

**TRADITIONS  
AND COUNTER-TRADITIONS  
IN VANCOUVER ART:  
A DEEPER BACKGROUND  
FOR KEN LUM'S WORK**

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"This essay was first presented as a lecture on the occasion of Ken Lum's, exhibition at Witte de With in Rotterdam in December 1990. It was slightly altered and corrected for publication in the yearbook, Witte de With: *The Lectures 1990*. I wrote a long essay for the catalogue of Lum's exhibition, entitled *Four Essays on Ken Lum*, and my lecture made several references to that text. These references are footnoted in the Barcelona catalogue, and relevant passages from the *Four Essays* are indicated. Readers who cannot get the Ken Lum catalogue can nevertheless follow the discussion in *Traditions and Counter-Traditions in Vancouver Art*; since it is not solely about Ken Lum, but develops another perspective which may be useful in considering Lum's work, but also the work of other Canadian artist."

"Today, I want to talk indirectly about Ken Lum's work. I thought that, in this situation, it would be more interesting to delve a little further into its background than I was able to do in my essay for the catalogue of his exhibition. The material I want to present here is probably much less well-known than are the aspects of his work which make it part of a general idea about contemporary art in Europe, Canada, and America. I want to draw out some ideas about cultural traditions which have formed artistic attitudes in Western Canada, and particularly, Vancouver."

To do so, it is necessary to begin with the work of Emily Carr. She is known as the originary figure in modern art in the area, and is thereby a kind of emblematic representative of traditions in

which all of us who work there are in some way or other involved. Emily Carr's work is generally seen as a kind of nature lyricism, and this lyricism is rooted in a British romanticism of the kind maybe most immediately identifiable with Wordsworth's poetics. This almost pantheistic nature romanticism is deeply connected to something else — a kind of adventurism. The Canadian State has, as you know, its origins in the great Western adventure of British colonialism; today, British Imperial culture has an old-fashioned and musty character, but in fact it was an intensely modernistic thing which projected itself all over the globe, moving from frontier to frontier. Vancouver of course is the final Western frontier, and in this sense is a kind of repository for all those complicated feelings and outlooks.

This *Imperial Romanticism* mutates through the 20th century to the point where you might be able to call it a kind of *Commonwealth Romanticism*, one which gives up some of the impulses of the old overt colonial attitudes, but which continues them in a context of the new national aspirations of former colonies. Throughout all its phases, it continues the idea of the domestication of the frontier. Canada shares this idea, this myth, with the Americans, but in Canada domestication seems to have a distinct character, one which we might call *Victorian*. This is exemplified by the public image of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert as a cosily domestic couple, an image which is carried on with tremendous sophistication by the Royal Family today. The idea has been that British culture would domesticate the wilderness and thereby universalize a British, Victorian concept of home and home-culture. Inside of this mythic construct, many contradictory images of home, couple, family, frontier, and wilderness circulate and mutate, sometimes as works of art.

Emily Carr was a spinster. She may have been homosexual. For years she ran a curious boarding-house in the city of Victoria. She wrote about this place in her book, 'The house of all sorts'. I have always thought that, this dominant home-culture concept. As an artist, she also rebelled and experimented with these things, never getting outside of them but never accepting them, nor reconciling herself to them, either. Her work is therefore the most intricate reflection of the revolutions and mutations of Imperial Romanticism and, since we contemporary

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Canadians have also not gotten outside of those traditions, her work's problematics remain closely linked to ours.

She was born in 1871, the year of the *Paris Commune*, and died in 1945. You could say that her life begins in the fin de siècle and ends at the beginning of 'our time'. If you were a hack art historian you might appreciate how neatly her biographical dates make her a representative of a certain epoch.

From 1909 until around 1928, she was painting in a style clearly rooted in English attitudes. Her works blend modernistic and subjectivistic elements with others which are close to the topographical pictures done by visiting artists who worked for the British military. A painting like *Alert Bay* (1912), for example, blend those topographical roots with a distanced acceptance of late symbolism and early 20th century painting style. She had been in both London and Paris in the early part of the century and was familiar with fauvism, for example. What she was trying to do with this painting was to express nature as she imagined the native peoples had experienced it. At the same time, she was still interested in reporting on and preserving the image of an aboriginal settlement which, from her point of view, was on its last legs, a dying if not a definitively dead culture. This was the dominant viewpoint at that time, and for a long time afterwards, and it is also expressed in the Canadian laws passed then to manage and regulate what were seen as the remnants of the Indian populations. Emily Carr's work emerges from within the spirit of these laws, but rebels against them nevertheless. The thesis of the *death* of native cultures is of course visible today as a wish or projection of the colonialist process and remains one of the central controversies on the West Coast up to now.

