An Introduction: The 1969 Photo Show SUB Art Gallery UBC

Art breakthroughs are unpredictable and are usually unexpected. Looking back 40 years and more, we see that the Photo Show was part of the greater zeitgeist of the late 60’s avant-garde, echoing exhibitions occurring elsewhere such as When Attitudes Become Form, ICA London of late 1969, Konzeption–Conception, Stadtschen Museum Leverkusen and the 1970 Information at MoMa NY. In Vancouver, The Photo Show was exhibited one month before the pivotal 995000 exhibition by Lucy Lippard which was held both at the VAG and the SUB Gallery in January of 1970.

There are a number of compelling reasons why this show could take place at UBC and no other venue in Vancouver at the time. The university was isolated from the city and this self-containment had an incubator effect. Interested students pursued an intellectual approach to their dedicated studies and carried out new, experimental art projects with the encouragement of key Fine Art faculty members.

Professor Alvin Balkind attracted a number of bright and enthusiastic students to his dynamic and amusing approach to curating exhibitions. He created an environment where students such as Illyas Pagonis, Willard Holmes, and myself could participate fully, mounting our own exhibitions and experimenting independently with the curatorial process.
Doris Shadbolt, another great supporter, introduced Lucy Lippard to Illyas Pagonis and me when we were the curators of the SUB Art Gallery. At the Vancouver Art Gallery, Doris led an afterhours accredited curatorial seminar class for senior UBC art history students that both Jeff Wall and I attended. Along with Alvin Balkind, Doris was dedicated to everything that was new and innovative. Both were great listeners and generous with their time.

At the UBC art history department it was Ian Wallace who provided thought provoking illustrated lectures on contemporary art history, attracting an energetic group of students from many different art disciplines. Ian was a seminal influence to many of us in the department who attended his classes in the late 60’s.

My proposal for the *Photo Show* was to highlight new approaches to the photographic medium within conceptual art. We invited like-minded art and architecture students from UBC to participate in an exhibition with influential American artists. I approached all the established artists to submit work via mail--Ian and (Elaine) Ingrid Baxter who were living in North Vancouver at the time, were approached directly. They all responded positively to the request. I should mention that Lucy Lippard made some important introductions on my behalf.

The *Photo Show’s* intent was to address new sensibilities and uses for photography within contemporary visual art. This included photography as an organizational structure i.e., as a formal work in and of itself. The show included photo projects that took on a critical analytical reflection of the urban fabric and used passive, unreceptive and non-aesthetic, bad picture approaches.
This approach was necessary to distinguish this new photo practice from established fine art photography. Furthermore, conceptual photography, like conceptual art, required a vacuum of artistic taste and had the appearance of an objective-to-neutral approach in the representation of the work. Photo reportage or documentary photography was avoided unless it was to record or become the fetish of a spent work of art or sculpture installation such as Robert Smithson’s *Glue Pour* or Dan Graham’s *Vanishing Point*. Although this early photographic movement was both rejected and abandoned by the late 70’s, it provided and expanded upon some of the underlying complexities of the ongoing photographic and installation art practices today.

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22/09/13