

From the Fragments

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Roy Arden's first mature work, begun while he was still a student at the Vancouver School of Art, was the series of photographs later grouped together under the title *Fragments* (1981–85). There are perhaps eighty or ninety photographs in the series — its boundaries have never been conclusively defined; indeed it is still even now open to a certain extent. The title came long after the work was made. At the time he did not think of it as a series that would necessarily come to an end. This work—diaristic, personal, aestheticized—was simply what Arden did, his *métier*. As he says now, "I thought I would work like that for the rest of my life."¹ To the extent that he had any goal in mind it was simply the development of a distinctive style.

The photographs — "rich, almost liquid" cibachromes — were taken with a twin-lens Rolleiflex camera that produced a 6 x 6 cm transparencies. Despite its title, *Self-Portrait (#1), Vancouver*, shot in a mirror, shows us virtually nothing of Arden. His face is self-consciously covered by a herringbone jacket that makes him look like the Elephant Man. Totally visible, however, is the Rolleiflex that he hunches over. "I am a Camera," the picture says, and the reference to Christopher Isherwood's decadent Weimar-era Berlin is apropos. As Arden acknowledges, "I loved the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Otto Dix, Christian Schad." Looking back more generally, he has written that, "The tenor of *Fragments* is essentially melancholic. I was looking for that time and space that means-end rationality had overlooked. My milieu at that time was a loose-knit group of young, mildly bohemian, Vancouver artists and poets. The portraits are not about identity or character so much as *being* — regarding the person as someone who inhabits a body."² The work is melancholy, yet also specific. Despite Arden's engagement with European models, almost every title ends the same way: *Vancouver*. The works now serve as a document of a moment in the life of the city, and Arden himself is known as one of the artists who has done most to shape the image of Vancouver for a worldwide audience. He is profoundly a *Vancouver* artist. It is this specificity in his work that gives it its texture. Work that aspires to universality often ends up bland and forgettable. It is the graininess of specificity that lasts.

While Arden now sees *Fragments* as "a bit ahistorical," it is nevertheless full of historical references. It is in fact nothing less than "an attempt to knowingly work through the aesthetic codes made available by tradition."³ This is a project shared by some of the self-consciously bohemian portrait subjects. Kevin Hatt *Kevin Hatt (#1), Vancouver* was evidently as involved with the *Neue Sachlichkeit* as Arden. He casts his gaze downwards, detached from, but observant of his surroundings. The whole series seems to seek — and often finds — this kind of dandy's relationship to the world, looking on intently, but with an eye that is both distanced and refined. When we look at the portrait of Hatt, and think back to the early 1980s, already itself becoming a historical period, I am reminded of what Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly said of Richelieu: that he was "handsome at a time when the senses in revolt shared the empire with the brain and when decorum did not preclude pleasure."⁴ Twenty-five years after these photographs were taken, they are already surrounded by the nimbus of a bygone era.

The light in the photographs is derived primarily from that of Wols, whose 1930s photographs added elements of Surrealism to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and the Bauhaus.

"I loved Wols's light: very cruel, very violent light," Arden remembers, and such a light can be seen clearly in many of the *Fragments* photographs, such as, for example, *Gerald Creede (#1), Vancouver*, or *Greg Girard with Coat, Vancouver*. Despite this bracing harshness, the photographs were nevertheless greeted by his contemporaries with suspicion. They

seemed too romantic, too anachronistic. A work such as *Taylor's Vitrine (#1)*, *Vancouver* does undeniably draw on the old-fashioned window display to refer to a tradition of comparable photographs by Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. There is a self-conscious working close to clichés, to the played-out, the about-to-be-discarded both as nominal subject and in the address to those subjects. This attraction to a decaying history would in the end sustain itself as a major theme for Arden, even as his way of working underwent drastic changes.

