CHRISTOS DIKEAKOS

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False Hood

Vancouver looks like Malta used to --

The negative of False Creek is revealed, nay, unearthed in Christos Dikeakos' photographs. This space, this slimy space, which is scummy -- the gangrene green of pilings north of Science World -- is not, however, a negative space or a negation of the negation. The logic of these pictures is not the orthodox dialectic of Engels, however, but more properly a matter of antinomies of capital and shit, or affluence and effluence. The truth in the false 'hood. The truth/hood, the truthness, suggests that the origins of the Euro-colonial project [which now turn, full circle, onto the Europe of Berlin and Athens]. A colonial project based on claims to objectivity, as in the British empiricist cartography in George Bowering's Burning Water. An objectivity that can only exist or take place by marking out the false creek, the colonist's disappointment at not reaching Burrard Inlet, or so the story goes of how British captain George Richards named this watery way. And this true falseness is what present-day developers want to erase by re-naming it as Creekside. And all of Canada is false -- for the stories we learn as schoolchildren, the textbook romanticism of explorers and coureur du bois [from the H.B.C. to the Group of Seven], depend on the hunt for a North West Passage, a mythic route that eluded all for centuries.

Once upon a time, False Creek was the industrial armpit of Vancouver, all sawmills and lumpy soggy smelly land, a fake inlet and a full inlet. Now, but still an affluent industrial effluence and effluence obtains -- for the common etymology of effluence and affluence suggests that things have not changed so much from the sawmill days to the condo days.

this is false creek:

harbour squatters.
There is at work in these pictures what we might call a dialectic of
the false, whence False Creek's troubled history as an industrial area
that is liminal
rimming a watery absence:

this logic
means
a muddy
mucky mess
arises
when the messy work
colonial capitalism begins
what was a vacation spot
for the salish
becomes
a stinking
ah, the pulp mill!
that's the smell of jobs!
industrial zone

A picture like Piles Paydirt, False Creek Vancouver shows up the
city's gaptoothed, sawbuck architecture for what it is: a tabletop
arrangement of the banal; ribbed-glass atrocities which actually look
best when mired in a sea of mud. The best public art is bulldozer
tracks with puddles of chocolate-milk, a fecal mud that is the shit of
capitalism.

I'm not really big on the boating life and rarely find myself down by
the marina except for the one time I consumed too much Asti
Spumante and woke up in a dinghy. A sunny day for the seawall
rollerblading kings and queens of luxury, spa-buffed and
sunsplashed in the afternoon condo canyon light. There's a reason
this area's called False Creek.

Three tendencies in local art: digging up the earth, seeing the rest of
the world through Vancouver-centric lenses/eyes, and using each
other's tropes. There is this tradition, of documenting the un-earthed,
Roy Arden's piles in Nanaimo, or his picture of the gaping hole that is [for] now Tinseltown. Vancouver school photographers get off on the construction debris, those post-Heideggerian tropes of digging, unearthing, which "reveal", unhide the hidden and the animal hides, but not as some longed-for truth, or authenticity, and rather to critique how capitalism refreshes its own dirt, an aesthetics of toxic waste management, the cat scratching dirt over its shit. You may be able, according to one phenomenologist, to tell a Volkswagen from a Mercedes, but here cultural distinction lies in getting out of your BMW and schlepping through the mud for that perfect vantage point.

And Vancouver's artists seem to find a Vancouver-ish vista when making art abroad: thus Stan Douglas's German allotment gardens have an East Van feel to them. What Christos Dikeakos does in these pictures is to "False Creekize" the Reichstag or "East Vanize" Athens. This means in some ways to find in Berlin that same hubristic orgasm of building that runs through the Vancouver body politic - and its material manifestation as the casual piles of new-ish construction material that seems as ubiquitous to Vancouver as movie crew trailers and needle wrappers. But if Berlin, like Vancouver, has been rebuilding since World War II, its neoclassical architecture is now as theme park[d] as any of our crappy buildings.

Then consider how similar tropes emerge in local artists' work - as when the piles in Arden or lonely pine in Jeff Wall that show up in an Arni Haraldsson. And here if the plastic-slick piles of dirt suggest nothing so much as Kelly Wood - as well as Smithson or the other Christo - Dikeakos also alludes to the theme park status of Berlin architecture through a few different pictures that show the tourist economy that now engulfs, via the backpacking yuppie figurines [think Straub's museumgoers, entranced with their Fanny packs and strollers], the tred remains of Nazi and Communist historical architecture. But wrapped dirt, a plasticized earthwork, pre-garbage garbed - Vancouver witnesses daily the felling of trees in this clear-cut our city and the erection of scaffolding and wrapping of buildings - if avant-garde romanticism has been replaced by a found capitalist method. Which method, constructed and critiqued via photographic practice, now is revealed to be the global, the method of Berlin gentrification and Greek freeways.

Jimmy came out of his apartment and started to say something and Harry shot him in the chest and throat and head. I threw up on Jimmy's Reeboks and then I went back downtown and threw the gun into False Creek. This nazi chick was sitting on one of those pebbled cement stumps, wearing sunglasses.

Here in Reichstag Berlin [Dem Deutschen Volke], an early 19th century building - built, tragically or ironically, by a Jew - is now underscored by half pipes and lumber, and quoted by spindly building cranes. [There's a tough-minded critique of globalization here much more hard-won than the lame current practice of taking pictures of global brands on urban streetscapes: it's not name brands that unites the world, Dikeakos says, but the destruction that is integral to capitalism - it is capitalism that globalization is about, not simply logos.] A building that was bombed to shit by the Russians during World War II, the Reichstag then is always already clapped out, viz. the Norman Foster-designed dome, resting behind the building in our picture like a Vancouver stadium behind the Downtown Eastside's neo-classical revival.

I dumped her in the creek - in my car. It just rolled over the edge, this was a while back.

A defining technique for Dikeakos's work has been the split between foreground and background - an ideological split which makes possible - which constructs via a binary aesthetic formalism - what he calls the capitalist picturesque. Everything is okay in one part of the picture, and everything is definitely not okay in the other part: piles of dirt in the foreground and a typical late 20th century cityscape in the background in Paydirt, for example. Here the pre-load of sand mounds are as "universal" or "global" as the cityscape: one is the other, the other. But Dikeakos's title is significant: if "paydirt" once signified the gold or other natural resources that "first" drew exploitors to the region, it now signifies a slightly different imaginary: the big money to be made in real estate, that "ground
rent" which Marx saw as essential for the movement from primitive capitalism to what we now call late capitalism.

But this splitting of the object [I am alluding, in this formulation, to the split subject], which according to some authorities has seen its day as a model with the coming of postmodernity and the sudden expansion of neuroses to such models as multiple personality disorders — as the following discussion should make evident, I think there is still something useful in the Freudian notion of the split subject], accomplished formally in Dikeakos's photographs, here continues in the foreground with the shiny plastic-tarped mounds reflected in the water. Now the effect is those stereotyped images used to sell Canada touristically for the past century. So Paydirt sees the return of the repressed, that very referent of nature, a return which can only turn to landscape cliche but does so in a stunning way [a far better way, I should add, to sneak in the “Canada’s most popular” imagery than the Komar & Melamid literalisms we recently saw at the Vancouver Art Gallery]. In this sense, in these pictures, we see the “return to painting” that has preoccupied Vancouver art for the past few decades — and especially Wal's art historical intertextuality. Once upon a time, photography was a message without a code. Without connotation, via the method of digital painting, painting returns to photography and connotation is its rhetorical effect.

the dictionary

The dictionary on the changing table: Mainland vis-a-vis the rest of the province supports this theory. And as native rights clash with resource/industrial capitalism, such contradictions will maintain the polity in the colonial electoral extremes of strong left grassroots combined with entrenched right-wing authoritarianism.

across the street

since december storm

scaffoldings

erected

unwrapped

These motifs - pictorial incongruity, "the whole is the false", and BC-centrism — finally can help us think about Dikeakos' New Attikis Freeway, Athens, in which the site of a freeway being built for the 2004 Olympics remains an animal-troddden garbage dump, rimmed by slight condo's and ancient olive groves. As goats, asses, and chickens feed on the remains, any illusions about the Hellenic "cradle of civilization" should fade away, for the similarities between an ancient city gripped by mega-event hype and our "young" civic boosters are somewhat chilling. And this is finally how Dikeakos's pictures undercut their own aesthetics as surely as their compositions undercut architecture, the urban, and the natural: if ancient civilizations are powerless before capital, what hope is there for a practice founded on that same ancient critique?

Clint Burnham, 2002

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Front Image:
The Reichstag Berlin (Dem Deutschen Volke), 2002
Transmounted lightjet photographic print
47 ½" x 81"

Back Image:
Detail, Piles Peydirt False Creek Vancouver, 2002
Transmounted lightjet photographic print
39 ¼" x 94 ½"