Through the mid-1920s, Carr's work was affected more sharply by what I would call symbolist-abstractionist art, often coming from Northern Europe. Munch, Hodler, and later, Hilga von Klimt or Mondriann are examples of this. Carr learned about these things in part from Canadian painters like Lawren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven, who was also interested in abstract symbolism. Around this time, she also had discussions with a young artist from Seattle, Mark Tobey. She thought a lot about the possibilities presented by a rhythmic distortion of

natural forms. By the late 1920s, she moved into this kind of painting, a deeply subjectivist, rhythmic kind of painting of forest motifs, now without the human figure. This style is the one for which she is famous in Canada, and the one which poses us the most profound problems. In it, her fascination with the native, with *other* cultures, is fused with the sense that one can experience artificially what other cultures experience through the forms of modern painting. This kind of art also attempts to take over the totemic or religious aspects of other cultures, which are dying out, and to create what was called a kind of *religion of art* based upon the apparent profundity of modern art. Like Kandinsky, for example, Carr was influenced by movements such as theosophy, which also wanted to create religious culture-forms artificially, philosophically, artistically.

The idea of an *art religion*, and the sense of experiencing religiosity in nature set the tone in British Columbia for a kind of treatment of the landscape which, by the 1940s, and especially in the 1950s, becomes hegemonic and has been called *inner landscape*. From this point of view the painting is an expression, by means of landscape, of the inner world of the artist, but also of the *genius loci*, the indwelling spirit of the place painted. This can be seen as a normative part of the British or Imperial Romanticism I outlined earlier, a modernization of English aesthetic ideas in the context of actual isolation of artists in the marginal, frontier setting of Vancouver. Emily Carr's insolation, which she experienced at several levels, is therefore, emblematic of the condition of painters, of artists overall, in this region, at least until recently.

Carr's work crystallizes, as a style of painting, as a kind of image, some central aspects of the modernization process as it evolves in British Columbia (B.C.). Her subjectivism destabilized British Romantic ideas, even though it grew out of them. It did so, maybe, because her impulses were constantly linked with a protest against the vanishing of the Native cultures and against the abuse of the forest environment by logging. Certainly by 1912, the economy of the region was firmly set in the direction of maximum extraction of lumber for the export market, a direction which continues up to today, when we can see the exhaustion of the forests, and are alarmed and ashamed by it. At the same time, her

work can be seen as an ideological reconciliation with the destruction of the forest. That is, reconciliation with nature as it is experienced in Carr's painting can be seen as the mark of a fantasized reconciliation with the economy, a means by which an acceptance of the actuality of forest-destruction is lived through and acquiesced to. This is a debate which has opened up recently among artists, critics and teachers in Vancouver, and it indicates that a new stage in the historical consciousness of Vancouver art is emerging.

Her crystallization sets into motion basic elements of the Imperial home-culture, re-works them, changes them, transforms them, and makes them a problem of a new type for everyone that follows. So, for us, Victorian Romanticism remains of the way we have been modernized. Even though, as I've said, by now things Victorian — *Victoriana* — are quaint staples of antique-shop culture, they remain charged and ambiguous in this context. So, Carr's turbulent and erotically lyrical treatment of Victorian dreamworlds makes them an unavoidable part of our sense of modernist art.

There are two other aspects of the local culture which abide and mutate in her work. The first is, of course, the persistence and survival of the Native populations themselves — the Haida, Tlingit, Kwagiutl, Salish and other nations which have been eulogized and lamented, prematurely. Carr, typically, felt that it was her role to make that lament and in some way to make her work a kind of symbol of another reconciliation: that between the *rising* or hegemonic cultures and the ones that were vanishing. In this her work also occupies a central place in our sense of guilt. But there is also another sense in which the image or concept of the Native constitutes a part of our modernity: in the survival of these populations we glimpse an image of the incompleteness, anal perhaps the incompleteness, of the Imperial conquest, of the colonialist world-picture. In that incompleteness we get other flashes of vision, too. For example, the shadow of apparently outmoded, different economies and ecologies are seen anew as languages of resistance against the hegemonic treatment of the environment by Canadian multinational capitalism. One of the fundamental tendencies in British Columbia politics now is made up of a fusion of the land claims made by Native nations with the ecological protest movements. Both put forward the image of other *ecologies* which must replace the existing

order. Both can refer to Carr's work for an image of their vision and discourse. In this, we can see the tightly bundled together character of the romantic aspects of English traditions with the *Image of the Native*. The romance of eco-politics requires the Native, as images of *other ecologies*, as a guarantee of its ability well to imagine an outside to the existing ways of doing things in the forest.

