6

NEW VANCOUVER MODERN

Scott Watson

In 1965, Alvin Balkind organized an exhibition for the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery he called "Beyond Regionalism."[1] Acknowledging that a post-war generation of Vancouver artists had achieved national recognition as a "movement," Balkind chose to locate their aesthetic disposition to earlier, pre-war modernisms. Perhaps he wanted, without wounding, to point out how recherché the "intellectual basis" of the Vancouver school was. He found it to be "essentially School of Paris, from Cézanne on, with a background scrim—like a racial memory—on which was projected a slide of English Landscape Painting." In other words, despite the national attention for an art that finally spoke of its own time and place, Vancouver's fifties' moderns were decades behind the times. While their art could be said to be "emotionally sympathetic" to the New York School—the most influential movement of the 1950s—Balkind concluded that "Regionalism ... was the prime aspect of [Vancouver's] uniqueness."

But by 1965, another generation of Vancouver artists had come to the fore. They had dispensed with landscape references and therefore with "any claims to regionalism. In its place, a new internationalism stepped to the forefront." Balkind credited, among other factors, the new exchange of ideas in an international art world that had become more visible through magazines and a new ease in travel. This transatlantic international art world itself had come into existence only in the post-war world.

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International art engaged urban sensibilities, realities, and images. The artists were interested in new surfaces, new pigments, new media—the more industrialized and less "natural" the better.

Reading this thirty-four years later, it might strike one that the forces, pressures, and ideas that inform the making of art in Vancouver are still very much cast into antagonisms over the duties demanded by "regionalism" versus those required to serve "internationalism." Furthermore, these antagonisms animate much of the history of Vancouver's art institutions. The kind of paintings alluded to by Balkind as regional are, after all, still very much with us as reassuring emblems of both modernity and place. All the more reassuring, one imagines, because the post-war "modern period" is now a part of history, with a beginning, middle, and end. What was once the future is now heritage.

Balkind took care, in the subtitle of his exhibition, to say "An exhibition of works by eight younger artists in the Vancouver area," thus avoiding the word "region" (for which he substituted "area") and also the term "Vancouver artist." He must have wanted to identify a local phenomenon without giving any expectation that it spoke of local essences. In recent years, the promotion of a regional identity in the visual arts has become something of an industry. The Vancouver Art Gallery's opening exhibition in 1983, "Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931–1983," was conceived by Luke Rombout, who, paradoxically, would on many other occasions express his impatience with the parochialism of Vancouver. That exhibition's attempt to paper over the contradiction at its heart—which was to make an exhibition of local art that did not extol regionalism—was thwarted by the refusal of the city's four most internationally active artists to participate in it. Nonetheless, the perception that the Vancouver Art Gallery's spectacle of local art had somehow turned its back on something essential to regional art—despite the inclusion of more than one hundred artists—provoked a counter-salon, "The October Show," which featured a somewhat alternate and also large cast. In turn, "The October Show" spawned "The Warehouse Show" and the "Artropolis" exhibitions. With the Vancouver Art Gallery's "Topographies," there appears a new drive to describe and legitimize the aspirations of a region for artist identity(ies). These exhibitions provoke and then calm anxieties about identity and community in a part of the world where unresolved land treaties, a rapacious resource extraction industry, and the very name "British Columbia" delay indefinitely an awakening from colonial mentality. The identities and communities that are celebrated in large regional exhibitions don't exist in actuality. Depending on how you look at it, then, regionalism has been an illusion that helped people turn away from reality—refuge from politics—or it's an illusion that contains a legitimate dream of place and community.

Since Balkind's "Beyond Regionalism" exhibition, there have flourished schools, individuals, and coteries who see themselves in terms of an international horizon. One would include the activity around Intermedia (1966–68), Image Bank (1968–1973), the N.E. Thing Co. (1966–1978), Western Front (1973–), Video In (1971-), and all the various formations, groups, and circles that have pursued international contacts, networks, and ideas since the 1960s. Remarkably, it is through these "international" practices that Vancouver first comes to be represented in art, not through the nature abstractions of the regionalists. Urban reality is represented as a crisis whose local conditions and circumstances represent, in turn, more general crises recognizable almost anywhere. Issues around identity and community surface in a more diverse way in an "international" context, whereas regionalism has no new proposal for negotiating identity. It is through the criticality of "internationalism" that society begins to register in art and that strategies are developed for art that seeks to dispel rather than maintain illusions.

