

Vision and its Discontents

On Roy Arden's Negative Diagnostics (Reprise)

Dieter Roelstraete

0.

The history of “Vancouver Art” — the instantly recognizable work of a group of artists that has often, much to their own dislike, been referred to as the “Vancouver School” of photo-conceptualism, including the likes of Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas and Roy Arden¹ — has been the object of much debate and discussion.² It could be said that, in essence, the momentous history of this school is closely intertwined with that of the *reception* of conceptual art in Vancouver from the late sixties onwards, a reception that is truly typical of the city's unique cultural condition as the perennially mythologized locus of West Coast vanguardism. In truth, the history of Vancouver's post-conceptual photo art is that of a highly localized reading and working-through of the teachings of conceptual art as the dominant force in American art since 1967–68, a reading that in many ways sought to *overturn* one of conceptual art's most hallowed central tenets — an *archè* or principle that concerns the very act of art-making as image-production or image-making as such. In this essay, I want to expose the extent to which Roy Arden's work of the last twenty years effectively *re-enacts* this localized process of reading, processing and, finally, overturning of the tenets of (American) Concept Art, thus highlighting the pivotal position of Arden's photographic work in the synthesis of Vancouver's celebrated brand of “post-conceptual photography,” while also considering the irresolvable antagonisms and ambiguities that set his work apart from that of his peers, contemporaries, *compagnons de route* and co-citizens.

1.

In many ways it could be argued that conceptual art, as a distinct historical phase in the development of modern and contemporary art that broadly coincided with the great era of post-war dissent, was fiercely anti-visual (“anti-retinal”) and “iconophobic” in intent. Its so-called iconoclastic, revolutionary aspirations, in the field of art as in society at large, were very often fuelled by a violent (“hot”) dislike of, or cool disdain for — *and* overt hostility towards — the image as *icon*, i.e., as the absolute, primary unit of *representation*, of making-present. This remarkable streak of iconophobia in what, for better or worse, continues to be “seen,” as an especially potent genre within the broader field of *visual* art practices, commands two levels of understanding.

On a pragmatically political level, this hostility — what Martin Jay, in his influential study *Downcast Eyes*, has called “the denigration of vision” — was, rightfully, directed against the hegemonic regime of western Western visuality and its resulting “society of the spectacle,” the economic directives of which were seen to encroach upon the autonomous sphere of high culture or Artart. In the dialectical scheme of 20th twentieth century art history, Concept Art thus provided the proverbial critical antithesis to the ocularcentrism or scopophilia of what had come before. It was especially critical of the “false consciousness” that seemed to anchor Pop Art's apparently one-dimensional celebration of that very same society of the spectacle, a new world order in which the visual had become the foremost article of conspicuous consumption. To Pop Art's categorical affirmation of the primacy of the image as commodity (*and* commodity as image) in the “scopic regime” of capitalist modernity, conceptual art retorted with a conscious debasement and debunking of the art of image-making. In a heroic attempt to radically break with a culture of image-production that had become inextricably bound up with (and thus politically compromised by) the pervasive logic of global capitalism, the early

Concept artists chose to resort to a rigorous program of anti-art that in part revived the spirit of dada Dada and Duchamp. To Pop Art's all-American aesthetic of capitalist plenty, Concept Art responded with the anti-aesthetic of a visually "boring," impoverished art that seemed to mimic the Spartan *Sachlichkeit* of scientific socialism; questioning and/or criticizing both the political economy that produced the society of the spectacle and its spectacularization as such. Seminal artworks and related projects by John Baldessari, Robert Barry, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Douglas Huebler, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner helped define the matter-of-fact, "administrative" visual idiom (to use a term borrowed from arch-critic Benjamin Buchloh) of Concept Art as a critique of the politics of *visuality qua* spectacle. This is the high-water mark of what, paradoxically, came to be known as Concept Art's canonical formalism, and constitutes an all-important contribution to the political history of western Western art as a whole.

