

Radical, Bureaucratic, Melancholic, Schizophrenic: Texts as Community

by Trevor Mahovsky

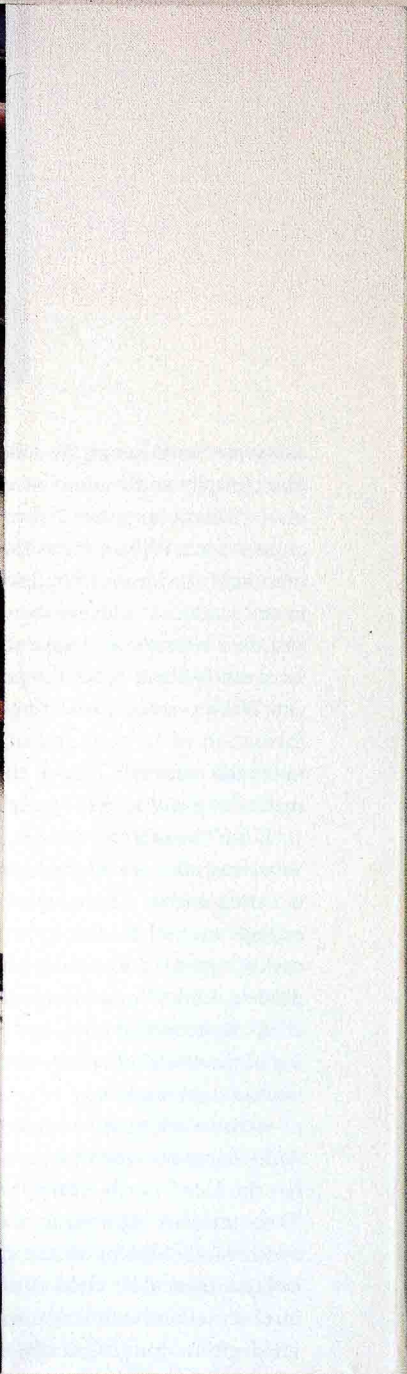
A couple of terrible photographs circulated through Vancouver newspapers during the summer of 1999. In them, top NBA draft prospect Steve Francis is shown grimacing, displaying his utter contempt at having been drafted by a basketball franchise located just past the edge of the planet. Another scene in Vancouver's continuing romance with the camera.

So many photographs of Vancouver picture an ubiquitous nowhere; Vancouver texts often confirm its self-appointed status as a non-place. Maybe rebuttals by petulant athletes who refuse to play here have had an egregious effect on the city's boosters. At writing those same boosters are wringing their hands over the impending loss of the Grizzlies, having already fretted over nearly losing Indycar racing and World Cup skiing at Whistler. It seems as though the image of Vancouver as a distinct and world-class city, engendered in part by Expo '86, is fading.

Many Vancouverites who write about their city internalize this attitude to a degree, although in the process it tends to be transfigured into a discourse of non-place insinuating a conceit of cosmopolitanism. Non-places must be a bit like every place. The lion's share of self-reflexive representations of Vancouver have valorized its status as Terminal City, keeping in play all the connotations of that phrase: end-of-the-line hinterland and transnational nexus. Publications such as *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City* characterize Vancouver as a point of shifting populations and capital. Editor Paul Delany describes Vancouver as "polyglot" and "contemporary" by virtue of its openness to "gay, bohemian, politically radical" subcultures. Delany holds Vancouver and Toronto up as models for urbanism because of their retention of ideals such as "civility, an impartial justice system, and comprehensive rights to health care and social security." Vancouver emerges as a utopian mixture of radicals and mandarins, disinclined to battle physical and financial colonization and transformation.

