

Rodney Graham
Linden, Ronse (Flanders Trees), 1989
monochrome colour print
90 ½ × 71 in. (230 × 180 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

**1,986,965
(2001 CENSUS)**

**AN INTERTIDAL
TRAVELOGUE**

Dieter Roelstraete

Edgeways

IN MOST ACCOUNTS OF THE REMARKABLE "STORY" OF VANCOUVER'S rise to global artistic pre-eminence in the Eighties and Nineties²—a history closely related, intertwined even, with that of the city's highly idiosyncratic brand of conceptualism that came to be known internationally as "photo-conceptualism" or "postconceptual photography"—the same names, "photo-conceptualism's usual suspects," keep reappearing time and again; they typically include Roy Arden, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace, among others. Many, if not all, of these historiographies would also add Rodney Graham to this shortlist—and with good reason.³ Much to his credit, however—and that is exactly what makes him a crucial presence in the conceptual framework of the current exhibition, which, emphatically, does *not* dwell on the photo-conceptual lineage alone—Graham has always been something of a maverick, whose influence, taking in such typically "Grahamesque" tropes as the loop, vaudeville, and "performing the double," a passionate interest in pop music culture and a rather arcane approach to "landscape," can nonetheless be felt quite palpably in current Vancouver art practices. Encompassing a vast body of widely diverging media, "disciplines," and artistic or broadly intellectual concerns (there is a strong streak of literal "amateurism" in Graham's conscious dabbling in these apparently irreconcilable fields⁴), his artistic practice has recently made a marked return to the "naturalist" and "landscaping" interests of his early years.

In the lavishly produced film works *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999) and *Loudhailer* (2003)—also notable, respectively, for their use of pop romanticism and the "break," "split," or "seam"—there already seems to be a renewed engagement with notions of landscape and pastoralism that were both conspicuously absent from Graham's work throughout most of the Eighties and early Nineties; it is in the much coarser, cruder, and more confrontational *Edge of a Wood* (1999), however, that Graham most convincingly establishes the idea, fraught with terrible ambiguities of course, of a "return" to landscape or "nature" even. A visceral, immersive, filmic experience that could not be further removed from the lavish production values and witty, mannerist detachment of the artist's "costume dramas"—the piece shows the edge of a forest at night momentarily lit up by the searchlight of a surveillance helicopter. The violent roar of the approaching aircraft and threatening convulsions its scythe-like blades send through the dark, impervious wave of trees perfect an anxiety-ridden picture of a forbidding, hostile nature that harshly resists all attempts at domestication, commodification, and romanticizing. Not only does *Edge of a*

1. The population figure in the title is a reference to Lucy Lippard's landmark 1970 955,000 exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the show that in many ways galvanized the global—as opposed to merely "local"—anchorage of Vancouver's burgeoning conceptual art "scene."

By way of introduction, I would like to acknowledge Roy Arden, Michael Turner, and Scott Watson for their various insights, guided tours, and many lengthy conversations. I would like to especially thank Monika Szweczyk, to whom I dedicate this essay.

2. However debatable the use of these lofty accolades, it is the global perception, within the art world of course, that something "remarkable" indeed—and, more to the point, quite often also instantly *recognizable*—had been brewing in an "unlikely" place such as Vancouver during this period, that first occasioned the very "idea" of the current exhibition. See also the preface, "Introducing Intertidal," included in this publication.

3. The compelling "story" of this "scene" has been told on quite a number of occasions of course; this text summarily refers to its roots in Vancouver's educational institutions (the true basis, perhaps, of the scene's perception as a "school") in consideration of Ian Wallace's work. For Graham, the defining moment of this convergence of aesthetic concerns would perhaps have to be the exhibition *Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace*, curated by Wallace himself at the 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art in New York in 1985. The work of Stan Douglas, another artist present in the current exhibition, and Arni Haraldsson are also often enlisted in these genealogies.

4. Self-consciously "acting" the leisurely "amateur" in *Fishing on a Jetty* (2000), a key work in many respects, this is perhaps Graham's finest moment of self-exposure or self-revelation; the "dabbling" of course pertains to Graham's seemingly whimsical interest in well-nigh *all* fields of creative artistic activity: writing, music, photography, film, "performance," sculpture, drawing, and painting—a markedly stark contrast with the single-minded course of Jeff Wall's practice, which Graham so slyly parodies in said autoportrait.

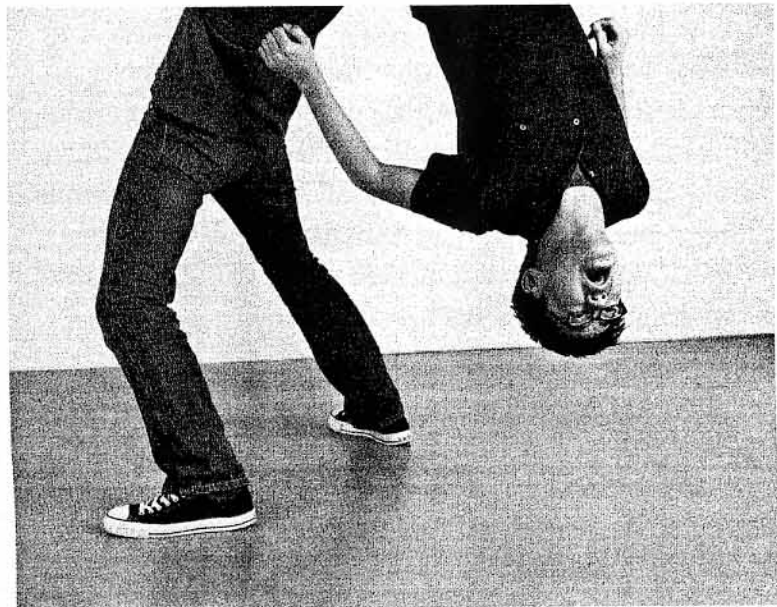
10. See Jeff Wall, "Four Essays on Ken Lum," *Ken Lum*, exh. cat. (Rotterdam: Witte de With and Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1990).

11. *Ibid.*, 31. Compare Jeff Wall, paraphrasing Benjamin: "the conception of discontinuity is the foundation of genuine tradition" while "the conception of continuity is the foundation of a tradition of the 'new.'"

re/construction of Self were brought to Vancouver decades ago, most persistently perhaps by Ken Lum; in this regard, Jeff Wall, in his influential essay on Lum's work, has drawn our attention to the "conflict between naming and portraying"¹⁰—it is of course quite significant that many of Lee's pieces that concern the moment of transformation from which a new self is born (or rather, "engineered") hinge on this foundational act of "naming"; for example, on the very gesture or "performance" that "produces" that name.

In his spectacular self-portraits as these prodigious Others, Lee also brings into play another important structuring device that will be discussed later in this essay—the "break," split, or junction, rupture, suture, breach, and/or seam as the locus of transition that ensures continuity through a violent exercise of staging discontinuity.¹¹ In *Untitled (No. 4, 1970)* (2002), for instance, Lee characteristically conflates "high" art history and

Tim Lee
Untitled (James Osterberg, 1970), 2004
lightjet print, edition of 5,
2 artist's proofs
71 × 89 in. (180 × 226 cm)
Courtesy of the artist;
Cohan and Leslie, New York;
Lisson Gallery, London; and
Tracey Lawrence Gallery, Vancouver



the lowly world of sports fandom in a diptych that celebrates both Bruce Nauman's acclaimed failure to "levitate in the studio" in 1966 and Canadian hockey superstar Bobby Orr's legendary acrobatic goal in the 1970 Stanley Cup Final: both sides of Lee's coinage represent two distinct moments at which these iconic figures enter the historical consciousness of the world of "new art" (high) and mass spectator sports (low) respectively, with the seam and/or suture again operating as the "differentiator" that establishes a new-found identity that might be the artist's own. Finally, in *Untitled (Ted Williams, 1941)* (2003), the visible reference again pertains to twentieth-century sports lore, or more specifically, to a turning point in the career of Ted Williams, who played for the Boston Red Sox and is considered "the greatest

In some sense, *Edge of a Wood* represents the bad conscience of the current urban desire for the imagined virgin territory of its “natural” hinterland.

Among a generation of younger artists, Tim Lee—probably the most historically informed artist now working in Vancouver—takes up the complex of ideas surrounding masquerade, “performance,” and “doubling” as pioneered in some of Rodney Graham’s more recent works (most notably the so-called “costume dramas,” as well as some of his photo-diptychs) and in the early photographic works of Jeff Wall.⁸

Overtly conceived as homages to his peers and predecessors, art historical and pop cultural references of all kinds are generously sprinkled throughout Lee’s various photo-montages and video pieces, ranging from the Beastie Boys, the Kingsmen, George Gershwin, and Iggy Pop to Dan Graham, Robert Smithson, and Rodney Graham himself. In one of his most elaborate self-portraits, most immediately “devoted” to Harry Houdini (himself something of an apocryphal art icon since his induction in Matthew Barney’s mythomaniacal hall of fame), we see the artist tied to a chair hanging upside down, reading Robert Smithson’s *The Collected Writings* upside down in turn, playing around with the grainy picture of Smithson on the cover of said book where, reflected in the brackish, shallow water of Utah’s Great Salt Lake, he seems ready—or so we assume—to embark on the epic odyssey of his *Spiral Jetty* (1970). The artist is shown here in dire straits, trying to wrest himself free, in true Houdini-style, from the riveting spells of Smithson, an important figure in Vancouver’s Conceptual art legacy⁹; far more poignantly, however, the sight of the artist hanging upside down brings to mind Rodney Graham’s upside-down trees, the “signature works” with which Graham honoured the defining moment of the invention of photography (in a tellingly “meandering” twist of microhistorical fate, Graham himself has credited Smithson’s influence on his own practice in a short memoir entitled *Smithson’s Brain*).

Far from being a singular quirk, vertical inversions have appeared in Lee’s work on a number of occasions—in his “homage” to Steve Martin, *Untitled (Steve Martin, 1972)* (2005), and most convincingly perhaps, in his monumental *Untitled (James Osterberg, 1970)* (2004), a celebration of that all-important moment in dissident pop music history when The Stooges’ “firebrand” frontman, James Jewel Osterberg, decided to change his name (and pretty much everything else) to forever become “Iggy Pop,” dramatically highlighting the powers of self-reinvention, autopoiesis, and *performance* that lurk within each and every one of us. Certainly, identity politics and the

8. As is well known, the notion of the double is a particularly important one in Wall’s early works; the abundance of doublings—and/as couplings and/or vice versa—is particularly apparent in a quasi-series consisting of *Picture for Women* (1979), *Double Self-Portrait* (1979), *Stereo* (1980), and *No* (1993). In these works, there are also notable traces of a sustained research into the nature of *performance*; of course, performance and theatricality most visibly claim centre stage in Wall’s oeuvre in tableaux such as *The Vampires’ Picnic* (1991) and *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1996)* (1992).

