

# NORWICH GALLERY

NORWICH SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN  
ST GEORGE STREET  
NORWICH NORFOLK NR3 1BB  
TEL 01603 610561  
FAX 01603 615728  
E-MAIL INFO@NORWICHGALLERY.CO.UK  
WWW.NORWICHGALLERY.CO.UK

19 MARCH TO 27 APRIL 2002  
CLOSED FRIDAY 29 MARCH TO 2 APRIL  
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC ADMISSION FREE  
10.00 TO 5.00 MONDAY TO SATURDAY

DAVID OSTREM IN CONVERSATION WITH  
LYNDA MORRIS AND SIMON WILLMOTH  
4.15 TO 5.00 MONDAY 18 MARCH 2002

PREVIEW 5.00 TO 7.00 PM MONDAY 18 MARCH

## DISPATCH 077

David Ostrem's photographic works from 1977-79 are a register of those phenomena that marked his life and the lives of other North Americans of his generation. It is as though he was trying to digest this period between the 50's and 80's - between Elvis and the Sex Pistols - and contain it in a time capsule. Ostrem was born in Portland, Oregon in 1945. A 'baby boomer' who saw the Vietnam war as a "crime against an emerging nation" he 'dodged the Draft' and arrived in Vancouver in April of 1969. Ostrem recalls that he was not exposed to contemporary art until his early twenties. An animated film of a Manhattan street scene by Red Grooms, along with the work of Warhol, were among his first inspirations. In 1974 he enrolled at the Vancouver School of Art where I met him in 1977 as a fellow student in the recently established photography department.

The Vancouver School of Art, like any other art school in North America, was then under the influence of Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptualism and all the other trends that emerged from Conceptual Art's radical questioning of every aspect and premise of previous art traditions. My own first memory of the school is studios and workshops cluttered with student Pop Art works - all derivative of American artists like Warhol, Rauschenberg and Lichtenstein. However, this impression faded in importance when I was introduced to the lively debate that characterized the seminars, where the discussion was centered on Conceptual Art and social and cultural theory. The student movement of the 60's had politicized a generation and forced them to reconcile politics and art. Talking about art often seemed more important than making it, and while some were inspired, many other students were left paralyzed by the discussion.

The major figures in Vancouver Conceptual Art were Iain and Ingrid Baxter - aka N.E. Thing Co. - Ian Wallace, Theodore S. Wan and Jeff Wall. All of these artists employed photography in new ways that separated their work from traditional fine art photography. Both Iain Baxter and Wallace taught at the school during the late 70's and their influence is still being played out in current Vancouver art. Ostrem was clearly influenced by this new "anti-aesthetic" approach to photography. In 1976, Punk Rock emerged as a response to the woolly complacency of hippie culture. Punk's visual language was supplied by art school students weaned on photoconceptualism. While Ostrem's photo works can be seen as late photoconceptualism, they can also be understood as part of the Punk Rock culture that saw its heyday in the last years of the 70's.

Ostrem's first photographs were 35mm transparencies made in 1977. They include still lifes, city views, informal snaps and images drawn over with markers. At the time, Ostrem was content to simply project these slides. The six still lifes from 1977 included in this exhibition were never previously printed. These ektachromes lack the more accomplished composition of the later works but possess a rich palette and dark claustrophobic unease that makes them worthy of consideration. The simplest of these, *Half Car* (1977) depicts a silver model car, the side of which was sliced off to reveal a cross-section view. The altered model sits on a sweaty orange leatherette beside a couple of plastic wheels and a camera lens cap. This simple arrangement already demonstrates the richness and potential of the


# SMASH YOUR FACE IN DAVID OSTREM PHOTOS 1977-79 CURATED BY ROY ARDEN

AN OR GALLERY VANCOUVER TOURING EXHIBITION

still life. The total sensibility is what first strikes one, the ugly, plastic poverty of the materials, the evocation of the onanistic culture of the glue sniffing, model building teenager. Many artists begin their careers as teenagers, alone in their bedrooms in their parents' suburban homes. The unapologetically male and proletarian subject and the inclusion of the lens cap suggest apperception and self-portrait.

There is a long tradition of plain-spoken literalism in American arts, from Walker Evans to Stuart Davis to William Carlos Williams to Ed Ruscha and on. Ostrem is very much a part of this tradition. The still life is an appropriate vehicle for literalist art. If one wants to reference underground comic culture or Delta Blues music in a still life, it is a simple matter of including a "ZAP" comic book or a Charley Patton record in the arrangement - as in Ostrem's *ZAP* (1977). In *Felch* (1977), the tinfoil set and the demonic-erotic imagery read like a bad acid trip. Psychedelia is one of the many subcultural styles that reappear in Ostrem's still lifes that, taken together, catalogue the majority of subcultural styles from the 50's to the 80's. A greaser before he was a hippie, Ostrem's 60's and 70's were more 'Sympathy for the Devil' than 'All You Need is Love' - as the repeated inclusion of Rolling Stones imagery and dearth of Beatles references makes clear.

In 1978 Ostrem switched to black and white and began a serious, in depth exploration of the photographic still life. He had seen the great potential inherent to this approach and determined to spill out his entire mindscape on to his tabletop. At times these works are sparse or minimalist, other times they are overloaded to the point of hysteria. Autobiography, political and cultural history, lyrical expression and humour and riddle all are possible through the simple act of arrangement. The twenty-five black and whites included in this exhibition are just enough in number to give a sense of the critical mass that is an integral aspect of this project. The abundance of material is part of the message as in most works that have employed archivalist strategies from Kurt Schwitters to Rauschenberg and Warhol to Gerhard Richter and Hans Peter Feldmann to Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine.

The signature work of this series and perhaps all the photographs, *Studio Shot - Georgia Blues* (1978), documents Ostrem's working method. Two simple lights on stands, a makeshift table made of crates, white card and a camera and film are all it takes to create his illusions. On the wall outside of the 'stage' we see some of Ostrem's other experiments, successive enlargements of a rabbit caught by the predatory vision of the camera. It is a clue to Ostrem's own intent to experiment on himself - to place his own life under the scrutiny of the lens. The greaser boot is a relic of his own physical fact, the Coke bottle at once a reference to his American roots and the Pop Art that inspired him. The record album is a statement of his love for popular music and a political identification with those lowest on the totem pole. By showing the surrounding darkness, excluded from the macro-view of the other pictures, he provides a theatricality made humorous by the pathetic objects. Like Ostrem, these objects are 'on stage for the first time'. 



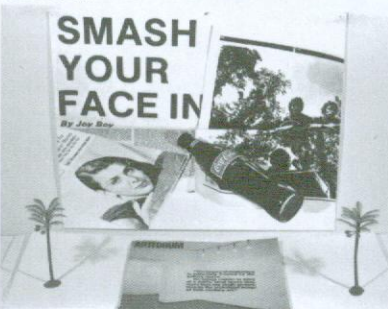
Images from periods before Ostrem's life appear as historical background or precedent. In the spare arrangement of *Public Enemy #1* (1978), John Dillinger appears before the court, awaiting judgment with dignity. A snap of Ostrem, standing like Dillinger, with hands in pocket and another snap of Ostrem's girlfriend laying on a bed bracket the central image of the outlaw. A 45rpm disc of the Rolling Stones' 'Dandelion' is placed in the foreground, overlapping an obvious seam in the Bristol board set. A self-portrait as straightforward as Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, this picture is also a romantic love letter to a woman who we must presume "don't tell no lies."

Ostrem's identification with the outlaw was deeply ingrained enough for him to resist the affirmative variants of hippiedom and survive until Punk rescued youth culture. While decidedly bohemian and somewhat anti-academic, he was intellectual enough to have researched, however informally, the history of oppositional politics. In *Life Fingers Reds* (1978) a 1949 *Life* magazine is spread on the floor of Ostrem's studio displaying a two page portrait gallery of "Dupes and Fellow Travelers" condemned for their communist leanings. Among the pictured are Albert Einstein, Arthur Miller, Charlie Chaplin, and Langston Hughes. This document of McCarthyism, depicted so nakedly, bears a resemblance to serial portrait works by Gerhard Richter of which Ostrem was certainly not aware. More importantly, it registers his anger with America's reactionary politics that could turn the most enlightened individuals into criminals.

Another *Life* magazine portrait gallery figures prominently in *The Real Sixties* (1978). These portraits are of American soldiers killed in Vietnam - part of a series that *Life* embarked on to show the human cost of the war. Above the *Life* magazine, a Lenny Bruce album, "What I Was Arrested For" depicts Bruce covering his mouth in mock horror with his hand stylized as the Stars and Stripes. A Canned Heat album, a postcard of cacti and an underground comic depicting cartoon mice in revolt against militaristic over-mice all vie for attention with their differing styles of black and white graphics. The realities of American politics are here an unbearable cacophony marked by death and revolt.

Ostrem's embrace of the occasional vulgarity of popular culture extends to pornography. In *North Dakota as the Artist Imagines It* (1978), a variety of vernacular American images and objects are juxtaposed to elicit the problems of a puritan cultural legacy that needed undoing. The picture *Three Bottles* (1978) displays a brute materialism; Russian vodka, 'natural' shampoo and Canadian rum are seen as subjected to the same laws of rationalization and commodification. This is an unromantic and critical gesture quite at odds with the cheerful ambivalence of most Pop Art.

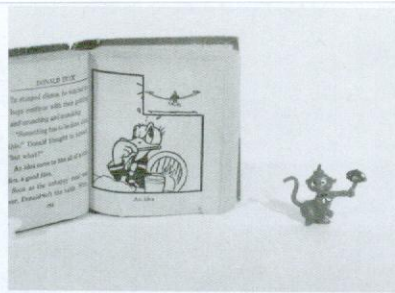
The photographic collage that Robert Frank produced for the cover of the Rolling Stones' legendary *Exile on Main Street*, appears in several of Ostrem's still lifes. This cover art mixes found photos of circus freaks, photos from Frank's great book *The Americans* and film sequences from his Stones documentary *Cocksucker Blues*. It is a landmark example of an artist combining vernacular and fine art imagery within an intersection of photo, print and film media - and was clearly a model or inspiration for Ostrem. Image production and consumption have been abetted by mechanization and become a huge monster that art cannot ignore without losing relevance to contemporaneity. In *The Artist as a Young Man* (1978), a still life showing Ostrem in one of several videos he produced alongside a View-master speak to the progress of reproduction technology. A magazine ad for "Panic Exit Devices" would seem to question the vain motive for this progress. Ludditic questioning has become so *passé* as to make anyone who might consider it retreat into paranoid isolation.



In *Smash Your Face In* (1978) Ostrem positions his practice in relation to contemporary art dogma. An *Artforum* magazine cover depicts an image of an art gallery interior with a text proclaiming that the "... white, ideal space ... more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of 20th-century art." Ostrem's own set for his still lifes

mimics the white cube, but his art is full of low, popular or vernacular imagery that is the antithesis of the minimalism that treated the white space as more than a container, often imbuing it with a sacred aura. Ostrem is arguing with a version of modernism that seeks

transcendence. However, his assault is tempered by the humour of the plastic palm trees - a 'Fuck You' to formalism, followed by a chuckle.

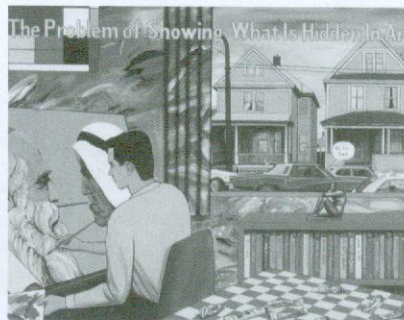


In 1979, Ostrem began a series of colour still lifes that took a less angry, more whimsical turn. *An Idea* (1979) again addresses art world dogma of the period. Mocking the conceptual artist, Ostrem has displayed a drawing of Donald Duck having 'an idea' and looking as self-important as Joseph Kosuth.

Colour itself is foregrounded and tied to desire in *The Magnificent Marilyn* (1979). Desire, or art and desire, is the subject of many of the colour photos featuring pinups and nudes. Women are the subject here in a way that marks these works as pre-dating the current of feminism that swept the art world in the 80's. In defense of his recasting of woman as object of desire, I would argue that these works propose that pinup culture is not very different at a functional level from the great nude paintings of the past. In that sense they are engaging in the same deconstruction of high art pursued by feminism.

In *What Causes Crack Up?* (1979), the sterility of the white cube is compared to the sanitarium where cruel hydrotherapy is applied to veterans of war. A rabbit seen in earlier photos reappears again as the lab-animal we all are under rationalism. In other works from this series, such as *The Purple People Eater* (1979), Ostrem is simply creating a disarming humour as a respite from the causes of 'crack up'.

*The Old Manhattan* (1979) leaves the tabletop set for a glimpse of quotidian domesticity. Duane Eddy, Mary Wells and the Stones scattered around the turntable, the girlfriend's footwear - but the music is not depictable. Visual artists have always had to deal with that, this is probably the reason so many are serious music connoisseurs.



Ostrem has continued to make photos since 1979, but these have been as studies for the drawings, silk-screen prints and paintings that have made him a local favorite. The works on display here are not the entirety of his production between 1977-79. There are many more photos, bookworks and videos. I organised this exhibition

because I felt that this body of early photo work was in danger of slipping out of the collective memory. Ostrem's contribution to photoconceptualism was perhaps not taken very seriously at that serious time because of his humour and idiosyncrasy. However, in the present context it has gained a significance for its foreshadowing of strategies employed by many younger Vancouver artists such as Steven Shearer, Kelly Wood and Damian Moppett.

Although subjected to art school, Ostrem always managed to resist becoming a 'professional' artist. It is as though he couldn't really believe that such a profession was real. A taxi driver for the majority of his adult life, as an artist type he seems closer to the Ashcan Realists or worker artists of the period between the great wars. His particularly American literalism derives from a skepticism - a hyperactive radar for b.s.. A later painting entitled *Art Sucks* (1988) depicts a modern art gallery, the walls bearing several grey monochromes. On the floor a rag lays by a sign declaring "Rag on Floor - One Trillion Dollars". In the corner of the painting he has added a "Free Bonus - Extra Painting" in which one is invited to "find the art gallery" which of course is the only featureless white building on a street crowded with busy colourful shops. Like William Carlos Williams, Ostrem is with the viewer in search of 'a recognizable image' not because they haven't entertained or understood the avant-garde - but because they have.

Roy Arden  
February 2002