In 1985 *Fragments* came to an end, as Arden became increasingly interested in an analytical approach to his work. As William Wood has written, the Vancouver art world in this period was “the site of contentious discussion distinctively addressing the history and current prospects of modernist art practice and theory. It also meant that, for ambitious student-artists, intellectual ability became regarded as an unavoidable counterpart to technical skill and aesthetic sensibility.”⁵ Arden was one of the key participants in this discussion. He stopped reading the romantic modernism of James Joyce and aligned himself instead with the more theoretically informed writing of Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. Benjamin’s excavation of forgotten histories and Bataille’s fascination with the abject offered new avenues through which to extend these themes, both touched on in *Fragments*, but there filtered through the sensibility of an individual, an aesthete. “It was the need to escape from subjectivity that caused me to finish with *Fragments*,” he later wrote.⁶

Around 1985 Arden became interested in the history of Vancouver and its ill-concealed traumas. He discovered the archive of historical photographs held at the Vancouver Public Library. At the same time he was looking at Andy Warhol’s “history paintings,” in particular the series of “race riots” in which Warhol used found news photographs as the basis for his rough silk-screening on to canvas. This use of found photography led Arden to the even more direct use of such material by Hans Peter Feldman and Sherrie Levine. Levine lectured in Vancouver in the early eighties. Their work made it clear that it was not necessary to have even the short distance from the original images that Warhol’s deliberately crude silk-screens imposed. In a radical switch in his practice, Arden decided to work exclusively with found photographs.

In 1938 unemployed workers occupied the post office, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and a downtown hotel. Their demonstration was brutally suppressed by the police. For *Rupture* (1985), Arden used cropped contemporary news photographs of these events to make a series of nine panels, each image paired with a photograph of blue sky mounted above it, so that the work consists of nine vertically- oriented diptychs. For Arden, “The monochrome seemed to be the emblem of modernism,” encompassing both “the materialism of Rodchenko and the transcendence of Yves Klein.” The blue sky in *Rupture*, in particular, references Klein’s insistent blue. The photographs of the sky were the last photographs taken with the old twin-lens Rolleiflex. After taking them Arden sold the camera and did not buy another camera for five years.

Rupture sets up a strict dichotomy between nature on top and history — debased history — on the bottom. Several of the photographs show beaten workers sprawled defenselessly on the ground. They are in the most literal way kept *down*. Even the sky seems against them, hovering above as if in triumph over them, at the least indifferent to their fate. The pose of the figures in the far left photograph recalls Masaccio’s *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (c. 1424–28), reinforcing the sense of being cut off or shut out from a natural paradise (as British Columbia’s boosters often describe their province).

The blue sky above makes specific reference not just to International Klein Blue, but also to Bataille’s autobiographical 1935 novel, *The Blue of Noon* (*Le Bleu du Ciel*, literally “The Blue of the Sky”), which was written amidst the rise of Fascism in Europe. The aggressive verticality of each diptych owes something to Bataille too, who in the novel identified the vertical with a repulsive phallic will to domination. Towards the end of the book he describes a group of young Nazi boys marching in military formation. They seemed, he writes,

in their sticklike stiffness, to be possessed by some cataclysmic exaltation. In front of them, their leader — a degenerately skinny kid with the sulky face of a fish — kept time with a long drum major's stick. He held this stick obscenely erect, with the knob at his crotch,... he would then jerk the stick level with his mouth; from crotch to mouth, from mouth to crotch, each rise and fall jerking to a grinding salvo from the drums.⁷

In his theoretical writings Bataille spelled out the distinction he draws between the upright and the base:

A man is not so different from a plant, experiencing like a plant an urge that raises him perpendicular to the ground. It will not be difficult to show that human morality is linked to the urge to an erect posture that distinguishes the human being from the anthropomorphic ape. But on the other hand, a plant thrusts its obscene-looking roots into the earth in order to assimilate the putrescence of organic matter, and a man experiences, in contradiction to strict morality, urges that draw him to what is low, placing him in open antagonism to all forms of spiritual elevation.⁸

Bataille acknowledges the desire for this lowness, the attraction to it, and from *Rupture* on in Arden's work we can see him also exploring this dynamic. The detritus of a 1930s riot made into a work of art in 1985 is still there on the ground in *Terminal City* (1999), *Smoking Area* (2002) or *Eureka* (2006). Arden has described himself as having "a disordered devotion to the real," and for him it seems that the real is often literally right down on the surface of the earth.

