded territory? Who is served by privatization and the extraction of resources from the land? *Fluid States* makes explicit the insidiousness of building a new oil pipeline amidst a period of rapidly escalating climate change and the ongoing violence perpetrated against Indigenous people in service of the colonial state and multinational energy corporations. But *Fluid States* also points to forms of resistance that emerge from this crisis state. The idea of the Commons, expanded to embrace Indigenous world views that see land and water not as a resource, but as entities with their own rights and agency, presents powerful points of resistance to the human-centred frameworks that have orchestrated our current crisis.



Holly Ward, *Monument to the Vanquished Peasant*, 2015. Acrylic paint on nylon, powder-coated steel, baskets of produce continually replenished. Dimensions variable. Photo by Maegan Hill Carrol.



In the center of the gallery is a large drawing on silk, draped over a rugged steel and concrete structure. *Surface Waters / Open for Business* (2021–22) was created using a Japanese Zen drawing process called Suminagashi in which drops of ink are floated on water and transferred onto a substrate. The water, in this case, is from Louis Creek, part of the Thompson River watershed system directly impacted by the TMX project. Through this process, the fluid dynamics of the water itself create the image, with Ward able to control some, but not all, of the outcomes. In the assemblage *Watershed / Where the Rubber Meets the Road* (2021–22), a video captures Ward exploring the wild and sonorous waterways surrounding the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc territory. Her first-person perspective continues as she drives down the highway, capturing the North Thompson and Fraser Rivers out one window and the TMX pipeline work crews out the other. Encased within a ceramic form, the video sits atop a plinth composed of large empty water jugs (themselves an allusion to the long-term and ongoing drinking water advisories affecting many Indigenous communities as well as water’s commodification). The work captures the power and necessity of these water systems, and the dangers they face from ongoing resource extraction and the systems that drive that process.



Holly Ward, *Surface Waters / Open for Business* (detail), 2021-22. Japanese ink on silk, steel, concrete. 55 x 33 x 270"



Holly Ward, *Spill / Layin' Pipe* (detail), 2022. Acrylic, ceramic. Dimensions variable.

Spill / Layin' Pipe (2022) locates the TMX pipeline physically within the space through the placement of two glossy black acrylic disks measuring 55 centimetres in diameter (mimicking the width of the pipeline) on opposite walls of the gallery. In front of one cross-section sits a pile of small oil-slick glazed ceramic sculptures atop an acrylic plinth. These palm-sized lustrous objects represent the bitumen flowing through the pipeline and are available for purchase at the gallery as a fundraiser for the Tiny House Warriors legal defense fund. This group of Secwépemc activists (amongst others) have been actively fighting to stop the construction of the pipeline over their unceded territories. By strategically building small domestic structures along the pipeline route, these land defenders are utilizing infrastructure — both physical and legal — to assert their jurisdictional rights to their land. Their physical sites of resistance are a means to protect and assert the rights of this vital watershed.



Holly Ward, *The Pavilion*, 2009-10, Wood, plastic, hardware. Image courtesy the Artist.

By centering Indigenous activism and ways of understanding the life force of land and water, Ward is mindful not to co-opt this strategy as her own. Rather she points to this expansive and reciprocal world view as a vital form of resistance. Championed by Indigenous leaders around the world, this resistance has taken form as the “rights of nature” legal strategy, which argues for the inherent legal and jurisdictional rights of ecosystems. It has succeeded thus far in conferring legal rights on watersheds in Ecuador and New Zealand, among others. If extrastatecraft describes the quagmire of human-centred jurisdictional relations, an expansion of the “rights of nature” itself can either deepen our understanding of extrastatecraft, or supersede it altogether.

Ward spends part of the year at *The Pavilion*, her “artist facility” at Heffley Creek in Secwépemc territory. *The Pavilion* is a long-term, interdisciplinary project, commended by Ward in 2009 as part of an artist residency at Langara College, Vancouver. In 2011, *The Pavilion* was moved to its current location, where it continues to function as an independent studio and self-funded residency space. In the summer of 2020, a “heat dome” descended upon *The Pavilion*, the region, and most of the province,

pushing temperatures well into the 40s for multiple days in a row. This extreme climate system led to rampant wildfires, was responsible for over 600 heat-related deaths, and incinerated not just many structures, but the entire town of Lytton, BC. The works in *Fluid States* were made during this period of extreme weather, when Ward was also on evacuation alert, bringing home with a ferocity that human-fuelled climate change is not imminent, but immediate. In *Fluid States* and throughout her entire career, probing her role as an artist working through crisis has been an ongoing preoccupation for Ward. With a wariness to aestheticize catastrophe, but a strong compulsion to respond, she employs her art practice as a strategy to develop points of possibility and imagination within a collective project of resistance.

1. Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (New York: Verso, 2014), 6, emphasis added.
2. Holly Ward, quoted in "Subject: What are you planning to do?," in *An Invitation to An Infiltration* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2010), exhibition catalogue, 19.
3. Albrecht Dürer, quoted in "Unterweisung der Messung (Treatise on Measurement), 1525," in *Planned Peasanthood* (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery), exhibition catalogue, 18.
4. The whole *Urgent Imagination* project can still be viewed online at <http://urgentimagination.front.bc.ca/>
5. Holly Ward, quoted in *Planned Peasanthood*, 4.
6. Ibid.

KELOWNA ART GALLERY

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We acknowledge that the Kelowna Art Gallery operates on the unceded traditional territory of the syilx/Okanagan people.



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Holly Ward, *Watershed / Where the Rubber Hits the Road*, 2021-22.
 Ceramic, polycarbonate plastic, acrylic, ratchet straps, iPad, video loop (38:44 mins).



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