

COLIN BROWNE / Location Hunting False Creek: An Interview with Christos Dikeakos

This interview originally took place in Kitsilano at the home of Christos Dikeakos on the afternoon of Wednesday, November 18th, 2009.

CB: Chris, you've been making photographs at a certain location in Vancouver for as long as I've known you. Tell me about this site, and about when you started making photographs there.

CD: It's the site of the Olympic Village in False Creek, which was once a big open space in the middle of Vancouver, the blue-collar area of the city. In fact, I worked there, and my father worked there intermittently.

CB: What sort of work?

CD: He worked as a machinist, and his first job in Vancouver was right across from where my studio is now, so it's a very odd thing for me. Of course, the studio was some kind of manufacturing place then. False Creek has always been a site of interest to me because it's got open space, the classic kind of messy, untidy, de-featured landscape that began to change in the late 1960s. It is a place of speculation and inquiry.

CB: Why did that location attract you?

CD: I was interested in the idea of looking at and examining the city, indexing, critiquing, looking at the fabric of the city, and I decided to do it through the car, rather than being a *flâneur* who strolled down the street. With Fred Herzog's pictures, he's walking through the downtown, or Chinatown, or wherever he finds whatever he would call interesting locations, and he would photograph along the street. My idea was that the street no longer gave you a sense of how this metropolis was changing and faring. You really had to see it through the actual lens of the windshield of the car. Of course, the person in the car, the lonely, alienated driver, also spoke of a kind of human condition, so photographing through either the driver's side window or through the windshield became a kind of automatic indexing. At the same time, the car stops, the operator gets out, and takes pictures of certain parts of landscape that are empathetic. And sometimes there's a moment—a kind of *comprehension*. Some of the shots you see

are the result of getting out of the car and taking a shot. So what is actually happening, very early on, is that I'm location-scouting the city, and this continues from the 1960s to the 1980s. By the 1990s it's clear that our post-colonial histories have erased from public memory the First Nations village sites, workplaces, and hunting and gathering areas in False Creek, and what's left are these exhausted landscapes. They're empty, they haven't been fully developed, they look ragged and tired. So I evolved a wonderful way of using a surface with text, and sandblasted images and words through which you could see these landscapes that—how shall I say—looked emptied out, erased, in transition.

CB: Some of these landscapes were created out of mudflats, weren't they?

CD: The land was partially filled in on the south side of False Creek for sawmilling, and for the importation of rock salt from San Francisco for the canneries. The salt warehouse is still there, it's going to become a community centre for the Olympic Village. There were gasworks and boatbuilding, the whole place was a work site. The other side seemed to be the terminus of the railway, and sand from the mouth of False Creek, which blocked the entrance to the industries and extraction plants, was taken and piped over to Main Street to fill in the railway flats. That's a tradition across the country, whether it's Regina or Hamilton, the railway takes over the flats, which in many cases are creeks or river beds.

CB: You talked earlier about the first photographs that you made. Did you have a mentor or photographer in mind when you started making pictures?

CD: In Vancouver, when I began, there were no really great photographers who taught at the art schools, nor was there a really good body of photography like the Malcolmson collection, or Andrew Gruft and Claudia Beck's collection. Later on, of course, Marian Penner Bancroft and others discovered amazing collections of early photography about this place, which resulted in historical reclamation projects, and now all that wonderful work is in the Vancouver Public Library. I didn't really have much knowledge of that. Having no practitioners to look up to, and no photographs to look at, I was looking at magazines. The very first really important books on Depression photography didn't come out until the early 1970s. Photography was considered a minor art. Then conceptual art comes around, and the objectifying and looking at and categorizing of

the world becomes very important, and photography plays an important role in terms of recording a particular activity that happens outside the institution of the studio or the art gallery, and the photographs become little fetishes, or “left-overs” of an event—let’s say a concrete spill, or a glue pour, or whatever it may be.

The other thing is that Vancouver was a painter’s city up until the 1970s, and painting, and the crisis of painting, started to hit with soft edge abstraction, with hard edge abstraction. People don’t even know what that is any more. But artists here didn’t want to be abstract expressionists; that was American painting. So photography, I think, became a counter movement to painting. It was also a movement where we wanted to look at the city. We wanted to look at this metropolis—and I say “we.” Ian Wallace was taking snapshots, I was taking snapshots, Jeff Wall was taking photographs, but the inspiration also came from looking at Ian Baxter’s catalogue called *Piles*, with its single photographs placed together in a loose-leaf binder. Looking at those wonderful photographs of piles of rocks, chains, logs, etc., gave us new radical ideas about sculpture. I began taking pictures of piles of things. It was exhilarating. Looking at that in 1968, and looking at Robert Smithson’s and Carl André’s work, was very exciting.

