

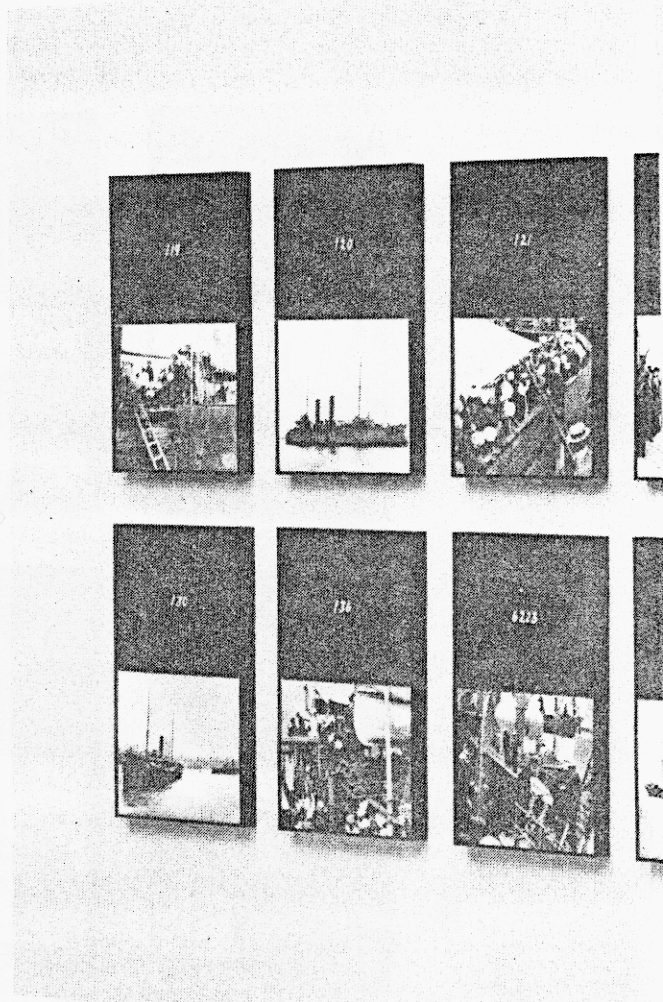
Roy Arden
Komagata Maru
1989
B&W silver prints
white ink on black
silver prints, metal
frames
ea. 16 x 10 in.
Photo: S. Douglas

Impossible Mission

by Earl Miller

Utopia's deepest subject and all that is vibrantly political about it, is precise — our inability to produce it as a vision, our failure to project the other of what it is, a failure that, once again, leaves undone with this history.

Frederic Jameson¹



Roy Arden proposes an argument for a politically-engaged modernism, a critical modernism that delineates the impossible mission of the documentary photograph's accurate representation of the Social. In his work, a modernist iconography and historical photographic documents are juxtaposed to form works whose very objectness abrogates all hope of charting the unrepresentable, the extrapolation of history beyond the presentational object. Arden's photographs, by taking the empty frame of modernism and placing within it, images of the historical, parallel the impossibility of the transcendence of the modernist object and the utopian dreams of modernist history.



Modernism is appropriated and revised to form a critical modernism, an abstraction whose signification, in direct opposition to the formalist ideals of spiritual autonomy, points to the Social.

Archival photographs from the Vancouver public archives and Arden's own family photo album, are re-organized in non-hierarchical order. They are either paired with, or framed by, monochromatic abstract photographs coloured black, copper or sky-blue. These shiny, reflective monochromes look generic and mass-produced. Signifying emptiness and absence, they are abstract icons that create a sharp division between the representational imagery of their documentative

counterparts, a division which Ian Wallace once described as "Image and Alter Image."² The archival photographs picture historical breaks, momentary disruptions of social unrest and racial oppression. One, for example, shows the last religious rites of a group of Iranian children being led to their deaths. All are social images bound by subtexts of despair and hopelessness and uncomfortably point to a *fin de siècle*.

