



Jeff Wall  
Forest, 2001  
black and white photograph  
94 x 119 in. (239 x 303 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist

## THE FRONTIER OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Ian Wallace

IT IS REMARKABLE THAT VANCOUVER IS THE HOME OF ARTISTS who have produced art that has come to international attention by virtue of its originality, technical innovation, and a depth of thinking about modernity and the avant-garde. That this originality is also a measure of its sense of place is itself remarkable, since this city should not have been expected to produce an avant-garde at all. Vancouver is still effectively a frontier city, carved out of the forest scarcely over a century ago and poised on the edge of a vast wilderness that stretches almost completely unimpeded as far as the north will go. But it is this character of the frontier, that of being a place “on the edge,” that makes the concept of the avant-garde particularly pertinent to Vancouver as a place for contemporary art. How did avant-garde take hold in Vancouver? This is a question that has as much to do with space as with aesthetic ideology: the distances that separate Vancouver from other cultural continents, and the spaces that exist within the city itself. This requires some rethinking about regionalism and the avant-garde, both present and historical.

The phenomenal global dispersal of contemporary avant-garde art first appeared in what we habitually call the “art centres” of Europe and the United States—now it appears everywhere. A striking example is the sudden appearance of avant-garde contemporary art in China. While the culture of any region is necessarily influenced by local factors, there is now also a transnational and transhistorical global condition, often discussed under the confused terms of cultural postmodernism and economic globalization, which mutates the regional and individual dialect of contemporary art. But there are some distinctive features of the Vancouver situation that could provide a model for understanding the entanglement between the global and the regional as it occurs elsewhere. There is no question that those Vancouver artists who over the past two decades have gained international recognition, stand out as much for their individual visions and the superior quality of their work, as for their ability to reflect upon local subjects. The most established of these artists include Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, and Jeff Wall. There are several others whose works are of the same rank, but not yet so widely exhibited or recognized. While the full understanding of their work can never be strictly limited to regional factors, this discussion will largely consider the “geography of aesthetics”: those various spaces, zones, locations,

Stan Douglas  
*Impounded Fishing Vessels*,  
 North Vancouver, 2001  
 c-print, edition of 7  
 48 × 57 in. (121.9 × 144.8 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 David Zwirner Gallery, New York



and scenarios that have played a part in the avant-garde art of the region.

Since Vancouver has only very recently grown from an isolated colonial outpost to a cosmopolitan city, one would normally expect an overtly provincial and derivative tone to the work. However in the late 1960s new conditions began to alter previous relations between centre and periphery. Provincial mindsets usually limited by immediate geographical factors had become offset by cosmopolitan, global influences. Access to information about current contemporary art was crucial to this development. The generation of new artists who surfaced in the late 1960s, and who were the first to make this qualitative leap from provincial to cosmopolitan, took advantage of improved air travel to connect to an international audience. By the 1980s, they had established exhibition opportunities as far away as New York and Europe. Moreover, although Vancouver was a comparatively isolated city with a public largely indifferent to contemporary art, there was a small but passionate circle of collectors, exhibitors, educators, writers, architects, and poets who provided an informed and committed audience. The Vancouver avant-garde, beginning in the late 1960s, also had some support from the local public institutions, particularly the Vancouver Art Gallery and the University of British Columbia, which introduced programming that emphasized the most recent manifestations of international contemporary art in all disciplines.

In his concept of the "global village," Marshall McLuhan was one of the first theorists to understand that new media would link local cultures to a singular global network and thus affect cultural geopolitics. This stimulated Ian and Ingrid Baxter to form N.E. Thing Company and experiment with mixing Conceptual art and advanced communications technology. Although N.E. Thing Company and its blend of Pop art and Conceptual art were the first to transgress the norm, they were soon joined by others. Intermedia, an independent artist-run centre for experiment in the media arts formed in 1968 and quickly became the rallying point for a generation of artists who migrated from painting and sculpture to the media arts, and broke away from all orthodox concepts of art-making, marketing, and spectatorship. Artists working with Intermedia, and the various artist-run centres that succeeded it, promoted a home-grown Dadaist performance-oriented avant-garde which capitalized on the free-spirited rebellion of the generation of the late 1960s. This Neo-Dada spirit later informed such lateral movements from the punk music scene to the skateboard scene. It also laid the infrastructure for access to video and time-based media and its

early acceptance as a valid art practice within the local institutions. Decades later, by the mid-1980s, these initial experiments provided a platform for the more polished film and video productions of artists such as Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas.

