



*Eraser Street - Hubris, Humility and Humanity
in the Making of a City!*

Henri Robideau

grunt gallery

Exhibition Dates: April 9 - May 16, 2015

Eraser Street – Hubris, Humility and Humanity in the Making of a City!

Henri Robideau

Exhibition Dates: April 9 – May 16, 2015

grunt gallery

grunt.ca | 604-875-9516

116 – 350 East 2nd Ave,

Vancouver, BC V5T 4R8



Henri Robideau:
the Photography of Dispossession

Clint Burnham

Looking at this remarkable survey - four decades of Henri Robideau's work - you are first struck by its consistency. In 1971, he took pictures of a tent city in Stanley Park. In 2014, he took pictures of a tent city in Oppenheimer Park. But such a simple through-line conceals what are really three connected or entangled histories: dispossession, protest, and aesthetic practice. Here I want to talk in more depth about these concerns and how they are made manifest in Robideau's photography.

Dispossession

Various Marxist critics, including Marx himself, Rosa Luxembourgh, the geographer David Harvey, the Vancouver-based indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard, and the Italian feminist Silvia Federici, have all written about the role of primitive accumulation (or what Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession) in capitalism. Whether originary (primitive) or ongoing (by dispossession), theories of accumulation describe how capitalist societies acquire the resources for economic exploitation, and fight off the threat of over-accumulation by spatio-temporal fixes (the phrase, again, is Harvey's). But Federici and Coulthard have also drawn our attention to the gendered

and colonial aspects of that dispossession. And most recently, in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014), Coulthard has shown how First Nations' special relationship to territory and land has been the special target of state-sponsored and acquisitive politics, whether in terms of resource extraction, indigenous women's access to housing, or the distracting and self-destructive role of the politics of recognition.

This line of analysis is borne out by the history of housing struggles in Vancouver. First of all, it is important to remember that all of Vancouver lies on unceded Coast Salish territory, on the traditional lands and waters of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Watuth peoples. This foundational fact, which risks being neutered and gentrified as politicians, academics, and cultural figures utter it in the form of an empty gesture (no matter how necessary), nonetheless means that ongoing struggles over housing and the like takes place on land and territory that has already been the object of dispossession.

Then, the process of dispossession continues again (anew) as capital seeks to earn more profit, whether building a hotel in Stanley Park, demolishing wood frame houses to construct apartment towers in the West End, replacing social housing in Riley Park with market stock, or the ongoing gentrification of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) from a working class neighbourhood into a bourgeois boutique row. These four acts of accumulation by

dispossession then should be historicized, the better to understand their specificity, as well as the role of Robideau's photographic events. This historicization turns out to be dialectical, both in terms of economic periodization and aesthetic agendas. The Stanley park land grab (unsuccessful) and the West End development (successful) took place during the 1970s, the end times of post-war economic boom times, events which appear in black and white, in the high-modernist, sharp tones of documentary photography. Then, the Riley Park and Oppenheimer Park political struggles take place in the period immediately following the (global) economic crisis of 2007, and concurrent with Vancouver's 2010 Olympics (mega-event as neoliberal response to austerity); these moments are photographed in the digital kitsch of High Dynamic Range (or HDR), a tremendously saturated colour printing that conveys all the tones of contemporary commodified life.

But to better understand this dialectic it is important to turn next to the responses of the people to accumulation by dispossession: I refer, of course, to protest movements.

Protest

A consistent theme in Robideau's photography is the documenting of protest movements, big and small. Indeed, his aesthetic bridges the "micro-politics" made popular by Foucault and post-structuralism and the mass movements supposedly out of date by now. So the Stanley

Park pictures, the Beach Avenue protest against demolition, and the Oppenheimer Park occupation share walls with massive protest marches, in the 1980s, against the BC government's neoconservative budgets (and, in Robideau's oeuvre, against nuclear weapons). So here a bit of historical context is useful to help the viewer to make sense of Robideau's tremendously important political solidarity.

Mud City Estates (July 1971) shows Yippies who occupied Stanley Park (from May, 1971 to April, 1972) to protest a proposed hotel development: "A vacant property that was slated to become a Four Seasons Hotel was occupied after squatters tore down the fence surrounding the site and created a tent and shack city that lasted for about a year." As with any history or event of squatting or protest or occupation in Vancouver, the Mud City took place, as noted above, on what was (always) already unceded Coast Salish territory, and can thus be interpreted as one colonial body squabbling with another. Nonetheless, Robideau's photographs document a moment of resistance against capitalist development, the use of the squat or tent city as a weapon.

Coming Soon: Another Cement Monster (1973 -1975) is more complicated both aesthetically (a series of photographs that rely on cinematic references to embody a ghost-like melancholy) and politically: in the latter case, a years-long struggle against dispossession, the replacement of wood frame housing with a modernist (or even Brutalist) tower, and one

of many protest movements in Vancouver's West End. Here legalistic tactics were used by the protestors, including hand delivering a letter of injunction to the real estate management company Macaulay Nicolls Maitland, with Robideau documenting the office mayhem in a way reminiscent of student protests at SFU in the late '60s.

Robideau would go on to document two great protest movements of the 1980s: anti-nuke marches across the Burrard Street bridge (which were part of global protest movements in those years, but not included in this exhibition) and the Solidarity movement (a broad coalition of workers, women's and community and church groups, that protested Social Credit politics of restraint and neoconservative privatization). But it is with two more recent protests that Robideau returns to themes of dispossession and activism: the destruction of Riley Park social housing, and the Oppenheimer Park tent city.

Aesthetic Practice

One salutary effect of the exhibition form of the retrospective is how it acts as a prophylactic against aesthetic sentimentalism. Nowhere is left melancholy more evident than in the critic's nostalgia for black and white photography, for their trace of the real, the assurance that "this" is how it was. Whether that "this" is photography or reality. Real photography was shot on film, in black and white and developed by the artist in his studio.

Reality was black and white, was simpler, there were good guys and bad guys. And so on.

And, to be sure, it is easy to be seduced by the sharp details in Robideau's 1970s pictures - in the photographs from *Coming Soon: Another Cement Monster*, for instance. The shot of the Beach Avenue wood frame houses being torn down by a backhoe are crisp, all the more so in the details of a building as it folds in on itself, the blacks from shadows created by the very demolition. This is always the paradox of social documentary photography, that Walker Evans and Robert Frank exploited so brilliantly, of course: poverty shoots well. But Robideau's effects here are also due to his careful technical attention to the chemistry of photographic development, to his use of selenium to darken the blacks, and the Agfa papers he used in the 1970s, Brovira (bromide) and Portriga Rapid (chloro-bromide).

But then we have to confront Robideau's more recent photography, his colour assemblages, which arrange in one frame a "Photoshopped" panorama (itself an update of his panoramas from the 1980s), a handwritten text, and a couple of appropriated photographs taken from Google or Apple images. Now the colours are garish, the built Vancouver (especially in the Convention Centre and BC Place series) is banal, and the proper response is to wonder not so much if Robideau has lost his aesthetic edge, but, rather, if the overdevelopment of the city has rendered art photography obsolete. (Here the nostalgia of figures from Jeff Wall

and Ian Wallace to Fred Herzog and Roy Arden is notable: all harken back to an older Vancouver - a nostalgia present also, I would venture, for my own generation in its desire for the 1970s and pre-Expo Vancouver. This nostalgia also comes with its own forms of racial and colonial erasure, to be sure.)

First of all, the proper way in which to think about the transition from black and white to colour in Robideau's case is in terms of the dialectic of analogue and digital. Alexander Galloway argues in his new book on François Laruelle, *Against the Digital*, that analogue and digital cultures are not so much a binary (as in 1s and 0s) but a dialectic, or an antagonism between different philosophies: the continuous versus the discrete, between the catatropic (or mirror) and the diatropic (or lens), between light and dark. Referring to Robideau's technical matters, we can argue that the catatropic is chemical, and the diatropic is digital.

Consider, next, the blocky, choppy edges of the panoramas (above the harbor in the Convention Centre picture, for example). This results from the "stretching" that occurs during the digital process of "stitching" the shots together in Photoshop. These blocks are the digital version of the black edges to be found in Robideau's 1970s and 1980s works. Those earlier frames were a demarcator of photographic honesty à la Richard Avedon: by printing the edge of the frame (even as far as the sprocket, on occasion), the photographer

declared that nothing had been cropped, nothing had been altered. The image was continuous with its production. (Too, Kelly Wood has said that the negative is her archive.)

But with a digital photograph, and with its production via Photoshop, honesty is now discrete, is chopped up, is mixed and recombined. Honesty is simulated. And even the edges of the Photoshopped panorama - what Robideau calls "pixel stepping" - denote a stretching of the image (or the images that make up the image), a metonym for the global surveillance photographs that, courtesy Google or Apple, function as supplements to these panoramas. (I leave aside the other supplements, the texts, which Robideau maintains in their holographic materiality.)

Another way to think about this distinction between analogue and digital photography is to compare two tent cities: the photographs from 1970 of "mud cities" in Stanley Park, and the occupation of Oppenheimer Park in 2014. Here we can think of the referents of the photographs (the tents, the campers) and the form (from black and white to colour). Tents have any number of valences: they are signifiers of aboriginal authenticity, but are also the recreational option par excellence for Canadian campers (and thus possess a sentimental value); they are used for outdoor events ranging from music festivals to military expeditions to resource development; and they, of course, feature in protest movements and occupations. Recent uses in Vancouver include the Red Tent

campaign by the Pivot Legal Society during the 2010 Winter Olympics (when the homeless were given red tents to make their condition more visible); the Occupy tents on the north lawn of the Vancouver Art Gallery; and various tent cities erected to protest homelessness - located by Science World, in Stanley Park, and at Oppenheimer Park itself.

In the same regard, thinking more historically and globally (for David Harvey's spatio-temporal fix, perhaps), artists and photographers have depicted those same tents and encampments, for both social and aesthetic purposes. A panoramic photograph of Edmonton from 1909 (City of Edmonton archives EA-400-1) shows the tents erected by new residents to the city. During the Great Depression, the spread of tent cities across North America (called "Hoovervilles" in the U.S.) led to numerous documentary projects by FSA photographers. More recently, in southeastern Europe, Macedonian artist Saso Stanojkovik made the video installation *Spaces for Protest* (2007-2012), depicting - but also intervening into - an unemployed workers' encampment in the Park of the Freedom Fighters in the centre of Skopje. American painter Lisa Ruyter, who has been working from FSA and other photographs over the past decade, has recently been depicting tent city pictures from the Depression. Finally, in his documentary *Enjoy Poverty* (2008), Belgian artist Renzo Martens has a pointed scene where he depicts the branding of tents in refugee camps in the Congo with UNICEF logos.

Ruyter's paintings use color; as with Stanojkovik's installation, they raise questions of historical and artistic interventions that indulge in aesthetic issues the better to trouble our knowledge of political or social conditions. This problem is directly relevant when we compare Robideau's Oppenheimer Park photographs to the Mud City pictures. Oppenheimer Park, as with Robideau's other digital photographs from the past few years, is shot in HDR, or high dynamic range, a saturated colour that provides a very rich range of brightness or luminosity with a decrease in contrasts of tonality. This super-contemporary format paradoxically reminds viewers from a certain generation (boomers and generation X, perhaps) of the Kodachrome/Ektachrome film colours in the 1960s and 1970s. That is, the colour in the Oppenheimer Park photograph looks like nothing so much as a touristic advertisement or snapshot: the protestors' tent city as sardonic image of Vancouver, (beautiful) British Columbia, the greatest city in the world. The muddy greys and beiges and browns of canvas tents (found in most tent cities of the 20th century, from 1909 Edmonton to 1930s Hoovervilles to 1970s Stanley Park) are now brought into the neoliberal present with the garish synthetic and polyester colours (the blues! the greens!) of lightweight, waterproof tarps and tents.

This is the hard lesson that Robideau's photography finally carries, then: using the most up-to-date technology, in a rich city with extreme disparities of wealth and social

access, a city that treats its poor as so much disposable, "bare life," a city in which the poor and the dispossessed nonetheless fight back, protest, and attempt to create a better tomorrow, in the midst of all of these contradictions and paradoxes, Robideau's photographs, in their very aesthetic and formal conditions, awaken us to our political possibilities, to the necessity of solidarity, to a wide view, a saturated view, of the struggle that continues.

Vancouver-Vienna, January-February 2015

1 <https://vanarchive.wordpress.com/2009/10/23/history-of-squatting-in-vancouver/>

2 Archival images of the '60s protests have been used by Bitter and Weber in their *Events are Always Original* (2010).

3 email, 15 January 2015

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Urban Subjects collective for a residency in Vienna in 2014-15, during which time this essay was researched and written. Thank you to Henri Robideau for the studio visit and helpful technical details, and to Glenn Alteen and Dana Claxton for the hook-up.

EVENTS:

An Evening in the Archive with Henri Robideau: A Fundraiser for the grunt Archive

Saturday, April 25, 2015

Drinks at 6:30 pm, Dinner at 7:30 pm

Tickets \$50, visit grunt.ca

Roundtable on Housing and photography in Vancouver: Henri Robideau

Facilitated by Clint Burnham

Saturday, May 9, 2015 | Time TBA

Speakers: Audrey Siegl, Wendy Pedersen, Lorna Brown, Eugue McCann, Jeff Derksen, Henri Robideau, and Clint Burnham.

grunt gallery gratefully acknowledges support from the Hamber Foundation towards this exhibition and catalogue. The artist would like to thank CUPE 15 for supporting the production of the Solidarity Era series. An additional thanks to the BC Arts Council for the project funding making this exhibition possible.

grunt gallery

grunt.ca | 604-875-9516

116 – 350 East 2nd Ave, Vancouver, BC V5T 4R8