This present exhibition, "6: New Vancouver Modern," was conceived to advance the kind of exhibition Alvin Balkind was thinking of in 1965. It is a small exhibition intended to concentrate on six artists whose work is just beginning to attract attention. The title rejects the idea that modernist notions of art making and the role of art

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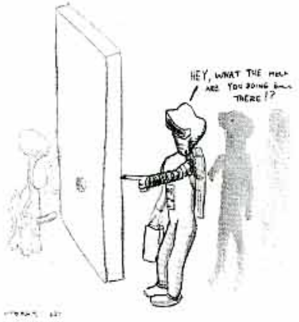
are completely dead and buried. The use of the word "modern" is meant to argue that a utopian impulse continues in the art of today and that it is still found in gestures of negation and refusal of all that is comfortably established as signs of social order. "Modern" is also meant to highlight the perversity of the work in the exhibition; that is, while it faces contemporary reality head on, it also turns away from it in calculated aesthetic alibis. In Vancouver, the word "modern" will also refer the post-war modernist west-coast "renaissance" in art and architecture, a period that is increasingly seen as a golden age but one whose work was interrupted and unfinished. But, as the work in this exhibition proves, we cannot return to finish tasks left undone long ago. The art in "6" depends on the disclosure of contradictions and dialectical impasses in the modernist trajectory. Some of these have been present for hundreds of years; others have only recently come into view.

It is a proposal of the exhibition that the artists all have an important relation to modernism, although each artist is working with different strategies. It is possible to find issues and stances that are shared by more than one artist in the exhibition. The art in "6" is characterized by a concern for sources in popular culture, processes of abstraction, and the hybridization of media. In a way, these are the characteristics of the internationalism Balkind identified in 1965. Much of the work has a formal restraint and rigour, yet the theme often touches on excess and waste. There is a dialectical dimension to this organized treatment of the disorderly and unruly. Much of the work refers directly or implicitly to the culture of children and teens as sites of pleasure and gratification no longer available. Like new work in Toronto, New York, Tokyo, London, or Los Angeles, it could be seen as a reaction against the institutionalization of theory. For some critics, this seeming reaction makes the work politically ambiguous. It flirts with slacker culture, defeatism, and indifference while attempting to re-establish the critical position of the art object.

It is also possible, I hope, to see that there are polarities at work in "6." The exhibition is installed to bring these out. One could, for example, pair the work of Ron Terada with that of Geoffrey Farmer to show that a deconstructive project is at work in Terada's appropriation of sixties' minimalist painting and that Farmer's anarchic image production is grounded in formal questions.

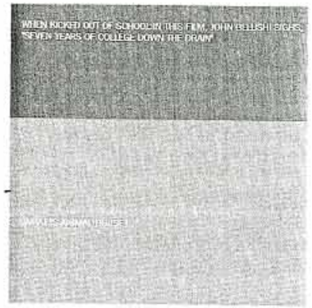
Ron Terada engages a minimalist strategy (in this case, one belonging to Lawrence Weiner) in his largely monochromatic paintings with texts that appropriate canonical conceptualist paintings. His paintings are about surface and presence. They represent through text. In the case of the series presented for "6," the texts are questions on geography, history, etc., from the game show *Jeopardy*. He asks us to think of them, therefore, as landscapes or history paintings.

Geoffrey Farmer's work with sci-fi, deploying "relics" from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The X-Files*, is about the psycho-sexual sociology of certain images produced for the entertainment industry. His reading of the popular imagination is a reworking of that imagination so that it follows his directives and allows him entry into its unconscious dynamic. One could say that the work of Terada and Farmer sprang from quite different inspirations. Terada employs aesthetic strategies that we are used to interpreting as impersonal. The monochrome realizes the autonomy and impersonal status of the art object and signals its refusal to accommodate the desire for pictures. If the issue of landscape is addressed, it is on a conceptual level. Farmer, by contrast, invites the viewer to experience something (literally) behind the monochrome as he presents a closet full of props and video behind his version of the monolith of Kubrick's film.


HEY, WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOING BACK THERE!?

Geoffrey Farmer, *Hey, what the heck are you doing back there?*, 1997

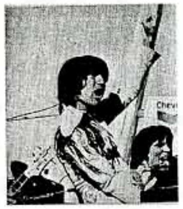
Terada's paintings reduce the genres of landscape or history painting to essential morphemes. Farmer's installation is polymorphous, posing an expanding field of


WHEN KICKED OUT OF SCHOOL IN THIS FILM, JOHN BELUSHI SIGHS, "SEVEN YEARS OF COLLEGE DOWN THE DRAIN"

Ron Terada, *Untitled (When Kicked...)*, 1997

images and ways to connect them. But in the works for "6," both artists, by coincidence, have used the monochrome as their central image. Farmer's exploration of the circulation of the fetish in popular sci-fi images is in dialogue with the certitude of the blank nothing of the monolith. And while Terada's paintings depend upon the same certitude, they are destabilized by their reference to the epistemological game show, *Jeopardy*. The questions are polymorphous, uncertain, dubious compendiums of Eurocentric clichés about the rest of the world. The reductiveness of the *Jeopardy* questions always leads to partial, myopic landscapes or truncated history. In *Jeopardy's* world of knowledge, the events of the Second World War are on par with knowledge of television entertainment. The paintings try to hang on to the process by which reduction achieves what is essential by stripping away all that is superfluous. Yet they reintroduce an infinite detail with the text, much of which we recognize as false, culturally determined generalities about otherness.