At the same time, a group of artists emerged from the art history department at the University of British Columbia, where Iain Baxter of N.E. Thing Company had been teaching. This alternative avant-garde was more intellectual, socially critical and well-informed about recent theory as well as art, and thus more articulate about their identification with the international avant-garde, specifically that of Conceptual art. Their early experiments with documentary photography focused on a critical commentary of the social landscape. By sidestepping the traditional techniques promoted in the art schools, they simultaneously critiqued the precious art object and the abstract painting of the previous generation of regional modernists. As to be expected, the techniques and attitudes of much of this new avant-garde, which Jeff Wall called the "counter-tradition," was looked upon with suspicion by the regional artists who were following the more established idioms of abstract art. But this generational conflict was important to the establishment of a self-consciously avant-garde practice for the first time in the region.

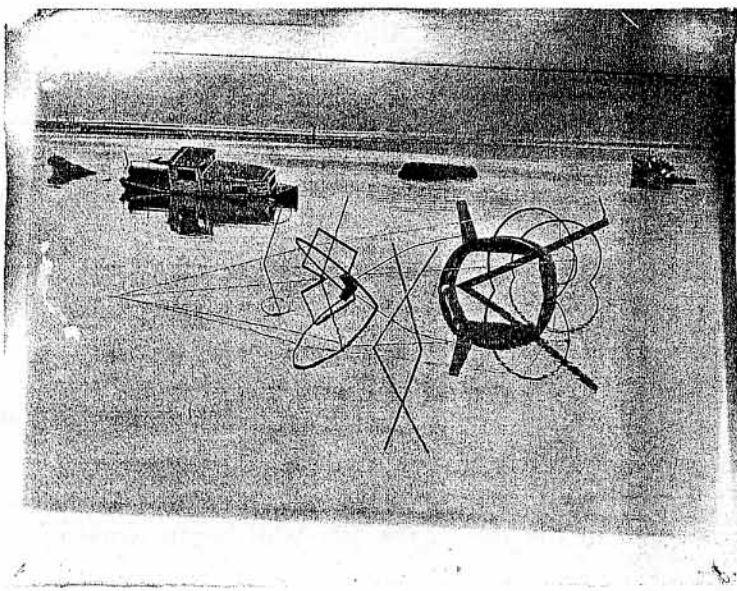
Nevertheless, although the avant-garde of the 1960s would eventually inherit the future, it would be mistaken to dismiss the achievements of the previous generation as irrelevant. Since Vancouver had only the most tentative contact with modern art before World War II, it was the postwar abstract painters and architects who set the stage for the support and recognition of the avant-garde that followed. The new language of modernity and abstract art introduced to Vancouver by the modernists of the 1950s was the natural expression of the optimism that accompanied the economic boom of the postwar period. The prosperity that came with the exploitation of what seemed to be unlimited natural resources began in the 1950s to reshape the Vancouver cityscape with high-rise office and apartment buildings in the international modernist style. The colonial port city took on the appearance and the ambitions of a more cosmopolitan centre. This architectural modernity was a backdrop to a shift in the attitudes of the middle and managerial classes, who were attracted to abstract art as a suitable decoration for the corporate lobbies and the interiors of the new modernist homes that were springing up in the surrounding hillside suburbs. Although not necessarily avant-garde in the fullest sense, this new modernity, informed by contemporary developments in New York, allowed for a refreshing openness

to the experiments of the more radical art that followed in the late 1960s.

Each generation will seek a position that is unoccupied by the previous one. Since the abstract art of the 1950s generally overlooked social subjects, this left an opening for the next generation to critique modernist formalism and introduce a critical politics that was taking hold in the student movements of the late 1960s. This shift was spatial as well as ideological, and when translated into photography it introduced a documentation of the local scene that opened up a discourse about its history, as well. Nevertheless, while much of this early imagery implied a social critique, it did so only indirectly. Photography was used essentially to provide concrete ciphers for "real" allegories that would bridge the gap between aesthetic and sociological subject matter. The contrasts between the urban centre, the hillside suburbs, the industrial lowlands, and the nearby wilderness supplied locations for the first avant-garde photographic art in Vancouver in the 1960s. The "cool," almost impersonal method of the early photo-conceptual work primarily sought locations in the industrial and suburban *terrain vague* that were apparently nondescript, but implicitly revealed latent ideological and political import, as absences which referred to the vacated spaces of a suppressed history.

This iconography of marginality made continuous reference to the lower cultural and geographical zones of the city; the industrial backwaters, the waterfront, the mud flats. These were sites for suppressed histories not only of aboriginal culture, but also the migrant and working class culture that populated the lower regions of the port. During the economic depression in the 1930s, Vancouver had become the terminal city, the end of the railroad for the mass of unemployed drifters who made their way across the continent fruitlessly searching for work. These displaced immigrants collected in large squatter colonies in the neglected industrial waterfront and later in the derelict downtown eastside, forming a vaguely bohemian and politicized working class culture that was the antipode to the dominant middle class culture of the city, and which remain as a residue of the social conflicts that accompanied the growth of this city from colonial outpost to cosmopolitan port.

The relationship between the artistic avant-garde of the 1960s and this earlier bohemian culture was specific. Following the example of Malcolm Lowry, who wrote his novel *Under the Volcano* in a waterfront shack at the nearby Dollarton Mud Flats in the 1940s, such artists as the renegade poet, collage-artist, and jazz musician Al Neil and the sculptor Tom Burrows squatted



Tom Burrows  
*Untitled sculpture,*  
*Maplewood Mud Flats, 1971*  
 black and white photograph  
 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist

on the “no man’s land” of nearby tidal flats in the later 1960s. Around his self-built home, Burrows created informal sculptures made from derelict pieces of metal and cable, which took on a vaguely Constructivist or Suprematist appearance when they were reflected in the rising tide. In attempting to bridge the gap between art and life, and to make art that would be a critique of dominant property relations, Burrows specifically referred to liberationist aesthetics running from the Russian Constructivists to the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys. In the 1970s, Burrows took his interventionist aesthetic around the world in the form of a travelling exhibition titled *Skwat Doc*.

The New York artists Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, whose innovative photo-journalistic art recorded the alienated spaces of the industrial and suburban wastelands in the eastern seaboard, were a major inspiration for a new photo-conceptual art practised by Vancouver artists in the late 1960s. Their documentary, photographic approach, which typified the critical conceptual photography of the late 1960s, inspired the Vancouver artists to take a closer look at the conflicted spaces of the region. Some of the first representations of the spaces of these lower zones appeared in bookworks such as *A Portfolio of Piles* (1968) by N.E. Thing Company, whose work was political in effect if not in intent. Jeff Wall’s *Landscape Manual* (1969), also a bookwork, was a self-reflexive narrative of a photographic journey by automobile through the innocuous suburban streets that would later reappear in his mature work. Wall referred to these spaces as the “defeatured landscape,” spaces that were intentionally stripped of their monumental character and returned to pure



N.E. Thing Company  
*A Portfolio of Piles, 1968*  
 offset lithography  
 6 ½ × 9 ½ in. (16.5 × 24 cm)  
 Collection of The Morris and  
 Helen Belkin Art Gallery Archive,  
 The University of British Columbia,  
 Vancouver

photographic phenomena. Also inspired by Smithson's idea of "entropy" and the antimonument, Christos Dikeakos' *Instant Photo Information* (1970) was a video and photographic recording of the industrial backwaters that lay in the eastern heart of the city, and thus inherently politically loaded. Originally an aboriginal hunting marsh and later the site of a squatter colony, while still a refuge for the destitute, this area is currently being re-developed as a technology park.



Jeff Wall  
*Bad Goods*, 1984  
 transparency in lightbox  
 90 × 137 in. (229 × 347 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist

By the 1980s, these earlier photographic experiments became technically more sophisticated and politically more tendentious and thus attracted a second generation of ambitious photo-conceptualists. In the late 1970s, Jeff Wall began working with large-scale, back-lit Cibachrome transparencies that challenged the regional avant-garde to pay attention to the narrative potentiality of new production techniques. In works such as his *Bad Goods* (1984), he influenced a new generation with the pictorial and political power of this *mise-en-scène* of the empty industrial zone. Its apparent emptiness, like the "defeatured landscape" of the earlier suburban streets, provided the staging for the pictorial unveiling of the complex layers of a problematic history. The scenario for *Bad Goods* is an empty terrain near the waterfront in the eastern side of the city that presents, as if on a theatre stage, an aboriginal male looking to the viewer from a distance across the foreground in which is dumped a box of California lettuce. Wall's dramatization of still images succeeded in bridging the gap between the latent history of the site and the conscience of the spectator. Aesthetic contemplation thus modulates political awareness.

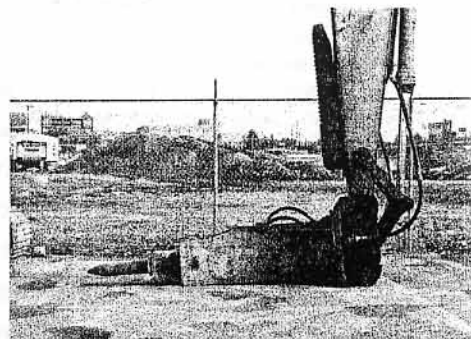
Christos Dikeakos  
*High Tech Park*, 2003  
 digital lightjet print  
 47 × 97 in. (119.3 × 246.3 cm)  
 Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,  
 Vancouver



In 1985, Roy Arden began a series of works such as *Rupture* and *Abjection*, which used appropriated documentary photography to recapture the suppressed history of local race and class warfare. Arden followed this with a series of large-scale photographs of freshly razed sites of the Vancouver waterfront that were being prepared for new development. At this time, also, Ken Lum did his *historical portraits*, small offset photographs of various natives and bohemians of the downtown eastside. Even more recently

Stan Douglas in *Every Building on 100 West Hastings* (2001) has made reference to this area. Liz Magor's monumental public sculpture titled *LightShed* (2004) is a recreation of a former waterfront shack elevated on pylons and displayed as a life-size monument to the past that stands in stark contrast to the glamour of the new high-rise apartments that tower over this site.

The important factor in the ongoing history of the avant-garde in Vancouver is that the 1990s gave rise to further new work by younger artists who continued the trajectory of the previous avant-garde, but were determined to define their own subjects with new techniques, new attitudes, and, most importantly, new locations for their scenarios. The spectacular development of the downtown core that accompanied the massive influx of Asian immigrants following the decolonization of Hong Kong converted the previously neglected industrial waterfront districts into a showcase for a new urban and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Thus, the original history of these locations was even further suppressed in what might be called the "culture of amnesia," in which new histories have erased and buried the immediate past. While politically tendentious aspects of the avant-garde still exist, there has also been a subtle rejection of historical imperatives. The mediated image in much of the new work becomes not so much a means of revealing suppressed history as of glossing it over. Nevertheless, the ironic detachment and cultivation of the inauthentic in this new work gave it a radical edge that distinguished it from earlier, more overtly tendentious work. By identifying with the contradictions, the contradictions were also identified. Vikky Alexander, who first established herself in the New York scene in



Roy Arden  
*Pneumatic Hammer (#2)*, 1992  
 archival pigment print  
 41.8 × 49.5 in. (106.2 × 125.8 cm) framed  
 Courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark  
 Gallery, Vancouver



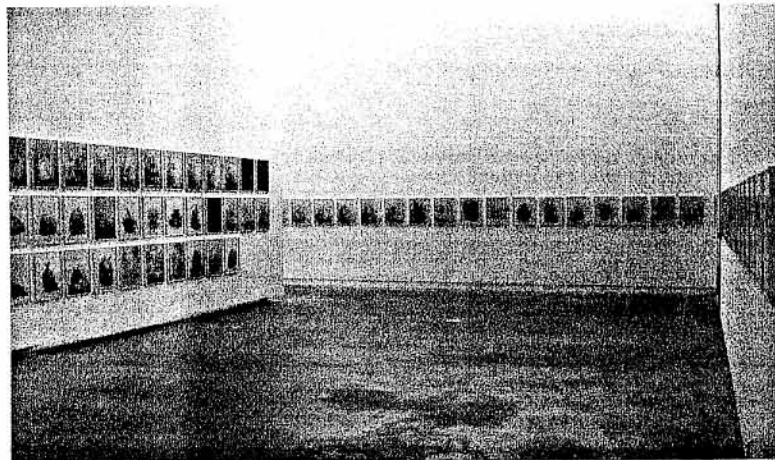
Vikky Alexander  
*Model Suite, Living Room*, 2005  
 transmounted Ektacolor print,  
 edition 1/3  
 40 × 60 in. (101.5 × 152 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 State Gallery & Projects, Vancouver

the 1980s with appropriation-based work, moved to Vancouver in the 1990s, and located her themes in the simulation of cosmopolitan interiors characteristic of the new architecture.



In the series *Model Suite* (2005), she has photographed the life-size model suites open to prospective buyers of high-rise condominiums yet to be built, and in which the windows are actually photographs that simulate panoramic views of the mountain and harbour landscape. The combination of irony and artificiality in this work is an astute commentary on the shifting social structures of the city. But the chic modernity that is marketed by real estate interests in the city comes into conflict with the actual social landscape that lies in the fissures of the streets below, and which is still haunted by an unresolved problematic shared by cities where there exists this collision between modernity and the frontier: what is the place of the outcast underclass in this landscape? The lower zone of the city has been treated as a disposable culture, like the detritus of Kelly Wood's *Continuous Garbage Project: 1998-2003*, which hints at the resignation of a post-avant-garde aesthetic and a sense of melancholy at the helplessness of art in the face of the real.