CB: Many people at that time were looking at *The Americans*—looking at Robert Frank—but you didn’t go in that direction....

CD: I did a show in my student years with Fred Douglas and Lynn Phipps, a photographer working in the downtown eastside in the late 60s who was photographing the conditions in the flophouses in the tradition of Jacob Reese—I was very interested in looking at Jacob Reese’s photography—and those two caught my eye. Another was Nina Rajinsky, who made wonderful street portraits of people. So we did the show. We had figures, and a sense of a critique, a social critique of the city. And that led, as you suggested, to looking at Walker Evans, and trying to figure out if there had been somebody here doing work like his in what was being called documentary photography, but I was also curious about people of my own generation.

But going back to the False Creek flats.... What happened over the period of 40 years? The great reserve continued to shrink, and the messiness, the untidiness... looking at that, looking at the cracks and fissures, became in itself a kind of aesthetic. At the same time there’s something about looking at the city through this shrinking space,

how the city takes shape while constantly changing itself through the lens of this place, with its narcissistic highrises that gleam and at the same time look down at the lowly.

The painters had been drawn to the waterfront. They were engaged by the Modernists, and by a whole variety of styles we're all familiar with, from the Douanier Rousseau simplicity in the painting of E.J. Hughes, with all the work activities and leisure activities that happen in boats—and fishing and logging—to the playful Paul Klee design aesthetic of B.C. Binning, who was an incredible draftsman, like Matisse. He did those wonderful pictures of himself and his wife, and boating, all the explorations of summer along the waterfront. And then, in a more Modernist vein, John Koerner and Jack Shadbolt were painting abstract forms of the future city, looking in dismay at the old, rotting Edwardian wooden city of the downtown core while picturing Vancouver along the waterfront as almost bejewelled.

CB: In Shadbolt's Second World War drawings of Vancouver, the houses are affectionately drawn and also slightly jaunty.

CD: Yes, yes... reminiscent of Thomas Hart Benton's vernacular social landscapes.

CB: Would you say you that beginning in the 1960s or 1970s there was a shift to a more critical approach of the city? Where did that come from?

CD: I think that came from being aware of and reading artists who were also critics or even art historians, like Robert Smithson, who had the ability to write, illustrate, and articulate ideas, even in popular art magazines. It was a wonderful moment. Or Edward Ruscha, who took banal gas stations and looked at them in the "every person's" way, as in, every person can do this. He really didn't want the art attached to it. He called himself "Heavy Industry Publications." So looking at Ruscha, Smithson, looking at magazines... and of course what's being used is photography, which becomes, conveniently, a counter-tradition to painting, to local painting, and at the same time, because of its objectifying role, it became a way of recording and looking at the city. Taking those pictures, thinking about them, re-looking at them, opening up.... Even if the pictures were an incomplete project, or an experiment.... None of us had any idea that after forty years they'd have historical memory. That's the irony. Because they were done in the moment—this is the way it is, this is the condition of this place—and now, all of a sudden, after forty years, these things are historical records.

CB: You said something important there: “This is the condition of the place.” What about the vision of paradisaical Vancouver?

CD: For me it was important to go at the edge of the de-featured, exhausted landscape of the post-industrial city, of the smokestacks. Smokestacks and smoke had been all about making money and jobs. Now they stand for pollution, degradation, and carbon footprint, and they’ve gone elsewhere. So we were witnessing that shift, and with car location-scouting you could drive through the city and think in a stream of consciousness, you could drive through the urban into the suburban and into the country, to the tract houses where, for example, Jeff Wall’s *Landscape Manual* takes us. My idea was to go from the west side of Vancouver into the east side of Vancouver, and I examined that, and at the same time made a couple of videos as well. Racing through and going through and cutting through the urban fabric and looking at it from one area to another is very interesting. Think of Ian Wallace’s *Melancholie de la Rue* where you have three pictures stuck to one another. They don’t really make a triptych, they’re three different pictures. You’ve got the mud flats, with their communal dwellings and mudflat people, and then you have a Volkswagen with a young family peering out at a new development in North Vancouver because they’re looking for a home, and then in the third picture people are under surveillance milling around outside a very brutalist late 1960s building, which is on the occasion, I think, of the Queen coming to the Winnipeg Art Gallery. What is it telling us? How is the city, and the changing life of the city, affecting us? And how do we record it differently from, let’s say, the experience of the Depression photographers? They would get assignment sheets, shooting lists: “Go to cross sections.” “Photograph from here.” There was an agenda, and it was to interpret the society in a certain way. I didn’t want to make pictures like that because we weren’t in a collapse, a human, economic collapse. In fact it was the opposite; this young city was actively building itself.

CB: Was anyone here looking for the “real Canada” in the way that, say, Walker Evans was looking for the “real America”?

CD: I think there was a stronger sense of cosmopolitanism, which perhaps the Modernists brought, being interested in a particular style of painting and engaging it, or music, or architecture. But a newer idea of cosmopolitanism arrived when Lucy Lippard brought a conceptual art exhibition to the Vancouver Art Gallery. It had such an

openness, it was so engaging and exciting compared to an art scene defined by regional Modernism. I was struck by this new idea of cosmopolitanism, with its openness, and its sense of the world and how we'd be affected by that world in Terminal City.

CB: And this in a city that kept rebuilding itself...

CD: Yes. Rebuilding itself and erasing itself on the opposite side of the south shore of False Creek, Noel Best and I were runners-up for a big sculpture commission, but we were disappointed to hear that the city planners didn't want us to make pure sculpture; they wanted rain shelters. This is typical control-freak civic management. They said it has to be a rain shelter. Noel and I were thinking about the history of place, and how we could use text, and there's one piece of text that I'd used a couple of times—"All built" and "All rebuilt." That big pile of concrete debris in the photograph reminds us of how we build and rebuild ourselves, and how there's a sliding level of opportunism here. There's intellectual and aesthetic speculation, along with constant land speculation, in this city of booms and busts.

CB: Is that different from other places, do you think?

CD: Much different, I think. And we also build, in some cases, in a very shabby way. We don't really build wonderful, beautiful buildings. When they build in Seattle, and it could be fifty- or thirty-storey towers, there's nothing frontier about it. It's well built, well finished, there's a whole other sensibility and a vision of great architecture. A lot of the buildings here, especially the real estate towers with their parks and whatever, are just a formula. They all have the same glass, the same exterior, and then, after being critiqued about that, they allowed other architects to put a red or a yellow stripe up and down the building. Well, how pathetic is that?

CB: When you began to photograph the False Creek flats, did you have a sense of yourself creating a critique of property development and city planning?

CD: Yes. There was huge land-shifting and shape-shifting for Expo. Expo 86 represented the province coming out of one of its worst busts while the rest of North America was doing exceedingly well. It was probably because commodity prices had gone up and everybody wanted what BC had; we're the hewers of wood and drawers of water and providers of all things. And the shape-shifting of False Creek took another incredible

turn. In fact, during the site work for Expo 86, it was covered with so much water it actually looked biblical—you know, it was the flood. And in the background you have a couple of highrises or whatever, as if the city is being washed away. You can see this in the photographs from around 1989–1991. So I was Johnny on the Spot, continuing to photograph these sudden, shifting patterns and the major decisions which were being made about what was going to happen to the site.

CB: Did you look at land-use plans?

CD: Yes, I did, when the Olympic Village was proposed. The city put one of their brightest planners in charge of it, because of course the city has millions of dollars of taxpayers' money tied up in it. I talked to him, a young guy, very bright, and I also talked to their head of marketing, and they all agreed that it would be a great idea for me to photograph this project as it's being formed. And the first part of it was to dig it all out and remove all the detritus and contaminated stuff, which of course is immensely interesting, because you're looking at the guts of the place. And then the foundations, creating a new coastline, another new coastline, creating a kind of magic, romantic island. The landscapers were imagining a First Nations kind of island. I found that absolutely hilarious. And every time I went there to take pictures there was always a reason why I couldn't go in. Again it's that controlling sensibility. And then I decided, "OK, if I'm not allowed to go in, I'll just go along the fence, and I'll shoot to see what's along the fence, but also I'll sneak in and take a picture." I could do that up to a certain point. And consequently there are a number of pictures here of squatters pitching up tents—nomadic, homeless guys who are not interested in going into homeless shelters, but are very comfortable setting up camp inside the Olympic city. I was thinking about this place in flux, and thinking about these individuals who don't really want to be part of civic life, who every day have to pick up their belongings, find nourishment, whatever else they want or need, and then set up camp again at some other spot.

The guys camping in those big open spaces project a sense of hopelessness. But I soon discovered that they're very much the individual not wanting to be in synch with the mechanization and noise of the city, and the sense I get when I encounter one of these individuals is one of reserve. We greet one another, perhaps with a smile, but always with reserve.

