



INTERTIDAL: VANCOUVER ART AND ARTISTS ANTWERP

Vancouver came to prominence in the mid-1980s when its art scene was recognized as a breeding ground for artists well versed in history and theory, and whose work is noted for its intellectual rigor and formal clarity. The main protagonists in this loosely knit group of photo-conceptual artists were Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Roy Arden, Stan Douglas and, slightly peripherally, Rodney Graham—now household names.

The conditions which pushed Vancouver, a geographically isolated port on the far edge (from a European perspective) of the Western Hemisphere to the forefront of contemporary art production, and the current forces which maintain it there, are among the central concerns of *Intertidal* [December 17, 2005—February 26, 2006]. Instigated by Antwerp's Museum of Contemporary Art (MuKHA) as a case study in the relevance of home-grown practices to art's global sphere, the show was co-curated by MuKHA's Dieter Roelstraete and Scott Watson, director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery of the University of British Columbia.

The title refers to a specific geographic zone—the five-meter wide swath of mud flats unveiled at low tide along stretches of Vancouver's shoreline—which has become, for some, a potent symbol of loss. From the late nineteenth century to the 1970s building boom, this no-man's-land (in Canada, private property legally ends at the mean high tide mark) was populated by squatters—outcasts, dropouts, and recluses later joined by hippies and artists—who built homes from scavenged materials and lived peaceably in self-determined fashion. Their eviction from the flats and the destruction of their dwellings by the civic authorities overseeing Vancouver's make-over into a modern metropolis marked the end, and nearly the erasure, of a utopian model of existence.

Local artists' initial responses to this transformation yielded the documentary photographs, texts, performances, and films which were the forerunners of photo-conceptualism—depictions of social landscapes that belied popular notions of British Columbia's so-called natural paradise. Abundantly presented in the exhibition's rich archival section, these historical materials show the late-1960s to mid-1970s Vancouver art scene divided between a hippie counterculture and a group of intellectual, internationally oriented artists thrust

together by dint of limited local resources (its mostly male members played in the same bands, attended and taught at the same schools, and wrote about each other's work). Other documents trace the latter group's preoccupation with degraded landscapes to the "Dan Graham/Robert Smithson effect," which was also the source of their photojournalistic impulse, already detectable in Jeff Wall's 1969 bookwork *Landscape Manual*. Smithson's *Glue Pour*, a work executed for Lucy Lippard's 1970 Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition *995,000* (so-named for the city's population, which has since doubled), gave Vancouver artists the opportunity to witness first-hand a manifestation of Smithson's ideas on entropy and the anti-monument.

Intertidal includes two key works by Wallace, the senior member of and mentor to the first generation of Vancouver conceptualists: his 1973 photo triptych *La Mélancolie de la Rue*, reputed to have launched photo-conceptualism; and video documentation of his 1983 performance *At Work*, featuring the artist reading silently in a sparsely furnished gallery over the course of a week. Wall, represented only by his *Landscape Manual*, and Ken Lum, whose oeuvre is summarized by the 1978 performance video *Entertainment for Surrey*, are, like Wallace, confined to the exhibition's historical section. Their individual legacies are nonetheless readily apparent throughout the show, which intersperses works by their colleagues Arden, Graham, and Douglas with those of ten artists who have gained recognition in photo-conceptualism's wake.

Not surprisingly, photography and video predominate, but sculpture, painting, and drawing are present as well. Landscape, in its conflicted urban/rural and natural/cultivated/commodified/simulated states, is evoked, if not actually depicted, in Liz Magor's sculpture, and the photography of Scott McFarland, Kelly Wood, and Vikky Alexander. Pioneered by Lum, identity politics is alive and well in Tim Lee's performance photographs and video, as well as in the work of Rebecca Belmore (performance video) and Brian Jungen (sculpture). Ron Terada probes the social implications and aesthetic repercussions of Vancouver's "art city" identity, as well as the problems inherent in following post-conceptual photography's famous act. Damian Moppett's video

parodies the role of the artist hero and the high seriousness of his calling by casting himself as a solitary trapper surviving by his wits in Vancouver's primeval rainforest.

Rodney Graham, who was considered a maverick among first generation photo-conceptualists for his promiscuous medium- and genre-hopping ways, and for his self-deprecating humor and ironic stance toward the Vancouver scene's accrued authority, is as influential a figure as Wall among younger Vancouver artists. Easily quotable, Graham's photographs of inverted trees, his densely layered impersonations of film characters posing as other characters, and his penchant for overtly split images—antithetical to Wall's seamless panoramas—find echoes in works by artists with widely divergent practices, suggesting the many avenues his work has opened up.

Graham's video and sound installation *Edge of a Wood*, 1999, fuses the genres of landscape and thriller. It is one of the show's most powerful works. Other "bests" include Stan Douglas' *Nut•ka*, 1996, a film that elegantly deconstructs the contested European discovery of Vancouver Island; and Geoffrey Farmer's *I thought that I could make a machine that would pierce the fabric of reality, in your world it appears as a 16th century sign*, 2004, a video projection of an apocalyptic explosion at sea, incandescent in its shimmering beauty, on a small shop sign-shaped object mounted perpendicular to the wall. The work's portentous title, which seems to come from out of this world, accentuates the subject's unsettling back-to-the-future resonance, while its diminutive size, approximately that of a small computer screen, keeps the image distant and visually riveting—an apt postmodern trope.

Large survey shows are inevitably frustrating on one level or another, and *Intertidal*, which comes across as possibly a tad tententious, is no exception. Yet the exhibition succeeds remarkably well in activating its European audience's desire to know more. Having made the artists' acquaintance at the equivalent of a big neighborhood party, the next step is to see how well each sustains our undivided attention.

—Sarah McFadden

ABOVE: Stan Douglas, *Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, 2001, chromogenic print, 66 x 426.9 cm [courtesy of the artist, David Zwirner, New York, and MuKHA]