Kelly Wood  
*Continuous Garbage Project, Year 4:*  
March 15, 2001 - March 14, 2002,  
2001-2002  
c-print  
20 x 16 in. (50.5 x 40.5 cm)  
installation view, The Morris and Helen  
Belkin Art Gallery, The University of  
British Columbia, Vancouver, 2003  
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,  
Vancouver



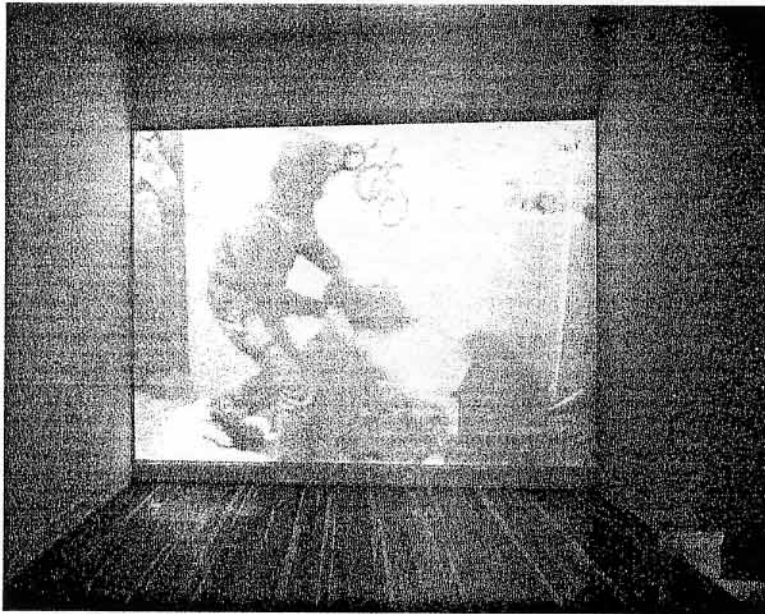
The theme of refuge that lurks in the imagery of recent work is a symptom of the attempt to resituate its aesthetic scenarios in locations that cloak anxiety with allegories of retreat that lampoon the histories and identities that the earlier avant-garde took so seriously. The foppish sincerity of Rodney Graham's lushly romantic video *How I Became a Ramblin' Man* (1999) contains such a fantasy of escape. Likewise, Damian Moppett in his video *1815/1962* (2003) plays out a fantasy of faux-historical survival in the nearby forest; a survival ironically rescued by means of a trap made from twigs modelled on a modernist sculpture by Anthony Caro. But the realist, socially critical model still exists, for example, in Jeff Wall's recent, large black and white photographs, such as *Forest* (2003), which represents transients camping in the woods but shying away from the intrusion of the viewer; not as an ironic romantic fantasy but as a reflection upon the very real current condition of a large population



Rodney Graham  
*How I Became a Ramblin' Man*, 1999  
video/sound installation (9 minutes,  
continuous loop), artist's proof  
(edition of 4, 2 artist's proofs)  
35 mm film transferred to DVD  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

of vagrants who are literally refugees from a society that has no place for them.

Those zones that collect the contradictory, the marginal, and the transient have now been both detached from and enfolded into the glossy fabric of the dominant culture. This theme of conflicted social space, which initiated the early work of the Vancouver avant-garde, continues to the present, but now is overwhelmed by the ongoing dynamics of history. While they also speak to the contingencies of immediate experience, Vancouver artists are now taking lessons from the rabid progressiveness of the third world and the homogenizing tendencies of globalized mediated culture. Alex Morrison describes the skateboarders in his video work *Housewrecker* (2002): "They are enacting freedom within the bounds of their prescribed social space." This new frontier of the avant-garde continues to be formulated in a temporal, as well as a spatial mode: spaces that have marked the work of the past are being displaced by spaces of the future, as the historical flux of this changing city on the "edge of the known world" continues to stimulate artists who are responsive to their era.



Alex Morrison  
*Housewrecker*, 2002  
5 channel DVD installation  
installation view, Catriona Jeffries  
Gallery, 2003  
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery,  
Vancouver  
Photograph: Scott Massey



Damian Moppett  
*1815/1962*, 2003  
production still  
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver