



# Aperto Vancouver

Clint Burnham

TIM LEE, *Untitled (Duck Soup, the Marx Bros, 1927)*, 2002. Light jet print, diptych, 130 x 104 and 91 x 74 cm. Courtesy of Tracey Lawrence Gallery, Vancouver.

A CITY ON THE EDGE, a 'terminal city,' Vancouver lies in a region that gave the world grunge, *Generation X*, the 1990 WTO protests, and cyberpunk (not to mention Pamela Anderson, Bryan Adams, and Microsoft), so it's no surprise that the generation of artists who emerged in the '90s in Vancouver (the slackers) have followed in the globalized footsteps of their seniors, the Vancouver school of photo conceptualists. The infrastructure that's developed at the same time has included a vivacious artist-run scene (often government grant-supported centers of experimentalism, notably the Western Front, Video Inn, Or Gallery, Artspeak, and the Helen Pitt Gallery); commercial galleries that tackle the impossible task of selling post-conceptualism to a bourgeoisie barely a century in existence (Tracey Lawrence, Catriona Jeffries, Monte Clark); civic galleries that manage not badly on a pittance (the Vancouver Art Gallery, Contemporary Art Gallery, Presentation House); art history and studio programs at the universities and the art schools; and a great deal of catalogue publication but little to no art journalism (because of little to no collecting). While popular

images of the city — courtesy of *Rolling Stone* and America's drug czars — are fixated on the dope-smoking laid-backness of the place, more properly it's a city in transition from frontier resource capital of the timber, fishing, and mining industries (now mostly in decline, of course) to a multicultural, technological Hollywood North on the Pacific Rim, a global city with widening income and health gaps between the rich and poor. The city's Downtown Eastside and its needle drug politics provide one set of imagery, and hockey / heavy metal / monster truck riots another — all of this against a backdrop of natural beauty and crappy architecture. The class or geographic divisions in the city are also to be found in critical conflict in the art world: two of the most significant controversies are over the seriousness of the new generation and how to view these artists in relation to modernism.

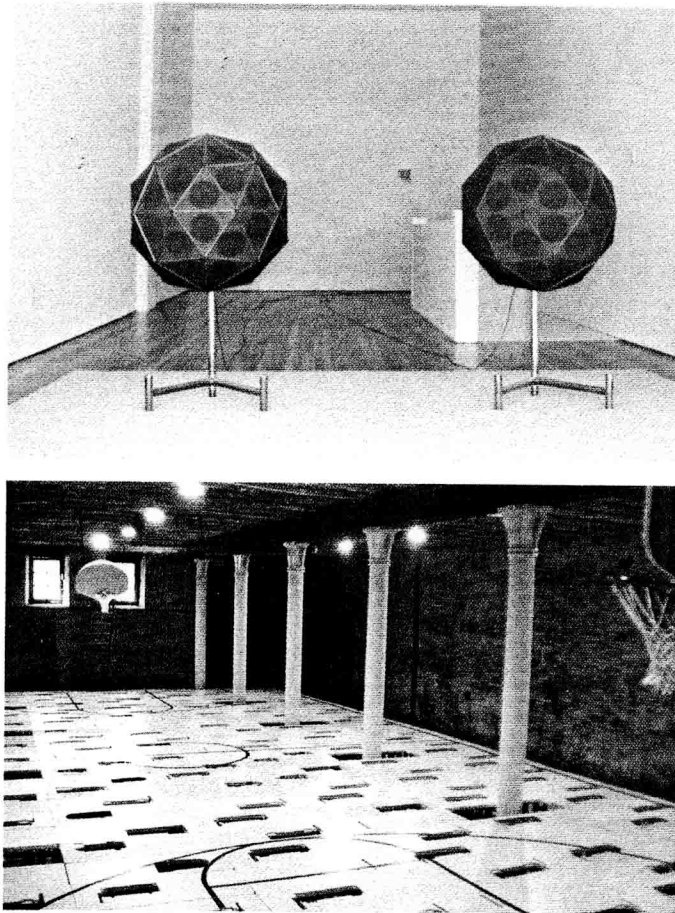
This first debate, over the younger artists' uneasy inheritance of theory-driven conceptualism, can be traced in the history of that generation's emergence. As happened globally, Vancouver's slacker/low/object generation of artists came of age in the mid '90s, when installations of Star Wars or E.T. figures in sloppily-

