Fourteen Reasons for Photoconceptualism

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Introduction
This text grew out of a talk I gave as part of the series organized by Presentation House Gallery (the panel, which included Lisa Robertson, Jerry Zaslove, and myself, took place Feb 14, 2003 at the Wall Centre in Vancouver). This essay then, is much like the one I delivered, with some elaborations on critical points: here I schematize a historical argument for a rupture in Vancouver photography, via some fourteen points.

Part One
I'm interested in the idea that a break, a rupture, in Vancouver photography, or in Vancouver street photography, occurred in the 1960s, a break we can see in the photographs in Unfinished Business. I will argue that this break exists, what the aesthetic changes were which took place; and then some reasons for why this should have happened here and not elsewhere. Partly I think also that in order to think critically about such a school or movement as Vancouver photoconceptualism, it must have come to an end: otherwise, one is still "caught up in the moment." So if the break which inaugurated photoconceptualism was a break both with the canon of art photography and with the local examples, it led too to a project which was theoretical as well as art-historical, one which dealt with the commodification of nature as well urbanization as a form of modernization, a simulacra of realism that was also a post-anti-photography that itself came to an end in the late 1980s.

These thoughts are part of a larger project I'm working on about the social contexts of the Vancouver school of photoconceptualism; my thinking about this aesthetic period has come to be that the unity of the practice lies as much in this epistemic rupture which is its own genesis as in a common set of methods or topoi. For if there is a "family resemblance" to Vancouver photoconceptualism—and I believe there is—then my argument is that this is due to a founding break with a pre-existing photographic context. And so before turning to what characterizes the break photographically, I will briefly describe just what I mean, theoretically, by a break or rupture.

This language derives from French theory of course, and in particular from the structuralism of Althusser and Foucault and the history of ideas in their teachers Georges Canguilhem, and Bachelard. The idea of a break in a history then is a formal version of the role of "revolution" in Marxist politics. And one specific example in Althusser's work is his theory that Marx's writings themselves divide into an early, or humanist period, and a later, or scientific period. The first period ends approximately in 1847 with the Theses on Feuerbach and/or the Manifesto; Marx's Paris writings, where he first derived a theory of human exploitation and alienation is insufficient as a critique of capitalism because it mistakes an effect of capital, or the alienation of the worker, with an essentially private, or proto-existentialist, condition of his soul. Thus alienation, a philosophical theory that Man is both alienated from the world, from himself, in himself—key to such Hegelian theory as the master-slave dialectic—is contradictory. This is so because it takes a necessary condition of human existence—our recognition that we are separate from the physical world—and posits that as an ethically critique.

This is the alienation that we see in the street photography of Fred Herzog or Fred Douglass the human subject now is somehow rescued via a compensatory aesthetic (the hurly-burly of Hastings, the mirrored corners at Main and Broadway) from the overwhelming neon and streetscapes.

But Althusser argued that it was only once Marx had begun to work out the surplus theory of value—or the scientific theory that as surplus value is extracted from the worker via wage-labour, and then turned from profit into capital and then reinvested in the circulation of capital—did he arrive at a materialist critique of capitalism. The earlier moment in Marx's work was merely humanist, dependent upon some ethico-humanist theory of the subject. This is a hothly contested insight in Althusser's theory, for it holds that Marxism is a theory of economics and not subjectivity (or, rather, it ignores the dialectic in such works as Capital, where, as Marshall Berman has argued, the swing from objective narrative to scientific statistics is almost cruel!). Better surely the opening up of the shot as we see in Wall, Wallace, Dikeakos, and N.E. Thing Co., the attention paid to empty lots and pavement, similarly turns away from photographer-as-charity-worker, to photographer as institutionalized sociologist.

As for the content of the break, I think we can see it most clearly if we compare the work of such essentially realist photographers—Svend-Erik Eriksen, Jack Dale, Bruce Stewart, Fred Herzog, Brian Stabylk, Dick Bellamy, Curt Lang, Greg Girard, Tony Westman—and the structuralist photography of Christos Dikeakos, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and the N.E. Thing Co.. What is this break? In some ways it is a shift in subject matter. First we have a "street photography" of the sidewalk—the Damon Runyonesque characters of a Tony Westman or Fred Herzog street, the neon-Hastings strip signage of an Svend-Erik Eriksen or Greg Girard: such visual representations of capitalism are literal texts. Then we have the blank suburbs of Jeff Wall's Landscape Manual, the intersection as abstraction of Ian Wallace, False Creek as decaying industrial signifiers in Christos Dikeakos: now we have a semiotic text, a latent capitalism (the absences at the heart of this work point to other artistic versions [Ruscha] as well as that at the heart of the French theoretical project—Blanchot, Bachelard, Derrida). In part the shift—this is much more than a shift, this is a rupture, a total break—has to be more than just subject

1. Etienne Balibar, a former student of Althusser's, was still holding with that date for the break in his book The Philosophy of Marx (Verso, 1995), where he argues for a critical Marxism instead of a monolithic dialectical materialism.
matter: it has to do with an attitude toward the camera itself, toward photography. A distrust of the image, a disidentification with being a photographer. The realist street scene is no longer of interest presumably because of how it over-signifies: Ian Wallace has said that he never shot in the East side because it was too full of connotation. Dennis Wheeler's "defeated landscape" (Dan Graham, too). This has to do with the post-war growth of visual culture, and how institutionalized and endemic the photographic image was becoming. Then, too, photography as either commodified labour process (journalism, stock photography [Stablyk]) or as art (the discredited modernist canon of Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, Diane Arbus) is similarly distrust, discarded, disdained. Thus the photomat as studio, as Jeff Wall puts it in Landscape Manual, and how the format of that book and Christos Dikeakos' Instant Photo Information worked to de-reify the art-photograph.

In Landscape Manual, the movement from "actual" or imaginary descriptions of photo-taking and driving around, etc., then move at the same Robbe-Grillet-like pace as the porno film project ("Skech for Patterened Tape/Film 'Disturbance'," p. 19 ff)—thus the camera-eye-like objectivity of the nouveau roman is returned to the technology of its inspiration. Too, Dikeakos' use of traffic carnage photos on the cover of Instant Photo Information veers between Braque's analytic cubism and collage, and the abject form (crudely stuck together photos, almost torn) meets a crumpled content of cars and drivers. Both texts betray an almost JG Ballard-like apocalyptic-futuristic tone—but also utopian: a lack of belief in the Real, a use of appropriation and collage and pastiche/parody as opposed to the naïve one sees in Herzog.3

So if there was such a break, if we accept such a division in the work offered for us in the Presentation House Gallery exhibition, what are the reasons for this? This is a double-barreled question, one that requires that we not merely look at the photographs to see "Vancouver as it used to be," for it is important to be able to see the photographs as photographs—to realize that "Vancouver never looked like that" in a certain way. What I mean by this is that there have been compelling arguments that photography can never be an art because we only ever see the referent—the city, the street, the neon sign—what the photoconceptual break, or the break as an early moment of postconceptualism, what it meant was a turning away from that referent. I'll argue shortly that the revenge of the referent shortly made itself known, even if, dialectically, that revenge was itself short-lived.

The reasons for this break are many, I would primarily group them under the heading of "The Intensification of Modernization" in Vancouver in the post-war period. I'll come back to what I mean by this in a moment, but here list some of the causes for a turn toward a new kind of photography:

1. the role of the universities in the rationalization of cultural production, including conceptual training for artists, meaning the very beginnings of knowledge of Marxism, semiotics, feminism; but also discredited or discarded ideologies like romanticism, classicism, McLuhanism, cybernetics (Bateson);
2. mass media as an image-economy which simultaneously devalues the individual image and gives us possibilities of seizing the image context;
3. the neglected role of UBC as a catalyst in the early and mid-1960s with its festival of contemporary arts (and other initiatives—TISH etc.—the role of the literary in general) resulting in the incursions of writers, poets, and later artists, from Charles Olson and Jack Spicer to Marshall McLuhan, Lucy Lippard, Roberta Smithson, Dan Graham; and also the role of the CBC and the NFB as similarly decentralized institutions; the self-consciously modernist painting and architectural and design movements from the 1930s in Vancouver—Arthur Erickson, Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith, R.C. Binning (as documented by Scott Watson);
4. the accompanying shift post-World War II from Main and Hastings as the centre of the downtown to the Granville and W. Georgia area, as those international modernist buildings were erected, and the suburbs themselves expanded and densified;
5. the development of the "art world" itself as a semi-autonomous economic and cultural field post-World War II and the simultaneous spread of late modernist avant-gardes—mail art, conceptualism, Fluxus, performances, happenings, Pop art, minimalism—and the specifically Canadian spread of public funding and artist-run centres;
6. the heroic role of the Vancouver Art Gallery as site for the avant-garde in the late 1960s—including its later publication of Vanguard magazine;
7. a civic change in Vancouver from a faux-British colonial outpost of the resource economy to what is now clearly evident as a post-industrial site;
8. a concomitant emergence post-1960 of a multicultural and Asian Vancouver;
9. the globalization of radical politics emerging out of the U.S civil rights movement, the Cuban revolution, anti-colonial struggles including the separatist struggle in Québec, the student and anti-war protests in Paris, Prague, and elsewhere;
10. the class fractionalization of Vancouver whereby the East and West are indelibly marked and the East side, east end, East Van is the demonized, criminalized, oriented zone of Vancouver's other; and finally two factors which suggest more about continuity than change:

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Or in Westman's, Dale, or Leng. But it's difficult to know where to put your money here: on the artfulness of Grant or Flick which yields some unexpected synchonostics (the two women opening their purses in Flick's Hastings Street at Combe, 1960 are worthy of a Helen Levitt photo), or on the sinfulness of a Westman (are the Fock Brothers, East Vancouver, 1957 about to fight each other?)

1. Neglected by the critics, that is.
2. See Christopher Brayshaw's essay "A Substratum of Disaster" (in Collapse) on Smithson in Vancouver; also, the forthcoming Smithson exhibition at the VAG.
12. on the one hand, the radical juxtaposition of our landscape that results in mountains and slums—to put it baldly—in the same frame or picture;

13. on the other hand, a strong presence here of a left culture, a social democracy which owes its origins to the rambunctious resource economies at the turn of the century, the struggle between organized labour and multinational capital, and a polarized electoral politics that even recently we saw with arguably the same voters electing (or voting for) a right wing Campbell provincially and a left-wing Campbell municipally;

14. and also, or equally important, a whole slew of absent causes, including a paucity of collectors or dealers (the role of Nova gallery [1976–1982], the Coburg Gallery [1983–1987], and the Pender Street gallery notwithstanding), residual Presbyterian-Anglo pioneer-colonial branch plant-branch office comprador ideologies that correctly saw little use for art, as well as an utter lack of a local artistic tradition (taking into account the minor examples of Shadbolt, Smith, Carr or native cultures).

Conclusions

The American critic Fredric Jameson has characterized postmodernism as in some ways the completion of modernism, the colonization of our unconscious and the last vestiges of nature; this is what I meant earlier by talking about all of these factors as an intensification of modernization, its completion. For if an aesthetic change is related to this variety of causes, which make their way known through the subject (education and personal know ledge of the artists), through the institutions (the academy, the museum), through the state (arts funding, the built environment of the city), through the economy (the post-war boom, the late 80s recession), through culture (new aesthetic forms, changes in camera technology and its popularization), through absence—if aesthetic change is determined by a number of causes, if it is, as Freud and others have said, overdetermined, then what is germane or what this tells us about artistic production is not simply that it is caused by a number of different factors but that it is caused by the fact that it is caused by a number of different factors. The rupture in Vancouver photography from a realist street style to a blank photoconceptual style, a rupture we can trace in this very exhibition at Presentation House Gallery, then, is caused by the place of the cultural, or the artistic, or the photographic, in late capitalism, a society in which the photograph is simultaneously commodified hobby and police surveillance, museumized artifact and kiddy porn—touristic signifier and critical art.

The Vancouver School developed here and not elsewhere both because of the lack of capitalist (dealer/collector/media) support locally and the presence of sundry institutions that all at various times were subverted from within. But if the break that I have been discussing here of necessity meant a blanking out or unreadability of the local or specific, then we can see both a revenge of the local—the geophysical Real that informs so much art—and its erasure, in turn, as that art goes global.