Bataille insists on the necessary break (the rupture) between an essentially spiritual appeal to the heavens and the recognition and embrace of the debased. And at times he sees also in that recognition the possibility of progress:

"By excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture, perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of a heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any man's spirit."⁹

Arden's other major work of 1985, *Abjection*, acknowledges its debt to Bataille in its title. But the abjection here is no longer that of the self-selected bohemians who inhabit *Fragments*. Nor is it the spontaneous thrusting down of rebellion that can be seen in *Rupture*. This is abjection systematically imposed on a whole community by state power. During the Second World War, Canadians of Japanese ancestry were interned. Before being taken to their prison camps, they had to leave their cars behind. The location chosen for this, with brutal irony, was the Happy Land amusement park.

***Abjection* follows the compositional pattern of *Rupture*, ten diptychs this time, with monochrome panels above and historical news photographs below. The central eight of these show the cars lined up, and single men walking forlornly away from them, across the muddy ground. At either end of this emasculating sequence, Arden has placed photographs of groups of women, calisthenically acting out supplication and surrender. Above these grim images, we are no longer given a blue sky, but only a crushing, funereal black.**

By the early nineties, Arden describes himself as "itching to make photographs again" and he once again acquired a camera. The new photographs, however, came from a very different point of view than the bohemian romanticism of *Fragments*. Now his goal was "to register the transformative effects of modernity as they are revealed in an everyday experience of the landscape."¹⁰ The body of work that he produced in pursuit of this goal is now often referred to as the "Landscape of the Economy." As with *Fragments*, however, these photographs became a series only *ex post facto*. At first, like *Fragments*, it was just a way of working, one that Arden assumed would continue indefinitely.

The influences now were North American: Evans, Stephen Shore, Jeff Wall. Evans had been a staple of Arden's early education as a photographer, but only now could he draw from the work. Shore was a pioneer of precise colour work that addressed the quotidian landscape. From Wall, Arden took the concept of the "tableau": a photograph that was not closed off from the traditions of painting. And thus he began to draw from painting too—Dürer, Courbet, Hopper. Films too, could be part of what Arden thought of as "all one big conversation." Particularly important was the work of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pasolini, like Arden, had both a rigorously critical mind and an attraction to abjection. He also understood social class as a determining cultural and economic force. This too was a subject to which Arden addressed himself. He recorded the conversion of the remaining rural landscape around Vancouver into commodified space, and the establishment of a regime of consumption. As Guy Debord analyzed such conditions,:

The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity... Social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities. With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses.¹¹

The humiliation of the Japanese Canadians in *Abjection* is effected precisely by the stripping away of their right to be consumers, to own things. Photographs such as *Landfill, Richmond, B.C. (1991)* or *Soil Compactor, Richmond, B.C. (1993)* are documents of the earth itself being prepared for its role as commodity, and the results are also here, in "Monster House" *Coquitlam, B.C. (1996)* and in the peak (or nadir) of spectacular commodity glut, *Wal-Mart Store (Plastic Stools), Burnaby, B.C. (1996)*. One of the most striking aspects of the man in *Cordova Street, Vancouver, B.C. (1995)* is simply that he has no *stuff*. Even the forlorn and abandoned protagonist of *Citizen (2000)* clings to whatever he can manage to carry with him.

Arden is clearly an artist deeply aware of history, and the burdens of history. *Abjection's* sharp line between the black monochromes above and the images below is echoed in the cut that formed the *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C. (1991)*, a cut straight across history. Lumber was the basis of the early economy of Vancouver, and Arden has pursued the theme from trees themselves to his photographs of old wooden houses and to pulp mill dumps.