CB: I've been reading Levi-Strauss on Max Ernst and thinking about Ernst's process of putting two contrary things together in a background that's contrary to the two of them.

CD: If you're looking at foreground/background relationships, you'll see in these photographs really messy foregrounds but optimistic backgrounds; those counter-influencing shifts and meanings are there. You can actually put them in one picture. You don't necessarily have to read them as one continuous picture. That's what I enjoy looking at. And of course this landscape is so rich, there's a sense of picturesqueness. The most picturesque city now, in the Americas, is Havana. It's a city that since the 1950s has stood still. So when you go there, you can't help but shoot like crazy. Then you have to hold yourself back and figure out, "Well, wait a minute, we know the condition of this place. What's the narrative? What are we going to say about it?" The False Creek photographs offer a subject matter worth noting. This big, wide-open space has continued to shrink and shift, and shrink and shrink, and all of a sudden it actually has become something. And that's the end of the story. You never know.

CB: We're putting some of the False Creek images between two images that you shot in Greece. Could you speak about those Greek photographs a little?

CD: When I was in Olympia, in Greece, I wanted to do two things. I wanted to break off a little olive branch with some small olives to give it to our friend Robin Blaser. The olive trees were planted for peace while the Games were on. All the different Greek-speaking tribes and nations—often at war with each other—came together in one place to have this ritual. And I'd forgotten that there'd been a violent earthquake that literally toppled everything. Parts of the temples are in the river, and you can see them, almost like skeletons coming out of the river, and you can see how the river changed course as a result. There were two precincts I wanted to visit—the Temple of Zeus, which was knocked down, where all of the columnar drums were lying around like wheels and left that way—very romantic, violent—and the other was where the famous sculptors and artists worked. They made wonderful, realistic sculptures of the winners of races, who were then worshipped almost as demigods. Unlike the artists who crafted their likenesses, and who were considered to have imperfect bodies, because they were labourers. They were artisans. The same thing is true today. So I wanted to see the tiny little operations where the artists made some of the greatest sculpture of that period.

And I could see the plinths, with maybe a bronze foot left behind, because the figures were all chopped down and melted. The row of sculptures went on for two blocks through the sacred grove of olive trees. As a winner you'd receive either daphne or an olive branch. And of course a sculpture in your name and likeness for posterity.

Meanwhile, I'm walking on my False Creek walks—and I can't get in or I've given up—and I'm thinking, "Why should I become the official photographer for this very controlled, conservative vision of an Olympic Village?" If you've seen it... it's a real yawn. The architecture, everything about it. There seem to be no public places for people to meet and interact, to have a drink and something to eat along that route; it's just made for walking and cycling. So, along the walks you notice things. I'm checking to see the progress—can I take a shot through the fence, or not, or is there an opening—and all of a sudden I notice this Scotch broom, which of course is the scourge of Vancouver Island, which I find out was brought by the Scots, by fishermen who set up camps along the coast for their gardens. They brought certain important plants with them. And here is this thing announcing May, and late spring, and saying, "Look at me. Here I am. For your enjoyment." Absolute golden yellow, and I'm thinking to myself, "This is too good to be true. By the Olympic Village." This lowly little plant had sprung up, I hadn't noticed it before, and it seemed to have grown up overnight, offering me visions of golden dreams of what will happen on the other side of the fence a few years from now. And here it is, an immigrant to this part of the world. I remembered the olives planted in Olympia, and I thought, "Well, here's my counterpart for the olive. Another little sacred tree making its announcement." You know, these things are fragile, they come up, they have their moment, and then a week later they're gone.

CB: So now we have two views from the Temple of Zeus, one in the so-called old world and one in the so-called new world. Is the Olympic Village the destiny of False Creek, do you think?

CD: The Olympic Village will be some sort of legacy. But when you really look at it, it doesn't offer anything close to what I'd call an interesting vision with respect to this place. It's the way that city planners have almost litigated how things happen, how they control everything, how they've lost a sense of what a truly great city is. They don't realize that chance plays an important role in human interaction. It's too controlled, like everything else about this town. And the whole idea of "Vancouverism,"

it's exported everywhere, but really, what are we exporting? We're exporting the idea of Granville Island, which we turned into a marketplace, an art school, and a tiny bit of housing. That's why it's successful. But the rest of Vancouver is an "ism." It's all about real estate development, and that's what's gone to Dubai and Texas and everywhere else. And I find that incredibly disappointing.

