

“The Old Mole”: Photography in the Neighborhood of Materialism

Shep Steiner

*“To call the ocean sublime we must regard it as the poets do, merely
by what strikes the eye...”¹*

Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment

Realism is a strange category in the photography of Roy Arden: it is constantly being placed under strain. Take *Pneumatic Hammer (#2), Vancouver, B. C., 1992* where a certain fascination with the hammer itself – the way it is isolated, blown up, and set in relief – lends the picture an intensity that complicates the documentary look of the whole. Functioning as a powerful visual hook its relative value, vis-a-vis the bits and pieces of the everyday that surround it, is striking. To these discrete objects it assigns the role of “realistic filler”, and they, the relatively undifferentiated field, confirm its status as a salient figure. For even if a kind of flatness pervades the image, this particular object pulls one in. It looms forward as a world of recalcitrant details pulls back.

Holding such a poetic effect in tension with a prosaic account is crucial to understanding Arden’s photography.² Realism for Arden does not hinge on the indexical function of photography, it dwells somewhere between the absolutely literal and the metaphoric which transcends the literal. The anxious dialectic within which this dyad exists is no accident. This work and Arden’s works generally are subject to a sustained process of judging and rejudging documents collected in an archive of raw photographs which over time are cropped and sized precisely for strikingness. In this particular instance, realism emerges out of a circuitry that governs the figure/ground relation. That this is a highly unstable relation, one so unstable as to forefront the process of assigning literal and figural value in the first place, is the crux.

As viewers, we are repeatedly thrown into the thick of such a dynamic; in this instance recruiting the literal to confirm the figural, and vice versa. If it is the yellow arm or rich hues of the head that initially seem significant, then it is because the grey scene and overcast sky are not. If the half-cocked angle of the great pecker itself catches the eye, it does so only by virtue of the squared off, matter-of-fact fence. What complicates this, is that one also zeros in on the red and white Drake, or the one-eyed hen both hovering rebus-like on the surface, or the pair of small perching birds ribboning the fence. They flutter and chirp, these miniature cousins! At least for the moment! For if the viewer settles upon the hammer itself as figure, it is not without a certain effort at making other details a figure as well. The eye is continually skipping back and forth between potential figures and grounds, testing each in turn for significance, only to confirm with each glance that the penultimate detail out of which the picture unfolds – where its secret necessity will finally emerge – is not exactly the object-at-hand.

I push the question of reading to a wild interpretation to make a point: the impassibilité of Arden’s photography makes any ascription of meaning gratuitous. And yet if the viewer is confronted by a rather dry depiction of contemporary life – one stupidly opposed to meaning as realism ought to be³ – it is hard to dispute that *Pneumatic Hammer* is not making a spectacle of meaning something.⁴ I invoke the ornithological, not to secure meaning, but to capture the rhetoricity of the image; to hint at a sardonic mood; to give apathy or indifference its rightful place in interpretation;⁵ ultimately, to dramatize the conditions of possibility under which any viewing takes place. Being lost in a thicket of details – eye darting

here and there like a bird watcher intent on identification – looking for anything to finally answer the call of the peculiarly powerful gaze, is all part of the Arden effect.

In looking at Arden's pictures one is continually compensating for the perverse feeling of occupying another's body; of being complicit in an act of looking alien to one's own perspective; of rationalizing the eroticism or violence of another's gaze by giving it an object. In *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C., 1991* one might argue for a depth, pathos, or affect-laden subject matter, as confidently as one may call it flat, apathetic, or instrumental. For if the rigid frontality of *Tree Stump* sets up the structure of a specular relation, there is also an aspect of the gaze that petrifies this detail, maintaining its utter singularity. Certainly a tree stump, nonetheless one that shudders with the muscular recoil of a kind of predatory excitement. The voyeurism of a durational piece like *Citizen, 2000* is related to this. The intensity of the gaze in Arden's static based work is both reengineered in terms of an obsessive circling around the object and displaced by the banality of repetition.

Making strange that which is familiar is a common enough premise in contemporary art: that Arden's work functions in this theoretical vein as a result of constantly renegotiating the practical problems confronted in looking is the difference. Forefronting the gaze by pinpointing its relation to detail is, however, only one way in which the viewer enters into the vicious hermeneutic at the core of Arden's realism. Even a cursory survey of his work reveals this less a golden rule and more a case particular to certain types of photographs. What requires acknowledgment is that the many entrances, affinities and pleasures of the image are parts of sets of self-imposed constraints that Arden teases out of each and every photograph. In fact there are at least four ways in which the transparency of photography is troubled: if the second negates the figure/ground relation already mentioned, the third implicates the linear perspective, then employing the human figure as a locus of narrative intensity is the fourth. The possibility of realism lies safe within these problematics. In each case it derives from the formal conventions of the medium and corresponds to a varying set of shifts between the literal and figural.

