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CHRISTOS DIKEAKOS' OLYMPIC VILLAGE LANDSCAPES

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It is difficult to come to terms with an event as culturally and socially complex as the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. There were many years of work involved and, regardless of one's opinions about its ultimate value, such an event indisputably signifies a tremendous feat of planning, labour, and international co-operation. I watched the Opening Ceremony from New Jersey, gathered with fellow ex-Vancouverites in a new luxury condo situated adjacent to the Passaic River, where former marshlands remain polluted after decades of industrial production and abandonment. Robert Smithson's 1967 article, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic," a document of the artist's fascination with the industrial ruins that permeate the landscape of New Jersey, continues to be relevant here.[1] During the Olympics, Vancouver was given to us through the lens of NBC, since the network had purchased the exclusive rights for broadcasting the event in the United States. That evening, we spent hours in front of the TV, watching as the ritual unfolded, real-time, in BC Place Stadium: the First Nations welcome, the parade of individual nations arriving, and the spectacular sequence of music, performance, and cultural display. From time to time, we thought about the CBC, since NBC spent much of the time between ceremonies profiling American athletes and their stories.

The festive atmosphere of the Opening Ceremony was disrupted, periodically, by announcers discussing the Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili, who had died during a training accident earlier in the day. The opening ceremony was dedicated to his memory, and his name came up several times during the evening. These were the instances when the coherence of the spectacular image ruptured, suggesting that the journalistic conventions of the Olympic media event failed to provide an adequate framework for dealing with the visibly heart-wrenching grief of Kumaritashvili's teammates and the sudden loss of an athlete at the start of an international competition. More than momentary awkwardness, the on-camera announcers repeatedly seemed to recognize that they could not find words for what had occurred because it just wasn't in the script. This created a visual glitch, disrupting the smoothness of the Olympic narrative as well as the continuity of the broadcast flow.

I've been reflecting on this visual glitch in terms of the social function of art, and how it might serve as a useful parallel for considering the contribution Christos Dikeakos has made to understanding the Olympics in his series of photographs that appeared in a 2009 solo exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery. Four, in particular, stand out: *Construction Dump/ Piles False Creek Vancouver* (2002); *Window View, Main Street* (2009); *Concrete Debris* (2007–2009); and *Squatter's Tent, Olympic Village* (2007–2009). These photographs are linked in a number of interesting ways, most conspicuously by their similarity in format, genre, and subject matter. All four photographs are large-scale, full-colour, lightjet prints. They are, to some degree, Vancouver landscapes that portray characteristic architectural or natural motifs: from the North Shore Mountains to the iconic geodesic dome of Science World built for Expo 86. Most relevant at present is that the photographs also portray False Creek, the site where the Vancouver Olympic Village (or the Millennium Water development) now stands. False Creek is a site that Dikeakos has turned to repeatedly over the years, as is evident in past projects such as *Sites and Place Names and Lookout*, the latter being a public sculpture on the pedestrian walkway along the water.

There is a parallel between the art photograph and the visual glitch; both are moments in which the perfectly polished media spectacle of the Olympics has been ruptured. This is not to argue that Dikeakos' photographs

represent the decisive moments typical of reportage but, rather, that both instances conspicuously fail to display the ideal image of the Olympics. Furthermore, viewers are made to understand that what they are being given is a self-consciously partial and inadequate account. In both cases, the version of the Olympics presented is indelibly bound up with an intriguing admission of limitation, perhaps also a degree of acquiescence, about the failure to provide a clear or confident message. Dikeakos' work utilizes the conventions of social landscape and post-conceptualism to demonstrate that pictures, rather than automatically functioning as an extension of the media spectacle, are important documents of desire, reflection, and historical memory. They function as perpetual reminders of how the Olympics have transformed Vancouver's urban landscape socio-politically, economically, and culturally.

The earliest of the photographs, *Construction Dump/ Piles False Creek Vancouver*, is a strongly horizontal composition, almost twice as wide as it is high, providing a panoramic sense of the landscape it portrays. Across the upper register of the photograph, a thin layer of cloud hovers in the blue sky. Visible on the horizon are the snow-capped mountains and a row of wintry trees. The distant landscape is populated by the metallic sphere of Science World. Adjacent to it are two apparently new, glass sky-scrapers. It is the foreground, though, that dominates this scene. Taking up almost two-thirds of the composition vertically, the foreground of the image confounds the eye because it is cluttered with massive piles of waste and detritus. The diverse materials, ranging from upturned tree roots, plastic bags, broken furniture, cartons, planks of wood, and blocks of concrete, appear in such massive piles that it is difficult to discern if they have been thrown onto level ground or if they are joining an existing ridge of land. While the piles of material appear to have been discarded relatively recently in terms of the time the

photograph was taken, the traces of mud and moss on some of the piles suggest that the debris has also been accumulated over time. What is fascinating about this image is that the details are insufficient to interpret what, precisely, has been dismantled, and what, if anything, is being planned. What the picture succeeds in emphasizing are the themes of urban transition and the landscape as victim of the process of intentional destruction. Built structures and nature alike have been upturned and torn apart for the sake of progress, although in this photograph we can't know why this is happening or what shape progress will eventually take.

These recent images are not the first time that Dikeakos has used False Creek as the subject of a photographic series. Grant Arnold, Christopher Brayshaw, and Scott Watson have described how Dikeakos' early photo-works, including *Car Scans* (1969–1970) and *Instant Photo Information* (1970), contributed to the emerging aims of photo-conceptualism in Vancouver during the experimental period following the hegemony of abstraction in painting.[2] Photo-conceptualism represented an attempt to recover strategies of documentation that had become diminished both by modernism's wariness of mimesis and by the shifting kaleidoscope of the mass media image. I imagine that the title given to *Construction Dump/Piles False Creek Vancouver* is an intentional allusion to the series of photographs titled *A Portfolio of Piles*, created by the Vancouver-based art collective N.E. Thing Co. in 1968, during the heyday of the conceptual era. Alongside a contemporary generation of artists, including Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, Jeff Wall, N.E. Thing Co., and Ian Wallace, Dikeakos' early interest in photography was shaped by a critical interest in capturing the socio-political and material consequences of urbanization and modernization, especially as they affected their respective locales. And, as Dikeakos recounts in a 2005 essay, False

Creek was, even in the early 1970s, "a site of wasteland scenery worth looking at."[3]

The geography of False Creek had been dramatically transformed during the colonial era, as the original marshlands were drained and dense stands of trees were cleared for settlement. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the area around False Creek used for railway yards and a variety of other industrial processes, including wood processing, sawmills, gasworks, and sewage dumps. As historians and critics have pointed out, by the mid-century these unregulated industrial practices had left the land and water of False Creek polluted and, as industry moved elsewhere, the area fell into disuse. Around 1970, when Dikeakos began recording the area, it was a site of industrial ruin.

During the 1970s, however, the City of Vancouver began to initiate plans for the redevelopment of False Creek's economic potential, moving away from land-use dedicated to industrial production toward a focus on residential, tourist, and leisure consumption. By 1986, consistent with the city's urban planning policy, the False Creek lands had been de-industrialized and cleaned up for the international tourists arriving to visit the World Exposition on Transportation and Communication. In 2002, the same year that Dikeakos photographed *Construction Dump/Piles, Vancouver*'s bid to host the Winter Olympics had been formally accepted by the International Olympic Committee and, by August of that year, Vancouver had officially made it to the short-list of cities bidding for 2010.