CB: I remember you telling me about meeting Robert Davidson at the Carnegie Centre when you were kids. When you first started photographing in the False Creek area, were you aware of, or were you thinking about First Nations use?

CD: The only thing I knew was that Kits Point was an old Indian reserve. I was told that there was an Indian reserve there, and that it had some connection to Chief August Jack Khahtsahlano. Much later, when I started going to the archives, an archivist came up to me and said, "You can buy this book for \$15." It was *Conversations with Khatsalano*. And that's how I discovered the transcriptions of the conversations between Khahtsahlano and Major J.S. Matthews, the first city archivist. They were great friends and lived close to one another. Khahtsahlano, who was born in 1867 in the village of Snaug, near the site of the Burrard Bridge, and who died in 1967, had an enormous amount of history and knowledge of this place, which alerted me to the dichotomy. This isn't just a place of economic behaviour during the 1920s or 1980s, it has another wonderful history.

CB: To this day the central narrative is the settler narrative, isn't it?

CD: In the late 1980s I started thinking about this, and I'm doing the project in Athens, I'm photographing all the sites and place names in Athens after talking to Robin Blaser about the world being out of synch, about the world being boxed in, about the fact that we're not paying attention to the mythic world, or we're just paying too much attention to the real world, or what we think is reality. Robert Duncan's on his mind, and also Charles Olson, who's talking about how you must look at maps. So I'm thinking about this. I pick up a guidebook that's totally out of date, but it tells me where Plato's Academy is, or where certain temples are, which now look derelict and out of place in the city. So I'm thinking, "Look at these wonderful contradictions." And I decide to shoot the city in a very conceptual way, perhaps in terms of a tussle between its origins and how it's growing up. So *Sites and Place Names Athens* is the name of the project, I have the

photographs and all the images, and while flying back to Vancouver I feel homesick. I'm thinking, "I'm not going to do this. I'm going to look at the place where *I* live." Because I'm actually a Vancouverite, I'm not an Athenian. And I'm going to take a good look at the whole idea of bicentenaries and tercentenaries, of the "discovery" of this place and the ensuing dichotomy, and I was well prepared to do this, knowing quite a bit about the art and culture. So I spent about a year doing primary research to figure out my locations, and then looking at the maps of the land claims, the land dispute maps of Vancouver. Getting access to local band offices took another six months, because they were wondering, "Who are you?" This white guy!

CB: Where the Olympic village is now, do you know what that site was?

CD: There's only one thing that's absolutely certain about that site; it was called "Suicide." It's on the opposite shore by the Cambie Street Bridge, so it would be where the road starts. One of the elders from both villages—Squamish and Musqueam—was asked, "What is this place?" "It's 'Suicide,'" he said, "somebody committed suicide there." And then, "I can't tell you." And that's all there was. That's all I remember. Part of False Creek is referred to as "Hole-in-Bottom," where natural springs bubble up and water pours forth, which attracts fish, and sturgeon, which are migrating down through these pools and feeding grounds. It was a good place to catch sturgeon. I think False Creek was basically a hunting and gathering place. Ducks. Herring. Elk was processed there and sold to the fur traders and lumber guys so they wouldn't starve. People don't realize that. And of course there was a village at the mouth of False Creek, and the First Nations people who lived there on the reserve were hustled out to build the Burrard Bridge in the 1930s. There's also a place called "Separated Points" on Main Street where you could walk across Main when the tide on the mudflats went out; that was the high point.

CB: Now the site named after a sacred olive grove in Greece.

CD: Yes, now it's the *Olympic* village.

CB: Named after the home of the gods.

CD: If the current construction is the best we can manage with millions of dollars of taxpayers' money, it's my guess that it would disappoint the old Olympic gods. As any

mortal can see, it's a commercial housing development. After 40 years of photographing this place, all I see is a failure to animate and enchant our social spaces and places with vibrant cultural and architectural visions. The opportunity to experience the range of what the gods have to offer, from the disorder of the wild man Pan to the serenity of Apollo, is absent from this Olympic bit of False Creek. In the recent past, Vancouver had glimmers and promises of a bold architectural vision. This could have been a first step toward a recovery of the public world.

CB: Do you now miss or regret the passing of the old industrial flats and wastelands with all their enchantment and their potential energy?

CD: I regret the loss of the spectacle of that ever-changing place. The interest it held for us over the years tells us as much, in a way, about the art in this city as it does about our history. The site stood for so many of the ideas that were alive in the visual art of the late twentieth century. I was coming to the end of the project by 2005. There's a brand new neighbourhood there now, and it's the 21st century. We'll see what this new century asks of us.