Pulp Mill Dump (#1), Nanaimo, B.C. (1992) and *Pulp Mill Dump (#2), Nanaimo, B.C. (1992)* are documents of waste that bring together Arden's interest in powerful economic forces with his continuing fascination with the abject. "Within a month of the taking of Arden's photograph two men died there when their bulldozer pierced a pocket of poison gas," Peter Culley noted about the latter photograph.¹² These works knowingly refer to Robert Smithson's influential *Glue Pour*, carried out in Vancouver in 1970, although Arden's version has about it a whiff of the satanic: "Until an elaborate series of filters were installed in the late seventies, the stench of sulphur hung over Nanaimo almost permanently."¹³ The tree in *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C.* was likely older than white settlement in British Columbia. Hundreds of years of gnarled and complex history is sliced through, precisely, conclusively. On one level this photograph picks up from *Pruned Trees (#1), Vancouver* from *Fragments*, but where that photograph was romantic, the trees wounded and melancholy, shot against a darkening twilight sky, the later one is defiantly materialist. The tree stump is shot head-on, the horizon line cuts directly through the middle of the composition as the line did in *Abjection*, and the sky is blank, washed out.

Whether romantic or materialist, however, one thing that always remains in Arden's work is his fascination with the abject. *Basement (1996)* is a sequence of twenty photographs shot in the basement of Arden's apartment building. They document an astonishing accumulation of stuff abandoned (or "saved") over nearly a century. Two photographs show a jar of Vaseline sitting in a container of axle grease that is itself nestled in an empty can of "Crisco" lard, the whole ensemble sitting on a beaten up stool: an almost parodic index of the *informe*, and a companion piece, in a way, to

the perfectly extruded and stacked stools of *Wal-Mart Store*. The image is very reminiscent of a Wols photograph, an untitled still life of 1938–39. Arden has said of that piece that, “If any one photograph had to stand for his whole practice it would be the image of the construction on the Alvar Aalto stool. It’s a kind of mock-monument made of the most ignoble and inconsequential materials stacked on a soiled pedestal.”¹⁴ The same could be said of Arden’s nested tins of grease, except that the repetition of the subject, and its grouping with eighteen others, pulls away from the monumental (even the mock-monumental) towards the archive.

In *Hastings Street Sidewalk, Vancouver, B.C. (1995)* the pavement is strewn with nasty little spills and windblown garbage. The walls and impenetrable shop windows bear graffiti. As Shep Steiner has suggested, “Move in close to this diminutive picture, inhabit its hunch-back glance, feel a history of the street rise like a sickening lump in one’s throat...”¹⁵ For Arden, this desolation row is nothing less than “the psychic center of Vancouver.” The figure sent sprawling into the gutter by the police in his *Polis (1986)* is lying in Hastings Street. In the 1950s, Malcolm Lowry, who lived off and on in Vancouver between 1939 and 1954, had also identified this street as emblematic of a degraded essence, in his poem “Christ Walks in This Infernal District Too” (1953):

*Beneath the Malebolge lies Hastings Street,
The province of the pimp upon his beat,
Where each in his little world of drugs or crime
Moves helplessly or, hopeful, begs a dime
Wherewith to purchase half a pint of piss—
Although he will be cheated, even in this.
I hope, although I doubt it, God knows
This place where chancres blossom like the rose,
For on each face is such a hard despair
That nothing like a grief could enter there.
And on this scene from all excuse exempt
The mountains gaze in absolute contempt,
Yet this is also Canada, my friend,
Yours to absolve of ruin, or make an end.*

Embracing the end and the ruins rather than any kind of absolution, Arden went on to make the sequence of sixteen black and white photographs, *Terminal City (1999)*, which explores the zones of urban wilderness that run alongside Vancouver’s railway tracks and in its alleys and vacant lots. The sequence starts wide and moves in until it ends with the camera pointed straight down. No way out.