Window View, Main Street presents an unusual combination of genres in that it is at once an interior and a landscape. The portion of the photograph showing the interior space dominates the composition and is rendered in warm tones, while the "view" through the window shows a

distinctly cooler and bluer landscape, creating a dynamic tension between interior and exterior. In this respect, the photograph is reminiscent of Jeff Wall's *View from an Apartment* (2005), another post-conceptual Vancouver photograph that creates an interesting dynamic between inside and outside. The interior portion of Wall's image shows the living room of an apartment inhabited by two occupants, while Dikeakos' image remains connected to modes of production in both interior and exterior. The interior of *Window View, Main Street* shows a workshop area cluttered with sanding belts, a pencil sharpener, a cordless drill, a chop saw, glues, solvents, and strips of sandpaper in various sizes. Because the composition is tightly framed, focusing on a single, densely packed wall of the workshop, the interior dimensions of the room itself are not visible.

There are a number of indications that this photograph, rather than a direct visual document or record, has been carefully constructed. The window in the centre of the composition, rather than offering a simple, transparent view to the landscape, functions as a transitional dimension between interior and exterior, or foreground and background. The glass panes of the window are smudged with dirt and the old, worn wooden window frame is textured with brown stain. Someone seems to have nailed extra triangular supports, not dissimilar to canvas supports, to each of the corners of the window. The "view" itself, although only about one-third of the photograph's composition, occupies its centre, adding an essentially abstract and geometric element of a rectangle within a rectangle. The wall of the workshop matches that of the picture plane, introducing a further element of abstraction that is reminiscent of painting.

The meaning of the photograph is intertwined with the fundamentally disconcerting incongruity between the workshop

and the landscape out the window. The intimate and individual scale of production in the workshop provides a sharp, dramatic contrast to the vast, industrial-scale production in process on the other side of the window. Striking for its density and scale, the landscape in *Window View* portrays the features of a new and generic global city, predictably dominated by construction related to real estate development. The sky is filled with the massive towers of construction cranes—there are at least eleven in view—and the rudiments of multi-story buildings springing up below them. This picture, taken in 2009, is testament to Vancouver's success, so many years after *Construction Dump/Piles*, in having won the Olympic Games bid. What we are looking at is, of course, another view onto False Creek and, more precisely, the construction of Olympic Village.

Olympic Villages are a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of the modern Olympic Games. Where athletes used to be housed in existing facilities or other temporary sites, it is now common to use the Olympics as an opportunity for urban expansion and property development. In fact, mega-events such as the Olympics seem to appeal to cities precisely because they offer an occasion to compete in the new model of post-industrial economic growth. No longer sites for factory or heavy industry, cities invested in consumption and entertainment-oriented economies must find development opportunities and ways to attract tourists, condo owners, and an ongoing flow of urbanites. The Olympics, as a mega-event similar to a World's Fair or the World Cup, is high in profile and rich in signification. Such mega-events are perceived as an effective means of positioning one's city because they allow for a process of branding and promotion on a global scale. The thousands of hours of media coverage generated by the Olympics, for instance, were understood by the City of Vancouver as an opportunity to position Vancouver "as a global centre for business—a city built on innovation

and creativity, a city that values and practices principles of sustainability."[4] Such events allow for the redefinition of a city and a possibility for advancing major urban planning initiatives whose legacy extends far beyond the event itself.

The range of official imagery used to connect Vancouver to the Olympics has been consistent with Olympism, the global philosophy that aspires to position the Games as a symbol of higher moral aspirations, including democracy, equity, solidarity, and self-improvement.[5] Harmony with nature is emphasized through images of pristine wilderness, the integration of diverse ethnic cultures through images of First Nations ceremonies, and a respect for athletics through a seamless integration of sport into everyday culture. [6] The official website of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is clear in its attempt to show the Olympics as a positive cultural signifier with universal relevance: "But far beyond the story of sport and athletes, it's a story about humanity [...] it's a story about art and design, about architecture, and fashion [...]. It's the story of Olympism, two thousand years of the history of humanity."[7] The current organization of the Olympics into a global spectacle and mega-brand continues to rely on the spirit of Olympism as a vehicle for appealing to its audience.

Dikeakos' *Window View, Main Street* appears to undermine the spirit of Olympism as a symbol of the universal and unproblematic embodiment of humanity's progress. Rather than suggesting that nature remains untouched by the presence of the Games, Dikeakos' image is fundamentally anchored in the material and industrial transformation underway. While the photograph offers a view to the outside that alludes to the vast machinery and labour involved in setting up the Olympics, it is careful to keep such progress in the distance. A landscape embedded with the Olympic spirit, of pleasant cultural signifiers from ceremonies to athletic events, is crowded out by concrete,

asphalt, and machinery. Once again, in a manner related to *Construction Dump/Piles*, Dikeakos situates the viewer firmly within a messy and chaotic foreground, strategically blocking and obscuring access to the spectacle on the horizon. Where a postcard version of Olympic Village would strip away the layers of the past and offer a seductive and beautiful promise of the new, Dikeakos' photograph acts as a stubborn reminder of the ugly and profound processes at work in production.

Similar motifs appear in *Concrete Debris* (2007–2009), albeit even more dramatically. The landscape is dominated by an enormous pile of abandoned concrete. The concrete, built for a purpose that has since disappeared, has been broken up into large blocks and sheets and dumped into a stretch of land for eventual removal. Behind the concrete, in the distance, construction cranes suggest the promise of future urban growth and prosperity. The concrete foreground, however, creates a barrier that prevents a means of connecting to that distant space. Above the concrete wall, the sky is stormy, dark, and foreboding. Given the scale of material debris, the photograph seems to attest to a new agenda at hand and an effort to displace the past. This photograph provides artefactual and material evidence of the inevitable transience of urban environments predicated on a logic of perpetual development and expansion. It calls to mind, perhaps more than any of the photographs so far discussed, Marx's famous dictum about capitalism as a system in which all that is solid melts into air.

The decision to build Olympic Village in the False Creek neighbourhood is part of the larger struggle around real estate and property development in Vancouver. It represents an arena of dispute where some stand to gain from the new regime, while others stand to lose. Those that are in favour of development, including politicians, realtors,

and developers, whether in False Creek, the Downtown Eastside, or other pockets of the city, claim that large-scale building projects, often combining residential condos with retail storefronts, help to revitalize neighbourhoods, and reduce crime and urban decay. Opponents of the process consider this kind of move an unfortunate process of gentrification, a logic that displaces local residents and working class people in favour of urban professionals who can afford the newly converted neighbourhood. Critics point out that gentrification destroys the notion of common or shared property, and that it results in a privatization process involving the redistribution of land for speculative gain at the exclusion of existing communities, including long-term home-owners, activists, members of the working class, and artists. Gentrification also, perhaps inevitably, enshrines historical amnesia.

Squatter's Tent, Olympic Village is the only work that explicitly declares that the landscape portrayed is attached to Vancouver hosting the Olympic Games in 2010. While it depicts the same part of the city, the photograph also engages in a dialogue with the previous images. The scale of the work is effective because, while not monumental, it is large enough to read the details. The composition emphasizes the strangeness of the scene: a single, dome-shaped, camping tent set up in the middle of a vast and desolate construction lot. Beside the tent, on the right, sits a cart with empties for recycling and various other mobile possessions, tucked away behind blue plastic sheets. The photograph raises questions about patterns of human habitation, emphasized, in particular, by the formal echo between the dome of Science World, another symbol of the mega-event, and the dome of the squatter's tent, a symbol of the displaced. On the right side of the image, a row of concrete barriers are stacked together, apparently acting as a kind of industrial wall or temporary shelter for the homeless. The only person that can be seen in the pho-

tograph is a construction worker in the distance, labouring behind a wire fence, alongside the dumpsters, cranes, and other signs of active construction and development.

