

# Tabula Nova

## A Personal Account of the Nova Gallery

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### **The 70's Context**

This is a very personal view of a particular time and place in the history of Vancouver art and the history of photographic art. It centers on the Nova Gallery, operated by Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft from 1976-81. These years proved to be pivotal in both the development of photographic art and my own development as an artist. The Nova's brief tenure coincided with the most significant developments in artistic photography since the period of the historic avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20th. Century. It also coincided with my first years as an art student - trying to understand art and find my own direction.

Until recently, Vancouver could never claim to be a very sophisticated cultural centre. Now little more than one hundred years old, it was settled by European, Asians, and others in search of fortune. The trees, fish, and minerals of British Columbia provided for them as they had for the native peoples. Immigrants to B.C. were largely those who had little interest in visual art or culture in general, focusing instead on attainment of wealth. People from the United Kingdom dominated in B.C.'s early days and played the major role in the development of arts institutions. European modernism was imported through artists from Emily Carr to Jack Shadbolt and fashioned into a regional romantic modernism. While their accomplishments were significant, their audience was small.

The Vancouver Art Gallery, The Vancouver School of Art and the local universities and libraries all formed a foundation for a visual arts culture through the 20th Century. These institutions reflected a generally progressive, liberal modern society. While such institutions certainly support the reception of art, it is government agencies such as the Canada Council and the commercial art market that provide for art production. The Canada Council began funding arts production in 1957 but Vancouver had a miniscule art market before the 1980's and it is still small in comparison to cities of similar size in eastern Canada, the U.S.A., and Europe. Most who have pondered this fact conclude that the reasons are three: firstly, Vancouver is a young city, second, the ethnic groups which settled it were not from cultures with strong visual arts traditions, and lastly, the natural setting of B.C. distracts attention away from culture.

The Vancouver art market looks very promising today, since the 1970's, its growth has accelerated, and there is no reason to think it might stop. However, to open a gallery devoted to photographic art in 1976 as Beck and Gruft did, must have seemed optimistic or foolhardy. At that time, there was only a small collecting scene and it was largely conservative, preferring the identifications supplied by paintings of West Coast scenery.

But these were two sophisticated, cosmopolitan bohemians, with a passion and curiosity for art, and a generosity of spirit. It was important to them that the gallery would be a commercial venture because they felt that the market was both the best way to fund creation and the best arbiter of artistic value.

Beck found her way from Indiana to Vancouver to teach a summer course in art history at the University. Gruft came from South Africa via Rio de Janeiro to practise architecture. They met in Vancouver and eventually became excited about photography, which was then beginning to be seriously considered, and marketed, as art. Trying to collect photographs with only modest means, they seized on a dealer's suggestion that they also buy and sell photos. They opened the Nova Gallery in a modernist storefront on 4th avenue, then the fading Haight-Ashbury of Canada.

In 1976, I was a nineteen year old who had been introduced to photography by a dedicated high school graphics teacher

named Walter Rand. My taste was Catholic and my appetite for culture, especially visual art and specifically photographic art, was insatiable. Vancouver still felt like a sleepy colonial outpost then, but the importation of important visual art, taken for granted at the time, was at a level that has not been equaled since. During the seventies, the Vancouver Art Gallery hosted many exhibitions of contemporary art from America, Europe and elsewhere. Pop Art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism in particular were well represented with exhibitions of Warhol, Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, Sol Lewitt Richard Serra, Donald Judd, and others. A traveling exhibition of Realist painting from Germany included work by the then less known Gerhard Richter. The opening of Doug Christmas' Ace Gallery brought even more of the big American artists including Frank Stella, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman to town as well as the odd European like Klaus Rinke. Equinox Gallery also showed work by such artists as David Hockney and Richard Hamilton.

By 1977, I was a student at the Vancouver School of Art. The photography department was, like most at that time, still steeped in the American tradition of 'straight' photography. Robert Frank was the most influential photographer with Walker Evans behind him as the father figure. I appreciated the respect for craft and tradition that reigned in the photo department but was often dismayed and frustrated by the accompanying disdain for newer approaches. The climate of the school was mildly bohemian, often crudely political and anti-intellectual. Current approaches to photography or the newly translated cultural theories were rarely discussed in classes or lectures. The exception to this was the "Art Now" courses taught by Ian Wallace. I attended these, along with Stan Douglas and many of the more interesting artists of my generation. Douglas and I became close friends and were both very influenced by the pictorial work of Jeff Wall and Wallace. Where Douglas' early works like T.V. Spots were directly influenced by Wall's cinematic approach, I was less inclined to work as a dramatist and found inspiration in 'direct' photography.