Several concepts outlined by Michel Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, are important to interpretation of Arden's photography. Arden re-defines past historical events in accordance with Foucault's argument of a history based upon the description of the archeological

monument. "Archeology," Foucault states, "is nothing more than a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin. It is the schematic description of a discourse-object."³ Arden re-structures history into archeological orders of the present, orders which resurface bits of information but, nevertheless, remain severed from their original subject. Thus, he does not attempt to revive the ideals of social-documentary photography, the historical "truth" of their origin. He will take historical photographs and re-arrange them as fragmented, decentralized images that refer to the archival source of the photographs, rather than their context within the linear documentation of history. Arden's archival information is contained within a specific series, referring to a single, largely unremembered event.

Foucault differentiates between a general history and a history of totalities. He writes: "a total description draws all phenomena around a single centre, a principle, a meaning, a spirit, a world view, an overall shape; a general history on the contrary would deploy the space of a dispersion."⁴ Arden's photographs, decentralized by their non-linear ordering and by severing gaps of modernist abstraction, form a general history. Their negative fields of open abstract space, initially invite a "given" quality to the perception of the viewer, but the absence of any connective information ultimately denies completion. Frequently encapsulating and framing the documentary photographs, this modernist space remains closed within its own objectness. His historical orders, sequences of discontinuity and contradiction, offer testimony to the impenetrable opacity of the object.

Bearing the repetitive homogeneity of mechanical reproduction, Arden's juxtaposed monochromatic photographs are nearly-identical. Erased of subject, and only bearing iconographic traces of abstraction, they disclaim notions of originality and authorship. And, in much of Arden's work, notably *Rupture*, 1985, and *Kamagata-Maru*, 1989, he has constructed a sharp polarization of difference between the absence of the social in abstraction and the representation of politicized iconography in his documentary series. Arden employs the vacant icons of modernism in order to form a critique of formalism's apolitical detachment. This leads from Jameson's position where:

The increasing abstraction of visual art proves not only to express the abstraction of daily life and to presuppose fragmentation and verification. It also serves as a utopian compensation for everything lost in the process of daily life.⁵

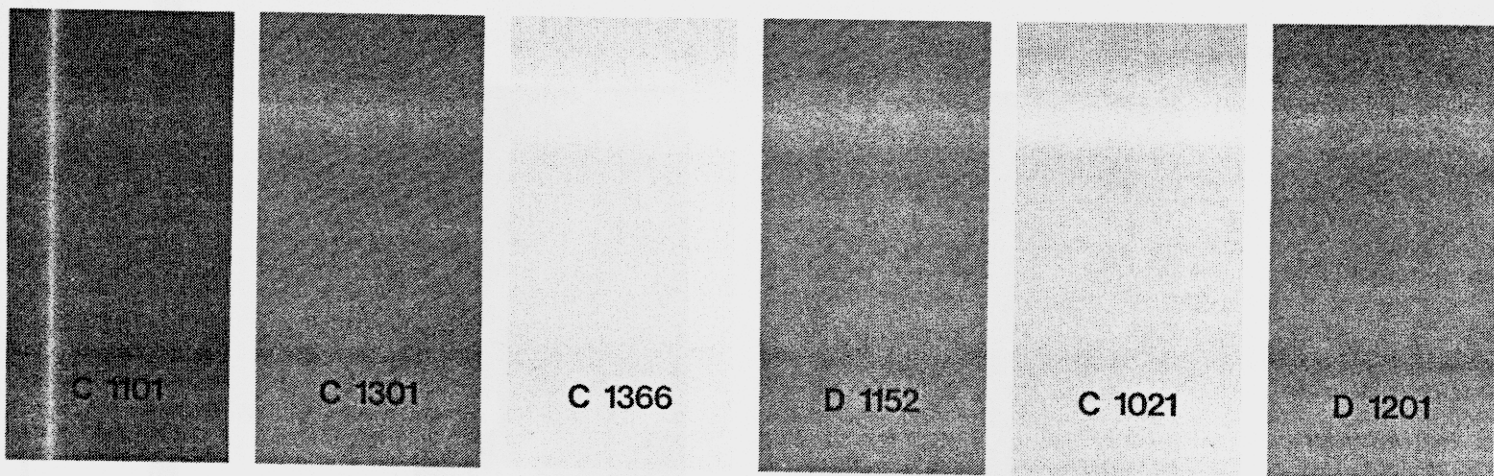
This critique, however, tends to reinforce the

political isolation that it is arguing against. In Arden's most effective work, *Mission*, 1986, and *The Potato Eaters*, 1987, he closes the gap between his abstract and documentary images, thus integrating a politics within formalism. Arden employs a strategy that Ian Wallace has referred to as "critical modernism." "Critical art," Wallace elaborates, "identified with the avant-garde, has adopted the objective strategies that sublimate the expressive techniques of modernism to imagery and technique. Political instinct is called to attention by the symbolic trap of the image. Arden's paranoia of identification with the subject is set into motion by its obliteration of the abstract."⁶

The disappearance of the subject in Arden's photographs, stresses the presence of the historical object, which limits the image to the finite context of its presentation. *Rupture* maintains a consciously wide division between juxtaposed images of abstraction and social-documentary photographs. Nine panels of photographs, monochromatic images of blue sky, are installed above photographs of "The Bloody Sunday Labour Riots" in Vancouver in the 1930s. The images depict various outbreaks of violence and the wreckage following the confrontation. The riot images of *Rupture* are journalistically slanted. There is a conjunctive aesthetic of hopelessness and despair where the fragmented moments of resistance and rebellion are ultimately of no avail. The differing viewpoints from image to image form an incomplete, non-linear narrative whose structure is based upon the differences, not the similarities between the images. By his juxtaposition of many contradictory images of the labour riots, Arden debunks the myth of the documentary photographer as an unbiased chronicler of the social, whose singling out of special moments in time forms an individual's determination of historical "truth." Further accentuating the differences between each photograph is the homogeneous appearance of the overlying abstract images. The shiny, seamless surface of these generic images remains closed to the any potential spirituality. As abstract icons they might seductively offer the modernist ideal of a boundless, Utopian subjectivity but the objective closure of the surface ultimately denies access.

Especially noteworthy among the documentary photographs in *Rupture* is an image of an abandoned, vandalized street, an embodiment of the sombre quiet following the riots. The tableau conveys a similar sense of vacuousness to its overshadowing abstract counterparts. This melancholic image, forms a strong allusion to death, the death of the subject to which recent photography has been tied.

By direct placement above the harsh reality of the underprivileged, the blue images, conveying the optimistic radiance of a clear sunny day, form a caustic satire on the political neutrality of abstraction. Here, Arden has delineated the split between the presence of



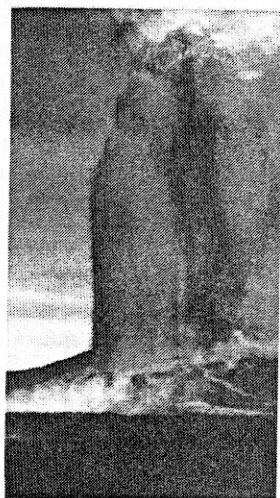
Roy Arden: *Colour Your World*, 1989: latex wall paintings with vinyl lettering. Photo: S. Douglas

the social and Modernism's autonomy from the real, to an almost absurd extreme. His sequence of abstraction, although acting as a negative shadow to its paired counterparts, nonetheless remains severed from the Social.

Similar themes of negativity, death and oppression resurface in the recent work, *Komagata-Maru*. The piece is constructed around eighteen photographs found in the Vancouver Public Library that document the circumstances surrounding the arrival of Indian refugees docked in Vancouver Harbour in hopes of quick immigration. A heated public debate ran on for weeks, over whether or not the Indians should be granted refugee status in Canada. The juxtaposed images show federal and local officials observing the refugees, the military guarding the ship, and the refugees posing for news photographers. These images suggest narrative sequences but defy completion due to their divided, non-hierarchical presentation. Installed above the documentary photographs is a sequence jet-black monochromes constructed of light-exposed photographic paper. Printed on these black rectangles, in white ink, is the corresponding library index number

of the image beneath (the archive uses an accession system, hence the photos are numbered at whatever time they are ordered). Several breaks in this numerical ordering form disconnected sequences, suggesting shifts in time which also serve to isolate the photographs from one another in terms of narrative. The act of numbering points directly to an archeological activity, the beginning of a rewriting of history that is given more significance than recording the source of the images.