In one respect, Dikeakos' work strives to demonstrate that photography can play a role in the process of historical documentation. His writings seem to verify this notion, repeatedly attesting to a belief in the social, functional role of photography. As the artist commented in 1994, in relation to his project *Sites and Place Names*, his photographs are intended "to record things that might not be remembered for future contemplation and comparison." [8] A decade later, in relation to his exhibition *Domicile/Drift*, Dikeakos explained that the documentary aspect of his works is intended to function "in contrast to the staging of the (impending and constructed) official cityscape." [9] In a 2008 interview, he explained that his work is part of the anti-spectacle, attempting "to balance out the idealized and constructed landscape of privilege and the good life."[10] Dikeakos' writing repeatedly confirms, then, an affinity with social documentary traditions, critical, or activist urban politics, and a consistent degree of concern for the underdog. He embodies, to some extent, what might be thought of as squatter's politics. In the history of Vancouver, this is a meaningful reference, dating back as far as the squatter community of the Maplewood Mudflats in North Vancouver that once included Malcolm Lowry and other artists and writers.

Dikeakos' photographs also function as pictures that go beyond reportage or documentation. As he commented in the 1990s, in reference to his panoramic landscape photographs, "The contemplative activity associated with art, with its attendant social responses, is as important as the social, functional role of art." [11] The barriers that Dikeakos has erected in his photographs, made of scattered garbage, miscellaneous materials, discarded concrete, or other detritus, are aesthetic devices used to foreground transition and push progress into the distance. In a sense, these barriers can also be seen as metaphors for art. This speaks to my earlier discussion of the visual glitch: where the official TV announcers are silenced or made to stutter in the absence of a script, the artist finds a starting point for conversation. Dikeakos' photographs present viewers with an opportunity to reflect on the human and environmental cost of the mega-event. Informed by the spirit of critique once associated with modernist painting, his pictures maintain a degree of autonomy, refusing to provide an ideal world into which we, as viewers, can simply escape. The visual glitch makes journalists and TV reporters uncomfortable because they rely on a continuous flow of action, but the artist utilizes the visual glitch intentionally because it creates a new vantage point from which to see things. The visual glitch, as employed by Dikeakos, also confirms that art is implicated in the unresolved social and material conflicts that it depicts.

NOTES

1. See Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic" (1967), in *The Writings of Robert Smithson, Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 52–57.

2. Grant Arnold, "Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation," in *Robert Smithson in Vancouver: A Fragment of a Greater Fragmentation*, ed. Grant Arnold (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2004), 9-30; Christopher Brayshaw, "On Lookout," in *Lookout: A Sculpture Installation in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Christos Dikeakos, 2001), 28-49; and Scott Watson. "Urban Renewal: Ghost Traps, Collage, Condos, and Squats—Vancouver in the Sixties," in *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete and Scott Watson (Antwerp and Vancouver: Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp and Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005), 31–50.

3. Christos Dikeakos, "A Vast and Featureless Expanse: The Car Rides and Street Scans, 1969/71," in *Unfinished Business: Photographing Vancouver Streets 1955 to 1985*, ed. Bill Jeffries, Glen Lowry, and Jerry Zaslove (North Vancouver and Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery and *West Coast Line*, 2005), 144.

4. Philip Boyle and Kevin D. Haggerty, "Spectacular Security: Mega-Events and the Security Complex," *International Political Sociology* 3 (2009): 258.

5. Christine M. O'Bonsawin, "'No Olympics on Stolen Native Land': Contesting Olympic Narratives and Asserting Indigenous Rights Within the Discourse of the 2010 Vancouver Games," *Sport in Society* 13 (1) (January 2010): 143–156.

6. Katherine McCallum, "The City as an Image-Creation Machine: A Critical Analysis of Vancouver's Olympic Bid," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 67 (1) (2005): 24–46.

7. See the official website for the International Olympic Committee: www.olympic.org (accessed 13 May 2010).

8. Christos Dikeakos, "Some Background Notes for Sites and Place Names: Vancouver/Saskatoon" (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1994), 6.

9. Christos Dikeakos, "Exhibition Notes," in *Domicile/Drift Exhibition* (Vancouver: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 2005-2006), n.p..

10. Gary Pearson, "Interview with Christos Dikeakos," *Lake: A Journal of Arts and Environment* (2) (2008): 49.

11. Christos Dikeakos, "Some Background Notes for Sites and Place Names," 10.