made *Wunderkabinett* started appearing on the avant-fringe world of the artist-run centers. Reid Shier, then curator at the Or Gallery (and now at the Power Plant in Toronto), began showing post-queer native art and faux-indie zines of the most appropriate kind given the Or's location in the heart of Vancouver's skid row. Two key moments in the reception of these new artists were the group shows "Buddy Palace" at the Or (1997) and "6: New Vancouver Modern" (1998) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) gallery. "Buddy Palace" was curated by Shier and Geoffrey Farmer and included the work of Jason McLean, Lisa Prentice, Brian Jungen, and Christine Corlett. Jungen's work in particular has attracted a great deal of attention over the past few years as he melds a Warholesque or McLuhanesque take on pop culture with meditations on the institution and the abject status of native people (First Nations) in Canada. In the "Prototype for New Understanding" series (begun in 1998), Jungen deconstructs Nike running shoes, turning them into sublime simulacra of West Coast native masks and ornaments. Thus the archetypal commodity of late 20<sup>th</sup> century youth culture is retro-

fitted into the authentic/kitsch (take your pick) of aboriginal art. One fetish meets another under the Plexiglas vitrine of the art museum. But Jungen is hardly interested in being constrained by his native ancestry and will also fuse sweatshops with basketball courts (*Court*, which was installed at Triple Candie in New York in 2004) or, magnificently, will make massive skeletons out of cut-up plastic chairs (*Shapeshifter*, 2000).

"6: New Vancouver Modern" was a more self-consciously institutionalizing exhibition, taking place at UBC's Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery and curated by a key figure, Scott Watson, who a decade earlier had established the careers of the 'young Romantic' painters. "6," which included the work of Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, Damian Moppett, Ron Terada, Steven Shearer, and Kelly Wood, raised the stakes for the new generation and hence raised questions, in the popular media as well as the art press, about the intellectual content (or lack thereof) in the work. In terms of generating interest, all of these artists have gone on to fairly spectacular careers, finding dealers in town as well as abroad — the South Granville

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stretch of galleries run by Catriona Jeffries, Monte Clark, and Tracey Lawrence has essentially cornered the market in young, hip art. And of course nothing raises the ire of academized artists and critics more than the youngsters' selling (out?). Thus in his review of "6," Ken Lum, a key senior artist of the photo conceptualists, while praising much of the YBA-ishness of the work, saw an overall facile application of pop superficiality to conceptualism's methods. Whereas Lum and his cohorts — Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, and Stan Douglas — sought solace in the referentiality of art history and quasi-Marxist gloom, the bratty new generation had thrown Adorno out the window.

Tellingly, it was this apolitical pop sensibility that a few years later earned these artists praise from Toronto curator/critic Philip Monk, who, prefacing his 2002 show "bounce" at the Power Plant (featuring work by Jungen, MacLeod, and Moppett), saw a break with the "melancholic skepticism" of the Frankfurt school. Adorno's

version of "don't throw the baby out with the bathwater" was a dialectical reminder not to dismiss all culture because of its class trappings. Now we have "don't throw the bathwater out with the baby": you can still make art of reference and semi-theoretical rigor, but skateboarding and cartoons have replaced *Capital* and Manet. This debate can be problematized in a number of ways. First of all, the older generation, while academically Marxist or critical, have for the most part avoided actual 'barricades' activism (indeed, by the mid '90s Wall in particular was moving away from Marxism). No doubt as the new generation ages they'll stop skateboarding, too (if they ever started). Second, the rupture between generations can obscure a material continuity; from the artist-run scene to the world of glossy magazines (based elsewhere, like *Canadian Art*) and academic discourse, much of the critical and institutional support/debate has taken place in sites that were already existing. Indeed, the success of the slackers in the commercial

gallery scene in Vancouver demonstrates the accommodation taking place. Finally, the artists themselves have turned toward more theoretical and art-historical contexts for their work as it has gained a larger and international audience.