Wallace would project slides of current art he had copied from magazines or photographed in galleries or museums during his trips abroad. Along with Wall, who was building the then-new Fine Arts Department at Simon Fraser University, Wallace also organized numerous guest lectures by important artists such as Hans Haacke and Sherrie Levine. Wallace often discussed the aesthetic and cultural theories of the time, introducing his students to Feminism, the Frankfurt School, Post Structuralism, and Semiotics.

Through the art school, I very quickly found my way to Pumps, an artist run space operating a gallery and video production facilities. Pumps was the punk generation's answer to the Baby Boomer experiments such as Intermedia and the Western Front. At Pumps, I found like-minded peers who were interested in current trends in international art. Some of the artists and personalities who lived or exhibited at Pumps during my involvement included: Kim Tomczak, Sandra Janz, Chris Reed, John Mitchell, David Larson, John Anderson, Peter Schuyff, David Ostrem, Keith Donovan and Neil Campbell. Pumps played host to visiting artists and art world types such as Sonja Ivecovich from Yugoslavia, Fabio Mauri from Italy, Willoughby Sharpe (editor of Avalanche magazine) and Diego Cortez from New York and Hermann Nitsch, the Austrian Aktionismus artist. Photography as practiced at Pumps was an open field. While the traditional approaches were respected, the experimental use of photography and the newly accessible video technology was the norm.

### **The Tradition of Photographic Art**

Until the 1960's photography as art had developed its own tradition, parallel, but largely separate from 'art' – which was painting, drawing and sculpture, but grew to include various multi-media and avant-garde forms. It is strange that photography, essentially a pictorial medium, was probably the last of the mediums to be accepted as art, even after performance, ready-mades and endlessly more ephemeral novelties and hybrids.

The reasons for this are many and complex, and deserve an in-depth study beyond the scope of this essay, but photography's mechanical nature and commercial uses surely played a large role in separating it from the artisanal beaux-arts tradition.

Not included in most art school curriculums until the 50's to 70's, artistic photography was always struggling to define itself against commercial, journalistic, vernacular and hobbyist photography. Most artist photographers also had to produce instrumental photography to pay the rent. Nonetheless, a tradition of artistic photography persevered,

developing its own history, traditions, aesthetics, and criteria. No matter how much an artist in the 1970's wanted to abandon, or radically depart from that tradition, he or she would have to come to terms with it, any new approaches would have to stand up to the criteria afforded by tradition. As a young artist, I knew I needed to educate myself. Spending long hours in the libraries would be necessary, but one also needs to see the real thing - for my purposes, Beck and Gruff's timing couldn't have been more perfect. At the Nova, I found good examples of everything from the pioneering work of Fox Talbot and the 19th century travel photos of Samuel Bourne to Robert Frank's *Americans* and Larry Clark's transgressive *Teenage Lust*. Walker Evans was certainly a photographic god in the 70's and his work has survived all the critiques of the recent past, emerging as the most important photographic oeuvre of the 20th century. I remember how important it was for me to see his prints at Nova, studying from books is good and fine, but never quite real until completed by first hand experience. When a young artist sees the Master's original work, it closes the theoretical stage of the young artist's development with an affirmative thud - signalling the move to action.

It was also important to see things that I was less fond of, the Pictorialist photographers of Camera Works, for example - who are nonetheless crucial to an understanding of the development of artistic photography; or to see things that I might have otherwise never paid much attention to, like Roman Vishniac's studies of the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe. These somber photos were lost on me as young man but I appreciate them more every day. The American works of the New Topographics and New Color period probably had the most direct impact on my own future production, as they also had on the artists of the Düsseldorf School. Before the New Color of Eggleston, Shore, Meyerowitz and others it was doctrine that only black and white photos could be serious art. Stephen Shore in particular, impressed me with his rediscovery of 16th century Dutch vision, as applied to the vernacular American landscape. The new American landscape photography showed everyone how to use colour film and taught me how to look at my own surroundings.

### **Photoconceptualism**

In the 1960's and 70's the aesthetic values of traditional art photography were challenged by conceptual art and the various accompanying critiques of representation. Art in general, was in for the most radical interrogation or deconstruction since the period of the historic avant-gardes of Productivism, Dada, and Surrealism. All of the old criteria were discarded and everything and anything was possible. Conceptual art and Performance art used photography without regard for traditional aesthetics. This largely involved using photography to document an event or things, usually accompanied by text. A common strategy of Photoconceptual art was to mimic or employ a vernacular style of photography, as in Ed Ruscha's snapshots of gas stations or commissioned professional aerial photos of parking lots, which were then employed in book works. N.E. Thing Co. also exploited such strategies in the work they were making then in Vancouver.

I saw both Ruscha's and N.E. Thing Co.'s work at Nova, along with other international and local artists from the period of 'classic' photoconceptualism like Robert Cumming, Mac Adams, James Collins, Eleanor Antin, General Idea, Michael DeCourcy, and Robert Heinecken. Probably the best local Photoconceptualist was Theodore S. Wan, who is sadly much under-appreciated here today. His elegant, austere, and original works employed medical photography, detective or voyeuristic photography and other vernacular styles. Rodney Graham was another important local conceptualist who showed photographic work at Nova. Graham's Rome Ruins were made in Rome with a camera fashioned from a matchbox, bubblegum and tinfoil, after his camera was stolen. The resulting prints looked miraculously like Pictorialist autochromes. Graham also showed his first 'upside-down' tree at Nova - derived from his experimental camera obscura. I would later be employed by Graham to photograph several of his tree series in Belgium, California and Princeton, BC.

Photoconceptualists often claimed that they were uninterested in the aesthetics of the photos they made or appropriated. However, it soon became clear that these new works were more likely expanding the vocabulary of what might be considered as an 'art photograph'. Walker Evans had earlier run through the various modes of vernacular photography and recruited them for art. Although his photos were often seen as 'unaesthetic' he never pushed as far as artists did in the 70's - in terms of a connoisseurship of 'bad photography as good photography'.

I began to think that much of what was happening in art in the 70's was not all new, but rather a reexamination or continuation of previous avant-garde ventures. The Baby Boomer generation had gone to universities and art schools in record

numbers, the economy at that time made it possible for unprecedented numbers of young people to pursue art and culture without worrying about money. It was also a time of political idealism and an interest in the radical art movements and theories of the past. A plethora of new books and exhibitions revisited the historic avant-garde moments. Although I saw the vocabulary expansion that Photoconceptualism brought to photographic art as fruitful, I was skeptical of the more radical anti-art poses and pretensions of the period. I knew enough to know that not everyone was an artist, and that art wasn't likely to affect the social order very directly. I did learn that art could be a form of serious philosophical or social investigation and expression - that art could be a legitimate form of knowledge.

### **Post-Conceptual Photo Art and the New Photo-Tableau**

That the photographic tableau should emerge from the experiment of Photoconceptualism might seem a scandalous betrayal or perversion to die-hard Photoconceptualists. Yet, it was precisely the radical rejection of traditional art photography aesthetics that made the photo-tableau possible. The world of traditional art photography had become somewhat musty if not moribund by the time of conceptual art's appearance. Many of its criteria and standards had come to be seen as unexamined bad habits. Did photographs always have to be perfectly printed little black and white prints in frames on the wall in order to be art? Was Ansel Adams really a great artist? Or was he an overrated producer of bombastic calendar images? The photo-tableau had been explored at the very beginnings of photography and survived in vernacular applications like public murals. Yet it never managed to enter the arena of high art in a significant or lasting way. Only when the radical rethinking of what 'photography as art' could be - that was instigated by Conceptualism, coincided with the newly available large format, colour photo technology, did the photo-tableau emerge.

I remember, as do many who were interested at the time, that it was artists such as the almost completely forgotten James Collins who paved the way for the photo-tableau's emergence. Gilbert and George, Urs Luthi and others could also be cited but Collins, who was shown at Nova, more than anyone, presented his work as large colour tableaux without any attendant qualifiers - such as that it was a document of a performance or had been splattered with a little paint. Collins came to the Vancouver School of Art then and impressed and horrified with his utter disregard for politically right-minded intentions. He mocked the image of the street photographer and suggested that one should be ashamed to walk around with a camera on their neck; "better to hide it in a paper bag" Whether one appreciated his dandy act or slick art was secondary to the fact he had reintroduced the tableau, long taboo even in painting, as an unadulterated, colour photograph. His tableaux were made in the studio with every aspect of lighting, props and poses completely controlled.

In the late 70's several Canadian artists began to produce large colour photographs that appeared to be as much in dialogue with the tradition of painting as photography. Sorel Cohen from Montreal showed her large colour images of wrestlers inspired by Muybridge's chronophotographic studies at Nova. These works were concerned with seriality, a mainstay of Photoconceptual art, but the handling of composition and colour was more painterly than documentary. Michael Morris also exhibited large, lush colour photos in his exhibition *Between The Frames*. These were enlargements of multiple frames of film depicting eroticized young men in a natural idyll. Morris played with chance compositional collisions of the frames - like Cohen, referencing seriality or process. These works by Morris and Cohen were stepping towards the tableau but stopped short of a stand-alone picture. I remember how difficult it seemed then for an artist who wanted to be progressive to simply make a picture. As absurd as it might seem today, at the time there was a consensus that the picture or tableau was obsolete, if not reactionary.

I first saw Ian Wallace's work at Nova and was stunned in particular by a work entitled *The Calling*, that was obviously a life-scale photographic restaging of Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew*. There was something somewhat kitsch about restaging a masterpiece like that, but Wallace's use of models in contemporary dress echoed Caravaggio's own use of contemporary types. Furthermore, his rough, sort of arte povera handling of the large sheets of matte black and white photo paper displayed a shocking disregard for the niceties of fine art photography. Parts of the image had been collaged on with scissors and glue from different exposures in a now uncanny foreshadowing of digital montage.

There was another work in the show after Courbet, entitled *In the Studio*, less successful than *The Calling*; this work also

used Wallace's artist peers as models, including Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham. Although I felt Wallace's works were rough or provisional, their brazen, plastic use of photography to produce a tableau was undeniably original and important. They seemed like Collin's work, to signal the end of photography's instrumental use by Conceptualism and the beginning of a new unapologetically pictorial, but inorganic approach to photography as art.

Some time after Wallace's exhibition, I was driving down Fourth Avenue and noticed a large back-lit colour image in the window of the Nova. From a distance, it had the appearance of an advertisement, but there was no text and it didn't 'read' from a distance the way bus-stop ads and billboards do. I later returned to discover it was Jeff Wall's exhibition in which *The Destroyed Room* had been placed before the gallery's open window. The image was sumptuous and ambitious. It was a completely controlled studio picture of a ransacked woman's bedroom that betrayed its staged nature through revealing details. Although this probably wasn't apparent to most viewers, the image's compositional structure was based on Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Wall was interested in the richness that can result from a dialogue with tradition.

Behind *Destroyed Room*, facing into the gallery, was a triptych entitled *Faking Death*. *Faking Death*, like *Destroyed Room* revealed its constructed nature blatantly; In one panel of the triptych, Wall's friends posed as a crew, holding lighting equipment and light meters, or applying make-up to Wall, who posed as though on his deathbed. The other two panels were virtually indistinguishable images of Wall alone, ostensibly as possible variants of a 'final' image

Both of Wall's pieces were clear and manifesto-like in their use of historical reference and their commitment to the pictorial aspect of photography. Wall was interested in using photography to produce works in dialogue with the great pictures of the past. While photography had for the most part failed to exploit the possibilities inherent to this kind of picture making, cinema had not. Through the cinematic model, one could make photo-tableaux that could perform much as painting once had.

At that time, the reception to Wall and Wallace's work in Vancouver and Canada was often cool, and sometimes hostile. That reception has only recently begun to change. Still, today there is no major work by Wall in a private collection in British Columbia. Although Beck and Gruft succeeded in having *The Destroyed Room* purchased by the National Gallery in Ottawa, selling photographic art in Vancouver and Canada, especially of the progressive, contemporary sort, proved to be a bust. Beck and Gruft were forced to close the Nova in 1981. Yet, their venture could hardly be construed as a failure, for they accomplished their original intention to be in the thick of art production and reception. The four years of the Nova Gallery were a starting point for a long career as patrons, collectors, supporters, friends of the artists.