9. Dan Graham and Robert Smithson have often been quoted in one breath as the defining, towering influences on Vancouver’s burgeoning Conceptual art scene; surely their commonly held interest in suburbia’s “second nature” or the dubious scenery of industrial wastelands, as in reportage or photo-journalism as valid new art forms in their own right (expounded most articulately by both artists in *Homes for America* [1965-] and *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* [1967] respectively) provided a blueprint of sorts for the early work of Christos Dikeakos, Iain Baxter’s N.E. Thing Company, Ian Wallace, and Jeff Wall (more specifically his *Landscape Manual* [1969]). As a teacher at the University of British Columbia, Wallace introduced his art history students, Rodney Graham among them, to the writings of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson. See also: *Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation*, ed. Grant Arnold, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2003); Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991); Scott Watson, “Discovering the Defeated Landscape: Conceptual Art in Vancouver in the Seventies,” *The Vancouver Anthology*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991). Along with *Vancouver: Art & Artists, 1931-1983*, published by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1983, *The Vancouver Anthology* is an indispensable accompaniment to mapping out (and “understanding”) the heterogeneous landscape of contemporary art in Vancouver.

hitter in the history of baseball." Lee's video shown on a monitor mounted on a Judd-like plinth is, again, reminiscent of Graham's early work, in which he transformed Judd's instantly recognizable "specific objects" into sleek, shiny bookcases. The video portrays Lee/Williams' baseball forever frozen in the irreducible singularity of the moment that produces "History"; that is, the moment when any-one becomes some-body.

12. Currently teaching at Simon Fraser University, Radul also has an actively "academic" interest in these issues; in a lengthy essay titled (rather appositely) "Stage Fright: The Theatricality of Performance," she dwells extensively on the "tainted" notion of theatricality theorized by Michael Fried, whose work is well known in Vancouver. See *Video Dreams: Between the Cinematic and the Theatrical* (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2004).



Performance

An important aspect of Vancouver's proverbial "other" art history, "performance"—that is, performance art as *genre* as opposed to mere "concern" or "mode"—also constitutes the bedrock of Judy Radul's art practice. After working as a performance artist for many years—an invaluable fount of inspiration and experience for her subsequent research into the apparatus of staging, directing, casting, and "acting"—Radul is now primarily working as a "director"¹²; her complex, technologically challenging (and mostly "immersive") video installations, at times reminiscent of the works of Stan Douglas, address "directorial," oftentimes Brechtian concerns, both formally and conceptually, surrounding theatre's "magic" of make-believe, identification ("empathy"), and alienation, and the essentially gratuitous nature of any distinction between on- and off- (or back- and front-) stage, "rehearsing," and "acting out." "Exploring the conventions of theatrical performance and cinema in a way that forces the tensions between static staging and moving pictures," as Helga Pakasaar has remarked, both *And So Departed (Again)* (2003) and *Empathy with the Victor* (2001-2003) circle around the "mechanistic" interplay between actor and director. In *And So Departed (Again)*, five different directors are shown rehearsing one actress' dying scene in a true marathon of "faking death"; three screens, corresponding to close-up, medium shot, and long shot perspectives, gradually expose the "fabricated" nature of a particularly convincing extinguishing, thus allowing the viewer some insight into the "personal" dynamics that govern the professional art of acting and directing—the art of "theatre."

Judy Radul
And So Departed (Again), 2003
installation, 3-channel projection, DVD
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver

In her most recent work, a multiscreen video installation toponymically called *Downes Point* (2005), Radul takes as her

13. Wallace's *Lookout* (1979) depicts "a forest landscape where figures are participating in a 'viewing party,' observing nature and simultaneously involved in an interpersonal exchange of glances and gestures of discussion and interplay. Upon examination, the viewer realizes that this panorama is not a document of an actual event or a naturalistic landscape. *The figures have been montaged into the scene*" [my emphasis].

Christos Dikeakos' description of *Lookout* resonates remarkably well with the compositional premise of Judy Radul's *Downes Point* (2005). See Christos Dikeakos, "Ian Wallace: Selected Works, 1970-1987," *Ian Wallace, Selected Works, 1970-1987*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988), 13.

14. Jenifer Pappararo, "Damian Moppett: Just an Amateur," *Damian Moppett: The Visible Work*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005), 9.

point of departure a sublime slice of Gulf Island geography—a clearing in an arbutus grove on Hornby Island. Leaving behind the slightly stifling interior settings that have provided the backdrop for the large-scale cinematic works discussed above, the work seems as much a commentary on the symbolist "spectacle" of nature (or "natural stage") as it is a reflection on the actor-director dynamic; not entirely without significance, this was also where Ian Wallace shot his epochal *Lookout* piece from 1979.¹³ The five-channel work is installed in such a way as to implicate the observer in the middle of Radul's dramatic *mise en scène*, with the image of the pensive, mulling director—a man alone in a clearing in the forest—shown on one screen, and the image of a motley procession of "characters" stepping up towards the camera on the other. In ways that again evoke reminiscences of *Lookout*, it takes some deciphering to unmask the scene as an impossible one, made "real" by the use of advanced montage technology and the equally painstaking positioning of five static cameras, making for a dense tapestry of optic geometries. In some sense, the palpable improbability of the image's taking shape serves to highlight the decidedly *spectral* nature of the scenic, as well as theatre's conscious play with the irreducible "spectrality" ("Spectres of Hamlet") of all enactment, staging, and appearance, while also redirecting the meaning of the term "natural" with regards to acting, staging, and performing. Finally, in its elaborate use of "technologies of seamlessness," *Downes Point* again foregrounds, if only by way of *technique*, an important ingredient in much Vancouver art—that of the breach or seam.

"Performance" is also an integral aspect of the work of Damian Moppett, one of a couple of artists who emerged from the Emily Carr Institute breeding ground that decisively altered the landscape of art-making—and just as importantly, its discourse—in Vancouver in the mid-Nineties (see notes 24 and 36). Pursuing a line of inquiry that sees him team up with the likes of Rodney Graham (as John Robie/Cary Grant/Archibald Leach/Jeff Wall) and Tim Lee (as Bruce Nauman/Bobby Orr), Moppett once famously donned the stern beatnik look of American avant-garde film-maker Hollis Frampton in *Self-Portrait as Hollis Frampton* (1999); moreover, like in Graham's work, the "performance-like" profession of faith of the passionately dabbling amateur figures prominently in Moppett's work. "We aim to be amateurs, to act in the unsecular forbidden margins" may be the creed (surprisingly perhaps) most commonly ascribed to the English high priests of unrelenting, austere conceptualism Art & Language, Jenifer Pappararo, in a recently published essay on his work, states it might just as well be Damian Moppett's.¹⁴ In the same

publication, John C. Welchman names Moppett as “heir to Mike Kelley’s unique combination of vernacular appropriation, formal organization, cascading self-reference and conceptual sophistication.” Like Graham and Kelley, Moppett “dabbles” in drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, video, and music; unlike these artists—and this is of course where “geography” comes into play—Moppett also makes *pots*, perhaps the single most “visible” expression (“work”) of the amateur’s stance and its cult of “DIY hobbyism.” His recent venture into the slightly quaint world of ceramics—with typically “amateurish” zeal, wherein Moppett, while never having worked with clay before, produced close to one hundred fifty ceramic pieces in a mere eight months—is of course laden with both historical and local associations, referring primarily to the tremendous riches of the West Coast’s (more specifically the islands, including Vancouver, Denman, and Hornby) ceramic tradition.¹⁵ Inevitably, said foray into a typical institution of “hippie” island culture—the very pinnacle of *craft*, one might add—signals a dramatic breaking away from the urban “slacker” (or *anticraft*) aesthetics that permeated much of Moppett’s work from the mid- to late Nineties—most notably the impromptu miniature sculptures consisting of cigarette butts, Lego building blocks, balloons, little scraps of cardboard and the like, invoking reminiscences of the abject, antimonumental sculpture of Fischli & Weiss and Vancouver artist Geoffrey Farmer, as well as mock architectural models such as *Cities of the Future* (2002) and *Endless Rustic Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version)* (2002).¹⁶

In *1815/1962* (2003), the conflation of both critical elements in the work of Moppett—his inquiry into “performance” and a return to the “natural” realm of craft—reach an exemplarily seamless conclusion; in this video we see the artist’s “country self” return, in the most literal fashion, to a rustic idyll of island or frontier life while simultaneously clinging to the established intellectual trappings (again, quite literally so) of his “city self.” The bearded, pipe-smoking artist appears in full, Jeremiah Johnson-style trapper regalia, roaming through an exquisitely lush patch of Vancouver Island rainforest. Our experience of these luscious surroundings is fittingly sensuous: bird calls, rustling leaves, the crackle of twigs, and the distant threat of rain intermingle to produce a most lavish sonic ambience—the perfect backdrop, it seems, for a dramatic, long-overdue reunion of Man with Nature. This phantasmal but ultimately regressive mirage is violently, caustically unhinged, however, when the hunter-gatherer finally kneels down at his trap—and not an especially efficient-looking one—it turns out that Moppett

15. See *Thrown: Influences and Intentions of West Coast Ceramics*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2004), which features work by Bernard Leach, Glenn Lewis, Wayne Ngan, John Reeve, and others.

16. Skateboard culture as a site of youthful Otherness and suburban dereliction also appears, quite emphatically, in the work of Alex Morrison, while a similar interest in the spatial politics of the infantile and teenage netherworld resurfaces in the work of Steven Shearer.



Damian Moppett
Untitled (Stabile B), 2005
 steel, yellow paint, wire, and stoneware
 27 × 39 × 14 in. (68.6 × 99.1 × 35.6 cm)
 Collection of Bob Rennie,
 Rennie Marketing Corporation
 Photograph: Scott Massey

17. Ironically, Anthony Caro, the revered figurehead of modernist sculpture, at one time also taught Tom Burrows, one of the prime proponents of the Sixties movement across Vancouver's "intertidal zone" towards the "islands" (more specifically Hornby Island, where he continues to work and live today).

18. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge: The MIT Press/Zone Books, 1997). In a sense, this field of inquiry is also where some of Damian Moppett's early work "originated."

modelled it after an Anthony Caro sculpture!¹⁷ (Needless to say modernism has not yielded much in terms of sustenance, thus returning the friendly forest to its original inhospitable state of otherness.) Much to the credit of Moppett's approach, then, the stale dichotomies and slightly outdated Manichaeisms of "island versus city life" are continuously complicated by a dense layering of decidedly "hybrid" references. The recent drawings, watercolours, ceramic sculptures, and video work may well invoke the well-groomed hippie idyll of Denman Island kilns and art's retreat from the dystopian hustle and bustle of the postmodern metropolis into the pastoral oblivion of "island thought," the appearance in them of such markers of urbane sophistication as a Calder mobile, Caro bronze, or Wittgenstein t-shirt serve to puncture the retrograde fabrication of "supernatural B.C."—a "balancing act" achieved most convincingly (and, again, literally) in Moppett's domestication of canonical Calder/Caro *Gestalts* into display racks for his flawed experiments in pottery.



