

March 1984.

Roy Arden
Or Gallery
Vancouver
December 18 to 31

Unlike *Fragments* (Coburg Gallery, August 1983), Roy Arden's recent show, simply titled *Photographs*, is sparse in comparison but with the intent of being more specific. *Photographs* contains five 8"x8" cibachrome prints plus pamphlets (free for the taking) with a lengthy quote from the first page of a novelette — *The Madness of the Day* by Maurice Blanchot. The prints correspond, quasi-thematically, to the quote which functions as a guide, locating the prints within a particular context by directing the viewer as to how Arden wants his photographs to be 'read'.

In order to fully understand Arden's show, it is necessary to know something about Blanchot — one of the most obscure literary figures in France today. He has been writing criticism and novelistic *écrits* since the late 1930's, having considerable influence on Derrida, Foucault, and others. It has been said that Blanchot writes so as not to die and, for him, death is at the heart of all writing. His writing is a philosophy of nonpositive affirmation as a contestation circumscribing an affirmation that affirms nothing — a radical break of transitivity. All texts, for Blanchot, are a profane and endless series to which his own writing is simply another addition. He reduces all hope to its sparsest, most denuded verbal contact, whereby the labyrinth of language is itself conceived to be a scattering of the centre.

In describing Blanchot's writing I am not so much describing Arden's show as I am describing his identification and admiration for Blanchot. *Photographs* is thus Arden's endeavour to re-contextualize his photographs by relatedness and identification to French avant-garde writing. In one sense, his prints can be interpreted as narrative illustrations accompanying Blanchot's text. In another sense, his appropriated quote functions as a supplement to the show, lending a certain credibility to the prints by assigning them to a uniquely individual voice. Theoretically speaking, if a supplement is to function as something rather than nothing, then it must expose the defect of the whole, for any whole that is able to accommodate the addition of a supplement testifies to the lack of something within itself. It is because Arden's photographs do not completely succeed in conveying a specificity of meaning that a supplementary quote from without must be added in order to compensate for the defective totality within.



Roy Arden, *The Cruelty of Daylight* (1983), cibachrome print, 20.3 x 20.3 cm, courtesy: the artist

To summarize, the quote describes a carefree solitude until interrupted by a scuffle, in which someone crushes glass into the narrator's eyes, almost causing the loss of sight. The painful readjustment to seeing in daylight and the unfulfilled desire to see things more clearly, forces the narrator to conclude that the brightness has lost all reason:

"At times I said to myself, 'This is death. In spite of everything, it's really worth it, it's impressive.' But often I lay dying without saying anything. In the end, I grew convinced that I was face to face with the madness of the day."

The metaphors of the thus characterized quote concern the image in general. If the quote — like all writing — produces mental images that are in themselves already reproductive, imitative, and pictorial, then it arises as a sort of primary image-making apparatus, as profound as it is invisible. Arden photographs what he interprets to be images of Blanchot's assertion, but he acts after the latter, retracing his steps: he illustrates a text that is already written and contains its own images. As such, his photographs are a mere addition for the sake of decoration.

Between Arden's photographs and his appropriation of Blanchot's prose there occurs a peculiar relation: one becomes a supplement of the other. The quote sets in motion a discursive play of differences, an identity that is fragmented, introducing a deferring effect which further distances Arden's work from social relations and asserts it as 'private.' The quote only defamiliarizes the work by alienating the viewer from coming to terms with the work in itself, allowing for a type of polysemy of the photographic image.

Arden's choice of subject matter is predominately characterized by depersonalization: a preference for a hermeneutic methodology of interpretation; a sense of social frigidity combined with a privileged distancing. His images are transfixed, which gives them an impression of latency or concealed subject matter.

Out of the five prints two have already appeared in previous exhibitions. *The Fire* was simultaneously on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery where it was titled *Tower*. *The Whole World* was part of a slide installation at the *October Show*; here it retains its original title. This would seem to suggest that none of the prints was made specifically to accompany

the quote, making the quote somewhat irrelevant in relation to the work. As a result one might wonder as to the authenticity of Arden's "apologies to M.B." located at the back of the pamphlet. Such a re-presentation of previous work makes for a depleted show.

Of all the prints, *The Cruelty of Daylight* — with its claustrophobic cropping of the subject — corresponds most literally to Blanchot's prose. We see a young man slouched against a wall as if in a daze, with his naked back turned to us. He appears illuminated by the painfully intense whiteness of the noonhour sun shining in through the window. It would appear that Arden wants the viewer to interpret his appropriated quote as a metaphor for the photographer's experience. His work is only as metaphorical or allegorical as a light meter atop a radiator can be, as in *The Half-Light*.

The Boat depicts a monument on one of the archways of the Burrard Street Bridge. It conveys the perspective of a lone wanderer in the midst of night — a dwarf in comparison to the symbolic site where time appears frozen twice. The low-angle point of view, from which the photograph was taken, reflects Arden's submission to the monumental. With the completed print he is able to posit himself in the position of the statuesque, whereby the viewer submits to Arden's original experience, now transformed within the photograph as having 'captured' the totemic and phallic power of the monument. The monument's inherent authority is not de-mythologized instead it is appropriated. No information is provided as to his subject's function. The historic and cultural language of monument as — among other things — objects of authority and worship is negated by a reductivist formalism.

If the choice of technique conditions the meaning and tendency of a given work, one could speculate as to whether or not the cibachrome medium, due to its lusciousness and saturation of colour, intersects with potential meaning, whereby technique is presented as fetish object. A deferral of meaning combined with a lack of specificity within the cibachrome medium can only suggest a promotion of a privileged aesthetic of art production (an archive of the Beautiful) whose potential marketability is its disguised materiality, reinforcing the 'fine art' aesthetic.

Aside from the problematics of Arden's medium, his decision to include a supplementary quote could also relate to the international resurgence of expressionism, especially

considering its intrinsic narrative characteristics. For example, due to mass media, narrative techniques have arisen as a desired alternative, communicating the social through the personal, whereby some command can be taken as the interpretation of a work. Much of recent photographic practices are a response to this problem, incorporating both textual and appropriation strategies to counteract mass media techniques.

The main problem with *Photographs* is that Arden does not acknowledge the underlying counter-theme of his show; i.e. he does not attempt to raise the issue of appropriation, nor does he allow for any relationship between text and image; instead he unconsciously disguises them. The quote from Blanchot serves Arden as a thread tying the work together, which would otherwise be unrelated. *Photographs* can best be seen as a trial/error experiment displaying Arden on the pivot of a potential transition stage.

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