Both Geoffrey Farmer and another artist in the exhibition, Steven Shearer, deal with an evocation of the remembered past. The science fiction of *2001: A Space Odyssey* is the past of our future. Shearer's subject matter comes from teen fanzines of the 1970s when people like Leif Garrett and Shaun Cassidy were stars.[2] The condition of adolescence is usually abject and its celebrity world reflects this abjection. Shaun and Leif look like the teenage girls that adore them. Of course, looking at these pictures now—monumentalized as rather cool and distant paintings that refer to Warhol, Polke, and Cady Noland by re-enacting the queasy sense of triumph that is still to be had from taking topical newspaper pictures and turning all their affect into aesthetics—reminds one that Leif and Shaun are not celebrities any more. One can already see that their flabby, androgynous bodies and "cute" features, appealing to a bisexual decade, won't age well into a commodifiable manliness. They are arrested, forever adolescent. High-school yearbooks interested Ron Terada, Farmer has done an installation on Spielberg's *E.T.*, Myfanwy MacLeod has been interested in slacker skateboarders. One could say that for some of the artists in this exhibition adolescence is the location of a critical, negative sense that all is not well with the social order. Shearer's pictures are partly a refusal of the world the pictures presage. He is, I think, interested in the seventies' teen celebrity system as the twilight of modernism, an idyll of obliviousness as global consumer capitalism marshalled itself—partly through the teen celebrity cult of the boy—to colonize childhood, prolong adolescence, and discourage any notion that anyone will ever become an adult citizen. Because it is vanishing and about to be fossilized, the world of the adolescent, as it used to be, has become a place where one is forced to think about modernism, social engineering, modules, and identity. The anarchic and irresponsible energies of adolescence are celebrated as the desire for freedom rather than as a condition of freedom. Shearer's pictures have the advantage of hindsight. We know the idyll will end in disillusionment and failure. Yet the sense of a return engagement or encounter with long-standing cultural tropes, both high and low, is one of the strongest features of this exhibition. It is a return to an earlier time in the culture and an earlier time in the artists' lives. It is partly an exploration of the long shadow adolescence casts over adult life and partly a display of the vast repertoire of image fossils that are piling up



Steven Shearer, *Chevron*, 1997

source for Steven Shearer's Module
Photo by Gert Högström, courtesy Studio Vista Limited, London, 1969

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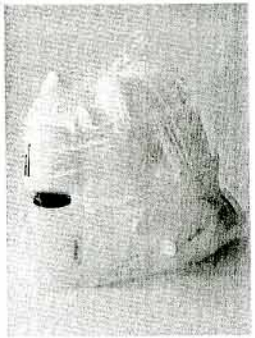
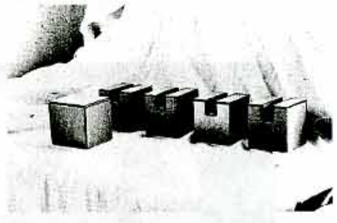
as communications media create and abandon billions of images.

Shearer's sculpture for this exhibition—an activity cell/pavilion—is based on a 1960s prototype for a recreational module. True to the reform-minded fifties' modernist imagination, the teens read as leisure activity (although one of the girls contents herself by watching the boy read). Delinquency has been banished from this picture of leisure, whose other, disruptive aspect is free time, time on one's hands, or idleness. Shearer places an electric guitar in his module as an emblem of anarchy, celebrity, and aspirations that move beyond middle-class contentment. His module also reinserts the module's other other—minimalist sculpture—into its reappearance. The sculpture represents an "historical living environment" whose discontinuity with the present is emphasized by the reference to canonical minimalist sculpture.


Kelly Wood, study for *White Garbage Bag*, 1997

One might think of Kelly Wood's large photographs of plastic garbage bags as performing a similar operation. Wood has photographed the bags in a formal studio situation. They could be big lumps of bronze, provoking a reading of the potential energy of the forms struggling to emerge from the bag as some sort of heroic expressionism. The studio set-up also refers to fashion, a world in which garbage bags are not, but could be, fashionable. For fashion continually draws on the marginal and dispossessed to renew the bourgeois palate's hunger for new sensations. In some of her works the subject matter is quite clear. We know that she has photographed a garbage bag, an unworthy material for such an heroic humanist statement on the ontology of becoming. She thus points to waste, excess, and all our contemporary discourses of marginality as the only sites for such an old-fashioned humanist depiction. In other photographs her procedures hide the nature of the plastic surface of the garbage bag, and the reference to paintings of big ominous shapes—also a trope of late modernist painting (Rothko)—becomes evident. Thus, while the photographs reassert modernist abstraction, they place the stress of a negative dialectic on the operation and invite a social reading that would link the packaging/repression of garbage with the collapse of socialist and humanitarian ideals in postmodern society.


