For more than forty years now, Christos Dikeakos has made works that occupy a threshold space among several of the main traditions of Vancouver art. His development has been a protean elaboration of variants on the possibilities he has recognized within those traditions.

He was among the first group of young artists and art students to get involved with the experimentation in and around photography in the later 1960s, and he organized the first exhibition of this work while still a student at the University of British Columbia. The exhibition, New Attitudes in Photography, included work by already well-known figures such as Douglas Heubler, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, and Ed Ruscha, as well as by the local student-artists who were hurrying into this movement – Iain Baxter, Ian Wallace, Christos, and myself. The work was generally what came to be called ‘photoconceptual.’

Yet, like most of his colleagues, Dikeakos was not really, or not seriously, a photographer in the late 60s. He was more interested in collage and most of the work he did at that time was collage, and this remained the case for many years, until he turned more decisively to photography in the mid-1980s.

This enthusiasm for collage was once again part of the local art and literary scene. The main stimulus, shared by poets and artists, came from the example of the Surrealist publications of the 1920s and 30s in which writers collaborated closely with artists and others, including intellectuals and political activists. This aspect of Surrealism was being rethought and reinvented in the context of the counterculture of the moment, and in the work of radical teachers at both of the city’s universities. Ronald Hunt, an itinerant and somewhat obscure British scholar, was among a substantial contingent of foreigners who taught in the city starting in the mid 60s. In 1969, he created the exhibition Transform the World! Poetry Must Be Made By All! at the then influential Moderna Museet in Stockholm. The show is considered one of the first and still one of the best expositions of the fusion of the radical avant gardes of the 1920s, and its catalogue became a source book for a new generation who were in the process of rediscovering the complexities and excitement of that era. Dikeakos took courses on Dada and Surrealism from Hunt, discovering the collage and publication work of the artists in that movement, particularly André Breton and Marcel Duchamp. Younger artists and writers in Vancouver were reviving and extending the fusion of poetry and found imagery in little magazines such as blewointment, radiofreerainforest, and Tish, as well as in poetry readings that fused into dance and music performances and, soon enough, rock concerts with light shows. In 1971, Dikeakos organized another exhibition, this time The Collage Show, which brought together the work of the Vancouver artists most intensely caught up in this development.

The late Robin Blaser, one of the most important of the American emigrés in Vancouver, was also a significant influence on Dikeakos, and became a life-long friend. Blaser encouraged the young artist to go more deeply into the esoteric iconography and the symbolism of Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors Even (1915-23), and, as part of that dialogue, emphasized the connections between the personal symbolic structure of that work and mythic orders of thought in general. Blaser’s poetry elaborated on those notions over several decades of writing, publishing, and teaching in Vancouver.

Foreword

By Jeff Wall

Christos Dikeakos, Pruning, 2012, ink-jet photograph, 37½ x 28½ in. (95.3 x 72.4 cm)
In 1957, as a ten-year-old, Dikeakos himself had emigrated to Vancouver with his parents from Thessaloniki, Greece; he brought with him memories of traces and shards of the ancient world still underfoot in the contemporary cityscape. The city itself could be experienced as a form of collage, a ‘Merzbau,’ to use the term Dada artist Kurt Schwitters coined for his own room-sized constructions of found materials. These memories played their part in the development of Dikeakos’ insight that the place itself, the place where the artist finds himself or herself, was a vast, layered and concentrated assemblage of fragments of many pasts, different presents, and contending futures.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were also the moment when the revival of the indigenous arts of the West Coast began to surface as a central aspect of contemporary culture in Vancouver. Dikeakos was one of the first artists to notice and become curious about this, partly because of his encounters with Robert Davidson when the two were adolescents. By the early 1960s, at around the age of fourteen, Davidson was already active as a carver, working on the small-scale argillite totems that had become a staple of the tourist trade, but which also acted as entry-points for native artists who were intent on taking things much further. By the later 1960s, Davidson and a number of others, many of them guided and inspired by Bill Reid, had laid the foundation for the emergence of the forms and styles of tribal and clan art as a paradoxical yet inescapable element in the notion of contemporary art in British Columbia. Dikeakos was able, almost instinctively, to make the connection between the references to the distant past exemplified in the form-languages of Coastal Native styles and that of his own native styles, left behind in Greece. Part of the excitement in Vancouver over Surrealism was due to the Parisians’ fascination for and appreciation of the indigenous art and ritual of the Northwest Coast. The fact that the French scholarship of the 1930s was so closely associated with the Surrealist movement had the effect of placing the native arts of British Columbia in the framework of avant-garde art, rather than in that of history or anthropology.
These currents flowed together for Dikeakos – the esotericism of Duchampian symbolism, the fusion of the literary and the visual in collage and page design, the reminiscence of mythic language and its startling presence in both the prehistory of B.C. and its immediate present – all of this further complicated by the new omnipresence of photography and its challenge to the whole structure of the evolution of photography as a gallery or museum art form and Vancouver artists played an important role in this development. Most of those of Dikeakos’ generation, such as Ian Wallace and myself, had made the small monochrome photographs that were characteristic of conceptual art in the 1960s and 70s, but had reconsidered the anti-art presuppositions of that work by around 1980, and had then moved in a different, even opposite, direction, one that engaged with potentials that permitted photography to be considered as a ‘tableau,’ a free-standing, even singular image that was to be experienced. The way paintings had been since the beginning of the modern tradition.

This direction was controversial because it seemed to many to be a revision of the canonical neo-avant-garde impulse to go beyond the established categories of ‘fine art’ or ‘bourgeois art,’ using photography as a means to restructure the viewing experience, the content of the work, and its relation to other social media. The new large-scale photography appeared to be abandoning this project and as such seemed to be moving in a reactionary direction. This controversy continues into the present day.

Dikeakos’ work Sites and Place Names (1988-92), combined dozens of fairly large colour photographs of places in Vancouver and Athens with a folding wooden cabinet containing related material, including maps. The Vancouver work announced his new direction, which involved an extension of his engagement with Native culture and specifically with the history of local sites in relation to the land claims settlement discussions that were becoming increasingly prominent in B.C. politics and culture at the time. The Athens project was a location scouting of an ageing place, contrasting the modern city with the forgotten untidy-to-derelict mythic and sacred precincts. These currents flowed together for Dikeakos – the esotericism of Duchampian symbolism, the fusion of the literary and the visual in collage and page design, the reminiscence of mythic language and its startling presence in both the prehistory of B.C. and its immediate present – all of this further complicated by the new omnipresence of photography and its challenge to the whole structure of the evolution of photography as a gallery or museum art form and Vancouver artists played an important role in this development. Most of those of Dikeakos’ generation, such as Ian Wallace and myself, had made the small monochrome photographs that were characteristic of conceptual art in the 1960s and 70s, but had reconsidered the anti-art presuppositions of that work by around 1980, and had then moved in a different, even opposite, direction, one that engaged with potentials that permitted photography to be considered as a ‘tableau,’ a free-standing, even singular image that was to be experienced. The way paintings had been since the beginning of the modern tradition.

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