And thus the context within which to view younger artists' work has also become a terrain for debate. While this discussion has taken place in academic critiques by trained art historians (William Wood, Bill Linsley, and Serge Guilbault in particular), it has also emerged in the writings of poets and novelists. There are a number of crossover moments in the Vancouver art world — with music, architecture, film — yet it is perhaps the relation between writers and artists that has been the most productive, at least for the artists. The Kootenay School of Writing, a writer-run center that has put on classes, readings, and talks over the past 20 years (as well as the anthology *Writing Class*), has also provided writers who could critique and contextualize artistic production. Peter Culley,

a respected poet (*Hammertown*) and musicologist, has written on any number of local artists; similarly, novelist Michael Turner (*The Pornographer's Poem*) has collaborated with and written on many of the key artists on this scene. And those of us working from outside art history proper have been most anxious to show our props by dropping, as they say, a little science.

Thus both Culley and Turner have utilized the photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher as context for Vancouver artists. Whereas Culley despairs of such a modernist project, Turner is interested in and redeemed by it. In an essay on Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project* (1998–2003), in which the artist photographed every bag of garbage she threw out for five years, Culley ruminates on the possibility of such post-Becher endeavors in an era in which every idiot on the planet has a website of photographs of abandoned sawmills or their Hot Wheels collections. Culley isn't sure that such taxonomies can be redeemed by artistic practice or by the insti-



tution. For him, Wood's photographs are in danger of being swamped by cyber-dreck — what Fredric Jameson has called “the eBay imaginary.”

Michael Turner refers to the Bechers in his review of “Baja to Vancouver,” a traveling exhibition of art from the West Coast of the continent that touched down at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the summer of 2004. Discussing Steven Shearer's massive collages/archives of guitarists posing with their instruments (*Guitar #5*), Turner views this project in the shadow (or reflection) of the Bechers, rescuing it from the kind of literalism that populist institutions sometimes propagandize (i.e., the ‘aboutness’ of art about pop culture). Shearer's archives of rockers has been developing for some time; a show a few years ago at Monte Clark Gallery displayed an impressive range of heavy rock fandom. And while now is the time that, as recently noted in *Vice* magazine, college kids want to look like they're in *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* (trucker hats, vintage rock t-shirts, mullet hairstyles), Shearer's work ably illus-

trates Marx's witticism that if history occurs twice, the first time it will be as tragedy, the second time as farce. The Bechers are late modernists who wish they could be as monumental as modernism, just as Shearer doesn't so much want to be a rock star as he wants to *want* to be a rock star.

The artistic practice of Brian Jungen, Kelly Wood, and Steven Shearer often develops a materiality of transgression and hybridity — from running shoes to trash, from heavy metal to light sculpture — that has emerged over the past decade because of, and in spite of, strong local institutions and lackluster local collecting. As with the old school, the new school has gone global out of necessity as well as desire; throwing theory out the window, it now discovers it needs theory the better to throw Vancouver out the window — all the better to crawl out that window from the basement suite of regionalism. ■

*Clint Burnham is a writer, critic, and teacher based in Vancouver.*



This page clockwise: KELLY WOOD, *Year Two and Year Four, Continuous Garbage Project* (installation view), 1998-2003. 272 C-prints, 51 x 41 cm each. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver; BRIAN JUNGEN, *Prototype for a New Understanding #14*, 2003. Nike Air Jordans, human hair, 64 x 36 x 30 cm. Collection of Lawrence B. Benenson, New York. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver; JASON McLEAN, *Underneath the Weather*, 2004. Acrylic and ink on paper, 45 x 60 cm. Courtesy of Tracey Lawrence Gallery, Vancouver. Opposite page clockwise: MYFANWY MacLEOD, *Don't Stop Dreaming*, 2004. Speakers, CD, carpet, C-print. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver; STEVEN SHEARER, *Metal Archive*, 2001. Mixed media collage, 122 x 91 cm. Courtesy of Francesco Noero Gallery, Turin; BRIAN JUNGEN, *Court* (installation view at Triple Candie, New York), 2004. 224 sweatshop tables, paint, ladders, basketball hoops, 3.75 x 8.5 x 21.5 m. Collection of Bob Rennie, Rennie Management Corporation. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