On a more fundamental level, however, beyond the pragmatically political and politically correct, Concept Art's programmatic hostility towards both the image and the various crafts of image-making (including "art" itself), its denunciation of the visual and all regimes of *visuality*, and its distinctly paranoid distrust of the order of the phenomenal as "that which appears" per se, may be rooted not so much in the irreducible complexities of socio-economic and political history, but in a complex of atavistic anxieties that seem to have been haunting and hounding the western imagination ever since it came to think of itself as exactly *that* — an imagination or "way of imagining" as "*imaging*," a way of thinking that *is* a conceiving, producing and emitting of *images*. The iconophobic impulse that is at the heart of Concept Art as a *historical* force — one that is important for understanding Vancouver art — quite literally speaks of a "fear of images"; a feeling of deep-seated revulsion that could be said to be aligned with a puritanical streak that has been inhabiting the western Western mind's idea of art (as image production) since its inception in Judeo-Hellenic times, and gained further strength in the iconoclastic programs of a radicalized Protestantism. We need only invoke the classic examples of the Mosaic Law's ban on the crafting of "graven images" — the originary puritanical stance that is the bedrock of the often-uneasy relationship between art and religion — and of Plato's impatience with *poiesis* as a travesty of divine *poiesis*, to understand the depth of iconophobia's enduring appeal. In some of the more extremist instances of Concept Art (Art & Language, Mel Bochner, Ian Burn, Ian Wilson), it is not hard to descry the conflation of a conscientious critique of "the political economy of the sign" with the mystical overtones of Puritanism's zealotry: these examples resulted in an art practice that wearily dreamt of doing away with the image altogether, or with image production as such, and replacing it with various performative manifestations of unmediated language, or with a mystical experience of *das Ding an sich* that was most commonly guaranteed by way of reductive serialism (Daniel Buren, Sol LeWitt) or monochromaticism (Ad Reinhardt).³

In Vancouver, however — and this is exactly what defines much of what has been taking place in that city under the contested moniker of "photo-conceptualism" — the epochal passage of conceptual art, marked, among others, by Lucy Lippard's seminal *955,000* exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, but also by the continuing engagement of Dan Graham with the city's burgeoning new arts scene, garnered a singularly unique result. Far from merely fuelling an already existing suspicion of images ("pictures") and image production, the legacy of Concept Art in fact led the city's emerging young artists to *reconsider* the art of image-making, and, paradoxically, further deepen their commitment to the cause of pictorialism instead of merely ditching, dismantling or deconstructing it. Indeed, unique among art scenes and artist communities, the lessons of conceptual art taught Vancouver artists to *go back* to the picture rather than turn away from it, as had been the case elsewhere. Informed by the critical, highly politicized findings of Concept Art's fundamentally anti-pictorial program, Vancouver artists returned to "image production" with a vengeance — that of the lavishly staged, grandly scaled or information-saturated photographic tableaux that were pioneered by the likes of Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum and Stan Douglas among others, and have made Vancouver an unlikely nodal point in contemporary art's global network. Producing and nurturing an artistic community that has attracted critical attention from all corners of the world, the history of much Vancouver Art is that of a return to the art of picture-making *after* the deluge of Concept Art's injunctions — a return to the picture, to be sure, that does *not* seek to restore the relative innocence of pre-conceptual art-making, but instead strives to mobilize the tremendous riches of Concept Art's momentous insights in the service of a "better," greater art; one that once again revolves around the *event of vision*.

In some sense, I regard Roy Arden's artistic practice as the nodal point in at which the particularities of Vancouver's response to the master narrative of Concept Art, and especially its negotiations with iconophobia and scopophilia, symbolically converge. His early "archival" works clearly speak of the fear of images that has haunted the conceptual art movement since its inception in the critique of the spectacle that animated much of the sixties' culture of dissent, whereas in the Realist realist photographs and videos made since 1991, the artist has produced the harrowingly beautiful, sometimes even *idyllic* pictures (admittedly, of rather "ugly" subject material⁴) that seem to fly in the face of Concept Art's austere admonitions of anti-visibility. Works such as *Gutter with Rags* (2000), *d'Elegance* (2000), *Crow* (2002) and the various stations that make up the black-and-white *Terminal City* (1999) suite⁵ are, quite simply, beautiful in all the ways that the first generation of conceptual artists sought to escape. They are richly textured, well-crafted in tone and lighting, graciously and studiously composed, and alive with art-historical and cultural references ranging from Bataille and Wols to Smithson and Nadar. Swinging back and forth between the symbolic extremes of "appropriation" as a way of accommodating the anti-pictorialist injunctions of Concept Art, and the defiant creation, *ex nihilo*, of lush photographic tableaux that usher in a return to the picture as such and the pictorialist endeavour in general, the work of Roy Arden in some way re-enacts the great culture wars of late twentieth-century art.⁶

2.

Arden's early 'archival' works, such as *Rupture*, *Abjection* and *Mission*, all dating from the mid-eighties (the *anni mirabiles* of the photographic brand of "appropriation art" to which these works so subtly nod⁷), speak of the fear of images and image-production instilled in a generation of artists raised on Concept Art's forbidding doxa of anti-visibility and anti-pictorialism. They show the artist engaged in a battle with the formidable question of what it means to make pictures in an era that has taught us, via the politics of conceptual art, to distrust "Spectacle," and recoil from producing the exact images that feed the supposedly state-ruled machine of "Vision." Partially interiorizing this punitive prohibition to "make pictures," Arden abandoned the sensuous intimacy of his early *Fragments* (1981-85), and turned to the city archives — a repository of already existing images — in from which he subsequently unearthed a series of news photographs documenting the violent suppression of Vancouver's 1938 labour riots among other episodes from the city's history. His work took a decisive turn towards a more detached, understated and coolly registered diagnostic mode. This turn towards the diagnostic was marked by Arden's choice of images of *defeat*; the slightly *défaitiste*, melancholy mood of the artist's retreat from "making pictures" echoed in a balanced selection of pictures from the Depression that call up catastrophic events of abjection, rejection, repression and denial. Vancouver's 1938 "Bloody Sunday" riot, which culminated in a multitude of unemployed men occupying Hotel Georgia, the Vancouver Post Office and the *Vancouver Art Gallery* — a most apropos comment on the mutual estrangement of the realm of art and that of the "general public" — signalled the end of the Depression, the greatest single instance of socio-economic upheaval in the history of America. The photographs appropriated in *Rupture*, for one, inevitably invoke evoke memories of Weegee as well as of the era's greatest chronicler, Walker Evans, whose defining influence was to remain palpable throughout Arden's career. Going back to the derelict, lifeless scene of these riots in the eighties and nineties, now terminally abandoned and emptied out of all vestiges of strife, Arden recorded the ravages of a wholly different kind of "depression" — one fuelled, not so much by political upheaval, but by lethally cheap drug cocktails and real estate speculation. The lugubrious, baleful emptiness of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in these pictures conjures the ghost of Eugène Atget's work, another one of the "artist's models" of whom Walter Benjamin famously asserted that his pictures of deserted Parisian streets resembled "scenes of a heinous crime." Finally, one of Arden's most recent video works, the close-up, gutter archaeology of *Eureka* (2005), sees the artist return one more time to the back lots on Hastings and Cordova Street — with a wholly different pictorial agenda, that of a scatological in/formalism that brings to mind both Wols and Kurt Schwitters.

For *Rupture* (1985), Arden selected nine archival journalistic photographs of this riot, and obfuscated their documentary value through the application of less-than-standard cropping methods. He complemented each of these images with a single shot, taken by the artist himself, of a cloudless, deep-blue sky to arrive at a suite of nine vertically arranged diptychs. It is revealing that the photographs of a blissfully sunlit sky should have been the *only* images the artist felt

entitled to “make” himself in the face of the terrible, unrepresentable traumas that History inflicts on the luckless lower classes. Indeed, these images belong to the long (and, as of yet, largely unwritten) history of the monochrome as the purported site of erasure, oblivion and renewal, and to the history of that negation as a negation of history. Ian Wallace has commented on Arden’s polemical coupling of the sky’s monochrome blue hue as a time-honed symbol of Utopian deliverance with the defeatist pictorial *mémoire* memoir of “Bloody Sunday,” noting that *Rupture* thus dramatizes the dialectic of “History as a document of resistance and defeat” and “Nature as an ahistorical, abstract plenum of transcendence.”⁸ Following Wallace’s reading of *Rupture*, amnesia, despair, indifference and melancholy are the pervading moods and pathologies in Arden’s work, of which Jeff Wall later again stated that it depicts “local history under the sign of catastrophe.”

In *Abjection* (1985), a work comprising 10 ten photographic diptychs that “document” the wartime internment of Canadian citizens of Japanese descent, the upbeat monochromatic blue has been replaced with a simple black square, an image that is replete with twentieth century art historical references. The negating power of this motif is far less ambivalently posited than that of the blue skies. The black squares in *Abjection* offer an even more radical dramatization of the artist’s powerlessness and/or refusal to “make pictures” in the face of catastrophe: these squares are no longer even “pictures” but mere sheets of exposed photographic paper symbolizing the very annulment of all acts of picture-making as image-production, and the renunciation of all complicity in the production of Spectacle as such. In *Mission* (1986), a photographic diptych depicting the sorry sight of the evangelization of British Columbia’s native Native peoples during the late-nineteenth century, this bleak idea of the monochrome ultimately returns as a *mural*, i.e., the blood-red *backdrop* to the archival photographs fitted in featureless, unfinished wood frames that invoke evoke both the cross and BC’s forest industry. This work represents appropriation at its very zenith, seemingly — and this is, of course, a crucial nuance — reducing the artist’s actual powers of intervention to a mere framing operation.⁹

Taken together, then, the archival works that duly cemented Arden’s reputation as an avid, conscientious chronicler of Vancouver’s subterranean histories of anomie and discontent single him out as the artist-historian *par excellence* in a city famed for its historically aware artists,¹⁰ while acutely and forcefully embodying this fearful suspicion of the uncomplicated image in the hegemonic regimes of modern visuality. In his laconic refusal of the visual, Arden’s stance speaks of fear (of the image’s political impact), distrust (of the image’s politically manipulative uses), rejection (of the image’s political futility) and of a sobering realization of the *powerlessness* inherent in all arts of image-making. Similarly, the experiences of fear, distrust, rejection and powerlessness are also what Arden’s archival works seek to capture and register in their various memoirs of misery — together, they set the tone in which the voice of history’s ruthless logic continues to address the world.

3. Some Thoughts on Recent Works

Supernatural (2005), a video work first shown in *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* at the Antwerp Museum of Contemporary Art of Antwerp, is the artist’s first moving-image piece consisting entirely of archival footage — images shot by local news stations, of the so-called “hockey riots” that tore up Vancouver’s usually peaceful downtown shopping district in the summer of 1994 after a humbling defeat for the underachieving local hockey team, the Vancouver Canucks. In this work, Arden revisits both the archive as atelier or “image bank” from which the artist, as an amateur archæologist, distils the raw material of Art, and Vancouver’s local history as an unlikely cauldron of social unrest and discontent. The images in *Supernatural* clearly resonate with the potent memory of *Rupture*, the work that perhaps most succinctly signalled the advent of a contemporary master, in that they both serve up iconic images of proletarian strife and the State’s state’s subsequent violent response to it.

In terms of content, however — that, is in terms of these images’ respective political “meanings” — these works could not be further apart. They effectively portray two *very* different types of civil unrest, or two types of societal antagonism with very different *raison d’être*. Whereas the downtrodden masses in *Rupture* are actively engaged in a righteous revolutionary struggle for Bread and Work — the classic stuff of socialist legend — the unruly mob in *Supernatural* is no

longer a mass or even a multitude in need of jobs or food. They are wreaking havoc just for the dismal fun of it, and thus incarnate the *lumpen* rest of irreducible Bataillan excess that no social system, however tightly controlled or sensibly accommodating, will ever succeed in containing — the reptilian yearning for cathartic release through random acts of preferably “stupid” violence and silly transgressions. It is impossible to gloss over the glum political commentary that is insinuated in Arden’s implicit coupling of *Supernatural* with *Rupture* as a document of the sorry fate that has befallen the masses’ revolutionary potential. In the neo-liberal New new World world Order order of nineties’ plenty, political resignation and ideological fatigue, the only thing that can still force the masses to revolt is a hockey game turned sour, and the resulting violence is so cynically aimless and depressingly unmotivated that the viewer feels right in thinking the formerly unthinkable and *sympathizing* (or at least *empathizing*) with the forces that wield the State’s state’s baton-shaped right to exert violence, namely the *police* — who, in the equation propounded by *Supernatural*, could be said to be closer to the original idea of a “proletariat” than the rowdy crowds of inebriated hooligans who harass and beleague them. The muddled spectacle of suburban youths running amok in the streets of Vancouver’s mildly glitzy downtown core, chanting and bellowing Canucks slogans and telling the Rangers to “go fuck themselves,” robbing the contents of shattered shop windows, throwing measly bits of trash against any car that happens to pass by, urinating in the personnel entrance of a department store, and, in one especially memorable instance, thumping an unsuspecting camera man in the back, is in fact a ludicrous and almost laughable one. That is exactly what makes this video work such a depressing statement from a merely political point of view — here is where the joke turns sour. There can clearly be no promise of redemption in this sordid display of a particularly crude, retrograde masculinity — it is a vile, testosterone-fuelled scene in which only few women appear (often to bare their breasts), and from which the spectre of an idealized, redeeming Other, that proverbial torch-bearer of Utopia (the “workers” in *Rupture*, “people of colour” in *Abjection*, the “Natives” in *Mission*), remains wholly absent. Inevitably, I am reminded here of a momentous passage in a book that has long been a favourite among Vancouver’s well-read community of artists, critics, curators and teachers, Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*: “in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image”.¹¹ Indeed, this is man-kind at its ugliest, man-hood at its lowest ebb — in *Supernatural*, Arden has reduced the aesthetic intervention to a bare-bones minimum of indecent exposure: there are no sublime color fields of a celestial monochrome blue as in *Rupture*, no grand allegorizations of negation as in *Abjection*, no theatrical, sanguine reds as in *Mission*, but only pitch black darkness in the mere soundless seconds that shackle one scene of despairing lumpen debauchery to another. In fact, the work’s main critical thrust, resides in Arden’s appropriation of the tightly controlled “Supernatural” nomenclature, as used by the British Columbia tourist industry to peddle the idea of Western Canada’s “Lotus Land.” “Supernatural B.C.” is how this promised land of soaring mountain views, virgin forest, extreme sports and existential relaxation likes to present itself to Canada and the world, and Arden’s deadpan characterization of the hockey riots as yet another instance of Vancouver’s famed daily Sublime surely helps to remind us of the price that had to be paid to achieve the mirage of the Dream City’s pull on the global imagination. Arden’s “natural history of destruction” as a mundane fact of contemporary post-political society may seem nihilistic and defeatist to some, but then again the relentless boosterism that today surrounds the very idea of “Vancouver” as a desirable global commodity certainly invites the harsh nuances of the artist’s scathing take on the inane “Supernatural” brand — even if it means plundering the network archives that usually do such a great job at of promoting it.

In *The World as Will and Representation* (2005 – ongoing), Arden’s first-ever online/net-art project, viewable on <http://www.royarden.com>, the artist’s return to the archival mode is completed in a psychedelic, delirious avalanche of literally *thousands* of images that unfolds like a domino theory of an “other” world history — one that is of course, *pace* Arden’s unfaltering sense of the microscopic and micropolitical, infinitely more modest and prosaic in tone — a history-telling that brings to mind both the magical view of art as an “other” thought or mode of “othering” (associative, analogous, allegorical, prone to “uncanny juxtapositions,” pseudo-scientific, parodic¹²) and the critical theory of art as the melancholy science of “negative dialectics.” In appropriating the title of Schopenhauer’s morose magnum opus, Arden inevitably subscribes to the rather bleak world-view that pitted the quarrelsome, cantankerous German philosopher against his contemporary Hegel, whose humourlessly self-confident, optimist belief in the teleology of progress and enlightenment would obviously prove the more influential philosophical doctrine. Schopenhauer’s history of the world is a notably sobering affair — and probably a lot closer to the “truth” than the sunny Hegelian fantasy of

History's march into the light. The swirling vision of inherent stasis and sameness that underlies Schopenhauer's worldview — he was among the first to introduce "oriental" concepts of circularity into western Western philosophy, thus questioning the dogma of linearity and teleology that had been shaping western Western thought since Aristotle — and famously presaged the Nietzschean theory of Eternal Recurrence, acridly resonates with Arden's caustic "vision" ("negative diagnostics") of History as an Eternal Re-run of irresolvable dialectical tensions. In Arden's *The World as Will and Representation*, the Western creed of linear progress is mercilessly parodied in the *faux-naïf* display of alphabetical orderliness in which the artist has accumulated his visual loot, most of which is of a rather underwhelming, neutral or indifferent nature (as a matter of principle, there are no "real" artworks in Arden's digital archive-gone-berserk): pictures of "Altamont" — of the Stones concert in 1969 which that signalled the demise of the sixties acid trip of love, peace and happiness — are followed by photographs of household objects in "Aluminum," of the "American Taliban" John Walker, of "Apes, Planet of," "Armour," "Asphalt" and so on — *ad nauseam* indeed. This humbling travesty of classification and taxonomy also relates back to art's critique of the hegemonic *epistémè* of scientific thought, with its relentless insistence on making the world a transparent and wholly surveyable place — another tyrannical hallmark of western "ocularcentrist" discourse. The soundtrack to this bizarre encyclopædic project — which inevitably brings to mind Jorge Luis Borges' famous jibe at the inherent absurdities of the very act of encyclopaedic archiving¹³ — is taken from a classic example of righteous, soul-searching seventies Black Music music — Timmy Thomas's heartfelt plea "Why Can't We Live Together.". In Arden's remix, however, the harrowing lyrics are never allowed to surface, and the song, much like the burning wheel of images it accompanies, remains forever trapped in the organ-pumped circular motion of a choir whose voices fail to materialize. We look on, dumbstruck and oblivious, as history unchains its fearsome powers of forgetting, with the clinical, slightly amused detachment of Arden's diagnostic gaze: strangely, we find that there is much disturbing beauty in the world's wretched spectacle.

Post script: "Against the Day", (2006)

In the summer of 2006, Roy Arden showed a series of remarkable new works at Vancouver's Charles H. Scott Gallery in an exhibition titled *Against the Day*. The centrepiece of that exhibition was a large format print of an image shot almost over a decade and a half ago, appositely named *Development* (1993), thus subtly begging the question: of what or whom exactly? The picture in question shows a row of identical single-family homes in the process of being readied for future habitation, a small herd of digging machines and lorriestrucks, and the artist's imperious shadow, as well as that of a lonely light post, cast onto the barren, brightly sunlit ground right in front. The pristine tract of Arden's mid-nineties' "*Homes for America*" blocks out the horizon and cuts the picture in two perfectly equal halves: the ravaged, flattened terrain below, and the menacing expanse of a cobalt blue sky above. It is not hard to discern an immediate family resemblance here with the chronicle of dissent, dejection and monochromatic abstraction that is *Rupture*, in which a similarly cloudless blue sky seems to promise the exact same type of redemption from earthly strife as is hinted at in *Development*. Around this iconic image, which appears to encapsulate so many of the artist's thematic concerns of the last two decades, Arden assembled a number of mid-sized photographic tableaux depicting several sidewalk flower arrangements together with some of his more familiar "gutter pictures" (*Sock* (2005), *Versace* (2005)), probably his most concerted (if hybrid and, in terms of genre at least, hierarchically inflected) effort at the still-life genre to date — a politically charged move, one may be tempted to add. The bouquets in question are mostly hydrangea bushes which the artist-flâneur encountered on one of his many strolls through his neighbourhood or, slightly further afield, East Vancouver. They are not exactly what one may want to call "lumpen flowers," but are nonetheless common enough to segue with the artist's long-standing pictorial interest in realist motifs culled from quotidian culture. In their subtle allusions to issues of class, leisure and the perceived domestication of nature — or vengeful lack thereof — these pictures continue the critical, realist agenda that has powered Arden's art from the very start, while also deepening the artist's ongoing dialogue with the art from the past. Inevitably, any present-day return to the hallowed tradition of the floral still-life must enter into a conversation with some of that genre's golden eras: that of the Dutch seventeenth-century for example, when the burgeoning Dutch bourgeois class's embarrassment at their new-found riches (often of colonial origin, which may have helped to heighten that anxiety) was mass-exorcised by way of a wholly novel take on the

ancient tradition of the Vanitas tableau; but also of later æsthetic developments such as Constable's elaboration of the rustic, the programmatic realism of Gustave Courbet, and the lush garden pictures of Claude Monet and other Impressionists. In their uneasy reconciliation of consumer wealth and Calvinist piety — Holland's was the first European society to experience the problem of massive oversupply — the Dutch typically made the still-life into an art of "looking at the overlooked." This phrase, which I have borrowed from a book by Norman Bryson devoted to theorizing still-life painting, could well serve as a call to arms for most of Roy Arden's photographic output of the last decade¹⁴ — the overlooked in Arden's case mostly being that which has been left behind by "the tidal waves of History as they wash ashore in the resolutely 'new' outpost of the global economy that is Vancouver." Arden has referred to these works as "études"; they may be studies of the microscopic effects of macroscopic dereliction, or of the tenacity of nature in the face of civilization's unrelenting onslaught ("development"). In the case of the floral pictures, they are also studies of the quotidian emergence of beauty, the classic stuff of still life.

The title of the exhibition, "*Against the Day*", finally, may have struck many a viewer as somewhat misleading, paradoxical even: loosely referring to a technique that exists in both painting and photography called "contre-jour" (literally "against daylight") in which the camera is pointed towards the light source, usually with dramatic chiaroscuro effects as a consequence. The exhibition did not, at first sight, seem to include a single discernible instance of such a photographic technique, as most of the floral pictures were suffused in a harsh, levelling sunlight, and contrasts were few and far between. When asked about the meaning of this title and his recourse to it, Arden unexpectedly pointed to the term's *literal* meaning first and foremost — that of the artist/photographer taking a stand, so to speak, "against the day" as the realm of industrial reason and of a rigidly economic approach to all things living and dead. The day is that time-span in the twenty-four-hour cycle of life that is ruled by the modern worship of profit and the productivist work ethic of Capital; it is that time when everything and everyone works and/or is put to work, and has therefore long been enemy terrain to the dominion of art — the long (and not exclusively Romantic) history of the artist's idle siding with the mystique of night life (dawn, dusk), – or with the peace and quiet of Sundays away from work — attests to this striking fact. The militancy of this stance, which of course inevitably invokes the equally long history of art's awesome powers of negation, provides a jarring contrast with the sunny charm of many of these impromptu flower arrangements (one of which is fittingly titled "*Solar* (2005)"; contrast and contradiction, it is worth remembering here, are at the heart of Roy Arden's critical realism.

Some years back, Roy Arden has commented upon his pictures in the following terms: "I wanted to continue with my interest in the politics, economics and history of the region but through my own direct experience of the present. At that time, I had a good friend who had gone off to Asia and became a noted war photographer. It occurred to me that if, as Clausewitz noted, "War is nothing but the continuation of politics with the admixture of other means," then one might just as well turn the camera on the *slow* war of the everyday economy. With this resolution, the artist does not just turn his machinic gaze *towards*, but also *against* the day; in doing so his work, compounding the dialectic with the merely diagnostic, becomes — in the memorable words of Walter Benjamin — both a document of civilization *and* a document of barbarism.

Footnotes

- 1 I take the fact that almost *all* of Roy Arden's photographs have been taken in Vancouver or its more or less immediate suburban or natural surroundings (up to and including the Vancouver Island port town of Nanaimo), to be some measure of justification for the amount of time spent, by way of introduction, on the investigation of the artist's hometown as his foremost theatre of operations.
- 2 Jeff Wall has published key essays on the work of every artist in this informal grouping except Stan Douglas; his essay on the work of Roy Arden, "An Artists and his Models" (published on the occasion of Arden's solo exhibition at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery in 1993) was an important initial point of reference for my own research. Wall's lengthy 1990 essay on the work of Ken Lum, "Four Essays on Ken Lum", is perhaps the most sustained meditation on the micropolitics of Vancouver's idiosyncratic brand of conceptually inflected photographic art. In 1987, shortly after having curated an exhibition that helped establish the idea, however irony-drenched, of a "Vancouver school", Ian Wallace published two mirroring essays on the work of the "second generation of photo-conceptualists" (Arden, Lum) in Vancouver's influential art publication *Vanguard*. In addition, both Lum and Arden himself have written extensively on various aspects of art production and image-making in Vancouver; some of Arden's most recent forays into critical and/or local art history writing include the widely read "After Photography" (first published in *Canadian Art*, december December 2000), "Supernatural" (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2004), and "Tabula Nova: A Personal Account of the NOVA Gallery" (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 2005). The most recent, and most thoroughly sustained critical engagement with the intricacies of these histories has come in the shape of a catalogue accompanying an exhibition of recent and contemporary art from Vancouver at MuHKA in Antwerp, Belgium. See: Dieter Roelstraete & Scott Watson (ed.), *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists*, (Antwerp: MuHKA & Vancouver: Morris & Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005.)
- 3 The unlikely convergence of Concept Art's quasi-managerial, pragmatist ethos of clarity, economy and precision with the lofty realm of mystique was first hinted at in one of the movement's foundational texts, Sol LeWitt's "Sentences on Conceptual Art," the first line of which famously read: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach."
- 4 Even though the æsthetic interest in images of abjection and loss — "pretty pictures of miserable matters" — has a history that, in the modern era, stretches back to the dawn of Realism (eventually, even the Impressionists took to painting industrial landscapes), this tactic has taken on a peculiar urgency in Vancouver art, where the dedication to producing images of an exceptional beauty and complexity has helped to establish this particular instance of the dialectical imagination as an "official" subgenre within the city's arts scene. A well-established and widely commented line of narration within the existing body of Arden literature, I have chosen to pass over the artist's critical attachment to picturing waste and decay, "the flotsam and jetsam left behind by the tidal waves of History as they wash ashore in the resolutely 'new' outpost of the global economy that is Vancouver." See, among others, my essay "1,986,965 (2001 Census): An Intertidal Travelogue", in: Roelstraete & Watson (ed.), op. cit.
- 5 *Terminal City* is the title of a suite of sixteen black- and- white photographs — hence, inevitably more "rustic" than their full-colour counterparts in the "Landscape of the Economy" cycle, a point further elaborated upon by Shepherd Steiner in his essay "Aspects of the Rustic as Trope," published in *Roy Arden: Terminal City* — dating from 1999. "Terminal City" is also the name given to Vancouver as the endpoint of the Canadian Pacific Railway, an epithet that can signify both the liberating promise of the New that lurks beyond the horizon of the known (i.e. Europe, Eastern Canada), and the dismal abjections and disillusion of a culture that has "reached the end of the line." Always intent on exposing the cracks or ruptures that sully the cosmetically enhanced image of the self-made metropolis— — thereby also revealing, ultimately, that metropolis' anchorage in an unsavory reality — Arden's interest in appropriating the "Terminal City" moniker obviously goes out to this latter City of Loss.
- 6 This apparent ambivalence or duality is also reinstated in Jeff Wall's astute (but ultimately outdated, see below)

characterization of Arden's photographic practice as one that "halts at the threshold" which that divides the realm of the autonomous pictures that dot the new Salons — those of Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth, and of Wall himself, of course — from "the poetic utilitarianism mapped out by Dan Graham and his photojournalistic precursors.". According to Wall's manichean scheme, Arden's photos of car wrecks, tree stumps, soil compactors, dismembered typewriters and boarded-up Strathcona houses "hover just at the point of resembling autonomous works of pictorial art. They reflect both the moment at which photojournalism becomes art, and the last one in which it remains lyric, miniature, and utilitarian — that is, in which it remains *reportage*." (Jeff Wall, op. cit.) In an email exchange with the author, Arden has pointed out the inaccuracy of that assessment which, at the time (1993), was largely determined by economic constraints imposed on his artistic practice and output: instead of "stopping short of the large-scale tableau," Arden from the very outset conceived of his pictures as "jumping back and forth over (and thus blurring and problematizing) the boundary" between miniaturist reportage — i.e., the now obsolete, slightly quaint format of Walker Evans's and Robert Frank's documentary approach — and grand photographic tableau, itself part of photography's response to the anti-pictorial challenges of conceptual art.

- 7 The work of Sherrie Levine is an especially interesting point of reference in that one of Levine's best-known works, *After Walker Evans* (from 1981), appropriated the canonical imagery of Evans's "journalistic" work of the thirties, which has been referred to in well-nigh every discussion of Arden's work to date; see note 12.
- 8 Ian Wallace, "Image and Alter-Image II: Roy Arden," (*Vanguard* 16:1, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1987).
- 9 To call a work such as *Mission* "iconophobic" in the way of orthodox conceptual art, however, would be unjust (not to say a gross misunderstanding of appropriation art's unique love affair with the culture of the image or "icon"), as Arden here not so much seeks to negate the pictorial qualities of the original photograph, but instead (literally) aggrandizes them. *Mission*, with its obvious appeals to the tableau format and tradition, has an air of grandeur about it that is absent from the other archival works, celebrating the original photograph's very "picture-ness" instead of its (obviously) perverted contents. Clearly, there can be no easy categorization in Arden's work in terms of "iconophobia" or "iconophilia".
- 10 The fourth ensemble of diptychs in the suites of archival works mentioned in this essay documents another pivotal moment in Vancouver's thoroughly class- and race-inflected history: the arrival, in 1914, of the passenger ship *Komagata Maru*, carrying a cargo of Indian immigrants who were denied access to Canada. This shameful episode in the early years of a city that would later go on to pride itself on its achievements as a truly successful melting pot of migrant populations, was also immortalized in Ken Lum's public art project *Four Boats Stranded: Red and Yellow, Black and White* (2001), installed on the roof of the Vancouver Art Gallery.
- 11 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Of course, in thus addressing the category of the ugly, *Supernatural* (along with a host of other works) may be seen to partake in an expansive art historical dialogue that includes the likes of Bosch, Breughel, Goya and other pioneers of the folksy grotesque, and in which the depiction of the (outwardly) ugly, debased or deformed is not necessarily without a measure of sympathy.
- 12 This is the exact point where Roy Arden's work intersects most markedly with that of fellow Vancouver artist Steven Shearer, whose archival works, huge digital prints assembling a dizzying array of photographic images culled from obscure internet Internet sources, deploy a similarly encyclopaedic tactic of "uncanny juxtaposition"; like Arden's archival works, Shearer's archives show artistic thought at work, caught in the process of its "other" world-making. In addition, both artists share a singular fascination for the netherworlds of "lumpen" or proletarian culture that is clearly not without its biographic overtones. As Nancy Tousley has noted in a 2002 issue of *Canadian Art*, "Arden is the son of Finnish socialists whom emigrated to Canada from a country exhausted by the Second World War, into which his father had been conscripted as a boy soldier... He grew up on a noisy street in a blue-collar neighbourhood in East Vancouver, just across from industrial sites that lined the banks of the Fraser

River.”. Shearer’s archives teem with the ignoble emblems of “contemporary proletarian craft” or “blue collar folk culture,” most notably of the hard rock/heavy metal variety; Arden’s preoccupation with the fate of the proletariat is well-documented, and ranges from the historical *Rupture* suite to the more recent “*Locked Out*” *Workers, Vancouver, B.C.* (1994). Surely, the aforementioned *Supernatural* is another powerful, if bleak, document of “lumpen energy” gone astray; *Basement* (1996) and, especially, *Juggernaut* (2000) also highlight — and with a much more sympathetic inclination — the base materialism of proletarian culture.

- 13 Borges (as quoted by Michel Foucault in his “Order of Things”) in turn quotes the example of a certain Chinese encyclopaedia which grouped “animals” as follows: “a) animals which belong to the emperor, b) embalmed animals, c) tamed animals, d) milk sows, e) sirens, f) fabulous beasts, g) dogs without a master, h) those which belong into this grouping, i) those who behave like mad, k) animals painted with a very fine brush of camel hair, l) and so forth, m) animals which have broken the water jug, n) animals which look like flies from afar.” See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage, 1994).
- 14 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). I am indebted to Roy Arden for bringing this exquisite book to my attention.

An earlier version of this essay appeared in the catalogue published on the occasion of Roy Arden’s exhibition at IKON Gallery in Birmingham, February – March 2006. The author would like to thank Nigel Prince at IKON for granting permission to use and expand on the earlier text.