There is, however, another aspect of our modernity which eluded Emily Carr, and which isn't really configured palpably in her work, except possibly as a resonance of the sense of adventure which fills the space of the frontier. Lumber and the forest was only one of the things which drew adventurers to British Columbia in the early days. The whole Coast of North America was formed in the Gold Rush of the mid-19th century, and gold and mining were attractions on a part with trees and forestry. The *moods* of these industries are different. Gold was the object of a feverish brand of international speculation, vagabondage, and criminality, with an energy different from rain-forest life. It is the crazy mood of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. In this process, British Columbia was populated by an extremely mixed ethnic population of drifters, gamblers and escapees, only some of whom had anything to do with British home-culture. Caribbean blacks, freed slaves, and Americans of all kinds mingled with other immigrants who were to the side of the great Scots-English industries like lumber, fur and railways. With the railways came also the Oriental coolies who built them, the forerunners of Lum Nin, Ken Lum's grandfather, about whom Ken writes in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue. The transnationalism about which I have written in that catalogue can be seen in this process here, at the origins of Vancouver and its culture.

By the end of Carr's life, after the Second World War, the cultural existence of these other populations remained extremely muted. In education for example, the influence of anyone but British people is minuscule until the later 1950s. This is certainly true of art education. There has been an art school in Vancouver since 1929, and until the 1950s it was a hot-house of these colonial-romantic ideas. In the 1980s, the school was renamed the Emily Carr College of Art and Design.

The emergence of influences other than

British-romantic occurs in the 1950s and, paradoxically, in the context of a renewed British identification by Canadians. The crowning of the youthful Queen Elizabeth at the beginning of the decade was a high-point in the revitalized Commonwealth concept of Canada and its culture. There have been too few studies of what we might call *Commonwealth modernism* a wave of exuberant, romantic traditionalism which swept across the English-influenced world after the end of the war, at the beginning of the post-war boom. There was a tremendous immigration of skilled British people to Canada then, as well. It was probably the last one. Until about 1960, this Commonwealth culture mingles with the growing American influence. It never really succumbs to it, however. What is interesting about this mingling is not so much tracing the rise of American culture's influence in Canada, although that is indeed visible; rather it is seeing that, in both British and American modernism there are traces of what could be called *other avantguardisms*, other modes of expressions, which are subdued for periods, and then resurface in original ways. For example, in Emily Carr's work there are, as I've pointed out, aspects of modernist painting ideas which are not at all British, but which derive from Continental European sources. This is true as well for the American painting of the 40s and 50s; the nature of Rothko's work has something important to do with his Russian-Jewish roots, and this central Europeanism, animated and synthesized by currents within surrealism, is another essential aspect of American painting now, the way it wasn't at the time of the Ash Can School or in Edward Hopper's work. The essential thing about the great English-speaking transnational modern cultures is that they are emigre cultures, syncretic like all great Imperialisms.

This is relevant to a consideration of the work of Ken Lum because it is in this period of the 1950s that the first glimmerings of a shift in the ethnic basis of Canadian culture begins to be perceptible. This reflects, of course, the recognition in Canada as a whole that the Anglo foundation of English Canada was mutating through the new immigration patterns which brought people from many other parts of the world to our country, people often from Commonwealth nations like Pakistan or Jamaica, but people for whom Commonwealth home-culture was only an aspect of their identity. Within this *multiculturalism* (as it came to be called in

the 1970s), the intertwining of British and American influences continued to develop, and hybridize themselves. Both of these tendencies are visible in the next central figure I must discuss, Jack Shadbolt.

