
In 1969 UBC students put together an exhibition called The Photo Show in the recently built Student Union Building that explored new ways of thinking about photography. More and more artists at this time were using photography, not in the traditional Modernist fashion of creating a precious object, but rather in a way that made the camera appear as a mere ‘copying device’ used to illustrate an idea or make a point that often resided outside the realm of the actual photograph. Photography’s ubiquitous nature in popular magazines and advertisements gave it a democratic vernacular that appealed to many artists who were caught up in the anti-hierarchical fervour of the 1960s. Eager to make a statement against the hegemonic ‘big canvases’ of Abstract Expressionism, casual photo-based work gave artists an opportunity to mark out new challenging questions about what art was and what it could be. The 1969 show included works from young students and faculty such as Christos Dikeakos and Illyas Pagonis who curated the exhibition, as well as Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Iain Baxter, all of whom went on to have important artistic careers. In addition to exhibiting their own art, they had the initiative to secure works for the show from emerging internationally artists who displayed a similar evolving ethos of Conceptual art like Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Douglas Huebler, Robert Kinnmont, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman. The current show uses Christos Dikeakos’s archive of the 1969 Photo Show and many of the original works from that exhibition. The Photo Show of 1969 was perhaps the first exhibition of its kind dedicated to gathering both local and international artists primarily interested in looking at new Conceptual photographic strategies.

The Photo Show: 1969/2013 in the newly built AVHA Gallery looks at what made the art scene at UBC in the late 1960s exceptionally exciting and innovative. It asks what was behind the culture at UBC and Vancouver that encouraged students and faculty to produce groundbreaking exhibitions not found anywhere else in Canada. The intent of the current exhibition is to look at the 1969 show and the impulses that were driving the changes in photography in the late 1960s, as well as their continuing relevancies for photography today.

While there were no BFA or MFA degrees offered in 1969 at UBC, it had a vibrant art culture in the few studio, art history and curatorial classes that were given. One of the events that made UBC a particularly interesting place during the 1960s was the popular Festival of Contemporary Arts. It was an annual event held at UBC since 1961 and initiated by B.C. Binning, the first head of the Fine Arts Department. It encouraged a wide cross-disciplinary emphasis in the arts and invited prominent guest speakers such as Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller, as well dancers such as Merce Cunningham, filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, and composers like John Cage. Probably the most exciting arts event of the year in Vancouver during the 1960s, the Festival provided an example of how to break down borders between disciplines, as well as fostering a north-south intellectual dialogue with many American artists, poets, and writers who came up to Vancouver.
UBC in the 1960s had an interesting mix of new innovative artist/teachers such as Iain Baxter, Ian Wallace and Alvin Balkind that brought fresh approaches and ideas to the university. Balkind taught curatorial studies and was the UBC Fine Art Gallery’s first curator. He saw his challenge as a way of making the gallery a locus of intellectual ferment, of discussion, and to be ready for change and experimentation at all times. Balkind’s significant impact on the art scene and his influence on young artists and curators was both profound and long lasting. Some of the shows at the Fine Art Gallery that were held a year before The Photo Show at the SUB Gallery included: Piles by N.E. Thing Company and Random Sample, N=42 by Arnold Rockman. Referring to these exhibitions, Lucy Lippard, the noted curator and author of Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object who was visiting Vancouver at the time, noted that no New York gallery has “come close to presenting projects as provocative as two recent exhibitions at the Fine Arts Gallery.” Piles was one of the earliest photoconceptual exhibitions in Vancouver and several photographs from Piles commissioned by Iain Baxter and taken by Fred Herzog are in the current exhibition. During her visit to UBC Lippard met with Diikeakos and Pegonis and gave them contact information for some of The Photo Show’s Conceptual artists who were then still relatively unknown. She subsequently included the SUB Gallery as part of one of her numbers exhibitions, the 955,000 show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, January 13 to February 8, 1970. More exhibitions at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery in 1969 just prior to The Photo Show included Concrete Poetry, featuring Michael Morris’ Letter paintings and the global concrete poetry movement. It highlighted the growing interest in the relationship between language and visuality that was to become the hallmark of many Conceptual artists.

Shortly after The Photo Show, Diikeakos curated the Four Artists exhibition at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, with works by Tom Burrows, Duane Lunden, Ian Wallace, and Jeff Wall. This was the exhibition where Jeff Wall presented his famous Landscape Manual for the first time, and Ian Wallace displayed his Magazine Piece. Wall’s Landscape Manual and some prints from the manual that are rarely shown are in the current exhibit. Thus within a very short time period in and around The Photo Show, some of the most innovative conceptual and photo based programming to be seen in Canada took place at UBC.

Conceptual art is typically known today as an exploration of the nature of artwork where ideas are preeminent, visuality is downplayed and the fetishization of the unique art object is called into question through various strategies of non-aesthetic practices. However, Conceptual art was not that rigidly defined in the late Sixties and it was just starting to make an impact on the international art scene at approximately the same time as The Photo Show with exhibitions such as “When Attitudes Become Form” Kunsthalle Bern, 1969 and “Ops Losse Schroeven (Situations and Cryptostructures)” Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1969. Besides traditional exhibitions, the notion of non-aesthetic practices and the idea that Conceptual art could take place anywhere allowed the ephemerality of magazines to become an important alternative form of exhibition space and distribution for the dematerialized practices of Conceptual art. There was a

recognition that the magazine as new kind of artist medium and distribution form might circumvent the expertise of the art critic, the exclusivity of the gallery, and therefore transform the reception of art. Ed Ruscha was one of the first artists to publish small bookworks that became a model for many artists in the 1960s, especially those using photography. A number of Ruscha’s books are in the exhibition including the original Every Building on Sunset Strip that was pinned up in the 1969 Photo Show. New York dealer and curator, Seth Siegelaub, was among those who pioneered the use of printed publications – booklets, catalogues and magazines – in the display and distribution of conceptual art. Several of Siegelaub’s publications such as the March 1969 exhibition in a catalogue and Douglas Huebler’s booklet November 1968 are in the current exhibition. Artists such as Dan Graham used magazines and newspapers as a medium to display work that only existed in that format. There was a plethora of inexpensive artist publications in the 1960s as not only a means to reach a wider audience but to also form a critique of the glossy mainstream magazines. They were not driven by a profit motif but by a belief in alternative forms of reception. Many of the cheaply made poetry and literature publications such as those from San Francisco’s City Lights and locally published blewointment press provided models for artist publications and a selection will be on display in the current exhibition.

The Photo Show illustrated an aspect of Conceptual art that was heavily invested in replacing the self-expressiveness of Modernism with a sentiment or, more to the point, a set of rules that forbids expressiveness. The goal was to avoid subjectivity by using preset rules for the execution of a work. In Sol LeWitt’s words all the “planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.” Taste is removed from the work of art by removing the artist’s arbitrary expressive content and in this way Conceptual art was meant to engage the mind of viewers rather than their eyes or emotions. However, the use of rules is also somewhat paradoxical in that the anti-heirarchical ethos of many artists of the late Sixties meant that they were keenly interested in breaking the rules of traditional art making and exhibition practices. Like the revolutionary Parisian graffito of May ’68, “It is forbidden to forbid,” the ethics of refusal are caught in a paradox when the forbidding is applied to itself. The idea that there are no rules is itself a rule. Nevertheless, unlike the sheer anti-authoritarianism of the Sixties protest movements that were hesitant to explicate new laws since they were not interested in seizing power as much as dismantling rigid hierarchies, Conceptual artists used rule making as a way of breaking down the hierarchies of art.

Given that there was no market in Vancouver for the kind of photo work being done in The Photo Show, there was a certain freedom to experiment without the usual fear of failure. As a result, breaking rules and creating new ones was part of the excitement and radicality of this new way of making and thinking about art. The Photo Show was filled with examples that use rules to execute works and to undermine conventional notions of authorship. In Christos Dikeakos’s Instant Photo Series he gave himself the task of driving a car while taking photographs. The rule of driving and taking photographs necessitated a spontaneity that by definition broke almost all the rules of traditional photographic technique and composition not to mention an additional element of danger.
The point was not to capture a ‘decisive moment’ but to document real life situations with a minimum of preconceived notions and to display raw information rather than aesthetic judgements. This raises one of the many contradictions of Conceptual art, it was invested on an attack of the primacy of the visual yet many Conceptual artists where using photography, a medium that is exclusively visual. What Dikeakos’s and other artists’ work in The Photo Show illustrate is a new reading of the pictorial without endorsing some sort of pre-Modernist defence of realism. It was about negating unexamined notions of good taste rather than advancing a technical photographic practice. In fact its snapshot style of the photography that has the look of ‘anyone can take that photo,’ disturbs the idea of taste and rarity by infusing a democratic appeal. The photographs operate in a fashion that reconnects with the physical world in a way that had been lost with Abstract Expressionism. The reuniting with social appearances – in particular photographs of the ‘street’ and their charged meaning in the protest era of the 1960s – reconfirmed art as a social engagement and cleared the way for a new type of photographic practice.

The street has a prominent place in most of Ed Ruscha’s books, as do a given set of rules for each. For example, Twentysix Gasoline Stations document all the gasoline stations on Route 66 between Los Angeles and Ruscha’s home in Oklahoma. He never waivered from his initial idea for each book and followed the pre-set concept to the end. Ruscha’s ‘dead-pan’ way of using the camera as a recording device was adopted by many Conceptual artists as a way to not only break the rules of what constituted ‘good’ photography, but as a way to remove authorial presence of the artist. Vito Acconicci took rule-making to extreme levels when he took a picture while walking down a street every time he blinked in his piece for The Photo Show called Photographic Situation: “Shut-Eye”; “The Camera Eye”; “Eye-Opener”; “Eyewitness.” Dan Graham took a slightly different approach with his Vanishing Point work in which a set of instructions was sent to the show’s curators and was executed by a group of student volunteers. By carrying out Graham’s instructions to create the piece, students participated in the creation of the work and thus something of the artist’s creative experience was communicated to the participants. There is reciprocal flow in this kind of participation as opposed to the usual flow in art from the artist to the audience. The artist placed faith in those that execute the work and the participants engage their minds and bodies in making decisions in how to execute the work as the process crosses back and forth across those social boundaries.

By transgressing existing rules and creating new ones, artists in The Photo Show revealed the poverty of existing tastes and emphasized that art could be much more than pretty pictures. The radical reformulations of photography and art seen in the show debunked the unchallengeable presumptions of what art was and thus acted as a model for resistance against all borders and structures of repressive and unquestionable norms. Despite the fact that Conceptual art has been occasionally referred to by some as apolitical, what needs to be understood in the context of the time is that the challenges put forward by these new photographic practices essentially changed everything in art and opened the way for new conventions that followed. Contrary to Conceptual art’s perceived apolitical stance, Douglas Huebler’s Haverhill Gazette piece is an example of a work that manages to directly link politics and art. It is a work where he gives himself the rule of being a
reporter for the Gazette to cover the Haverhill contingent at a peace march in Washington. The documenting of the contingent discloses the kinds of structures that the U.S. government employed in order to foil any attempts at dissent that would have been otherwise concealed on an everyday basis. Huebler’s presentation of the piece in a very documentary format blurred the line between art and non-art, almost as if his art was trying to be non-art. The neutral copying device like photographs fundamentally end up expressing without expressing something. In the process, new demands are made on the audience, where the viewer is required to be intellectually attentive to the seriality of the photographs that elicit a type of physical interactivity identified with reading. This shift in reception is marked by a practice of art demanding a space of cognitive attentiveness and a more practical domain for thinking and talking about art. The Photo Show: 1969/2013 revisits this moment of changing practices and receptions and provides interesting questions for thinking about the possibility of possibilities.