Of the second and third variety the vast majority are outdoor pictures. All figures of urban blight and decay never far from home – forgotten alleys, garbage dumps, wrecks and houses marked for demolition. Making up a roll-call of topics favoured by Arden, they are the exotic birds one sees every day but to which one has grown accustomed. Yet in *Landfill, Richmond, B.C., 1991*, and *Pulp Mill Dump, (#2), Nanaimo, B.C., 1992* there is a strong sense that Arden feels photography must hit the eye of the viewer with the same impact and affect that it strikes his own eye; it must smart and swell the eye, make it sore to the point of distorting and perverting vision. That all of these works are in fact 'eye-sores' underscores this point. Look at that obscene tumescence in *Pulp Mill Dump (#2)* where the absence of any figure/ground relation pushes the narrow field of view toward the informe. It lends the picture a pregnant fullness or over-ripeness that reeks of the passing of historical time – of rancid meat on the bloat. This fetishistic, glistening effect of details everywhere is undoubtedly linked to a similar shimmer in the gelatin silver print, *Volvo Engine, 2000*, and further, the shimmy captured on the DVD video, *Juggernaut, 2000*.

In *Landfill, Richmond* the warping of the so-called *plana tabella* is achieved through perspectival means. This is big sky country British Columbia. Convexity is so pronounced that recession into depth is not only neutralized but inverted and caricatured to the extent of a fish-eye effect. If a certain habituation to perspective impels entrance to this space, the more comfortable one gets the more pronounced the terms of expulsion. In Arden's oeuvre, such effects are the clearest expression of the drama played out between the literal and figural. The bulge is a promise: a space of sacrifice and ritual; a mounding up that corresponds to the very possibility of realism. At its most arcane it surfaces in Arden's sculptural work where a funnel or 'perspective cone' turns an empty Coca-Cola bottle into a specimen jar, perhaps for the occulted share of "perspective as symbolic form"⁶

Undoubtedly the most vivid example of putting the resources and constraints of perspective into action is *Hastings Street Sidewalk*, 1995. That the dynamic of this picture thrives in spite of doing away with the necessity of an object of focus reinforces the fact that it is perspectival convention alone which is at stake. The spate of social and economic problems in this region of Vancouver is familiar. But what is the actual human cost? 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... eyes askew... chest a heave... overhanging porticulus... Tastes like bile in the morning to me! Walter Benjamin's flaneur is here revealed in the most sorry of contemporary manifestations, not as bird lover, nor even hunter, but as wretched, homeless, piss tank. With linear perspective pushed to a breaking point – horizon line gone, gaze directed earthward, vanishing points torn between the gloomy recess at left and the fuzziness at right – the surface itself embodies the pressure of watery eyes in a convulsive fit.

The temptation to privilege this empathic response is great, but the tension between an optical and a haptic experience of space must be maintained. Seeing double pinpoints a notion of responsibility implicit to Arden's realism that is of the most politically progressive kind. It harkens to the voice of the other! In this, Arden shares much with Jeff Wall, who has characterized the latter's work in terms of the 'photo-journalistic';⁷ more recently, in terms of 'reportage'. The label fits, especially in a work like *Cordova Street, Vancouver B.C.*, 1995 where the responsible viewer is assailed by the lingering doubt that the immediacy of reportage is not simply a product of the shot just captured, but "derives from the medium".⁸ For Arden, listening to the other involves a dialogue with the medium after photography. For if the quintessential moment of reportage is one in which the event itself strikes a chord, tips a scale in favor of disbelief, jump-starts a process of wonder on the spot, then in Arden's work this document, where the particular is inscribed by the world-historical, becomes a site of intervention.

Certainly all the spontaneous and chance effects of 'shooting from the hip' are implicit to *Cordova Street's* highly achieved use of reportage. Whether this is an effect of existential urgency or a careful teasing out of questions the medium itself raises after the fact, and inevitably leaves unanswered, is another story. Always uncertain in the work of this inveterate master of the quick shot is that one can never be sure of what initially was so striking. Not simply because Arden's realism is closely allied to the medium, but because the dynamic around which any one picture will turn is unpredictable.