In another recent piece entitled, *Colour Your World*, 1989, Arden works within the order of modernism, exploring misconceived representations of nature. Six vertical panels of pure colour, taken randomly from *Colour Your World* commercial paint charts, are centrally marked in white with the manufacturer's colour code. Placed below and horizontally spanning the installed width of the monochromes is a black-and-white photographic panel which shows a seascape. The photograph, a straight forward image of an ocean view, is vacuous and empty. This nature vista sharply contrasts with the industrialized aesthetics of the mass-produced colour-chart. Modernism is seen, not as an



Roy Arden; *The World As Will & Representation*; 1989; colour photos in wooden frame. Photo: S. Douglas

order of spirituality but as an economic order based upon a limited selection of consumer materials where choice falls within the limits of a pre-determined line of paint.

Arden delineates the futility of rendering the universality of nature within the defined boundaries of the modernist object. The ocean scene, like the image of blue sky in *Rupture*, denies the promise of spiritual transcendence. Each of these sequences forms an inside critique of a divulgence of formalism's failure to maintain an autonomous subjectivity severed from the social. But the social-political is notably absent in *Colour Your World*. Arden reveals an economic signification through his colour charts, but his critique remains closed within the context of modernism.

In *Mission* the division between abstraction and documentary that occurred in *Kamagata-Maru* and *Rupture* is confined to the unity of a single photographic image. Two archival photographs, taken at brief intervals, are split into a series of six photographic panels, depicting a re-enactment early in this century of the Christian crucifixion drama performed by native

North Americans under the direction of missionaries in Mission, B.C. The crucifixion is dramatically silhouetted against a bleak, white sky while a crowd of natives observes the spectacle. Despite the spectacular theatricality of the passion-play, there is an anti-climatic non-eventfulness to the drama. In the still photographic images, frozen in time, nothing seems to be happening. The consequential atmosphere of this negativity alludes to the loss of the historical subject by its documentative representation. Insinuating the very absence of the subject, Arden avoids the individualized bias of commentary on the photograph's political content: the exploitation of the natives by the missionaries.

Yet separating the archival images from the eye-witnessed histories of *Kamagata-Maru* and *Rupture*, is the allegorical nature of the crucifixion drama, its role as a fictional reconstruction. A connection is forged between Arden's appropriation of a pallid re-enactment of spirituality through the object. The stark, white sky, sharply contrasting the silhouetted crucifixion, forms a division between Nature and the Social that in works in

which his abstractions are physically divided from the photographic image. But in *Mission*, modernism is merged with the social. The unifying frame of the photographic image, and the surrounding wall, which was painted a blood red, places the political within an empty modernist frame.

In *The Potato Eaters*, the circumscription of monochromatic black abstraction results in a similar marriage between the photographic image and the negative space of modernism. Stemming from a more personal archive than the library source of *Mission*, the photographs in *The Potato Eaters* were taken from the artist's family photo album. Arden's chosen images, however, remain absolutely detached from his family ties. Rural archetypes, possible farmers, settlers or sharecroppers, are depicted through extreme close-ups of hands, feet and tightly-cropped portraits that resemble passport photographs. Such a documentation of specific social types recalls the portraits of August Sander. The subjects' faces, in Arden's photos, reveal moods of resignation and cynicism, even in the young children.

Referring to Van Gogh's painting of like title, *The Potato Eater's* questions the truth value of a work of art exemplary for its painterly, expressionistic interpretation of the underprivileged. Arden delineates through the conspicuous alterations of his found images, how the individual artist's viewpoint and art's context of presentation abrogate an accurate social documentation. The portraits, except for their like social background, do not maintain any connective narrative threads. Arden's heavy, black framing of the images serves to isolate them from one another. Just glossy enough to mirror the viewer, the surrounding photographic paper offers an initial invitation of openness, promising the viewer the perceptual completion of the narrative gaps between the photographs. But the images remain fragmented and disengaged amidst a dark field, which in the end only

offers alienation and closure. Arden's bordering of the photographs initiates the dispersion of historical information, a proposal for the decentralization of history.

