



1984 Chevrolet Caprice Classic Wagon, 94000 kms, Good Condition, Engine Needs Minor Work, \$1200 OBO 604 888 3243, 2000, C-Print, detail, 1 of 5 panels

Kevin Schmidt is selling his car. Its portrait, consisting of five photographs and a lengthy, classified ad style caption, forms his contribution to *Out of Sight*. Schmidt claims that his project's success is a result of its formal purity: the photographs show off the car to good advantage; the title is designed to help potential buyers make up their minds. Schmidt also says his project is straight forward—he's moving to Tofino; the car's got to go—but I hope he

will forgive me for suggesting that through its gallery presentation his ad has become art, whether or not he accepts that label. His work is also a fine example of non-indexical photography, and it is this question of its looking like one thing while actually being another that I want to address here.

Schmidt's car isn't glamorous. It's primarily been used for transporting surfboards to and from the west coast of

Vancouver Island. Typically, to sell this kind of car, an ad would be placed in the paper, perhaps accompanied by a black and white photograph, naturalistic in the extreme, which would focus on the car as object, verifying the accuracy of the text description printed alongside it, certifying, for example, that "Good Condition" actually means, *No Rust*. The *Auto Trader* or *Buy & Sell* photograph serves as an indexical stand-in for the absent vehicle. Schmidt's color photographs, on the other hand, are non-indexical, as are most sophisticated advertisers', insofar as they aim to sell the car by creating an aura of mystery and excitement around it through the conjunction of its image with landscape images, thereby creating an emotional subtext which will influence a buyer's decision to purchase it. The photographs join the car with a sunset (designed to make the car look "romantic," "lyrical," etc.), a high mountain road ("rugged"); a mountain peak ("noble") and so on. Each photograph in the sequence depicts a different attribute of the car's "personality," an aspect that an *Auto Trader* or *Buy & Sell* ad would not convey, one which has been imaginatively fabricated and draped around the vehicle. We can observe Schmidt's manipulation of his hypothetically "naturalistic" images in various ways; for example, the way the car seems to shine when viewed at certain angles. This just might be the result of a vigorous wax and polish, but closer observation of the photographs reveals a white gleam on the vehicle's bumpers and sides—the reflection of light from a photographic strobe kit, which Schmidt has carted out into the wilderness. Details like this indicate that Schmidt's work is first and foremost an exploration of how photographic images are fabricated. But I think Schmidt's work can be seen in another way as well, one closer to the originating spirit of the photoconceptual works from which it draws inspiration. Specifically, the work is a sophisticated institutional critique. An art

exhibition in a public gallery is an important opportunity for artworks to be seen and discussed, but it's also a chance for the work to "put its best foot forward," to shine itself up like the car, perhaps in hope of being purchased for the institution's permanent collection. Schmidt subverts this whole process by implicitly addressing his work to the crowd, to people whose needs are more practical than those of the institution. In this way, he keeps faith with prior generations of artists who recognized that, if they were to be faithful to the ethical premises implicit in their work, they would have to relinquish all claims of knowing for whom, and how, their work succeeded. The work would form its own audience, a subgroup of all possible spectators, and this process would be utopian because the criteria by which the group constituted itself would be impossible to determine in advance. Schmidt's work is patently not addressed to the institution. After all, what use does a public gallery, even a suburban one, have for a 1984 Chevy? The entire work is pointed beyond the institution at the public: potential car buyers; people who know people who might want to buy a car; those who, like most gallery-goers, are "just looking." The institution is treated as a platform for a brief moment of connection between the artist and a public he can anticipate but never confirm in advance. The work's aesthetic (and for me, ethical) value supersedes its image component; the photographs are not uninteresting, but what I like best about the work is the fact that Schmidt and a buyer may meet and seal a bargain, one that will be entirely invisible from the institution's point of view, a "performance" whose "documentation"—canceled cheque, license transfer, Aircare test and engine repair—will remain an important component of the project, yet forever outside it.