(from left to right)
Geoffrey Farmer

Undifferentiated mass with small figures; repeated, inadequate, sluggish, ultimately abandoned and then taken up again, (beginning), 2004
transmounted lightjet
40 × 40 in. (101.6 × 101.6 cm)

Undifferentiated mass with small figures; repeated, inadequate, sluggish, ultimately abandoned and then taken up again, (middle), 2004
transmounted lightjet
40 × 40 in. (101.6 × 101.6 cm)

Undifferentiated mass with small figures; repeated, inadequate, sluggish, ultimately abandoned and then taken up again, (end), 2004
transmounted lightjet
40 × 40 in. (101.6 × 101.6 cm)

All courtesy of Catriona Jeffries
Gallery, Vancouver

Another early Nineties Emily Carr Institute alumnus who also shares a marked number of artistic interests and aesthetic concerns with Damian Moppett, among others, Geoffrey Farmer, through his interest in the an/aesthetics of clutter and sprawl, is perhaps ideally placed to address the allegorical notion of "driftwood" as it is implied in this exhibition's assertion of the "intertidal zone" (and concurrent tidal movements) as a poetic metaphor for the dynamics of Vancouver art. Belonging to a generation of artists interested in less-than-glamorous notions of "other" sculpture, Farmer—unlike Brian Jungen and, more ambiguously, Steven Shearer—is not so much involved in a critical reappraisal of "craft" or material culture, but rather working through ideas of "formlessness"¹⁸ and their corollaries of abjection, hybridism, polymorphous eroticism, and unwieldy impurity. His fascination with stacks, piles, heaps, and/or undifferentiated masses of all kinds, most apparent in his photographic montages and in works such as the *Hunchback*

Kit (2000) and *Every Surface, Altered, Decorated and Changed Forever* (2004), recalls both the “accumulationism” of Iain and Ingrid Baxter’s N.E. Thing Company—themselves close in spirit to the work of Robert Smithson—and the *trompe l’œil* sculptures of Liz Magor, an important figure in Vancouver’s sculptural tradition. (Incidentally, some of Jungen’s lesser-known pieces also include stacked plastic trays and finely sanded red cedar pallets). This pursuit also intersects with another well-established strand in local art practices that concerns strategies of archiving and archival aesthetics; here, Farmer’s work enters into an illuminating dialogue with that of Roy Arden and Shearer (there are plenty of abject “stacks” in Arden’s body of work titled *Landscape of the Economy*; obsessively systematic accumulation also informs Shearer’s “archival” inkjet prints), while Kelly Wood’s “archival” five-year garbage project, to which we will be coming back later, could also be construed as both evocative of Smithsonian driftwood aesthetics and referring to the relentless tidal movements of history’s debris. In short, Farmer is firmly located at the cusp of what has been called a culture of “beachcombers.”¹⁹

Farmer has also been one of the remarkably few artists who have taken a more than merely passing interest in Vancouver’s well-publicized status as Hollywood’s cheapskate Other or north-western body double (“Hollywood North”). Culling inspiration from “filmic” sources such as *The X-Files*—the popular series of new-age, sci-fi mystery that was famously shot (but never actually “set”) in Vancouver—and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to produce drawings and video works such as *The Wormhole* (1998). Farmer’s *The Blacking Factory* (2002), in fact, proved to be his most ambitious, caustic comment on the film industry’s monopoly of artifice in a city that is continuously being pressured into being “somewhere else.”²⁰ This piece consisted of a truck trailer “fabricated in mimicry of those used by movie production companies—an increasingly common sight on the streets of Vancouver—and alluding to the transportation of such necessities as props, lighting systems, and costumes necessary to the creation of illusions,” and “a film work depicting a window of the Contemporary Art Gallery shattering from an explosive concussion”²¹—just as “fake” as the hollow truck, of course, but causing quite a stir nonetheless, proving that the levels of sophistication reached in film production have indeed started to obscure the audience’s critical powers of judgement. In this work, along with the closely related Robert Morris-inspired blockbuster *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (2002) and *Wash House* (2004), a project developed for his 2004 solo exhibition at Vancouver’s Charles H. Scott Gallery, Farmer also

19. *The Beachcombers* is the title of an exhibition held at London’s Gasworks gallery in 2002, in which Farmer took part; tellingly, it references the most widely exported television series ever made in Canada. The press release states: “Shot in British Columbia during the 1970s and 1980s, the sitcom followed the life stories of a multicultural cast of characters who made their living salvaging runaway logs along the British Columbia coastline. These artists [Geoffrey Farmer, Brian Jungen, and Myfanwy MacLeod] are beachcombers of popular culture, taking inspiration both in subject matter and form from the regional and global culture that surrounds them. The work is hybrid—they share a humorous attitude and a lightness of touch which distinguishes them from an older generation of Vancouver artists” [my emphasis]. Obviously, the very notion of beachcombing is closely linked to this exhibition’s overarching allegorical principle—that of the intertidal zone as a residue of culture’s many tidal movements. For the archival impulse in Vancouver art, see my considerations on the work of Arden and Shearer; see also the Morris/Trasov Archive at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, an extensive collection related to the art practices of Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov consisting of mail art and assorted documents related to Mr. Peanut, Colour Bars, Babyland, Ray Johnson, Image Bank, Fluxus, General Idea, and many more—a treasure chest of ephemera that sheds an interesting light on Farmer’s accumulating practice.

20. Reid Shier, a long-time supporter of Geoffrey Farmer’s work (he curated both Farmer’s exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Gallery and the artist-run Or Gallery) highlighted this affliction in his video *East Side Pride* (2000), based on Jackie Chan’s *Rumble in the Bronx*—a film shot in Vancouver.

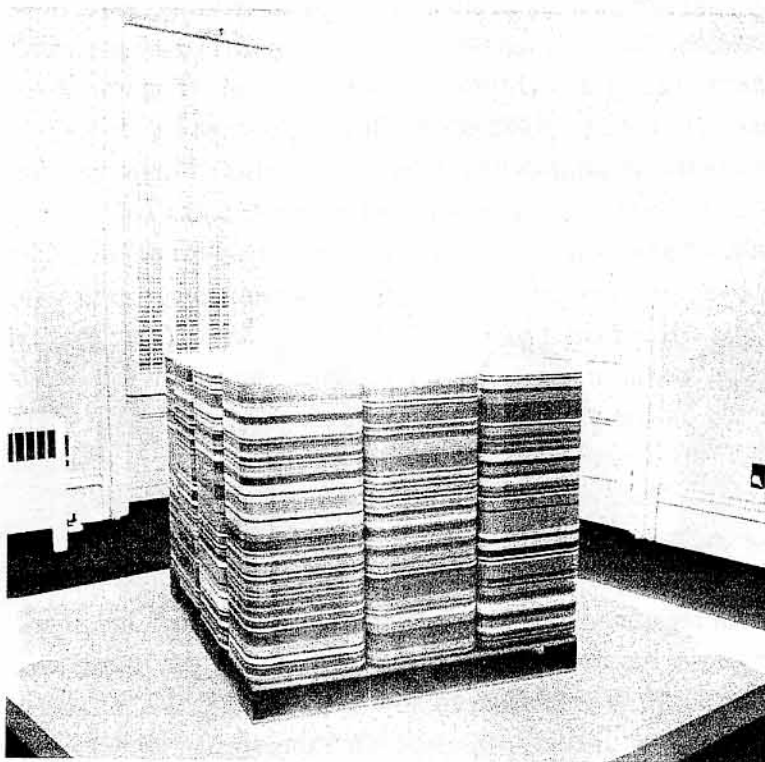
21. This quote is from a press release from the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

tentatively explored another fixture of Vancouver art—the spectral double and/or/as well-crafted *loop*.

The Cunning Sleight of Hand: Craft's Monstrosities

The work of Brian Jungen perhaps most fully embodies the “return” of craft in contemporary art in Vancouver, another avatar, one might venture, of the “Return of the Real” *qua* “repressed.” More importantly, Jungen is one of a couple of younger artists—along with Geoffrey Farmer, Damian Moppett, and Myfanwy MacLeod, among others—who has in some way “revived” the very idea and endeavour of “sculpture” in Vancouver, an art city justly famed for (and dominated by) two-dimensional work; among these artists, Jungen stands out as a master of form with an almost uncanny feel for the particulars of his material of choice, whether this pertains to designer trainer shoes, plastic white stacking chairs, lunch trays, baseball bats, or cedar wood pallets.

Brian Jungen
Isolated Depictions of the Passage of Time, 2001
plastic food trays, television,
red cedar pallet
50 × 47 × 40 in. (127 × 119.3 × 101.6 cm)
Collection of Bob Rennie,
Rennie Management Corporation



Of mixed First Nations and Germanic European parentage, Jungen is exquisitely “placed”—or rather, *displaced*—to confront the fundamental hybridity that is inscribed ontologically in all notions of culture (*and* in some of culture’s most deluded constructs, such as all pristine imaginings of an ahistorical Nature that opposes it). This was perhaps most literally achieved in his *Prototypes for New Understanding*—the series that signalled his emergence around 1998 as a new voice in contemporary

Canadian art—featuring objects handcrafted from Nike Air Jordan trainers. These works closely resemble ceremonial masks from Northwest Coast First Nations tribes,²² revealing an equally deft handling—conceptually or intellectually and downright “manually”—of First Nations material culture, as a shrewd understanding of the dynamics of commodity fetishism and appropriation in the globalized society of the spectacle.²³ In these “signature” works, then, Jungen effortlessly straddled the seemingly antipodean realms of New York pop and/or appropriation art—the theatrical potency of their display links these “masks” to the work of such apparently remote references as Haim Steinbach, or Mark Dion, even—and that particular type of “updated” First Nations art that British Columbia has come to promote, ironically, sometimes even cynically so, as its greatest single contribution to world cultural heritage.²⁴

In his subsequent practice, Jungen’s focus has markedly shifted away from this savvy engagement with identity politics and has turned to more globally informed aesthetic and artistic concerns, both formally and conceptually, that revolve around the persistent actuality of the nature/culture dichotomy; for example, the “naturalness” of culture’s proverbially innate tendency to contaminate, hybridize, cross-pollinate, and “mix” on the one hand, and the constructed “nature” of all Nature on the other. Interestingly, in more recent works such as *Shapeshifter* (2000), “a museological-style whale skeleton constructed from \$4.99 white plastic patio chairs” and *Habitat 04 / Cats Radiant City* (2004), an ideal city for orphaned and abandoned cats based on the plans of architect Moshe Safdie’s Habitat 67 in Montréal (itself a *machine à habiter* inspired by Le Corbusier’s utopian “Radiant City”), Jungen has chosen to further explore these categories of the cultural and the natural, of nature as a *genre*, by way of one of art history’s “minor” motifs—*animals*. With regards to an artist shifting shapes with such breathtaking ease, we are right to expect anything but the unexpected from Jungen’s resolution to now work through a not entirely insignificant historical footnote in Vancouver’s rich legacy of left-leaning, environment-friendly political activism, as for some time now, Jungen has been contemplating plans to create works “memorializing” the foundation, in Vancouver in 1971, of *Greenpeace* . . .

Where Jungen has established himself as Vancouver’s most accomplished young “sculptor”—provided, of course, we expand the traditional meaning of that term—the same could be asserted with regards to the work of Steven Shearer (together with whom Jungen graduated from the Emily Carr Institute in an especially enriching year for new art²⁵) in the adjoining

22. Raised in British Columbia’s Dunne-Za Nation territory, Jungen’s association with these “coastal motifs” is emphatically *not* an autobiographical one; thus evading the pitfalls of identitarian anecdotalism, this disjunction in fact further complicates the tactics of appropriation that permeate Jungen’s work.

23. See Cuauhtémoc Medina’s essay on the “fetishistic” nature of *Prototypes*, in particular in the forthcoming exhibition catalogue published to accompany Jungen’s exhibition organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery. Daina Augaitus, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Ralph Rugoff, Kitty Scott, Trevor Smith, *Brian Jungen*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre and Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, forthcoming 2005).

24. See Roy Arden’s essay in the catalogue that accompanied *Supernatural*; an exhibition curated by Arden at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2004, in which he coupled the work of the celebrated Kwakwaka’wakw carver Beau Dick—tellingly, a maker of masks first and foremost—to Neil Campbell’s Op Art. See also Scott Watson’s essay on Brian Jungen’s work, in which he defines the “status quo in the field of contemporary native art” in the following terms: “I mean that art, from Bill Reid to Susan Point, for example, that you see in the Vancouver International Airport and which has been invested with so many notions of authenticity from so many interested parties.” Scott Watson, “Shapeshifter,” *Brian Jungen*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001), 15.

25. Jungen and Shearer both graduated from the Emily Carr Institute in 1992, along with Geoffrey Farmer and Damian Moppett, and one year after Ron Terada.

26. See note 36 for Scott Watson's comments on the "cultivation of infantilism" and what Watson terms the "abject condition of adolescence": "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." Published in *6: New Vancouver Modern*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1997), 25.

27. In a prodigiously ironic twist of fate, one of these "Longhairs"—depicting, in fitting heroic fashion, "celebrities" and folk heroes of the global metal and extreme music underground, such as Mayhem's Euronymous—has recently ended up on the cover of an LP by Belgian mock-black metal outfit Spasm.

realms of painting and drawing; two colossal fields of artistic inquiry that for various reasons went through a notably barren spell in Vancouver's Seventies, Eighties, and early Nineties, an era during which the city's high international profile was essentially determined by an almost puritanical commitment to "technological" media such as photography, film, and video. Of course, despite a supremely self-conscious devotion to these time-honoured, historical "traditions"—and to the "Idea of Tradition" *per se*—the relationship Shearer entertains with all notions of craft is a highly ambiguous, even scabrous one, fraught with affectations of trauma, abjection, and denial; this is especially apparent in works such as *A Geometric Healing Space for Youth* (undated), *Hatework* (1999), *Cradle of Filth* (1999), *Chasm* (undated); all from the *Craftmonster* series of silk-screened reproductions of crudely rendered children's "art" that caustically mimic the commonplaces of modernist abstraction and its analogous architectures of repression (*PVC*, *Playground*, 2001).²⁶ Likewise, the apparently effortless brilliance of execution—and the matching choice of "traditional" techniques such as silver-point and crayon—in such works as *Longhairs* (2004), *Dirty Face Pretty* (2004), and *Mouthbreathers* (2005), is compromised and sullied by the choice of "camp" subject matter, such as a hall of fame (or "infamy") of metal warriors, 1970s teenage stars, and Dickensian street urchins. Notwithstanding the "base" blue collar vernacular of these lowly "metal" motifs ("puffrock") or the



Steven Shearer
Longhairs, 2004
crayon on paper
14 × 11 in. (36 × 28 cm) (5 panels)
Courtesy of Galerie Eva Presenhüber,
Zürich

awkward schmaltz of 1970s teenage pap, many of Shearer's paintings and drawings, through their self-conscious display of virtuosity *and* adherence to craft, indeed enter into a dialogue with the titans of art history, such as Breughel, Cranach, Dürer, Holbein (see Shearer's *Longhairs*²⁷), Manet, Munch (see Shearer's *Larry in Germany* [2004]), and Rubens, reviving an interest in the syntax of the "masterpiece" that has been a hallmark of much Vancouver art of the recent past.

Many of these drawings and paintings, incidentally, are based on "minor" motifs the artist picks from a vast, ever-expanding database of photographic images ("image bank")

that are in turn assembled into “artworks” in their own right in the parallel universe of his “archival” work. Endlessly “beachcombing”²⁸ the immense ocean of “trash” that now constitutes the World Wide Web, Shearer meticulously filters and collects thousands of minute, coarsely grained JPEG images in huge archival tapestries and maze-like grids that contain many thousands of “icons,” some of which eventually make it to the purgatory of drawing (*Band*, 2004) or pantheon of painting (*Pete*, 2001); “archival” works such as *Boy’s Life* (2004), *Guitar* (2003), *Kaleidoscope* (2001), *Metal Archive* (2001), *Slumber* (2004), and *X-mas Trees* (2005), Shearer’s satanic homage to Rodney Graham, alternately recall the prosaic typologies of German conceptual artist Hans-Peter Feldman and Bernd and Hilla Becher²⁹—most notably in *Toolsheds* (2001), replacing the imposing, often biomorphic structures of the German economy’s antiquated industrial powerhouses with the mongrel anti-architecture of the typical suburban “toolshed,” a derisory symbol of working class male self-empowerment³⁰—or Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1962–), a comparably disparate encyclopaedia of photographic images that, for the most part, hold little or no artistic interest of their own, but from which Richter nonetheless salvages the blueprints for many of his masterpieces.

Harbouring such widely diverging research interests as an “anthropology” of suburban amateur culture and debased “pop” aesthetics (preferably of the ignoble, plebeian kind), strategies of archiving, images of excess, perversion, and transgression, and the ambivalences of craft and “mastery,” the proverbial cauldron of Shearer’s sprawling body of work reverberates with concerns that also animate the work of Roy Arden, Geoffrey Farmer, Rodney Graham, Kevin Schmidt, Damian Moppett, Jeff Wall, and Kelly Wood.

Before, During, and After Photography³¹

Mainly working in the field of “straight-forward” photography, Roy Arden’s dogged (and historically informed) commitment to the photographic enterprise arguably singles him out as the one most active artistic force working in Vancouver today to continuously engage with postconceptual photography as an all-encompassing, comprehensive *intellectual* endeavour. Besides making art—photographs as well as video works—Arden has taught at different art schools and regularly publishes magazine and catalogue essays;

28. See note 19 on the cultural politics of “beachcombing.”

29. The reference to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher is also enlightening in that it brings into play the distinctively German tradition of a photography of “types,” which in turn sheds some light on Vancouver’s famed photo-tradition: the work of Karl Blossfeldt—an important point of reference for the Bechers, while also palpably present in Roy Arden’s *Juggernaut* (2000)—and August Sander (whose “humanism” or “anthropological” inflection resounds in the work of both Shearer and Stephen Waddell) is just as important as that of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth here.

30. For an in-depth consideration of the “problem” of domesticity, class, and masculinity in the work of Steven Shearer, see this author’s essay in *A Prior Magazine* 13 (forthcoming, Winter 2005).

31. The title of this paragraph references that of an essay, published by Roy Arden in *Canadian Art* in 2000, on the occasion of a show Arden himself had curated at the Monte Clark Gallery; the Vancouver home base of some of the photographers discussed in the piece: Karin Bubas, Chris Gergley, Scott McFarland, Howard Ursuliak, and Stephen Waddell. Even though Arden’s argument posits that the dizzying revolutions of digital (or “liquid”) technology have inaugurated an era “after” photography, the point he really seeks to



Roy Arden
Rupture, 1985 (detail)
9 diptychs: Cibachrome and gelatin
silver prints on paper
28 × 17 in. (71.5 × 43.5 cm) each
Collection of Vancouver Art Gallery

make is that these artists make pictures after *postconceptual* photography. Michael Turner, alternately, in a "scene report" has called Vancouver "the most photographed city in contemporary art." Michael Turner, "Wall and Void," *Modern Painters* (Summer 2003), 39.

32. In addition to the show discussed in note 31, Arden's curatorial track record also includes a coupling of apparently disparate photographic practices belonging to Damian Moppett, Howard Ursuliak, and Kelly Wood in an exhibition titled *Bonus* at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 1997, and an exhibition featuring Neil Campbell and Beau Dick (see note 23).

33. This is the title of a suite of black and white (hence inevitably more "pastoral") photographic works from 1999; "Terminal City" is also the name given to Vancouver as the endpoint of the Canadian Pacific Railway, an epithet that can signify both the liberating promise of the "new" that lurks beyond and the "terminally" dismal abjection and disillusion of a culture that has "reached the end of its line." Always looking for the cracks or ruptures that sully the cosmetically enhanced image of the self-made metropolis—thereby also revealing, ultimately, that metropolis' reality—Arden's interest obviously goes out to the City of Loss. ("Lotus Land," incidentally, is yet another of British Columbia's many informal monikers.)

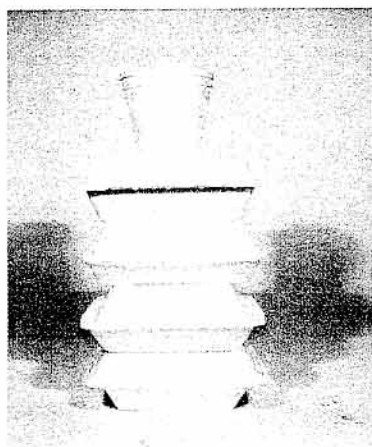
34. Jeff Wall, "An Artist and His Models," *Roy Arden*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1993), 24. Alexander Alberro likewise locates Arden's photographic practice "between the pictorialism of early Modernists like Alfred Stieglitz and the more positivistic practices of documentary photographers like Walker Evans." Summarily titled "Between the Tides"—the reference may well pertain to the deluge of "social" detritus, which Arden sees wash up on Vancouver's luckless shores—Alberro's essay also foreshadows the central metaphor of the current exhibition. See Alexander Alberro, "Between the Tides," *Artforum* (January 1997), 70-74.

Roy Arden
'Monster House' Coquitlam, B.C., 1996
transmounted c-print
42 × 49 ½ in. (106.2 × 125.8 cm) framed
Collection of Canadian Museum of
Contemporary Photography, Ottawa

more importantly, he is also a curator—a "role" that allows him to signal new "trends" or support the practices of emerging artists in Vancouver and elsewhere, but also direct attention to the overlooked.³² Claiming a key position in a generational dialogue of sorts, Arden's engagement speaks of an "intellectual/activist" ambition that is today only shared by a few.

According to Jeff Wall, Arden's "straightforward" photographs—of car wrecks, tree stumps, soil compactors, dismembered typewriters in an East Vancouver gutter, of boarded-up Strathcona houses, landfills, and dead crows—in short, of the debris that litters the streets and back lots of "Terminal City"³³ as grim reminders of Lotus Land's dystopian other—"halt at the threshold" that divides the realm of the autonomous pictures that dot the new Salons (most consciously represented by Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth) from "the poetic utilitarianism mapped out by Dan Graham and his photo-journalistic precursors." Indeed, Arden's "... photos hover just at the point of resembling autonomous works of pictorial art. They reflect both the moment at which photo-journalism becomes art, and the last one whereby it remains lyric, miniature, and utilitarian—that is, in which it remains *reportage*."³⁴ Not surprisingly, given the artist's predilection for an apprehensive realism wherein pictures of filth, gloom, and *mélancolie* are legion, Arden's use of the reportorial paradigm often pertains to vestiges or testimonials of conflict, disruption, or fragmentation, either culturally, socially, or politically. As an "amateur historian" chronicling the easily forgotten histories of civil unrest that have shaped the civic consciousness of Vancouver (as it has with so many other world cities), Arden was interested in "using" images of





Kelly Wood
Continuous Garbage Project,
Year 4: March 15, 2001 - March 14,
2002, 2001-2002 (detail)
c-print
20 × 16 in. (50.5 × 40.5 cm)
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,
Vancouver

Rothko's colour field abstractions (with tufts of candy floss). Pursuing a dual interest in both "high" and "low" models; that is, informed by both "postconceptual photograph" and "abject art," Wood in 1998 embarked on a five-year project that now arguably stands out as "postconceptual, abject pop photography's" defining magnum opus.

Indeed, the *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003* is a tremendously ambitious project in which a great many tropes and motifs of modern and contemporary art visibly resurface, ranging from (auto)biography, autonomy, autoreflexivity, and theories of "aura" and "punctum" to serialism, difference and repetition, mechanical reproduction, environmentalism, archiving, and accumulation. A reflection on *photography itself*, as Wallace has remarked, more than on photography's ability to allow the viewer "insight" into the photographer's (or his or her subject's) personal life, the work obviously resonates with the "methodology" of compulsive obsession and monomania that informs the work of such widely diverging artists as On Kawara, Roman Opolka, Niele Toroni, and Daniel Buren; furthermore, the very focus on such base fields of interest as waste, garbage, detritus, and Bataillan notions of excess also allows for a reading that aligns Wood's work with the strand of abject art (Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, John Miller, Jason Rhoades) that has become the dominant form in American art; in particular, while also bringing her practice in line with an important sentiment in Vancouver art throughout the late Nineties.

Finally, the work holds many references to the plight of autoportraiture, an important, if (perhaps understandably) undervalued aspect of much Vancouver art: photographing every single bag of household waste she produced for five consecutive years, totalling two hundred and seventy-two photographs of an equal number of garbage bags draped across the gallery wall in an austere chronology, linear order, it is hard *not* to think of the work as a diaristic reflection on the economy of selfhood. Even though, as Wallace has pointed out in his contribution to the catalogue of Wood's exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, "the almost prophylactic, semi-transparent skin of white plastic" only indirectly "hints at the possibility of an autobiographical reading," making for a photographic work that "is more about photography . . . than it is about the artist herself," surely the semi-transparency (as opposed to its semi-opacity!) of the image seems designed to pique our curiosity instead.

More pointedly, however—that is, *à propos* the critical framework of the current exhibition—the work also hinges on a series of dialectical oppositions that "resemble" the pendulum-like

movements of the tide that constitute Vancouver as an “intertidal zone” both physically, for example, in terms of maritime geography, and imaginary (metaphorically). Conscientiously documenting, in a mock-scientific fashion, the tidal waves of garbage that threaten to engulf and clog up this erstwhile virgin wilderness, Wood’s archival report—speaking of a critically detached, yet environmentally “aware” mind—emerges from a wholly different type of jungle, one shaped by the torrents and floods of a global economy that perennially washes away all traces of a carefully conserved history.

Close in “conviction”—and concomitant commitment to the photographic image, that is, to “picture-making” and to the work of his colleague Roy Arden, Scott McFarland has inscribed himself into the lineage of Vancouver’s great photo-tradition; emerging from a “school” that could be said to include the likes of Karin Bubas, Chris Gergley, Arni Haraldsson, Evan Lee, and Howard Ursuliak, among others. The photographic work of McFarland is perhaps closest in spirit, *qua* photography *stricto sensu*, to that of Jeff Wall, with whom he shares a telling number of conceptual concerns and form-related interests.

Honouring the alluring (but equally debatable) notion that the “garden is the birthplace of all art,”³⁸ McFarland’s interest in *gardens* of all varieties—as intricately groomed stage sets for human actors, as force fields of quasi-scientific inquiry, as autonomous aesthetic motifs in their own right, and therefore presiding over an art history all of their own—brings into play a plethora of “philosophical” and broadly cultural tropes, ranging from the epicurean view of the garden as a place of learning and the Biblical idealization of Eden as the originary site of a divinely ordained “natural” order to the “defeatist” philosophy of gardening as expounded in Voltaire’s *Candide* and the utopian yearnings for a classless society in the twentieth-century “garden cities.” Within the context of the cultural imagination encircling Vancouver as a “Terminal” or “Dream City,” the unkempt, overgrown gardens in some of that city’s most highly prized and sought-after real estate (Point Grey, the site of McFarland’s *Orchard View, Early Spring; Rubus discolour, Prunus nigra, Prunus serrulata* (2004), *Fountain Study, Late Fall; Cedrus atlantica, Acer palmatum, Populus nigra* (2004), and *On the Terrace Garden, Joe*



Scott McFarland
Spraying, Norman Whaley Applying Aphid Solution, 2004
 digital c-print, edition of 7
 41 × 49 ½ inches (105 × 126 cm)
 Courtesy of Monte Clark Gallery,
 Vancouver

39. With some of Vancouver's younger artists actively heading back "into the forest," this "return to Nature" is overwhelmingly geared towards the proverbial "island version" of Nature; for example, the sensuous, lavish rainforests of Vancouver Island and the like. One artist in particular, however, easily straddles the opposing poles of Nature's spectrum: Kevin Schmidt has produced work that reflects both the forbidding, desert-like interior of south-east British Columbia (*Burning Bush*, 2004) and Vancouver Island's Long Beach (*Long Beach Led Zep.* [2002]; *Fog.* [2004]).

40. Tellingly, the mixture of anxiety and fascination with which we thus experience the spectacle of this "return of the real" resonates with a broadly felt, deeply entrenched uneasiness with issues of First Nations *land reclamation*: in some way, the "sublime" sight—that is, wedding the *tremendum* with the *fascinans*—of Nature regaining its grip on lands long deemed lost to an essentially "alien," intrusive civilization, could be said to reflect the spectre of land disputes perennially hovering over development in this part of British Columbia. Documenting such genteel pastimes as horseback riding and gardening in well-to-do neighbourhoods such as Kerrisdale (situated, in fact, next to the Musqueam Indian Reserve), Scott McFarland is well aware of these issues.

41. With a tradition encompassing the work of Canadian Expressionist painter Emily Carr—surely the closest thing British Columbia has to offer in terms of "state art"—Jock MacDonald, Fred Varley, and others, as well as defining (if "subversive" or "deconstructive") contributions by Vikky Alexander, Roy Arden, Iain Baxter, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace, among others. It is indeed tempting to single out "landscapism," however broadly defined, as the region's most established and highly regarded "genre."

42. The eight pictures that make up the *Cabin* series are almost all still lifes, speaking of human presence through a conscious elision of the human figure as such.

43. This art historical reference is not a whimsical one; the "realist" manifestos of such socially aware aesthetes as Gustave Courbet and Jean François Millet have found a particularly rapt, attentive readership in some factions of Vancouver's artist community. Moreover, as is the case with Jeff Wall's famed reading of Édouard Manet, a number of photographs by Scott McFarland (as well as by fellow Vancouverite Stephen Waddell) are visibly modelled after well-known tableaux of labour by Gustave Caillebotte, Courbet, and Millet.

and *Rosalie Segal with Cosmos altrosanguineus* (2004), among others) represent the ambiguity that is embedded in Vancouver's overt posturing as a sophisticated postmodern metropolis fighting off and/or domesticating the very "wilderness" from which it derives, in no small part, its cultural *raison d'être*. No need to "go back to Nature" here—meaning, alternately, the forbidding desolation of British Columbia's stark interior or the virgin lushness of the Islands³⁹—since we are able to witness Nature's return to our doorstep instead, its penetration, both violent and enthralling, of the abandoned outposts of the Empire. Alternately and consequently, the very idea of the garden as a tamed, "second" nature—or of its proverbial Other, the teeming "wild" garden that seemingly sees Nature reclaim some long-lost terrain⁴⁰—as pictured in McFarland's densely layered take on the tried and tested formulas of the landscape tradition, of course serves to highlight the deeply problematic, ideologically contained character ("nature") of such contrived "cultural" constructs as "Nature" versus "Culture." Rather like Vikky Alexander's *Model Suite* series (2005), then, McFarland's garden pictures could be read as an astute comment on the commodification of "landscape" that, in part, defines Vancouver's self-image, while also continuing the city's artistic and intellectual commitment to "landscape" as the Pacific Northwest's "official genre."⁴¹

Landscape is perhaps where McFarland's work touches closest on the subject matter of such "iconic" Jeff Wall works as *Diatribes* (1985), *The Storyteller* (1987), *A Hunting Scene* (1994), or the more recent *Boys Cutting Through a Hedge* (2003). McFarland's garden pictures, as opposed to his more "rustic" *Cabin* series, for instance, so symbolically devoid of conflict and figural tension,⁴² also comment on the "sociology," or politics even, of gardening as landscaping, *and*, symbolically and metonymically, on the economic realities of any societal structure that can afford itself the relative luxury of the gardener's indulging in botanical beauty for its own sake; issues of class, race, ethnicity, and "rank" emerge, however subtly, in McFarland's seemingly "innocuous," beatific pictures of the naked facts of the garden and gardening *as such*. The idyll of the garden as an exemplary retreat from the hustle, bustle, and conflict of quotidian urban living ("survival") is a thoroughly socioeconomic machination moored in the selfless labour of people often appearing as mere ciphers, their faces averted, their Courbet-like postures⁴³ absorbed in the many tasks, some menial, some rewarding, required by the reproduction of Nature as fantasy.

Sight & Nonsight:

"Vancouver Likes to Talk about Itself as a Nonplace"⁴⁴

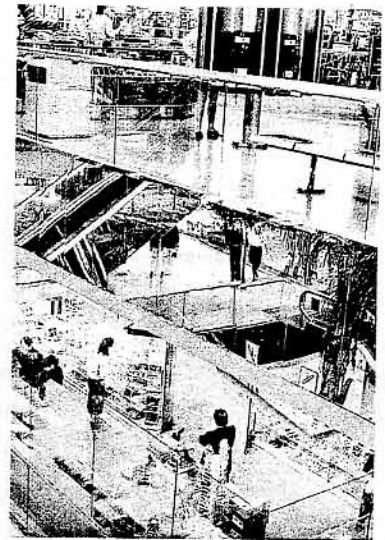
Equally informed by notions of landscape as a "painting of modern life," but focussing on the instantly recognizable trappings of the "generic city" instead, the photographic works of Vikky Alexander evoke reminiscences of both Dan Graham's tract house photography and, more significantly perhaps, of fellow Vancouverite Roy Arden's *Landscape of the Economy*.⁴⁵

In her new series of photographic works, collectively titled *Model Suite*, Alexander both returns to and continues her weathered interest in the dialectics of inside/outside and interior/exterior. In her best known and most widely exhibited work, the *West Edmonton Mall* series from 1992, the labyrinthine maze of mirroring surfaces inside a shopping mall was portrayed in such a way as to completely destabilize our sense of space and orientation, making for an almost *psychedelic* experience of depthlessness, the very emblem, in Fredric Jameson's widely read analysis of the "cultural logic of late capitalism," of postmodern architecture and of postmodernism as a whole. This being the largest shopping mall in Northern America and one of the main tourist attractions in the province of Alberta (or so its propaganda would have us believe), it is tempting to read Alexander's conscious obscuring and confusion of "in" and "out"—of what is really a *window* and might possibly offer a way (or at least a *view*) out, and what is "only" a *mirror*, falsely doubling our sense of space by plunging us ever more deeply into interiority—as a damning comment on the tragic loss and corrosion of public space (the "biggest mall in the Americas" invariably strikes the viewer as a pretty desolate, lifeless affair), or on the inherently *simulacral* nature of our living and lived environment. A critique of the simulacrum—that dubious cornerstone of postmodern theory that enthusiastically claimed the liberation of the sign from its "duty" to signify—is also at the heart of Alexander's *Model Suite*.

The pictures in Alexander's *Model Suite* series are of an idealized, slick high-rise condo interior looking out, through luxurious swathes of glass, across the awe-inspiring spectacle of Vancouver's gorgeous natural harbour; they were in fact shot inside a *container* (ironically, a very common sight in the city's actual port area). Too many mirroring surfaces for an ostensibly cramped space are called upon to make the "place," a cluttered "demonstration house," seem palatial and grand, though, in fact, they cause nothing but more spatial disorientation and, hence, also *suspicion*. The "views" are quite clearly false: one window imitates a view onto False Creek at dusk, while another looks out across a sun-soaked Stanley Park. The luminous, dizzying

44. Trevor Mahovsky, "Placed Upon the Horizon, Casting Shadows"; paper delivered at apexart, New York, May 2000.

45. Most widely known for her "architectural" photographs, Alexander's *painterly* practice more decisively deals with notions of the interior, the private, of interior decoration, and the small-scale "design" of the family microcosm; as such, an interesting point of reference, within "new" Vancouver art, with regards to these concerns could be found in Ken Lum's "furniture pieces" from the Eighties, partially anchored in a critique of modern American dwelling habits that was most famously unmasked by Dan Graham in his influential *Homes for America* (1965–) project. On the impact of Graham's "photo-journalism" on Vancouver practice, see note 9.



Vikky Alexander
West Edmonton Mall 1990 Series #17,
1992

c-print, edition of 3
24 × 20 in. (61 × 51 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and
State Gallery & Projects, Vancouver

46. The reference here is to a recently published book on Vancouver architecture. See Lance Berelowitz, *Dream City: Vancouver and the Global Imagination* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005).

47. Ian Wallace, "Vikky Alexander: The Mirage of the Sublime," *Vikky Alexander: Vaux-le-Vicomte Panorama*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1999), 19-28.

48. The observation (and subsequent selection of names) is attributed to Michael Darling. See Michael Darling, "Can't Get No Satisfaction," *Ron Terada*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2003), 42.

49. See *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2003). Covering work emanating from seven major centres on the Pacific Rim—the exhibition also travelled to Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and San Diego—nine out of a total of thirty-one artists, for example (close to one-third), in fact, hailed from Vancouver.



Ron Terada
Entering City of Vancouver, 2002
3M reflective highway vinyl, extruded aluminium, industrial lights, galvanized steel, wood
120 × 120 × 60 in.
(304.8 × 304.8 × 152.4 cm)
installation view, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver, 2002
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

effect of fake day or lamplight flooding the ersatz pad is achieved, ironically, by way of back-lit transparencies. A scathing reminder, of course, of the important role Jeff Wall's photographs—pioneering that very same technology in art—have played in the timely “deconstruction” of the bland iconography of Vancouver boosterism: there are no blighting “Coastal Motifs” to be found in this model suite’s commanding panorama of Canada’s dream city.⁴⁶ Ingenuously perfecting the commodification of Vancouver’s (admittedly spectacular) natural scenery on which the economic directives of “Supernatural B.C.’s” real estate developments thrive, the Downtown Vancouver model suites serve to peddle a landscape of quite literally “impossible” beauty, in short, *a lie*—a supreme illusion or “mirage of the sublime,” as Ian Wallace put it in his 1999 essay on the work of Alexander.⁴⁷ If anything, *Model Suite* strives to reveal the bizarre machinery of real estate *trompe l’œil* effects behind these psychedelic concoctions, the apparent “seamlessness” of which is intended to gloss over the harsh disparities—with, say, East Vancouver’s skid row—this dream vision seeks to “forget.”

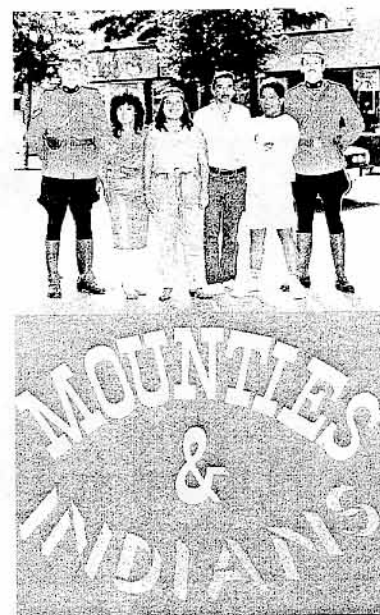
The dialectics of “site” and “nonsite” and delusional conflation of “place” and “space” also inform the work, if only less “traumatically,” of Ron Terada. Articulating a broadly felt unease with the very idea of geographically defined exhibitions such as a “Vancouver” or “West Coast” show in which artists are seemingly arbitrarily lumped together on the basis of such highly questionable, tenuous criteria as “domicile,” Terada’s work often takes turns parodying—and thereby, inevitably, subscribing to—the lure of place (more specifically Vancouver itself) and deploring or ridiculing the art world’s continuous obsession with siting, location, national and cultural identity, and “art scenes.” Parodic pride and deadpan “Sachlichkeit” prevail in one of Terada’s best-known works, *Entering City of Vancouver* (2002), a life-size street sign stating that “we”—anyone encountering the sign in whatever environment—have, indeed, “entered the city of Vancouver”; that is, the gravitational field of a city parading as a fantasy and vice versa. To Vancouver’s supremely self-conscious arts scene—the piece was first shown at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver in 2002—that inevitably also means entering the city of such internationally revered and renowned artists as Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace,⁴⁸ who have done so much to secure Vancouver’s status as an “art city” where austere standards of intellectual rigour reign supreme. When *Entering City of Vancouver* was later included in the West Coast art travelogue *Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art*,⁴⁹ this

brooding tension obviously resurfaced in the piece's awkward positioning; "entering the city of Vancouver" is as much a welcoming sign as it is a warning, or an exorcism even, "designed" to help us master, by mockingly trivializing the "art city" status, the subdued anxieties that come with having to "perform" as an artist on Vancouver's demanding, discerning "arts stage."

A similar anxiety about place also animates one of Terada's more recent works, in which he again takes up one of the tried and tested typographic formulas of "canonical" Conceptual art aesthetics: whereas the *Jeopardy Paintings* (1996-1999) that first brought him some degree of national recognition in the late Nineties were visibly modelled after the "language paintings" of John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, and Lawrence Weiner, the current "neon light sculptures" invoke obvious references to Joseph Kosuth and Bruce Nauman; his most recent neon-lettered mural warns us to "Stay Away from Lonely Places"—a fitting rejoinder, perhaps, to *Entering City of Vancouver*. Again expressing the artist's "fear of exhibitions based on place and how this shapes the appearance or perception of 'schools,' as in so-called Vancouver photo-conceptualism,"⁵⁰ the work's enticing pop aesthetic exhorts us, among other things, to steer clear of the arid, barren plains of art "scenes" turned into stone. Perhaps this rather acrid exhortation to "stay away" could then also be read as a recommendation to forever "stay outside," both literally and metaphorically speaking, and enjoy the relative freedom of the "outsider," of the renegade, *flâneur*, or drifter—or, in other words (again, projected onto the background of an art scene that is all too aware of the haunting dialectics of "inside" and "outside," of being "part of the story" or banished from it instead), the supposed "amateur" stance. Finally, on a much deeper level, a sign urging us to "stay away from lonely places" of course also speaks about the dilemmas of *belonging* in a city that is continuously being reshaped and remoulded by the daily influx of hundreds of people in search of a new "home"—a place-to-be that will deliver them from the terrible loneliness of a life on the move or on the run. This is where Terada's work most immediately touches on the issue of the "anxiety of place"—and that of the anxieties, instilled in the outsider, by any mention of "site" or "nonsite"—as the primordial, defining syndrome of the *migrant experience*.

Among Vancouver's internationally established artists, Ken Lum has dealt most directly with the traumatic experience of mass migration and subsequent "assimilation" that has shaped the destiny of Vancouver, as it has indeed done with all major American cities. Stretching back into the late Seventies, when Lum was fresh out of art school, a great many of his works have,

50. Ron Terada, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 2005.



Ken Lum
Mounties and Indians, 1989
 photograph and gloss-paint on Plexiglas
 80 × 50 in. (203 × 127 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist

battleground on which the working classes of the world—as opposed to that of one given culture, nation-state, or culturally defined society—assert themselves as legitimate interlocutors in the public space of “global talk.” According to Michael Turner, the signs in these works representing small, family-style businesses—one work, *Parvi* from 2000, reads as: “PARVI FRESH MEAT & POULTRY,” followed by a line of text in Arabic, and “FREE HOME DELIVERY / TRY OUR HOME MADE PATES / PRAISE BE TO ALLAH”—are “particular to certain aspects of the city, specifically the ‘unofficial’ Vancouvers. None of these ‘businesses’ would be operating on Robson Street or South Granville, in Kerrisdale or False Creek, or even West Vancouver for that matter (all places where ‘official Vancouver’ is constructed), but I’m sure many living in those well-to-do areas, driving by on a Sunday afternoon, might linger just long enough to ‘get’ their ‘otherness,’ identify these signs as markers, if only to remind themselves they are not at home but instead passing through ‘Little India’ or, all at once, along a single block of Kingsway.”⁵⁵ Whether pertaining to “Little India,” “Little Pakistan” (*Taj Kabab Palace: Peace in Kashmir* [2000]), “Little Africa” (*Ebony Eyes, Beauty Salon, Unisex Hair, Nail and Skin Care* [2000]), “Little Eritrea” (*Amir* [2000]), or “Little Reeperbahn” (*Mondo Nudo* [2000]), Lum’s sign paintings ultimately speak of a faith in language—language *despite itself*, I am tempted to add here—that makes the “global village” happen, in Vancouver as elsewhere around this brave new world of literally boundless signage.

Dreams of Seamlessness

A recurring motif in my argument so far has been the figure of the seam and/or breach—breaches necessitate seams, seams *are* breaches—as one of the organizing principles, if not conceptually (as in the work of Roy Arden or Ian Wallace⁵⁶), then surely formally or methodologically (as in the work of Rodney Graham, Tim Lee, Ken Lum, or Jeff Wall⁵⁷), behind much Vancouver art practice. Perhaps more than any other artwork in the current exhibition, Stan Douglas’ *Nu·tka·* (1996) foregrounds the Manichean methodology of rupture and suture as a pivotal procedure in producing meaningful images; that is, in producing both meaning(s) *and* image(s). Interestingly, Douglas’ masterful “use” of the seam/breach as a prime structuring device in *Nu·tka·* has also been the main focus of Julian Heynen’s incisive essay on both this particular piece and *Der Sandmann* (1995), written on the occasion of Douglas’ exhibition in 1996 at Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany, simply called *Seams*.

55. Michael Turner, who has also contributed an essay to the present book, is the author of a volume of poetry dedicated to Kingsway (“Vancouver’s oldest thoroughfare”). See Michael Turner, *Kingsway* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995).

56. For my views on Roy Arden’s use of these procedures, most notably in the appositely titled *Rupture*, see note 33.

57. In the work of Rodney Graham, the dialectic of the breach and/or seam centres around his judicious use of the loop and the diptych, a line of inquiry further pursued by Tim Lee; in the work of Ken Lum, this organizing principle is most obviously operating in the iconic “word/image” paintings of the Eighties, such as *Mounties and Indians* (1989) and *Ollner Family* (1986). Finally, in the work of Jeff Wall, this dynamic of cleaving and reassembling as a superior structuring device is most famously deployed in *The Storyteller* (1987), which could be read as a work about rupture *as such*.

A "Canadian Gothic romance," as Douglas himself would have it; *Nu·tka·* is set in "one of the most sublime moments of the romantic period—that of first contact between Aborigines and Europeans on the west coast of Vancouver Island at Nootka Sound."⁵⁸ The west coast of Vancouver Island itself being something of a site of decidedly "sublime" beauty that is so often invoked to make a case for British Columbia's hollow claim of "supernaturalness," Douglas uses this heavily romanticized, iconic site of island lore—an idyll predicated on fantasies of paradisiacal wholeness that continue to inform much political discourse in the contemporary, postcolonial global arena—as the setting for an unsettling narrative of disjunction, violent disruption and dislocation, of elision, omission, and oppression. In short, of the very powers of negativity which serve to destabilize the ideologically contrived mirage of a harmonious, "wholesome" modernity.

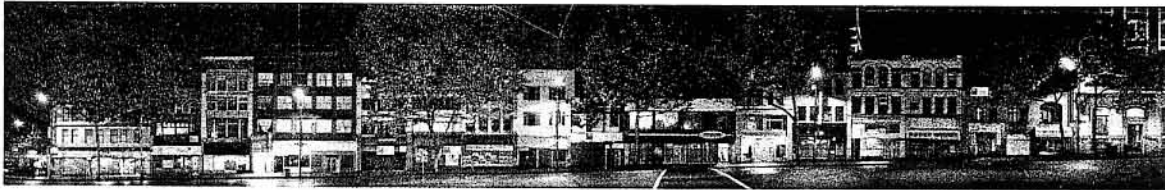
The "story" of *Nu·tka·* is that of the (naturally conflicting) versions of the facts of "first contact," as told by the Spanish and English explorers respectively, two narrative accounts of expansionism's "finest hour" on two desynchronized audio tracks, continuously overlapping and obscuring each other, making it well-nigh impossible for the viewer-listener to "decide" who was "first" and who could thus rightfully claim this lush, new-found terra incognita for which crown exactly; this "undecidability" obviously serves to reveal the blatant absurdity of our desire to find out who was "first" in a country peopled for thousands of years already. Only every now and then the audio tracks blend into one neatly synchronized "master narrative," at which point the alien powers that be make it clear that Vancouver Island can only "belong" to Europe—to that civilization whose modernity and impulse towards modernization could only develop in tandem with (or, more poignantly, *on condition of*) its imperialist enterprise. When the two "conflicting" audio tracks, in truth speaking with one voice, namely that of subjugation, do fold onto each other, so too does the image, strangely out of focus before: the sudden clarity that now bathes the luminous, virgin beauty of the densely forested coastline paradoxically reveals the true "Heart of Darkness" that looms large in both colonial accounts; that is, the victims of its ellipsis—the First Nations that peopled and settled the north-western coast of America long before Captain James Cook and George Vancouver sealed these lands' incorporation into the British Empire. Literally "deconstructing" or *taking apart* both visually and auditorily as a matter of *critique*, a (pre)history that has been smoothed over into one seamless myth of Empire and Enlightenment time and again. Douglas thus uses the dialectic

of the seam and the breach to its greatest effect in *Nutka*; and, in the process, he also subverts the glib pastoral fantasy of sublime, “natural” harmony that continues to obfuscate and generally cloud city visions of the islands as historically blessed sites of benign eventlessness.

A similarly “apocalyptic”—in the literal sense of “revealing” or “revelatory”—interplay of disruption and congruence is also deployed in a wholly different kind of “landscape art,” one that has seen Douglas turn his attention to the very opposite of the “island/city” spectrum (and its “utopia/dystopia” equation) on a number of occasions. I am, of course, referring here to his pictures of the blighted “landscapes” that dot Vancouver’s destitute East Side, most ignominiously the couple of blocks on Hastings Street, the inner city’s main thoroughfare, which together form the artery of the city’s rampant drug culture—the setting of Douglas’ *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001).

59. See *Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs, 1955 to 1985*, ed. Bill Jeffries, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2003).

60. See Reid Shier’s introduction in *Stan Douglas, Every Building on 100 West Hastings*, ed. Reid Shier, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002).



A seamless nightscape that brings to mind, most notably, Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966)—within recent Vancouver art history, an equally interesting, and perhaps far more revealing point of reference would have to be Svend-Erik Eriksen’s little-known *Paris Shoes, Hastings Street Morning* (1973) or *Carrall Street North, Hastings Street Morning* (1973)⁵⁹—Douglas’ *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* consists of a number of photographs of each individual building on said block, each picture “telling a story of tragic decline,” segued together in a vast, colourful panorama of Vancouver’s much-maligned Skid Row. Whereas we might be justifiably angered or shocked by this dismaying testimony of continuing urban decay right at the heart of a downtown core that has seen real estate prices soar like never before and is currently enthusing about the most comprehensively planned inner city development scheme in North America,⁶⁰ what is in fact most disturbing about this picture is its *emptiness*—the ominous absence of “people” in a part of Vancouver where so many, in fact, live on the street, looking for a fix. As such, Douglas’ epic, yet matter-of-fact cityscape reminds the author of Eugène Atget’s well-known photographs of eerily deserted Parisian backstreets—the very same emptiness that led Walter Benjamin to construe them as “scenes” of some hideous, untold (and probably unmentionable)

Stan Douglas
Every Building on 100 West Hastings,
 2001
 c-print
 26 × 168 in. (66 × 426.9 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and
 David Zwirner Gallery, New York

crimes. It is of course quite “ironic,” to use a rather infelicitous word, that Douglas’ picture was first exhibited in Vancouver during—to quote from Denise Blake Oleksijczuk’s enlightening essay titled *Haunted Spaces* on Douglas’ “100 Block” piece—“the most notorious case of social and civic neglect in the city’s history.” A case concerning the disappearance of some sixty-three women from the Downtown Eastside, all of whom are now presumed to have been killed by Canada’s most prolific mass murderer, a Port Coquitlam-based pig farmer by the name of Robert Pickton. According to Oleksijczuk, the uncanny desertion of Douglas’ city block not only signals the women’s absence (most of them were drug addicts or sex trade workers), but also the erosion and final breakdown of a society whose oblivious indifference to the plight of its inner cities has made this glaring devaluation of human life possible in the first place.

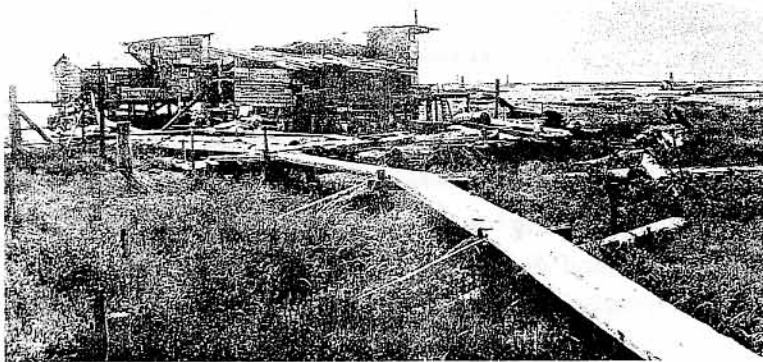
The appalling tragedy of these women’s disappearance and, more poignantly, the subsequent laxity of the local police in making this the focus of a serious criminal investigation, is the prime contention of *Vigil* (2002), an unsettling performance/video piece, fraught with heroic symbolism, by Anishinabekwe artist Rebecca Belmore. We see Belmore appear on the corner of Gore and Cordova streets in East Vancouver—a location close to where many of the women are thought to have disappeared—her bare arms covered with the names of the missing women; she starts to scrub the concrete pavement with soapy water and, with great difficulty, tries to light votive candles in a steady breeze. Methodically picking up a bunch of roses strewn across the street, she then proceeds to call out the names of the missing women to no avail and drag the thorny stemmed flowers through her mouth, spitting out the blood-red petals like so much spilled blood. In a second “scene,” the artist dons a bright red dress nailed to a telephone pole from which she can only wrest free after having torn the dress, “bleeding” its inflammatory reds, to tattered shreds. Finally, we see her lean against a pickup truck parked on the side of the street; listening to James Brown’s shriek coming from the stereo, we are incessantly reminded that, alas, “It’s a Man’s Man’s World.”