That morning on Cordova Street Arden was almost certainly struck by a motif in the offing: Paul Strand's nameless man in a street, Jeff Wall's *Mimic*, 1989, *A Villager from Arıcaköyü arriving in Mahmutbey – Istanbul, September, 1997*, 1997, and Arden's own walking figures in *Abjection* (second version), 1992 are all here. What is curious given these references is that the crucial locus of this picture hinges on an arbitrary narrative intensity. One might be tempted to find in a bent knee, a blurred foot, or the posturing of a body an intentional reference to Wall's *Mimic*, but the real dynamic here turns on the figure itself – the loser, loner, the king of the street – something of which Arden would have had no forethought. Cool enough in his own circle of friends, here 'the man' is caught suspended like a marionette – a projection of the piece of white trash below and behind. Accentuating the bend of the curb in front, and the bow-string effect of the space depicted, the subject serves a decorative function in the economy of the whole.

The language of photography has a crucial role to play in all of this. In spite of the dynamics explored, one would not be misguided in imagining a typical day of shooting for Arden to hinge upon something on the order of "a-going-out-ahunting- for-motifs". This means that confronted by the scene in *Pulp Mill Dump* he may well have been struck, without thought for meaning, by a formal resemblance to Robert Smithson's *Asphalt Rundown*, 1969; that what struck the author of *Citizen*, 2000 was a silhouette of the figure gone to ground in *Rupture* (1985). One wonders what would have struck the original viewer of *Pneumatic Hammer*: an empty outline or angle from Atget's *Grue au pont du Louvre*, or merely the contour of a dirt pile devoid of depth in one of Walker Evans' photographs? Would he have gloated over the facile similarity between Wols' *Sans titre*, 1938–1939 and the blue stool, tin and Vaseline jar in *Basement*?

Always a transit between literal and figural, Arden's photography poses realism as a site of anteriority, and inasmuch the material inscription it thinks is inseparable from memory. In this sense the motif and the language upon which it depends is a complexification of a notion of the archive fundamental to the early 'meta-photography' of *Abjection* and *Rupture*. To some extent, making art about photography is still what Arden does: all of his photographs are archival, all of his work impacts on the theory, practice and politics of the archive, the difference being that because his reportage is grounded in a look entirely singular, without pathos or reflection – merely a formal effect – it militates against the historical continuity that an understanding of the motif as the guardian of cultural tradition, or the archive as the custodian of civic memory might suggest. Arden's realism keeps the material event safe beneath the veil of symbolic appearance. No wonder he likes to think of himself as "the old mole": in the basement burrowing away at his secrets in the archive, or in the neighborhood throwing up molehills wherever he goes. In any case, it is worth remembering that if Arden sees "as the poets do", such an arbitrary connection between experience and the representation of experience involves the loss of the symbolic without actually doing away with it.⁹

Footnotes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), p. 111; quoted by Rodolphe Gasché, in *The Wild Card of Reading, On Paul de Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 91–113.
- 2 Jeff Wall uses this terminology to describe Arden's relationship to the photojournalistic in Jeff Wall, "An Artist and his Models", in Roy Arden, (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 1993). For Arden realism is tightly bound, even underwritten, by the question of figural language. This is especially true of his "Landscapes of the Economy" where, as titling suggests, the question of exchange dwells within the apparently natural category of the landscape.
- 3 On realism's relationship to meaning see Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*. (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 64–79. On realism's relation to photography see John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: realism, photography and the everyday*, (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1998).
- 4 If the anthropomorphic look of the object is a provocation to reduce meaning to any number of circumscribed frames, the sexual perhaps the most compelling, it is worth remembering that Arden's work is too phlegmatic for any such enthusiastic response: affinities, likenesses, all manner of entrance and pleasure must remain a temptation to be overcome.
- 5 See Klossowski's reading of the Marquis de Sade, where the sensuous is always undermined by its "apathetic reiteration", the notion of which is linked to Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of photography in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" – a crucial text for Vancouver photography. Pierre Klossowski "The Philosopher Villain", in *Sade My Neighbor*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), pp. 11–42.
- 6 "Caca avant tout", to quote Masson and distill the essence of Bataille's base materialism and his notion of the secret society (André Masson, Letter to Georges Bataille. Tossa, 8 November, 1935, in André Masson, *Les années surréalistes: Correspondance 1916–1942*, ed. F. Levaillant, (Paris: La Manufacture, 1990), p. 293.). Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. C. S. Wood, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 34.
- 7 Jeff Wall, "An Artist and his Models", in Roy Arden, *ibid.*
- 8 See Jeff Wall and Roy Arden, "Photography in the Over-Information Age", *Art Press* 251, 1999, p. 17.
- 9 I would like to thank Jeff Wall for his comments on an early version of this essay, and acknowledge a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts.