INTRODUCTION

BRUCE GRENVILLE

Sites & Place Names is a changing and expanding body of work produced by Vancouver artist Christos Dikeakos. Through it he raises challenging questions concerning the representation of place and history. To the original body of work, which explored Vancouver and its diverse histories of inhabitation, he has added a second supplementary series which focuses on Saskatoon. It is at once an extension of the methodology of the original project and a preliminary “sketch” for a new project. The development of this supplementary project raises important questions for anyone concerned with strategies of representation and cross-cultural commentary. Can, for example, a locally developed methodology be successfully transferred from one site to another? How is local knowledge embodied within different communities? How do we gain legitimate access to that local knowledge? Is there a significant role for photo-based art in redefining social history? And, more specifically, are there relevant comparisons to be made between the pre-colonial and colonial histories of Saskatoon and Vancouver?

In the essay that follows, Dikeakos outlines the early development of his work and places it within a history of production in Vancouver. He identifies a reflexive, photo-based practice that emerged in that city in the late 1960s, one that placed a strong emphasis on local knowledge. In so doing, it challenged the singularity and homogeneity of the modernist world vision. Dikeakos proposes that Sites & Place Names offers a logical extension of his early practice in its emphasis on the representation of the land and its uses, but now he moves the project beyond an ahistorical model of cultural critique to one that confirms the social and historical complexity of inhabitation.

The challenge, of course, for both non-Native and Native peoples is to speak to the history of the land in a manner that acknowledges the complexity of that history and the plurality of the land’s use. Here in Saskatoon, the Wanuskewin Heritage Park offers a thought-provoking response to that challenge. Its interpreters and displays tell a story of more than 6000 years of inhabitation in this region. The calculated decision to tell this story through a hybrid strategy of representation—one that combines conventional archeological models, traditional storytelling and practical demonstration—is a decision of substantial importance.
We leave Wainuskewin not with the illusion of a complete or singular understanding of Native history in this region, but rather with a new or renewed awareness of our place within a vast continuum of histories.

In his Vancouver project, Dikeakos proposed a similarly persuasive model of representation. These works emerged not only from his own practice and a history of photographic practice in Vancouver, but also from the necessity to acknowledge and explore his place within a broader community. During the development of the Vancouver project, Dikeakos realized there were differing voices within the local Native communities which, in turn, identified differing narratives and histories. This confirmed the need for an awareness not only of the complexity of history but of the complexity of language and its place within representation. In Saskatoon, Stan Cuthand, a Plains Cree scholar and elder, has argued for a similar consciousness of language and its place in any representation of history. His ideas have had a significant influence on Dikeakos’s interpretation of the Saskatchewan landscape and are in many instances incorporated into this project.

It is hoped that Sites & Place Names: Vancouver/Saskatoon will reaffirm the work of those in these two communities who have played an active role both in the reinterpretation of the history and in the representation of this land and will provide a catalyst for those who seek to break with the hegemonic vision of the colonial state.

SOME BACKGROUND NOTES FOR SITES & PLACE NAMES: VANCOUVER/SASKATOON

CHRISTOS DIKEAKOS

Sites & Place Names: Vancouver/Saskatoon is my most recent work, originating from my continued interest in photographing urban reality in a constant state of change. This project refers back to an earlier examination of Vancouver’s so-called urban renewal as the defeated landscape, the theme for an exhibition at the University of British Columbia’s Fine Arts Gallery in 1970.¹

I began by taking snapshots of Vancouver in 1968. These generic black and white photos documented and provided information about the social landscape; they constituted a continuous, materialist examination of the city’s street signs, buildings, sidewalks, roads and, especially, its peripheral urban land tracts. Those of us, including Bill Jones, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, among others, who were making art via these modest snapshots, believed that this simple process would de-mystify