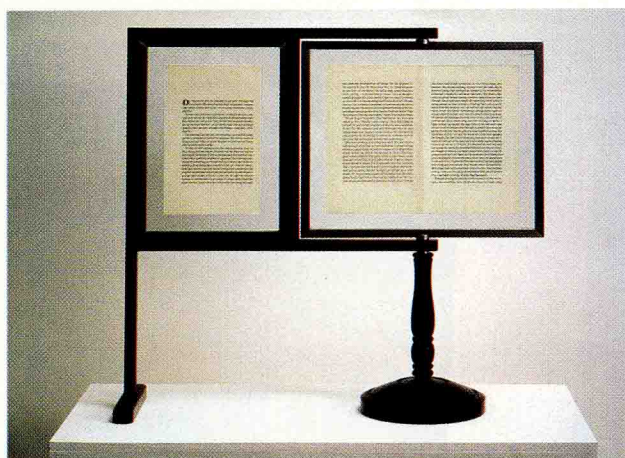
Likewise, artists from Vancouver have treated the city as a staging ground for charting global flows of people, capital and information; locally, *genus loci* has been utterly dismantled. Roy Arden's camera may be pointed at Vancouver but his photographs index, to quote the title of a catalogue essay, a "Landscape of the Economy." Ironically, Vancouver has produced a vigorous inward-looking literature and art couched in a rhetoric of liminality, non-place, transnationalism and the "defeatured landscape." Furthermore, this rhetoric has been produced by a critical, curatorial and pedagogical discursive community formed from the assertion that local artists, curators, writers and historians do not form any kind of meaningful community *per se*.

Thus quickly from Steve Francis to Robert Smithson, another tourist who has dumped on Vancouver. Smithson's *Glue Pour*, executed in 1970 on the University of British Columbia Endowment Lands as part of the exhibition "955,000," proved a seminal photo opportunity in the city's urban discourse. Dan Graham, who visited Vancouver in 1978, has been ensconced as a model



Ian Wallace *Hotel Alhambra, Paris I* 2000–2001 Photolaminate and acrylic on canvas 61 x 61 cm Photo Paul Arbez Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery

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alongside Smithson in the subsequent rhetoric surrounding photography and notions of urbanity in Vancouver. In his essay "Discovering the Defeated Landscape" Vancouver curator Scott Watson traces the incorporation and reconfiguration of the ideas of Smithson and Graham as manifested in the practices of artists such as Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace and their concurrent facture of what Watson terms an urban semiotic. Watson notes the pedagogical aspects of Wallace and Wall's practices, reflecting on the possible danger of the formation of "a local and official academic style" based upon the masterful play of this semiotic across the reified surface of painting in the guise of photography.

It can't be said that a latter-day salon has been realized in Vancouver; this would slight the heterogeneity of local practice even within photography itself. Rather, I would like to engage another tradition born from a reconfiguration of conceptual art's linguistic and pseudo-photojournalistic models. Linked to photographic practice, this academy of doubt is predicated upon an adroit use of text and a reworking of the model of artist/writer embodied by Smithson and Graham, among others.

Artists such as Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum and Roy Arden form the core of a particular textual community that has produced much writing both ambitious and insightful. Their texts are significant contributions to art production and critical thinking in the city. Yet these texts cannot be isolated from their field of effect, in which they transmit intellectual and cultural authority and enact a process of self-legitimation. Ironically, they do so by virtue of their auto-critique concerning ideals of academic community and the dissemination of information and power. Indeed, it could not be otherwise.

The particular textual community of concern here exists within a larger, variegated one. Many writers comment on local practice, including of course critics for the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Georgia Straight*. This list can be expanded almost interminably when catalogues produced by institutions such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, the Contemporary Art Gallery

and artist-run centres such as Artspeak are considered. Recent texts on local video and performance also stand out. Artropolis catalogues as well as publications such as *Front* magazine (published by the Western Front Society), *Canadian Art* and the departed *Vanguard* add writers to the list. Of these writers, it is Belkin gallery director and curator Scott Watson's work that connects most frequently with the texts discussed here.