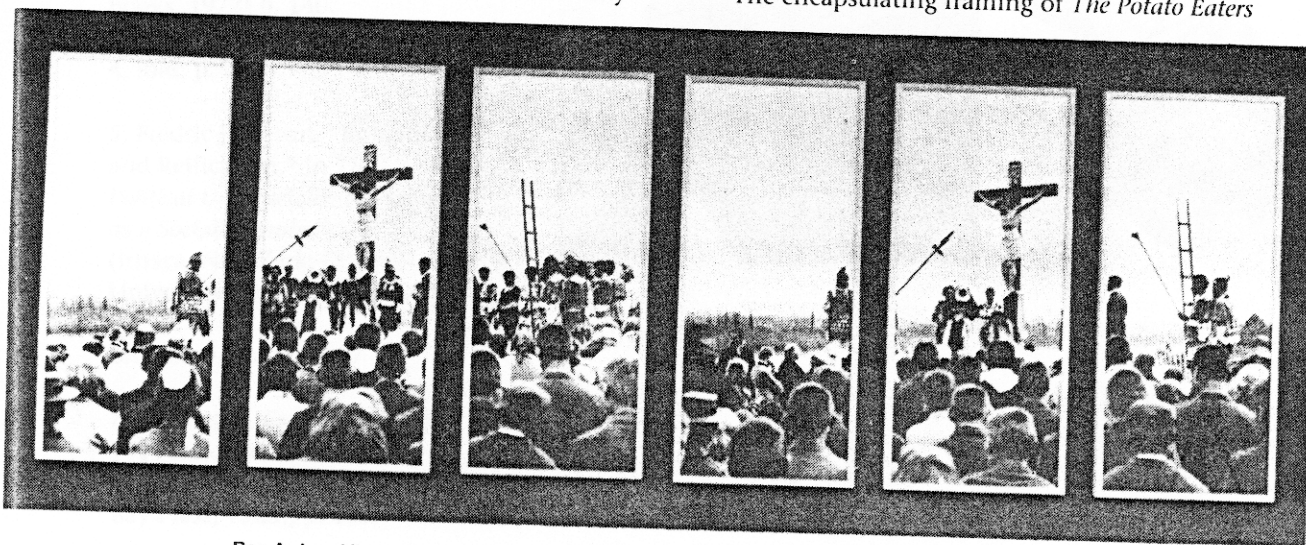
Arden's references to Sander's attempts at an accurate documentation of social types brings to light one of the primary stumbling blocks preventing the accurate photographic representation of the social: the documentary's generalization of social archetypes. Social groups, in political documentary photography, are portrayed, literally in black and white, with no specificity of definition. Arden illuminates such standardizations by his clear-cut division of social paradigms: the marginalized other, authority and the impoverished.

Hal Foster, in his book *Recodings*, states:

Presentational political art remains problematic as soon as they, [social practises] are represented as universal or even uniform, such representations become ahistorical and thus ideological. It is here that the rhetoricity or presentational political art is exposed for when art seeks most directly to engage the real, it most clearly entertains rhetorical figures. There can be no simple representation of reality, politics, society. 7

Foster's statement echoes Foucault's argument for a history whose presence as a discourse object is unavoidably severed from the real. But Foster departs from Foucault's discourse on the past, his attentiveness to the crisis of the lost historical origin. Instead, Foster brackets the deadlocking of the forward-looking ideals of political art by the presentational context of the socio-documentary.

The encapsulating framing of *The Potato Eaters*



Roy Arden: *Mission*; 1986. B & W silver gelatin prints, wooden frames, painted wall. Photo: S. Douglas

separates Arden's archival images, which bear a close semblance to the social documents that Foster described, from the linear structure of history, placing them firmly within the present tense. The piece functions as a *momento mori* that marks the limitations of the historical object. We are left with the overpowering presence of a still external history, a melancholic reminder of our mortality, our imperfect, fragmented existence in the realm of the social. ▼

Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, "Of Islands and Trenches," in *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971-1986 Vol. 11, The Syntax of History*

2. Ian Wallace, "Image and Alter-Image," *Vanguard* 16:1 (February-March 1987), p. 24.

3. Michel Foucault, "Archeology and The History of Ideas," in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) p. 140.

4. Ibid, p. 7-8

5. Fredric Jameson, "Romance and Reification," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981, p. 221.

6. Wallace, op cit. p. 27

7. Hal Foster, *For a Concept of The Political in Contemporary Art*, in *Recodings* (Washington: Bay Press, 1985), p. 155.

