

Street Photos 1970

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I began using the theme of the street in my photographic work in late 1969 and it has appeared intermittently up to the present. The urban street, and the intersection in particular, formed the primary image for *Poverty*, 1980, *My Heroes in the Street*, 1986, which was followed by other related street series that continued through the 1990s, and most recently with the *New York* series, 2001, and the *LA* series, 2003. In all of these series the urban intersection with pedestrians in the crosswalk form the core motif of the imagery. Throughout this period, I have also turned my attention to a variety of other themes, but the image of the urban intersection and crosswalk remains a key subject in my work. This is a personal account that reflects primarily on how, why and when I originated my early photographic street works between 1969 and 1971.

Breaking away from the monochrome

My early photographic works were immediately preceded by a series of monochrome paintings and sculptural arrangements of standard building materials that I exhibited between 1967 and 1969. My primary interest was philosophical. I wanted to make a work that was completely autonomous and self-sufficient, and yet connected to what I felt were significant developments in recent contemporary art. My early attempts at monochrome painting presented no image other than its own distinctness as an object and initially that was more than enough. Nevertheless, although this 'zero degree' of monochrome painting opened up new directions in artistic practice, it seemed insufficient as a means of reflecting on the more compelling aspects of contemporary life—those observations of changing relations in society that more image-oriented work of the time was effective in communicating (Pop Art being a key example). Although monochrome painting seemed to confirm autonomy, it lacked relevance. While its objectness was solidly founded on the structuralist tendencies of the 1960s, it didn't have the semiotic richness that would take it into the 1970s. Nevertheless, I didn't want to fall back into the typical artistic techniques of pictorial representation, which were unavoidable in the medium of painting. But photographic work that emerged from conceptual

Untitled
(Lonsdale Avenue)
1971/1995

art practices in the late 1960s (an amalgam of minimal sculpture, Pop Art and concrete poetry) seemed to offer some solution to the formal problems of late modernist abstraction without returning to figurative painting. Most importantly, it opened up new areas of thinking about contemporary life while still maintaining a connection to the formal and critical strategies of modernist art.

Early Photoconceptualism and the Photo Show of 1969

My attraction to the subject of the street, the city and the social landscape in general came at a time when many other artists were focusing on similar imagery. I remember being inspired by a published exhibition catalogue of photographs by Vancouver artists N.E. Thing Co. titled *Piles*, 1968, that accompanied an exhibition of the same title. I also was intrigued by other photoconceptual projects that used mass media publication formats as an artistic medium, including Dan Graham's *Homes for America*, 1966, Robert Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic*, 1967, and Ed Ruscha's *All the Buildings on the Sunset Strip*, 1966. This work suggested a latent political perspective. An even more direct influence came from discussions around new work produced by younger Vancouver artists: notably Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual*, 1969, and Christos Dikeakos' *Instant Photo Information*, 1970. Like N.E. Thing Co.'s *Piles* catalogue, these works by Wall and Dikeakos presented a photographic portrait of the local environment. One of the most important features common to all of this work was the idea of roving by car in the streets and the peripheral spaces of the city, and discovering objects, shapes, structures and events similar to current avant garde art. The cinematic potential of this activity opened up narrative possibilities for photo-based art produced in the 1970s, especially when portable video units became readily available. The fact that the architectural environment of the North American city and suburb formed the subject matter of these works was important. When the local environment became recognizable for its artistic potential, especially as it appeared in N.E. Thing Co.'s *Piles* and even indirectly in the work of local photographers such as Fred Herzog, Fred Douglas and Curt Lang, this opened up a crucial new direction for a generation of younger regional artists who were attempting to forge an ambitious and original artistic programme out of immediate experience and thus have an authentic and relevant relationship to the art world at large, despite the marginality of the Vancouver scene at the time.

By proposing that photography of the local landscape could be potential material for art, the borders between everyday reality and art were blurred. The legacy of Marcel Duchamp was paramount. Photographic appropriation converted the city and its suburbs into an endlessly open-ended source of readymades. This was the primary method of N.E. Thing Co.'s *ACT* series where any object of everyday life could be appropriated via photography to function as an aesthetic statement. The *ACT* series



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Curt Lang
Granville Street
 1972
 ink jet print
 Courtesy the Estate
 of Curt Lang and
 Presentation House
 Gallery, North
 Vancouver

drew attention, often with an ironic and deadpan humour, to the simple but curious objectness of ordinary things in the world, and despite affecting an anti-art attitude it functioned with surprising effectiveness to transform these objects into signs for the idea of art. Once the artistic potential of this new photographic strategy was understood, a new generation of artists converged on the streets looking for subjects for new works. This was the starting point for the street pictures I started making for an exhibition called the "Photo Show" in the late fall of 1969.

This ground-breaking exhibition, which was installed at the student union building at the University of British Columbia from December 1969 to January 1970, was one of the very first comprehensive exhibitions of photoconceptual work done anywhere. Initiated by Christos Dikeakos and Ilyas Pagonis, this exhibition included not only recent photographic work inspired by conceptual art done by Vancouver artists, including N.E. Thing Co., Jeff Wall, Duane Lunden, Dikeakos and myself, but it also included work by Dan Graham, some of the early photo works by Vito Acconci, *Glue Pour* executed by Robert Smithson (who was in Vancouver earlier that fall), and book works by Ed Ruscha. In that show, I exhibited my first photo work—an untitled binder filled with approximately 100 photos stapled into transparent sleeves and installed on a sculpture pedestal. These photos depicted scenes observed while driving around the lower mainland. It was a very fragmentary and disorganized collage experiment—a work-in-progress scrapbook that has since been pulled apart and reconstructed into subsequent works. I intend by this account to acknowledge that my turn from monochrome painting to photoconceptual practice was part of a larger artistic shift that generated a lot of exciting new work and intense discussion. Exhibitions like the "Photo Show" were essential to this process.

Against the look of art

It is also important to identify the decisive split that existed between photography as a fine art and this new conceptual approach to photography. In the early 1970s, conceptual artists made a conscious effort to distance themselves from traditional photographic 'fine art' practice. The photographic imagery in the works by Dan

Graham, Robert Smithson and Jeff Wall were intermingled with a narrative or descriptive text that was essentially illustrative rather than autonomous. My own street images were constructed as assemblages or montages or in sequential forms indicating shifts in time or space to create what I called a literature of images. The imagery was always seen as part of a larger whole rather than an end in itself. These were works of art that avoided the conventional look of fine art in an attempt to simulate real information that emphasized factual observation more than subjective impressions, although expression often crept in the back door.

Hanging onto the concept of art

Although my own work reflected tendencies related to that made by other artists around me, my commitment to art in its aesthetic, idealist and historical sense was perhaps stronger than it was for some others. I was not willing to completely sacrifice the idea of art as an autonomous and necessary category, which I still felt had redemptive potential, to the idea of information. Even though, like others at the time, I had somewhat naively appropriated pseudo-scientific methods and research jargon in the systematic production of the photographs, I sought in these strategies those characteristics that would ground them more securely as art works. I wanted to link the new conceptual strategies in contemporary art to what I had come to understand as the fundamental character of art since prehistory—as a language by which we know the world in its fundament. This was, in my formulation, the notion that art is an objectification of consciousness.

Photography and the endgame of late Modernism

Although any medium of artistic expression could express this concept, it nevertheless seemed to me at the time that the photograph was the most direct means to this end. Given the specific conditions of avant garde art of the late 1960s, and monochrome painting in particular with its radical closure on representation, which was caught in what I call the endgame of late Modernism, Photoconceptualism provided the means for breaking out of this deadlock and opening up new ways of engaging everyday life. The photographic strategies that emerged from earlier text-based conceptual art provided an equally radical but more engaged medium for reflecting the concept of the 'objectification of consciousness'. This was a realization that emerged directly from my earlier experiments with the monochrome. From the outset I understood 'conceptual' photography in a crudely literal sense. I wanted my photography to engage the world through a performative act that made conceptual understanding concrete. The simple choice of subject and the simple click of the shutter, followed by the representation of the image as a work of art, was the means by which this primary event could play



In the Street
 (The Cologne Series III)
 1989
 photolaminate, ink
 monoprint, acrylic on
 canvas, 2 panels,
 203 x 305.5 (overall)
 Private Collection

itself out. These photographic images were also fragments or abstractions taken from the plenum or 'field of reality', which was for me the infinity of the landscape of the city, its manifold perspectives and confusion of movements. The street became an icon or a cipher for the space of modernist reality. When these images of momentary experiences abstracted from the wholeness of this field were converted into the autonomous referential language that we understand as art, they could function as platforms for critical reflection on that reality. In this way, the abstractive process of conceptual photography could play an intellectual, expressive and political function. I still conceive photographic representation as abstraction in this sense. By depicting the most banal events of everyday life, such as people crossing the street, I realized I would probably limit the audience for the work. But it remains my feeling that these images established a presence in art, for the cities, the people I pictured, and ultimately for myself as an artist. The documentation of the tangible and recognizable immediacy of the objectivity of the world originated from a specific artistic intention and reflected a concept of existential choice. Also, as my forgoing observations indicate, its more compelling aspect was its sympathetic relation to the self-reflexive logic of modernist representation as an existential or phenomenological outlook. Despite the disguises, these pictures were generated as works of art that consciously emphasized the event of making the work itself as a form of performance—these images were as much about performance as they were about the city. More importantly, the linking of theory and practice was crucial to the consistent development of my work over a lifetime. My art work remains deeply informed by this historical idealism.

The intersection

My attraction to the theme of the street, or more specifically, the urban intersection or crosswalk as a site, location or scene for a subjective narrative for photography was metaphorical as well as specific. The street, and more precisely, the stage of the sidewalk on which the pedestrians are poised to cross, is both a metaphor for reality in general and the location of specific experiences of the modern city. I considered the street of the urban centre an extension of the working space of my studio, and the dynamics of the intersection, with its pedestrians, traffic, signage and architecture, to be part of my artistic working material. My choice



*The Transmountain
Building II*
1991
photolaminate,
acrylic on canvas
244 x 121 cm
Private Collection

of the downtown intersection was motivated by an interest in the larger city environment. I was fixated on the asphalt monochrome of the intersection that was to be found in any comparable modern city. But if the literal space of the rectangle of the urban intersection was the crossing point for a reflection on the dynamics of modern culture in the most general sense, and a literal observation of the social architectural field, with its control systems of electronic traffic signs, it was also a reference point for theoretical, literary and artistic concerns.

Abstraction

The urban environment provided me with visual references to three fundamental technical innovations of twentieth century avant garde art: abstraction (the monochrome being the most radical example), the readymade (in which any object of the world can be appropriated to function as an aesthetic reference point), and collage (the montage of heterogeneous objects or images into a unified image). I intended the photographs of the painted rectangular boundaries of intersection crosswalks to make a subtle but specific reference to the blank rectangle of my earlier monochrome paintings. The ostensible subject was the rectangle of the intersection, but the parallel subject was the dynamics of urbanity. In this way, I was able to quietly ground my earlier attraction to the symbolic negation of the painted blank monochrome, which was both a rejection of the image and a *tabula rasa* for reinvented meaning, in the social environment, so that the hermetic and introverted aspect of abstract art would be hung out to dry in the common space of the everyday. The referential power of photography preserved the connection between monochrome painting as a trope of modernity and the space of the everyday as a site of political and existential presence. Abstraction was grounded in the actual.

My earlier work with the singular and uncomplicated abstraction of the monochrome paintings seemed at odds with the complexity of this new photographic work. I attempted to give order to the chaos of my imagery through my earlier research into the abstraction of Piet Mondrian and what I understood as a theory of limits. It is the frame or the limit that defines the identity of art as distinct from all else surrounding it. Contemporary art is involved in a constant dialectic between its autonomous identity, its otherness as art, and a need to merge with the milieu which surrounds it. Earlier movements in modernist abstract art drew power from this distinction, but late modernist art consistently sought to blur the boundaries between art and non-art. Sometimes it was successful, sometimes not. In the late 1960s, still very committed to the autonomy of modernist art, I researched intensively the abstract paintings of Mondrian, and found in the unifying formal structure of the crossing or intersections of horizontal and vertical lines in his work, parallels to the architectonics of the urban



Untitled
(Car & Bridge)
 1970/1998
 silver gelatin print
 33 x 50 cm
 edition 1 of 3
 Courtesy of the Artist

landscape with its horizontal traffic lines, the rectangular quadrant of the crosswalks, the verticality of buildings, poles and people, and so on. Spatial composition in the limits of the tableau and the limits of the urban landscape were brought together in the dynamics of the quadrant of the downtown street intersection where people met traffic regulated by signage. These formal dynamics offered a web of interconnecting visual points that gave unity to the disparate elements of the visual field. In addition, these formal dynamics drawn from abstract painting gave coherence to the abstracted fragments of an infinite and confused field of reality reproduced in the photograph. I thought of the iconography of the city, the rationally ordered perspective of the streets and the orchestration of movement of people and traffic by electronic signals, as a complex of 'limits' that organized and justified the randomness of reality—similar to how the frame of a work of art separates and makes distinct the expressive statement from the field in which it operates. It was also my observation that the macroeconomic system of capitalist property relations that has shaped the North American urban environment was an intrinsic part of this system of limits and that a critical reflection on these limits could be achieved through the photographic image.

Collage

As a crossing point of an infinite variety of arbitrary movements permanently fixed into a unified image by the instantaneity of the photographic snapshot, the intersection images were a real-time analogue to collage. Collage was important to the new generation of Vancouver artists emerging in the 1970s—and significantly, Dikeakos followed up the "Photo Show" with the "Collage Show" in February 1971. This exhibition is one example of how collage was and remains one of the most influential techniques of twentieth century art. Beginning with the *papier collés* of Braque and Picasso of 1912, collage introduced into modern art fragments of material life and images torn from the fabric of the everyday and recast as the readymade in the work of art. Collage mirrored the alienation of the commodity form and converted it into expressive ciphers for modernity. As a technique it led directly to both abstraction and the readymade. Collage has gone through changes in appearance and method. It has shifted from the early cut-and-paste techniques to the photography of post-war artists such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank or Lee Friedlander, who used the versatility of the 35mm format to capture ironic juxtapositions of people and

objects. By the late 1960s the concept of collage was latent in the assembly of factual photos that characterized the first photoconceptual art. *Piles* by N.E. Thing Co. and *Landscape Manual* by Jeff Wall are fundamentally extended collages in which a fragmented and alienated world is reconstituted and redeemed through the framework of art. For my own approach to collage I extrapolated urban images and applied them back into the world literally as street intersections, where people, traffic, architecture and signage converged. I was also interested in the mapping of reflections of the street in store windows so that movements of people and traffic merged with their reflections and, in doing so, formed another kind of collage imagery. My series of photographic works in 1970 titled *Street Reflections* showed pedestrians mirrored against the displays in department store windows. Later the same year I produced a similar work in London titled *Pan Am Scan*. These works were assemblages of serial images using a shifting time or spatial movement in the photographs. The heterogeneous nature of collage and particularly its photographic variant allowed the chaos of reality to be read as a literature of images.

The readymade and the allegorical eye of the flâneur

When Marcel Duchamp invented what he called the readymade he placed an everyday object purchased from a department store on a pedestal and called it art. Because of its ability to shock and yet function as a work of art with critical, ironic and allegorical effectiveness, the concept of the readymade has subsequently become one of the most pervasive techniques of modern art. And since the beginning of photoconceptual strategies in the late 1960s, photography has become the most ubiquitous technique for the appropriation of images of the world into the language of art and in effect has opened up the world as a readymade. As such, photoconceptual art extends the concept of the readymade from the realm of the object to the realm of the image. When the photographer hunts through the streets for images, the city becomes an open archive for the allegorical sensibility. The photographic appropriation of the phenomena of urbanity thus transforms the literary/philosophical concept of the flâneur, or wanderer in the city, into an artistic performance. The random wandering by the literary flâneur on the pavements of Paris that was passed on from Baudelaire to the Surrealists, and then to the arcades project of Walter Benjamin, and the "dérive" or side-tracking of the Situationists, is given a new life in the hands of the photographer. Baudelaire's reference to the "forest of symbols" was a reconfiguration of objects and signs in the city street into poetic allegories of alienation and redemption. These allegories mirrored the desires of the flâneur who saw the world as something other than what it is—ultimately seeing the everyday as a 'work of art' that converted the new world of industrial capitalism into figments of the romantic imagination. This concept of the poetic flâneur, which originated with the Parisian avant garde,

didn't take hold in North America until the post-war period and wasn't intellectually assimilated until the late 1970s. But when it did arrive it was transformed from the alienated urban pedestrian to the cross-country automobile cruise carried out by the American literary beats such as Robert Frank in his photographic essay *The Americans*, 1956, or Jack Kerouac in his novel *On the Road*, 1955. The photographic flâneurism of photoconceptual art in Vancouver in the late 1960s and early 1970s was also determined by automobile movement and often took the form of location scouting for the *mise-en-scène* of imaginary cinematic projects. Again, Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual* and Dikeakos' *Instant Photo Information* are classic examples. Although I did several works that were taken from the automobile while driving, the intersection pieces under discussion were made definitively from the perspective of the pedestrian, and thus recalled the classic flâneurism of the romantic period of Surrealism and the Situationists. In my works the anonymous pedestrians were the performers in the scenario of modern life.

In the later series of works beginning in 1986, titled *My Heroes in the Street*, I made specific references to the individuals in the crosswalks, friends that I had asked to play the part, as contemporary counterparts of Baudelaire's "heroes of modern life". The city and the street then became a backdrop or *mise-en-scène* for an allegorical narrative of existential presence. What began in the late 1960s as an objective and phenomenological photographic mirroring of the city as the field of reality in general, turned, in my post-1985 work, into a more animated scripting of social existence, with more pointed references to symbols of modernity, and being more monumentalized as works of art, engaged in a continuing dialectical and critical relationship with Modernism and abstract painting.

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