The title of the video *Eureka (2005)* suggests that with this work Arden has “found it”; found what he was looking for. But what would that be? This relentlessly detailed tour of a filthy alley strewn with trash and discarded junkie paraphernalia makes the landscape of *Terminal City* seem like a bucolic idyll by comparison. What one looks for here, it turns out, are drug stashes tucked away in the most miserable of holes. But what Arden is looking for here is not drugs, but rather the holes themselves. The *hole* is the locus of the old mole. We are back to Bataille: “the ‘old-mole’ revolution hollows out chambers in a decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of the utopians.”¹⁶ Certainly little could be more repugnant than the alleyway of *Eureka*, but the hope of any revolution now seems very far away.

Nowhere is that made clearer than in the video *Supernatural (2005)*. Composed of news footage, it shows the street rioting that followed the 1994 defeat of Vancouver’s ice hockey team, the Canucks, by the New York Rangers. All the romantic signifiers of revolution are here: at first, the scenes resemble Paris in 1968 — here at last the return of the old mole — but the rioters are quickly revealed as the most lumpen imaginable. It was Marx who first referred to revolution as the work of the mole: “Well grubbed, old mole!”¹⁷ Yet it was also Marx who wrote: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all

great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”¹⁸ *Supernatural* gives us revolution as aimless destruction, degrading the traditions of collective resistance that formed the source material for *Rupture*. For his title, Arden appropriates British Columbia’s latest tourist slogan, turning it against itself in its application to this inventory of unfocused violence.

While the source imagery of *Supernatural* is found footage, the composition of the piece as a whole belongs to Arden. The work fades in and out, producing its ultimate effect through the accumulation of fragments. Like so much of his work, it seems to be about the end of something. Despite the crude violence of the source material, the work generates a melancholic, even elegiac, mood. Arden’s work began with this state of mind in *Fragments*, and today, despite all the variety of approaches he has brought to bear since, in fragments it continues to stake its claims.

Footnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Arden are from a conversation in Vancouver on January 13, 2007.
- 2 Arden, "Notes on *Fragments*" in Roy Arden, *Fragments* (North Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2002), pp. 10–11.
- 3 Arden, "Notes on *Fragments*," p. 11.
- 4 Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Dandyism* (1844), trans., Douglas Ainslie (New York: PAJ, 1988), p. 29.
- 5 William Wood, "The Insufficiency of the World" in *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists* (Antwerp: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst; and Vancouver: Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 2005), p. 67.
- 6 Arden, "Notes on *Fragments*," p. 12.
- 7 Georges Bataille, *The Blue of Noon*, trans. Harry Mathews (New York: Urizen, 1978), p. 151.
- 8 Bataille, "The 'Old Mole' and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and *Surrealist*" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-39*, ed. and introduction Allan Stoekl, trans. Donald M. Leslie Jr., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), p. 36.
- 9 Bataille, "The 'Old Mole,'" p. 43.
- 10 Quoted in Marnie Fleming, "Selected Works 1985–2000" in Marnie Fleming and Shep Steiner, *Roy Arden: Selected Works 1985-2000* (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 2002, p. 13.)
- 11 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Translated bytrans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 29
- 12 Peter Culley, "A Note on 'Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C., 1991' and two Two othersOthers" in *Roy Arden* (North York: Art Gallery of York University, and Vancouver: Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 1997), p. 15.
- 13 Culley, "A Note on 'Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C., 1991,'" p. 15.
- 14 Arden in Jeff Wall and Roy Arden, "La photographie d'art, expression parfaite du reportage" in *Art Press* 251 pp. 20–21.
- 15 Shep Steiner, "'The Old Mole': Photography Neighbouring on Materialism" in Fleming and Steiner, *Roy Arden: Selected Works 1985-2000*, p. 28.
- 16 Bataille, "The 'Old Mole,'" p. 35.
- 17 Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852) in Robert C. Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 606. The metaphor comes from Shakespeare (Hamlet, referring to the ghost of his father) through Hegel (the historical spirit, pushing forward).
- 18 Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire," p. 594.