Shadbolt was born in 1901, and knew Emily Carr. He considered himself her heir, and is thought of in Vancouver as the painter who took the complex of problems bequeathed by her through into a new period. His pre-World War II work follows her lead closely. During the war, his focus changed toward a kind of social expressionism connected to English war art styles, as exemplified by Graham Sutherland, John Piper or Henry Moore. Here the English romantic and lyrical roots of B.C. painting are renewed and, when the war ends, Shadbolt moves both forward and backward, backward to a re-engagement with a subjectivized concept of nature very much in the vein of Carr, or in the manner of English painting in that period, and forward towards an approach, influenced by the New York School. Shadbolt was very interested in extracting something very specific from the new American painting, especially that *mythmaking abstraction* which we identify with painters like Baziotes, Gottlieb and Rothko. In these works traces of totemic figures and forms derived from various sources, sometimes American Indian, served as a kind of iconographic armature upon which the subjectivistic painter could elaborate. In many of these paintings of the earlier 1950s, Shadbolt followed this methodology using Northwest Coast motifs. Later, his work becomes more *abstract*, more generically related to the forms colors of various landscapes, in which totemic motifs play a very subdued role. Shadbolt's work is the best example of what I earlier called *inner landscape*, a term coined, I believe, by the critic Scott Watson. This decorative type of lyric painting, with its specific relations to the image of our environment, dominates the discourse of painting in Vancouver until the middle of the 1960s. Shadbolt had a long and influential career as a teacher in what was at that time the Vancouver School of Art. His work is now entering a discussion among younger artists and critics, some of whom are suggesting that the whole genre of *inner landscape* is problematic because it is entirely committed to the kind of illusionary reconciliation with nature which I discussed earlier. The most critical position is that this reconciliation is delusionary, an ideological pathology in which the effects of a rationalized



and intensified exploitation of natural resources is forgotten in a celebratory evocation of the land. The discussion has been shaped by an important critique written by Vancouver painter Robert Linsley. It was presented at a public forum a few months ago, and I want to quote a passage from it. Linsley writes, "The increasingly rapid industrialization of the land and consequent prosperity also mean increased powerlessness. The so-called inner landscape of fifties abstraction in Vancouver clearly show the political withdrawal and passivity that characterize this boom phase of the economy. Where we might expect a confident culture to flourish in a growing, confident economy, in B.C. the reverse is true — when the economy grows, culture is full of doubt and on the defensive. But, further, and more specifically, powerful interest within the culture work in complex and indirect ways to block and forbid its own representation, a representation that could potentially display the actions of those interests for the scrutiny of its citizens. As Scott Watson has pointed out, "... the dominant look of painting in Vancouver (in the fifties) (was) a lyrical, painterly abstraction with a landscape reference... the landscape reference being metaphorical as often as it was is literal." I think we should reserve the standard art historical view of the fifties, and instead of talking about positive influences such as abstract expressionism, look at negative features, at what is left out. The taboo against figuring the real social and material landscape of the present, which broadly can include the city as well as the country, is inverted and hidden as it takes the form of an "inner landscape". Later, art in B.C. would stabilize itself under the new post-war conditions dominated by the automobile, the suburb, and the T.V. having thoroughly internalized this taboo. Of course there always is a space in B.C. for images of nature, as long as they... avoid conflict."

By about 1964, these *signs of conflicts* begin to appear. Throughout the sixties, however, the decorative lyricism of Shadboltian painting expand to the scale of, appropriately, airport murals, bank lobby art, and Federal-building art.

These signs of conflict are, however, of course not simply something new, something provided by Pop Art and photography. So, in order to consider them, we have first to go back a little in time again, and talk about what I would call a figurative countercurrent in B.C. art before 1960.

This current is weak but important. The

most significant figure involved in it is Frederick Varley, a member of the Group of Seven who came to the west coast in 1926. His work was affected by the example of Edvard Munch. Munch is part of that Northern tradition which, as landscape, had a tremendous influence on canonical landscape in Central Canada. But Munch's psychological and symbolic concentration on the human figure is something which finds a much waker echo in Canada, so Varley's interest in Munch is idiosyncratic and very significant. Varley's paintings, in which figures are positioned in relation to their natural settings, are on the one hand quite conventional in terms of modern figuration, but on the other represent a sort of counter-position to the rhythmic adsorptiveness of lyrical landscape painting, either figurative or non-representational. Nature is interrupted and placed at a distance; this is a fundamental formal characteristic of Varley's work, and often a dramatic theme in it as well. The interruption of the sense of unity with nature which is fantasized in lyrical painting means that figure-painting in this context indicates an aesthetic which wants to interfere with certain kinds of fantasizing. This is a political impulse; it is distressed by the dynamics of fantasizing and wants to examine them; it wants to look at the often hidden links between *inner landscapes* and social landscapes.

The work of Maxwell Bates should also be mentioned here, although his presence on the west coast dates only from the early 1960s, when he was already in his sixties. Bates had been in combat in World War II, had seen evidence of the Holocaust, and was influenced by German art of the Weimar period, by people like Grosz and Dix, and maybe others, like Schlichter, who oscillated between social expressionism and New Objectivity. He held a pretty marginal position, but did some very good work, and impressed younger artists with the possibilities of a satirical, figurative form of expression.

These possibilities began to develop with the impact of Pop Art around 1964 or 1965. Pop in Vancouver was formed fundamentally in relation to London, and to a certain extent, to Los Angeles, and not so much in terms of New York or Germany. The impact of Warhol, Richter or Polke appears only in the 1980s. English Pop Art is, in my opinion, far more interesting and significant than it is usually given credit for being. It was suave and, in a way that is typical of London art, is

filled with subdued *other vanguardisms*, traces of older tradition of social figurative art which are reworked in the terms of the new style. Its suavity was a characteristic *Commonwealth modernism* effect, similar to the smooth British Foreign Service style, and one to which Canadian artists are instinctively responsive. Pop painting in Vancouver, as done by people like Michael Morris (who was very close to Maxwell Bates), David Mayrs, or Claude Breeze, had relatively little interest in the ideas of reiteration of commodity-culture. It was a satiric form of figuration, which held on quite firmly to the distinction between *fine art* and other things, in order to look at those other things in a fresh way. Looking back at that moment, it might be possible to say that the Anglo-pop style clicked for these Vancouver painters because it gave them a way to break from lyricism, to break from the regional hegemony toward and art of interruption, skepticism, irony, and objetivism.

In my essay in the Ken Lum catalogue, I discuss the ways in which Pop Art, and the hybrid forms which followed it, created the fundamental break with *beaux-arts* ideas in art, culture, and art education in Canada. Pop art was entirely intertwined with the counter-cultural concepts of the period of the sixties and seventies, and so played a big part in opening up the discourse about what art was and could be. The lyrical tradition, obviously, depends entirely upon the preservation of beaux-arts thinking; in it there is very little space for irony, and none for an aesthetic of interruption, or arrest. Pop figuration, social satire, *cool* hard-edge painting, minimalism, and the re-emergence of photography as an art form through the models given in conceptual art appear very rapidly between 1964 and about 1970. Thus, the second half of the 1960s is the moment when a first fundamental seachange occurs in this region, reflecting in its peculiar way similar transformations happening globally. However, the British, romantic, lyrical tradition continues to play its part, though this becomes increasingly more complex and dialectically reflexive, as I will specify a little later, it makes a strong revival in the 1970s and 80s, linking up with aspects of *arte povera* and earth art, in a context of the growing environmental consciousness. Strictly speaking, there is no break in the lyrical-romantic tradition. Its roots in popular culture, and, in any case, the counterculture, especially in the west coast, is too deeply implicated with its own version of the

romanticism of nature and the Native to ever formulate a really distanced image of itself. Here we can catch a glimpse of the comedy of the shamanism of the 1970s.

This *counter-tradition* of an art of interruption is instinctively suspicious of the image of the artist as shaman. The next central figure I must discuss, Ian Wallace, is perhaps the ultimate counter-shamanistic artist in the history of B.C. art. Though he has been an art teacher for over twenty years, his teachings run against the grain, animated as they are by a bohemian dandyism which treasures irony and aloofness. Like all the other significant *protem-figures* — Carr, Shadbolt, or the part-haida sculptor, Bill Reid — Wallace's work fuses important aspects of the dominant traditions with new, destabilizing energies deriving from antithetical or foreign sources. His work in the 1964-70 period is animated by a combination of a radical sense of literature and with an affinity for the experimental procedures of minimal art. In 1967, during a vogue for hard-edge painting which was commemorated in an exhibition called 'Joy and Celebration', Wallace painted monochromes in grey or randomly selected colors. He expressed no real joy, and celebrated nothing, thereby separating himself from the recuperation of lyricism in the new forms of 70s art. Wallace's paintings are the clearest mark of an anti-lyrical sensibility of that moment, and I think it can be said that the streams of tradition and counter-tradition in Vancouver divide with the appearance of his work.