On the other hand, it must be noted the degree to which certain texts and forums for texts do not connect. Stan Douglas's *Vancouver Anthology* took a happy step towards rectifying this by bringing together disparate works by writers such as Robert Linsley, Keith Wallace, William Wood and Nancy Shaw. Writings in the anthology touched on topics as diverse as painting, early video, artist-run centres, feminist performance and criticism in Vancouver.

In contrast to the *Vancouver Anthology's* relative plurality of approach and the clear seams between the concerns of the texts within it, in much current writing on art in Vancouver there is a sense of a related critical project. There is at times a twinge of claustrophobia, a by-product of a frank process of "mentoring" in some of the work; however, that mentoring is understood as part of a larger inquiry into how artists can continue to operate within evolving academies. Certain motifs are developed and carried forth across many texts, posited as theoretical figures to re-engage older critical models. Grounded in theorizations of the photographic index, they include the "askance" view, the "cipher" and conceptions of homelessness and non-place. Not least of these shared concerns are the relationship of text and image, theory and practice and the figure of artist as academic.

Hence these texts offer a problematic but useful model of discursive community, of artists as thinkers, writers and educators. Much of this writing concerns moving forward from past models (of the avant-garde, of the university) without destroying them, and how we can produce models that are not so rigid that they cannot be re-imagined. At stake is the question of whether this model, itself an engagement with conceptual art, is being broken open and made



FAR LEFT: **Rodney Graham** *Reading Machine for Lenz* 1993
Printed paper, glass, plexiglas, wood (edition of 3) 55.2 x 59.7 x 19.7 cm

LEFT: **Myfanwy MacLeod** *Untitled (The Mascot)* 1999–2000
C-print 79 x 108 cm Courtesy Catriona Jeffries Gallery

valuable by and for an expanding community of artists and disciplines. The texts cited here have been accused of exemplifying didacticism in the works they inform; I argue that this most didactic aspect of these artists' practices is perhaps also its most redemptive.

Jeff Wall has made explicit reference to the wish he shared with Ian Wallace to build upon "the humanistic, social-democratic approaches of our teachers" and pair this with a sociological and aesthetic critique of the avant-garde. Fittingly, a significant portion of Wall's "Four Essays on Ken Lum" outlines Wall's own pedagogic project. Wall develops an ethnographic reading of Lum's practice for this survey catalogue, published by the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 1990, that is framed within the experiences of emigration and academic tutelage. Here Lum is cast as "the subject who has survived subjection," both social and intellectual.

In this catalogue, Lum also provides a statement that relates elliptically to his work. However, substituted for apologia are stories about Lum's grandfather Lum Nin working for the Canadian Pacific Railway, Lum's youthful catalogue-inspired home-decorating fantasies and his trips past the jumbles of signage that line the streets of major cities.

Lum's text recapitulates Wall's positioning of him as the mobile and critical product of a kind of homelessness. Yet Wall's otherwise sympathetic reading also characterizes Lum as an educational guinea pig, receptive to Wall's "teaching experiments" by virtue of his status as a native-born child of immigrants. It is implied that Lum has a comparatively direct and authentic experience of transnationality.

Lum's autobiography exposes the limits to which this experience of homelessness can inform his work, which itself points to social structures and codes that shape notions of the "personal." Lum's narrative, an embodiment of his askance point of view, also resists the exclusive placement of his work within the context that Wall narrates. However, the statement does so by virtue of its opacity, its status as that ultimate figure of nomadism and homelessness: the cipher.

If Lum survives the subjection of both "imperializing modernity" and the teaching of Wall, the teleology of

Wall's argument posits that his pedagogical system already accounts for this and helps to realize it. On one hand Wall encourages a skeptical engagement with vanguardist ideals by students such as Lum, whose status of "permanent emigration" and "angry conformism" provides them with a critical mindset: the askance viewpoint. On the other hand, Wall argues that teaching art engages necessarily with the institutional structure that embodies the state's concept of art, which by that time had come to include conceptualism's academy of the askance.

