A Vast and Featureless Expanse:
the car rides & street scans, 1969/71

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In this text I reconsider several photographic and video works I made in the 1969 to 1971 period that document Vancouver views seen while driving east along the 2nd/4th/6th Avenue/Great Northern Way corridor that leads to the T-junction at Clark Drive. The video records the return trip west by automobile, past the same industrial sites along False Creek, to Cypress Street in Kitsilano. My camera drifted by what seemed to be a vast area of False Creek landscape. I saw my photo works and video scans of the late 1960s and early 1970s as opening up the possibilities and experiences of the socioecnoic and the physical geographic space of a soft industrial area attached to a young metropolis. My idea was that a non-documentary approach to documenting this industrial area had to be developed so as to critique and aestheticize both this experience and the city itself. I tried to record a serialised sense of time-travel through an industrial suburbia in which distance became dematerialized—in which space was measured only in time.

The making of these snapshots/photos took risks other than their aesthetic risks. There was, for instance, the hazard of operating the camera and the car simultaneously; using the car as a camera. This conceptual procedure, as it turned out, did not result in any traffic accidents, but it should have. Most of the black and white 35mm camera shots were taken in close proximity to the car, either temporarily stopped, sometimes in traffic, or parked while the engine was left idling. The image of Vancouver from the car’s vantage point was meant to be both anonymous and mundane, recording Vancouver’s banal reality as if it were another, distant, soft industrial urban landscape. The street shots revealed a landscape of indifference, de-peopled streetscapes as disfigured places. The blur of fast moving cars seemed to replace the movement of pedestrians on a typical urban street. My intent was not just to picture a local defeated landscape similar to that written about and recorded by Robert Smithson in his observations on the entropic industrial American wastelands of urban disintegration. I also saw the indexing and scanning of the streets of Vancouver as part of a critical discourse on urban expansionism and its social and political ramifications. The term entropic was originally used in physics and mathematics to refer to the measurement of the degradation and disintegration of the universe. Smithson applied this strategy as both a critique and a polemic in an effort to show the frozen features of an entropic expanse; i.e., the photos and video of a street scan would depict the featurelessness of “a place” and its urban expansion, as “unrelenting desolation and as a field of energy, as a positive potentiality.” (Smithson) In the
car rides & street scans of 1969/71, I was a vehicular flâneur of Vancouver's False Creek Basin, an industrial and desolate urban expanse. This was a wasteland not just of buildings, but of human values and street interaction.

The word flâneur became popular in the 1980s after the English translation of Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire in *Illuminations*. The flâneur may have originally been the pedestrian who gazed upon the cosmopolitan and densely populated metropolis of Paris, but I wanted to address the issue of the flâneur as it was manifested in Vancouver experience. In Vancouver the discourse of street signs and symbols bounced and ricocheted meanings within a busy and commodified human universe that was both similar to and utterly unlike what the flâneur would see in a city such as New York. But in the 1970s you had to go downtown to get New York-style crowd shots in Vancouver. Fred Herzog and Ian Wallace's photos of Hastings Street in the *Unfinished Business* exhibition are possible examples of Vancouver flâneur experiences.

Flâneurism operated in relation to my work at a low intensity; it was disengaged. In Vancouver, and in my work, the pedestrian's ambulatory gaze seemed to have shifted to that of the solitary driver, gazing from within the car. The human subject was replaced by the noise and blur of vehicle traffic. The isolated and disconnected individuals were the other drivers in traffic. As an automatic critical response, perhaps this premeditated, conscious photo scanning—the car ride within the city—was the true Vancouver flâneur experience, one of solitariness and alienation. I thought of the images as manifestations of my disinterestedness; I saw this existential approach to photography as opening up a kind of visual research into a civic wasteland, rather than suggesting a critical position in relation to that wasteland.

In this work, I proposed that this scanning of things, as opposed to the photo shoot assignment, would best provide an open-ended observation of a haphazard sub-urban fabric, with its lack of street interaction (the same may be true for residential as well as industrial "sub-urbs"). But this scenery was still worth looking at. The flâneur-approach required an objective and impartial mindset, to record real-time sites in transition, but with disinterest.

Thus, the pictures were intentionally anaesthetic in conventional compositional terms. They also conveyed a boring place with a bad picture attitude. These projects produced mixed results. The young Vancouver artists of the early 1970s who experimented in early photo conceptualism moved onto museum-sized photography as their primary format. Yet these artists are still attracted to the streetscapes that feature the cracks and fissures of the city's streets, the untidy, the unkempt, the derelict parts of the city with empty lots. The monochrome of Vancouver's empty spaces provided a picture implying unease; deserted land tracts have become a Vancouver photo-obsession. This obsession gives a new twist to the idea of the flâneur. Ironically, for most of our city's citizens and visitors alike, our city's reputation is of
beautiful and pleasant place to live. The photo-conceptualist persistence in picturing Vancouver in a critical and philosophical way suggests not only that things here may not be as they seem, but that little about this city's history or present is known as part of public discourse and even less about its future can be predicted. In the true history of Vancouver, its structures, as well as its principles, inevitably evolve or collapse. For these photographers there is a thought-provoking exhilaration and responsibility about picturing this city's life history.

By 1973, I abandoned this particular set of photographic inquiries and experiments. By 1980, the car rides and street scans had evolved, in my mind and for other artists, into location scouting for an entirely new type of newly composed photograph. The question raised by this photographic work was whether the anti-object polemic was the beginning of a search for a new avant-garde art in photography. This radical distancing from traditional photography provided valuable alternatives and lessons of how to re-engage photography within art history and from how to do it from our local point of view. In her *artscanada* review of the UBC Photo show of 1969—an exhibition that included Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, Iain Baxter, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, myself, and many others—Charlotte Townsend astutely summarized this photographic approach as "a series of careless shots... but not dumb... polemical... and an indexing phenomenon." Her final comment of the show also applies nicely to the *Unfinished Business* exhibition: "the camera has now the ability to record and take on anything and everything."

The *Unfinished Business* exhibition opens up the idea of the "street photograph" to this "anything and everything" attitude. The pictures here reveal a kind of devouring approach to street photography, as if Vancouver had no decisive moments, in which the street is just indifferent, sequential and serialized. The small photographs illustrating a textual script, the melancholic or the classic documentary, and the vernacular and the factual reportage; all these many points of view, but none resembling the iconic street photographs of other cities.

In the 30-minute video of car rides and street scans of 2 November 1970 you see the industrial False Creek wasteland animated by motion and by the radio news from Québec's FLQ crisis. This reel-to-reel tape, shot on a Sony portapak, is now, 33 years later, remastered and "baked" so that the recording tape and emulsion would chemically re-bond. Having recently completed this restoration process, the video has now been edited according to the original script.

This video is a rapid version of the 1970 shots in *Instant Photo Information*, of which, twelve hang in this show. The Sony video portapaks of the late 1960s absorbed the scenery electronically with the instant playback feature known through Polaroid film, but otherwise unavailable in conventional photography at the time. The experience of instantaneous recording produced a kind
of time travel through the city. The hand-held camera recorded False Creek with live news radio broadcasts and popular music. False Creek was the symbolic site of the city’s resource extraction industries and contained industrial heavy equipment depots with distribution facilities. This is a video of the active ruins of the soft industrial areas of the city. A site of economic behaviour and as I noted earlier, a site of wasteland scenery worth looking at.

The work of “filming” was carried out on two occasions and at the spur of the moment on what appeared to be important natural and social upheavals of the time. The news event soundtrack that fleetingly passes over the False Creek scenery during these history-making moments seemed to prove yet again that all great events, political and natural, seem to occur elsewhere. To imprint this absence of not being there, especially the gripping events that lead up to the imposition of the War Measures Act on 16 October 1970—the FLQ kidnapping of Pierre Laporte, Québec Minister of Labour and Immigration, and British diplomat James Cross—I scripted French subtitles, translating the local news, emulating the feel of a Godard movie. But the French subtitles can also be seen as a muffled resistance to the political turmoil that Pierre Trudeau initiated. Those of us who thought we were part of the student Left may have felt that it was a crisis, but the video, in its fast and dreary way, is more about the recorded alienation of Vancouver than the FLQ. The unpeopled and unaesthetic treatment of this journey on the outskirts of the city’s “progressive” downtown core, and the spectacular mountain vistas, make the street scans a muffled resistance to a political event, and for the young generation of artists, it meant being outside the aspirations of late modernist practice.

This video-vérité, or road movie of the False Creek area, is a memory disturbance and a comment on this city’s chronic amnesia. My photographs shown in the Unfinished Business exhibition were queued on 6th Avenue, proceeding east toward Cambie Street, where the radio news from Québec begins. In just over an hour, this video traversal of the city’s edge (or underbelly) moves beyond the abject inner urban expanse of False Creek to the featureless streets of the city’s westside. The car rides and street scans run out of video tape; the tape of what is perceived to be a boring, conventional neighborhood in the suburban city runs out, only to reappear as new housing communities in the False Creek industrial wasteland ten years later.