At this point we must cease to speak only of painting, of a tradition which defines itself fundamentally in terms of painting. Wallace was one of a number of young artists who turned from painting to photography, video, or other related forms under the influence of conceptual art, *anti-form*, *arte povera*, performance and the new cultural politics of '68. Wallace, who was already teaching in the Fine Arts Department of the University of British Columbia in 1968, had a forum with which he could disseminate information, concepts and attitudes, and guide courses of study for art students only a couple of years younger than himself. I was one of those students; a couple of years later, Rodney Graham was another. Wallace was, alongside, Ian Baxter of the N.E. Thing Co., one of the principal publicizers and protagonists of these contestatory aesthetics, aesthetics which implied a decisive

break with beaux-arts attitudes. I do not have the time here to outline the profusion of *media art* forms and organizations which sprang up in Vancouver, like so many other places, around this time. But, this was the framework in which the photographic procedures stimulated by the problems posed by conceptual art had their local origin. By 1969, Wallace, Baxter, myself, and other sympathetic artists like Duane Lunden, Christos Dikeakos, and Tom Burrows had arranged group exhibitions with figures like Ruscha, Smithson, Weiner and Graham, and the literacy for photo-conceptualism in Vancouver developed quickly. A work like Wallace's 'Magazine Piece' of 1970 is a good example of this. In 'Magazine Piece' Wallace took all the pages out of the current issue of any magazine (in this case, symptomatically, *Seventeen*, a publication aimed at young girls), and taped them to the gallery wall in the order that they came out of the binding. What this kind of work signifies in terms of the pattern of traditions I am trying to outline is the release of forms of perception, and methodologies of artistic practice which had obviously been present in cultural experience for some time, but which had been inaccessible through the terms set by beaux-arts lyricism.

Up to this point, much of my examination could theoretically be abstracted from its locale in Vancouver, and transposed else where. The form of the story: a beaux-arts tradition of lyrical and expressive modern art dominates a region and then, under the impact of counter-culture approaches, loses its hegemony as traditions divide and proliferate. This is indeed pretty standard stuff. But, if there is a unique element in it, an element which distinguishes this story from others, it may be the fact that, early in the 1970s, a movement out of the impasse of conceptual and antiformal art presented itself also in the work of Ian Wallace. Already in 1970, Wallace was making large rough black and white prints of urban scenery and displaying them in pairs. He was attempting to formulate one of the fundamental problems for photography: to find a legitimate way for the photograph to occupy the kinds of spaces in architecture and culture reserved for painting. These experiments led to a work of great suggestiveness and richness, 'La Melancolie de la Rue' of 1973. This is a triptych of large hand-colored black and white photographs. On the left is a picture, taken in 1972, of a crowd waiting outside the new Winnipeg Art Gallery for the inauguration ceremonies to begin. They appear

lost on the sidewalk, ignored by the brutalist concrete exterior above them. Wallace had gone to Winnipeg as a critic for the magazine 'ArtsCanada' to write about the new gallery, and the photograph was taken to illustrate his article. The article was rejected, and the photograph migrated from photojournalism to art. The center picture is of a young family house-hunting in their Volkswagen on a sunny afternoon. They are passing a new house in a subdivision that has been created by cutting down a mountainside forest. On the right is a photograph of a shack on a strip of waterfront illegally occupied by hippies and other squatters who built their own home there in a display of anarchic counter-urbanism. The squatters were expelled and their shacks burned by the civic government shortly after the picture was taken, but before it was exhibited in an art work. Many of the central post-conceptual strategies for photography are present in this piece, and in its treatment of landscape and settlement it is inherently antilyrical, bringing forward precisely those aspects of the urban situation which are erased in *inner landscape*, but which recall the works of Emily Carr which studied Haida village life. Wallace's work takes the lyrical, pastoral tradition as its basic target. It emphasizes the conflicts involved in the making of a city, and outlines a kind of *urban geography* which has affinities with various trends of critical urbanism of the 60s and 70s. This work really starts whatever new tradition one might claim exists in Vancouver, one which wishes to remake the image of the city. In other places the analytical and critical approaches identified with conceptual art tended to lead toward deconstructive strategies which de-emphasized the potential of images as forms with a legitimate truth-content. In Vancouver, the same strategies are turned in a different direction: back toward the pictorial forms of earlier modernist art, the modes in which formal experimentation was combined with a program of *critical realism*, a kind of *painting of modern life*, carried out in a dialectically removed relationship to painting by means of its replacement with photography. In this development, modern pictorial art is understood as a contrinous tradition, one which includes, but is limited to, approaches characteristic of avant-garde art, and one which derives much of its self-consciousness from the historical adventure of the art of painting, but which reflects on it from without, as photography. Wallace's acceptance of the languages developed by art history is related to the fact that, in

Vancouver, those young artists who could not accept lyrical romanticism often could not face going to the local art school, so they ended up studying art history in the university, the only other viable institutional gathering place.