In "Some Are Weather-Wise; Some Otherwise: Criticism and Vancouver," an essay in 1991's *Vancouver Anthology*, William Wood complicates this exchange between Wall and Lum by bringing it to bear upon broader issues in criticism. Wood deliberates upon the manner in which the institution of criticism constructs meanings and audiences for the objects of its contemplation. Instructively, his target is less Jeff Wall than the slew of earlier journal reviews that treat Lum as Wall's homunculus. Wood demonstrates that Wall's overtly paternalistic texts counteract such assertions, operating as they do in a covert manner to recast Lum's production into appropriate typologies for appropriate readers. At issue is the nature of the space for contemplation, disinterested or otherwise, that occurs in the text itself.

Significantly, Wall ends his masterfully written set of essays with two paragraphs on translation. If these writings are about a kind of mastery, Wall's conclusion regarding the nomadic drift of texts, drift facilitated by translation, at least promises that mastery's undoing. Taking up Walter Benjamin's argument, Wall finds translation less an act of submission to the integrity of the original text than an enrichment of the language of the translator.

Wall's text, then, asks for another not only to undo it, but to realize its value. The translator exemplifies the askance point of view: colonized yet productive in unpredictable ways. The play of the texts of Wall, Lum and Wood, and the countless writings of which they are translations, manifest just such an interdependent process of undoing and reification, of antagonism and mutual extension.

Ian Wallace, like Wall, valorizes the figure of the “askance” or skeptical point of view in “Image and Alter-Image,” a two-part essay written for *Vanguard* that deals first with the work of Ken Lum, then with that of Roy Arden. Wallace relates the askance view to Rodchenko’s “vector of the tilt”: that formal inflection between image and alter-image that produces an oblique view of modern life and its official iconic vocabulary. Wallace himself would later be characterized by Jeff Wall as a skeptical neo-productivist, his distrust of polemic embodied by his self-positioning as a latter-day symbolist. The “polemical anti-polemism” that Wall identifies in Wallace’s work finds an equivalent in “Image and Alter-Image,” where the work of Arden and Lum threatens to function as vanguardist critical idealism. But this work, too, pulls back from the trap of a problematic and paranoid “identification with the oppressed subject” and consequential oppressive fixing of the meaning of the images in their work.

Since the mid-’90s, Roy Arden and Ken Lum have also written about the work of younger artists in relation to their ambiguous restaging of critical tropes. The degree to which these same theoretical models are utilized in the discussion of this later work is almost as striking as the change in tone and tenor of the writing itself. Gone in the writing is the implication that the askance view functioning in the work is an inherently moral position. It becomes a point of contention whether the works suggest even temporary respite from the dystopic scenarios they insert themselves into. The work’s relation to theory is recast, from productively skeptical to melancholic or even schizophrenic.

In the recently reworked essay accompanying his curatorial project “After Photography” at Monte Clark Gallery, Arden notes the “pass” taken by the artists in the exhibit regarding theory and the deconstructive critiques of recent photography. The work, however, still foregrounds themes of surveillance, class and the urban as scarred by the ravages of capital. Arden indicates that Scott McFarland’s images lit by the flash of home-security lights, Howard Ursuliak’s flea-market stalls, Chris Gergley’s forlorn shop façades, Stephen Waddell’s contemporary flâneurs and Karin Bubaš’s suburban homes, replete with Neighbourhood Watch signage, all stop short of any attempt at grand or overarching social inquiry. In the catalogue for the Contemporary Art Gallery’s 1997 exhibit “bonus,” another Arden-curated project, he notes how the slapstick, melancholic and sarcastic elements of the work of Damian Mop-

pett, Ursuliak and Kelly Wood temper their critical posture.

If Arden suggests these artists traipse gently around the pit of theory, Ken Lum’s review in *Canadian Art* of the exhibition “6: New Vancouver Modern” identifies a predilection for diving into said pit. The editorial tag affixed to Ken Lum’s extended critical discussion of the 1998 exhibition reads, “Is a new generation of art stars on the rise in the west-coast capital of conceptual art?” With this tag insinuating a cynical careerism at work, Lum’s remarks themselves are by turns scathing and supportive.

In “Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel,” published in 1991 by *Art Metropole*, Jeff Wall argues that one of the enduring values ascribed to conceptual art is its dismantling of formal and generic hegemonies. While the bureaucratic look of conceptual art was one source of its internationalism, Ken Lum’s “Canadian Cultural Policy: a Problem of Metaphysics,” a piece that appeared in this magazine in 1999, speaks to the role conceptual art played in fostering an utterly administered and ironically defensive Canadian cultural posture. If Arden’s writing points to a melancholia that seeks to escape these rationalizations of both the economy and theory, Lum’s suggests that a certain level of psychosis has flowered within Canadian universities.

Lum describes the work of “6: New Vancouver Modern” as pop art masquerading as conceptual: it is, in Lum’s estimation, “a consequence of the proliferation of the art school, of which every artist in this exhibition is an alumnus, and from which learning about art has become an increasingly glib process.” The pieces in the exhibition ranged from Ron Terada’s monochromes infused with *Jeopardy!* questions, to Steven Shearer’s grainy images of forgotten teen rockers, to Myfanwy MacLeod’s reworking of Duchamp’s *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, à la Chuck Jones. In this case the shovel is deformed by the impression of a cartoon head, left by some victim of a hilarious blow.

The catastrophe of history, a touchstone of much of the writing of and on Wall, Arden and Wallace in particular, is superseded by the catastrophe of theory. The inner dialectic of self-critical thinking is rendered, according to Lum, as schizophrenic yammering. After deeming the work abject, lacking in complexity and even “morally pathetic,” Ken Lum implicitly asks if a cynical attitude toward theory cannot be productive, even surreptitiously critical. While exhibit curator Scott Watson acknowledges in the catalogue text that the work flirts with a defeatist attitude, he ultimately argues that it extends Marxist, psychoanalytic and deconstructive critiques. Lum finds that the work has actually emptied those lines of enquiry and fashioned them into mimicry. In this point Lum grants their provocation crucial agency.

Of interest is the manner in which the text in a general sense implicates Lum’s own activities as both a writer and a teacher, constitutive as these activities have been regarding the abject nature of the scenario he elucidates. This is tellingly distant from the self-congratulatory tenor of Jeff Wall’s “Four Essays on Ken Lum.” Similarly, Roy Arden

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Kelly Wood *Continuous Garbage Project 1998–2003, First Year: March 15, 1998–March 14, 1999* (detail) 1998–1999
1 of 59 c-prints 51 x 41 cm Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario



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speaks his wish to avoid smothering the works of “bonus” “under a strata of theory.” The suggestion of both texts seems to be that artworks in fact advance a kind of knowledge not contained in the text, that artworks can in fact move forward within the circular logic of theory. That movement can include a temporary sense of being lost, by virtue of a sense of emptiness experienced as shock, or an excess experienced as an effusive melancholy.

It is notable that these essays about the uncertainty of meaning are so well reasoned, something made evident to me by Robert Linsley’s essay on the “jungle of overgrown metaphors” found in Smithson’s text “Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan.” It seems as if “lost” here suggests a place where one might be truly conceptually lost within the text itself: a Smithsonesque hinterland. Linsley, who has criticized the closed, hyper-rational nature of Wall’s “critical tableaux,” notes that for Smithson displacement, disruption and confusion not only constitute an effective critique of modernist criticism but make conceptual art possible.

Surely this is a significant shift, from the overtly hallucinatory to the apparently forceful and sure. What this marks is a heightened distinction between critical text and artwork, even when those texts are the texts of artists; this is especially relevant given the noted hallucinatory and even schizophrenic aspects of recent art practice. Consider the ambiguous status of Dan Graham’s *Homes for America*, or the elliptical journey of Smithson’s text “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey.” Rodney Graham’s *The System of Landor’s Cottage* or Wall’s *Landscape Manual* likewise offer the ambiguous conflation of theoretical text and artwork as a kind of praxis. More often the artist moonlights as critic, historian or curator. The attendant schism between practice and theory is a problem felt acutely by many artists presently attending art school.

Yet this is ultimately a false dichotomy, given that any essay is a messy agglomeration of misunderstandings and mistranslations; the reading of text produces its own shock

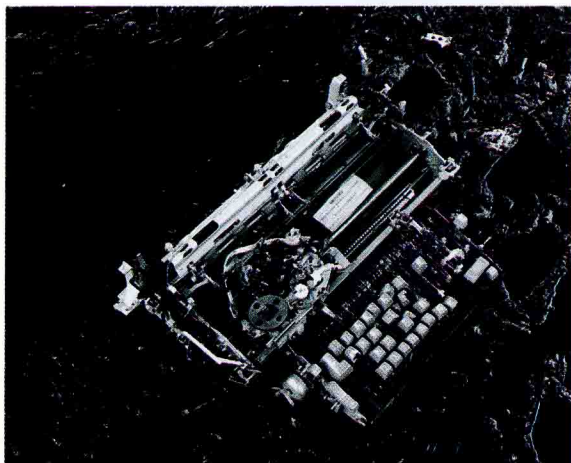
of emptiness and melancholic excess. The conceptually lost nature of texts need not be self-dramatized to make it so. Another option is to misconstrue the text as a discrete place for clear-headed contemplation, somehow antithetical to the mess of the studio. The schism between text and work is productive because it is so alternately empty and excessive.

That said, the model of the critical artist elucidated here approaches the status of a given in Canadian universities, and the danger looms that the alter-image of the cipher as a *critical term* has irrevocably hardened into the reified form of its antithesis, the iconic image. It appears that in the rush to expand that redemptive discursive community under the aegis of the university, its critical tools have lost their edge.

If here lies the danger of critical academic texts, Ian Wallace asserts in his essay “The Idea of the University” that a “compensatory value” exists in this kind of transmission of ideas. Again the figure of the cipher returns, this time as a redeeming quality of the text: as Wallace calls it, “a cipher for a whole range of realities and contingencies.” Although the writing cited here is often seen as a response to the demand to theorize one’s work, and may contribute to an argument that artworks can be fully explained and accounted for, no theoretical works have ever treated the objects of their contemplation more like ciphers. Such a positioning of the artwork as a floating sign, defenceless to its own reinscription, may seem to disempower it. This is only, however, until these texts are subjected to a similar act of translation, where they too are rendered nomadic. This can be difficult, given their institutionalized authority, and can only occur in a large, vibrant, and even somewhat disconnected discursive community. Further, one of the stakes in the writing of Ken Lum and Scott Watson is the status of the lone theoretical text in the “6” catalogue, participating artist Kelly Wood’s brief “Garbage and the Work of Art.”

Why shouldn’t artists use such a forum to share in the work of their colleagues? Despite cynical arguments to the contrary, writing can be a generous parallel activity. It is no secret that the essays discussed here function at some level as career-driven position-taking; certainly this accounts in part for the lucid, authoritative tenor they employ. Yet the real danger is that artists will write less, losing a form of community that exists within but also in between the institutions of the gallery, university, journal and art press. This can, significantly, also be a highly fragmented, even antagonistic form of community that does not rely upon an essential school of “local sensibility” for its *raison d’être*.

Ultimately, the beauty of these writings is that they remain generous despite themselves and in ways they cannot predict, authoritative and self-contained though they can seem. Texts are as vulnerable as readers, and they are especially prone to subsequently being used *against themselves*. If our artworks are melancholic and schizophrenic, so are our texts; this vulnerability makes them dialogical. They remain, to use (or likely abuse) a phrase from a Robert Linsley essay, “moving fragments.” ■



Roy Arden *Terminal City (#14)* 1999 Silver gelatin print
41 x 51 cm Courtesy Monte Clark Gallery