Damian Moppett, *12th and Dragamahn St.*, 1997

Damian Moppett's sci-fi dioramas might usefully be compared to Geoffrey Farmer's use of similar material: the cosmos as imagined by a teenager. As in Farmer's work, the conventions of sci-fi are the unconscious of the present representing as much an inability to come to terms with the traumas of the past as they are a projection of the present upon the future. Moppett's *Cities of the Future* are black and white photographs of cardboard utopian architectural modules laid out on tables and desks in domestic settings. They reverse the modernist priority for urban networks over domestic space and show utopia as conceived in the space least likely to benefit from it—the disappearing domestic world. In a funny way, Moppett's little toy cities mix Judd-like rows of articulated cubes, organic towers, and lyrical out-of-scale furniture models. The reference to a child's building blocks is cannily elegiac, a dysfunctional proposal that nevertheless insists on an imagination of the future. *Cities of the Future* gives the patriarch/patrician/architect's view while exposing the child's need to master his/her environment. The domestic setting for the cities, as table-top fantasies, emphasizes the sense that they are games.

The world of the child or entertainments for children is represented in our culture by cartoons. Artists like Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley—themselves educated as conceptual artists—excavate repressed narratives of sexual aggression and humiliation from cartoons. Their work is a prolonged attack on the figure of the father, the figure who brutalizes and maims the child until it conforms to the social order. Their

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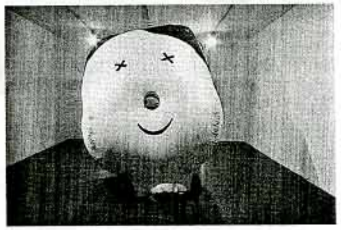
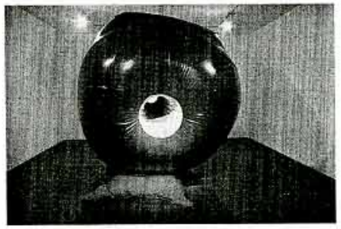
"Fuck You" art has been for several years extremely influential in art schools. The use of cartoons mediates an expressionist abjection over the impossibility of ever getting over the trauma inflicted by the father and cools it out and gives it broad cultural references.



Myfanwy MacLeod, *My Idea of Fun*, front view 1997



Myfanwy MacLeod, *My Idea of Fun*, rear view 1997

Myfanwy MacLeod's interest in cartoons is partly in the nightmare culture they represent, that of the father who devours his children. Her formal interest is in how cartoons play on somatic transformation. Bodies with extending "rubber" limbs and bugged-out eyes might suggest an imagination of a liberated body, much more adaptable to circumstances than is our own. Or the cartoon body might just be the plaything of the sadistic father who revives the damaged cartoon body only to torture it again. In her work for "6: New Vancouver Modern," MacLeod has moved away from the issues she explored in 1997's *My Idea of Fun* (a giant inflated dead head fuck toy—an offering of one's entire being to penetration by the father) toward more cryptic explorations that suggest freedom rather than complete subjugation. Or is it just that the avowal of desire for the father is the only possibility for "freedom" under his law?

There is a relationship between this resistance to and exposure of the law of the father and the recourse to adolescent culture and modernism's twilight. They are on the same continuum. It is in adolescence that we learn to distance ourselves from our parents' ideas of who we are and should be and begin to demand independence. In the work in "6," this is presented as a culturally incomplete task. The work is modernist not only because it refers to art and popular culture of post-war modernism, but because its strategies take on cultural criticism with a renewed attempt to synthesize Freud and Marx. The works do not illustrate theoretical propositions—a strategy of the eighties that, if you think about it, relied totally on the book page as a model. Rather, they set in motion again the contradictions that are necessary to a work of art that sets out to bear witness.

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1. October 6–23, 1965. An exhibition of works by eight younger artists in the Vancouver area. Iain Baxter, Claude Breeze, Brian Fisher, Ann Kipling, David Mayrs, Gary Nairn [Lee Nova], Marianna Schmidt, Jack Wise.

2. I remember George Bowering's mid-1970s initiation of a year-long game at the Cecil Pub directed to the question "Who is more beautiful, Leif Garrett or Shaun Cassidy?"

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