The thing which is curious and significant about the direction opened up by the work of those interested in *conceptual photography*, is that, in a way, it didn't go anywhere. In Vancouver, there was little resonance and it could be said that the whole phenomenon really disappeared during the 1970s. Part of this had to do with the fact that some of the people most concerned with this approach left the city for differing periods of time after 1970.

In 1983, the Vancouver Art Gallery held an exhibition called "Art in Vancouver, 1933-1983" probably the most ostentatious attempt at a *history* ever done there and such work was barely included. This reflected not simply the incompetence of the curators but the fact that, as soon as there was any foundation for it at all, the inherent, dominant lyricist tradition reasserted itself. During the 70s, and into the 80s, many Vancouver artists worked in 'mixed media', photography, and so on, but the bulk of this work remains bound to romantic orthodoxy. Artists in Vancouver were trying to work out the connection between the new, *open-form* structures they were seeing in art magazines (work by people like Beuys or Kounellis for example) and the romantic traditions they could not get away from. At the same time, the commercialization of the lyrical landscape tradition was reaching its peak. Shadbolt and followers like Tony Onley had great commercial success at this time; you might say that their success was the other side of the coin of the bureaucratic success of the romantic *open-form*, *installation art* which seemed to epitomize Canadian art promoted as it was by the federal cultural agencies.

I think it was the onset of economic recession at the end of the 70s which had something to do with the re-emergence of an anti-lyricist trend at that moment. The new conditions — government budget cutbacks of all kinds, including to subsidies for culture, new political instability, and, in art and music, the impact of Punk — reflected a dissatisfaction with the narrowness of the romantic *inner landscape* idea of art. This provided a foundation for the kinds of

critical ideas about representation, about urbanism, about subject-matter and so on, to regain a kind of legitimacy. And in this process, the threads leading back to the experiments of the late 60s began to reappear and become interesting once again. It's of course at this moment that Ken Lum enters the picture, and does so in close connection with artists like myself, Wallace and Rodney Graham, people who had consistently opposed the local orthodoxy and looked for methods outside it.

Once you recognize that whatever that is *new* in the Vancouver context had its origins primarily in the thinking of people who were consistently and, I think you could say, rigorously, alienated from the whole idea about the image of nature and the city which dominated — and continues to dominate — Vancouver culture, then you can also see that these artists have also — consistently and rigorously — reworked the image of nature and of the forest, probably for the first time since the 50s. A good example of this is Wallace's *Melancolie de la Rue*, as I explained earlier; another is his work of 1979, *Lookout*. It is one of the most significant works of Canadian landscape. The work is a huge panoramic view of part of Hornby Island, one of the most popular coastal retreats, a legendary place for *alternative lifestyles*. Wallace collaged figures photographed in his studio onto the sections of the landscape, creating a kind of *experimental pastoral*, in which what is expressed is the distance of the people from their favourite places. It is a monumental image of a kind of neurotic way of being out in the countryside.

Wallace's photo-collage or photomontage continues the experimental and deconstructivist attitudes of the 60s, splitting apart elements of the art work, making their suturing-together visible, as a kind of analogic image of the hidden fractures in the illusions under which people live out their social relations, which include their relations, with objects and with the natural world. Rodney Graham's work has also been organized in terms of this experimentalism, and, by 1976, he was making works which, maybe more than any others, turned the whole lyrical-pastoral attitude inside out. His work, '75 Polaroids', is a series of pictures taken in the woods at night using a Polaroid flashcamera. What appeared in the frame when the polaroid developed could not be pre-visualized at all, since it was impossible for the artist to see anything until the flash went off. The



images are utterly random, and have the feeling of penetrating a deeply secluded condition of the forest. They were presented as a frieze which ran around three walls of a specially-built black pavilion. It was exhibited in Vancouver in 1976. I don't think there could be a work which is more perfectly negative in relation to the lyrical landscape tradition. And yet, it continues this tradition in its negativity. It reinvents the tradition, cutting away all the complacent pipe-dreams about *inner landscape*. '75 Polaroids' is *inner landscape* too. It is an attempt to get close to nature; but Graham displays to us that *getting close to nature* involves invading it, lighting it up with flares, technologizing it. The work brings together what is usually comfortably separated: the pleasure of retreat into the forest-park with the conditions of forced development of the rest of the environment. 'Illuminated Ravine', which Graham made in 1979, made all this utterly explicit. In an essay entitled 'Into the Forest' written for a catalogue of an exhibition of Graham's work, I analyzed this piece, and I hope you will forgive me for quoting a passage from my essay here: "In the 'Illuminated Ravine', the audience was invited into the friendly woods surrounding the Simon Fraser University campus to observe the illumination of a small ravine by mercury-vapor lights powered by a gas generator. The engine's racket and exhaust made the place seem like a worksite in the pioneering resource industries, while the flickering light produced a dream-like image of nature closed in upon itself under our distanced gaze. Illuminated Ravine created an agitated, transient model of our real relation to parklands and nature reserves: it recognized them as stage-sets, isolated objects of alienated contemplation. The work built upon its audiences growing awareness of environmental abuse to make perceptible the neurotic aestheticism inherent in the contemplation of special parts of nature dissociated from the labouring totality. Ravine explicitly staged this isolation of nature and spectators from each other, and made the experience of a 'special place' one of anxiety and guilt rather than absorptive repose."

In my essay in the catalogue for Lum's show, I claimed that 'Illuminated Ravine', along with Lum's furniture sculptures, first presented in 1978 and 1979, were the indicators of a new direction in the art discourse of Vancouver. These works give us a kind of new cartography of the city and countryside as seen from an anti-pastoral

point of view, an anti-lyricist, anti-romantic, anti-Commonwealth position. One could say that, at the moment in 1979, a new kind of literacy crystallized in overt opposition to the still-dominant traditions, that a counter-tradition, long in preparation, surfaced. So, to use a phrase reminiscent of the early 1970s, there was a sort of *epistemological break* in the local history. These days, the work of Graham, or Lun, or Wallace, or my own work often pointed to as somehow representative of *art in Vancouver* or even *Vancouver art*. Nothing could really be further from the truth. It should be remembered that this work developed not out of the major trends and traditions I have outlined here, but out of a continuous rejection of them, a rejection of a mythic self-image of Vancouver which has shaped the art discourse. The development of this work did not take place in any harmony with the local context, but in contradiction to it. This is the meaning of the term *counter-tradition*.

Having said this, I suppose it will be all the more ironic that one can find works by these artists which address issues and themes of forest, nature and city in ways which would be inconceivable without the example of the lyrical romanticism of Carr, Shadbolt and the others. The picture entitled 'Scorned as Timber, Beloved the Sky' is one of Emily Carr's most famous works. It was painted around 1936. The few spindly trees which have been left by the loggers stand, in their isolation, as tragic symbols of wounded and suffering nature. The lone tree is a conventional romantic image of the human soul, an image entirely consistent with the Victorian lyricism of Carr's aesthetics, and yet it contains a surplus, something which cannot be contained within that point of view. Maybe this is why it recurs, as a kind of memory trace and a shared point of focus and of dispute, in works otherwise unequivocal in their differences with Carr's attitude.

In Graham's 'Millennial Project for an Urban Plaza', made in 1986, a raised yellow platform supports a large camera obscura which looks out onto an open square in the middle of the city. In the square an oak tree has been planted at the moment the pavilion has been completed. The camera obscura watches the tree grow. After fifty or a hundred years, the tree is fully-grown and tall enough to be framed precisely on the screen in the chamber's interior. Graham's project inverts the relationship between the forest and the architecture of the existing city.

Today, it is the ruination of the forest by export development which permits buildings to rise in town. Graham commits a building to the task of waiting patiently for a tree to grow and then, when it is grown, to preserve it in its sight.

The tree as symbol appears also in a picture I made in 1988, 'Tran Duc Van'. There the tree grows up through an outlet in the sidewalk. It is reduced almost to the status of *street furniture*, but at the same time it provides support and shelter for a distraught and abandoned man, whose name is the picture's title. A Vietnamese, Tran Duc Van is another in a long line of people who have journeyed a long way to the West Coast, to begin again or to vanish.

Finally, Ken Lum's 'A Woodcutter and his Wife', made in 1990. The environmental movements in the rain forest areas must confront the historical experience of the logging workers, who maintain their families and way of life by cutting timber. The felling of the giant trees keeps the families together. Lum attempts to portray the structure of the togetherness of this couple by including in his *family group* the noble, tragic, threatened, immobile tree."