Keeping vigil over the remembrance of these invisible women, Belmore, through the very mobilization of her *body*, paradoxically “represents” a double degree of invisibility. As a woman artist (and a *performance* artist at that!) in a city that has long been “run” or dominated by male artists (the lasting legacy of the late West Coast painter Emily Carr notwithstanding), she “exposes” the plight of visual insignificance of the women who ended up in the backyard of Robert Pickton’s pig farm, while also alluding, however subtly, to the unstable position of women

in Vancouver art and to that art scene's general, deep-rooted unease with (and outright suspicion of) overt bodily display, especially of the female body.⁶¹ Second, as a First Nations artist in a national culture crippled by the unresolved ambiguities of its relationship with "contemporary" native art⁶² (while also struggling to uphold the cherished image of a successfully multicultural society), Belmore takes issue with the easily forgotten fate of the marginalized, minoritarian "Other." She addresses the fact that the serial killer's victims were indeed predominantly easily forgotten "others" banished to the outer margins of Canada's Great Society because they didn't fit that society's picture—a mirage of flawless wholeness obviously did not help to secure the investigation of a much-needed political or juridical priority. Thus, continuing a well-established tradition of "artistic" solicitude with sociopolitical issues of a "grassroots" (or, more appositely, "street") nature, Belmore's *Vigil* in its own, highly personalized ("embodied") way also helps to anchor the persistent paradigm of the breach, seam, or "cleft" as an important syntagmatic tool in contemporary art from Vancouver. The confrontational, fractured physicality of Belmore's "display" serves not just to remember, but to reopen and *expose* the fissures that underlie—and, in part, even *define*—Vancouver's social fabric (as they do with the societal tissue of so many other cities around the world) and are too often, too hastily polished over or cosmetically spirited away by the city's boosterist "dreams of seamlessness."

61. The fact that performance art, specifically, could be thought of as Vancouver's "other" art history—see my comments on performance and performativity in the work of Judy Radul, as well as Monika Szewczyk's exposé on that subject elsewhere in this book—most obviously stems from this deep-seated suspicion, fear even, of the (female) body's unsettling "otherness" and potential for contamination and destabilization. This unease or outright hostility could perhaps in turn be explained away by taking recourse to the region's colonial cultural history: Scott Watson has noted on a number of occasions that, its superficial enthusiasm for a mildly hedonist lifestyle notwithstanding, the dominant culture of British Columbia remains firmly steeped in the Victorian inflections of its namesake—an emblem, in fact, of a generally *repressive* attitude towards the body. "Abjection" may have found its way into Vancouver art in the Nineties, but even then and there it very often remained shrouded in a nimbus of "anglo" anxieties. Finally, in his essay on the work of Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall has shed some interesting new light on the dynamics of "problematization" that govern the appearance of the female form in (or, more to the point, its absence from) much conceptually based Vancouver art. See Jeff Wall, "La Mélancolie de la Rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace, 1967-82," *Ian Wallace, Selected Works, 1970-1987*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988), 68-69.

62. See note 23.



Ian Wallace
La Mélancolie de la Rue, 1973 (detail)
 hand-tinted photograph
 62 × 41 in. (157.5 × 104 cm) (3 panels)
 Courtesy of Vancouver Art Gallery

Full Circle: Ian Wallace, 1973 & 1986

The historical importance of Ian Wallace in the establishment of a distinctly Vancouver brand of Conceptual art—again, most commonly referred to as "photo-conceptualism," though "post-conceptual photography" might be a more commendable,

63. Much later in that decade, Graham, Wall, and Wallace famously teamed up again—this time in the visual art studios of Simon Fraser University—to form Vancouver’s short-lived no-wave/art-rock sensation U13RKK5 (pronounced “you jerks”), whose debut album featured a song inspired by Dan Graham; although one might easily be tempted to overstate the importance of this fortuitous coupling of Vancouver’s pioneering conceptual artists, the fact that their dialogue should, at one time, take the form of a pop group, of course, partly explains why pop or rock music, as a “dissident” mode of critical thought or volatile emblem of “unofficial” cultural diversity or “difference,” has been held in such high esteem (or at least has resurfaced, thematically and invigoratingly) in the work of a younger generation of Vancouver artists such as Tim Lee, Scott Livingstone, Shannon Oksanen, Kevin Schmidt, Steven Shearer, Ron Terada, and others.

64. Yet more salient testimony, if ever needed, of his vast knowledge of (and affinity with) his hometown’s recent art history, Tim Lee in 2001 undertook—again, by way of *homage*—to recreate or remake this “primal scene” of Vancouver conceptualism in a poster piece, annex curatorial project for the Western Front. Refraining from casting himself in the role of the “artist as intellectual worker,” however, Lee chose to portray local Marxist critic and theorist Clint Burnham “at work” instead.

65. Another beautiful, complementary irony is implied in Wallace’s ostentatious reading of Kierkegaard’s *On Irony*: Kierkegaard’s book continuously refers to the great peripatetic Athenian Socrates, whose model of learning in some way parallels the conception of the Vancouver School—which was of course never a “school” in any formal sense—in Ian Wallace’s art history courses. Incidentally, Wallace himself had been a student of N.E. Thing Company’s Iain Baxter.

apposite term—can hardly be overstated. As a teacher at the University of British Columbia in the beginning of the Seventies, where he could count Rodney Graham and Jeff Wall among his students,⁶³ Wallace not only helped lay the foundations of the so-called “pedagogic enterprise” as an all-important dimension of Vancouver art practice—many Vancouver artists have engaged in teaching at one point or other in their careers—but also proved to be instrumental in establishing that tradition of intellectual rigour and dialogical critique for which Vancouver’s art scene later became known internationally. This charged, positively ambitious image of the artist as intellectual first and foremost—or better still, to stay true to the lingo of those impetuous times: as an intellectual *worker*—ostensibly grounds Wallace’s seminal *At Work* (1983),⁶⁴ showing the new type of artist “at work” in what is meant to represent a new type of studio space or studio experience: there are no easels, paint brushes, or stretches of canvas draped across the floor here (even though painting really *is*, one might argue, the bedrock of Wallace’s artistic practice), no chisels or lumps of marble, stone, or wood, no slabs of Cor-ten steel, no video or photography equipment even; in fact, the artist’s studio here strikes us an impossibly *clean*, forbiddingly sparse and stark environment, with the artist concentrating, with almost monastic zeal, on a stack of papers spread out across a modestly-sized table top. “This is what an artist does nowadays,” is how this image could be summed up in manifesto-like terms; the picture’s subdued militancy, however, is subtly balanced by a string of mild ironies inserted by Wallace into the “work” or meta-work himself—the fact, unknown to the uninformed viewer, of course, that the book on the artist’s reading table is none other than Søren Kierkegaard’s treatise *On the Concept of Irony*, in some way serves to subvert the slightly presumptuous claims of overbearingly smart and sassy “conceptual art.”⁶⁵ This not only allows us to “read” *At Work* as a true performance piece, wherein the artist stages the theatrical cliché of the artist as intellectual worker, but presciently operates as a “warning” of the inherent dangers of inwardness, solipsism, and wilful alienation or “detachment” that loom large in the ivory tower cult of the artist as a crypto-aristocratic hermit, whose sole desire it is to merely *interpret* the world instead of actively helping to bring about its transformation.

Seen from this vantage point of the “historical dialectics” of the intellectual stance—the alternating desire to act upon the world today and forsake it tomorrow (or vice versa)—*At Work*, of course, sets up an enlightening dialogue with Wallace’s own *La Mélancolie de la Rue* (1973), considered by many (see Jeff

Wall's discussion of this piece in his 1988 essay written about the work of his one-time mentor⁶⁶) to be one of the foundational "texts" of Vancouver's idiosyncratic Conceptual art movement. With its title, tellingly, invoking parallels with a 1914 Giorgio de Chirico painting called *Mystère et mélancolie d'une rue* (1914), Wallace's triptych could be construed as an emblem of the early Seventies' flight from both the city and the street, much like de Chirico's pictures of desolation that so often speak of retreat and despair. Wall calls "the motif of flight and secession from the city" central to Wallace's "photo-conceptualist" statement: "the examination of characteristic phenomena of the boom period of the early '70s—runaway suburbanization [the 'middle' panel of Wallace's triptych, a view of a Volkswagen Beetle driving by a newly built, monstrously pristine Palladio-like suburban tract house—a precursor, in fact, to the 'monster house' of the 1990s as documented by Roy Arden, and the profusion of modernistic 'palaces of culture' [the 'left' panel, showing a crowd of protesters in front of the Winnipeg Art Gallery] is counterposed to the dropout 'alternative' architecture of the already defunct Dollarton Mud Flats [the 'right' panel, a view onto a visibly dilapidated stilted wooden dwelling in Deep Cove, in what is really the 'intertidal' zone to which the title of the current exhibition refers], which had been a semilegal community of bohemians, marginals, and old-timers until it was forcibly cleared for redevelopment in 1971."

Whether or not Wallace, in the outgoing gesture of what is essentially a "documentary" work rooted in the photo-journalistic impulse, was really swept up in a torrent of "anarchist, anti-urban, antibourgeois sentiments" affiliated with Symbolism's celebration of *mélancholie* as the sole legitimate response to the disenchanting effects of modernity's instrumentalizing *Dialektik der Aufklärung* is a bone of contention I would like to leave for future generations of Vancouver scholarship to sort out. To the author of these lines, however, Wallace's *La Mélancolie de la Rue*, along with his *At Work*, embody the asymptotic poles in between which the recent history of much Vancouver art practice has been played out symbolically: the opposing paradigms of, on the one hand, intellectual retreat into the artist's own inner (mental) landscape, periodically re-enacted in the actual *physical* retreat of the artist and his or her body "into the forest," "back to nature," or "back to the islands" even, and on the other, of the artist's activist engagement with the social, political, and economic issues of the day as they are acted out "on the streets" of countless "cities" around the world—of which Vancouver, finally, is but one.

Vancouver & Brussels, July-August 2005

66. See Jeff Wall, "La Mélancolie de la Rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace, 1967-82," *Ian Wallace, Selected Works, 1970-1987*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988), 67.