

SEDUCED BY MODERNITY

The Photography of Margaret Watkins

Mary O'CONNOR and Katherine TWEEDIE

Montreal and Kingston:

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007

321p., illus., \$49.95



FRED HERZOG

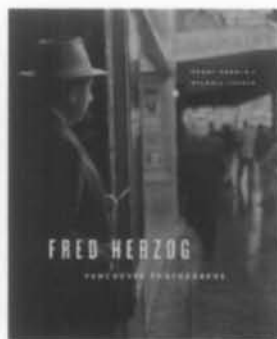
Vancouver Photographs

Grant ARNOLD, Fred HERZOG,

and Michael TURNER

Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2007

160p., illus., \$45



Two recent publications on photography aim to awaken interest in Canadian artists whose contributions have been missed or undervalued until now. *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins* is the biography of the Hamilton-born artist who has previously been known and appreciated for Pictorialist and advertising photographs made while living in New York during and for a decade after the First World War. The book has been co-authored by Mary O'Connor, a professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster and Katherine Tweedie, a photographic specialist and retired professor of Studio Arts at Concordia. *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs* is a photographic book published in conjunction with the first major exhibition of his work, organized by Grant Arnold, curator of British Columbia art for the Vancouver Art Gallery. The two books are

comparable to the degree that both fill gaps in our knowledge of photographic Modernism. They are equally thought provoking in terms of the authors' attempts at answering reasons for those gaps. In other respects, the books are significantly different. An institutional perspective frames the Herzog project, while second-wave feminism plays an important role in delivering the portrait of Watkins. The authors were working with different expectations of reception, and they were not wrong. Although not entirely obscure, Herzog's remarkable oeuvre broke over the Vancouver art scene like a wave; O'Connor and Tweedie's long anticipated monograph has been received by the photographic community with pleasure and relief.

Margaret Watkins was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1884. Until the age of fifteen, she was a child of bourgeois privilege. A combination of parental health crises and business failures brought the family down the social ladder and established certain productive tensions in Watkins' life: a restlessness with bourgeois domesticity and a desire for a home of her own; a sense of indebtedness to her Glasgow aunts and an independence of mind. She left Hamilton at the age of twenty-four and never again lived in Canada. Having been pushed by the family's circumstances to turn her creative talents to account, she headed for the Roycroft Arts and Crafts community in East Aurora, New York, where working as a chambermaid, she learned new skills such as book illumination and was introduced to the movement's marriage of utopian ideals and cottage industry. Moving to another summer place, Sydney Lanier Camp that catered to the escapist desires of the rich, Watkins encountered a stricter aesthetic code as well as its usual complement, free love. In her summers at Lanier she made soft-focus images of campers and Bible plays, both contrived with the latter excruciatingly so. Away from the Camp, she learned photography at Arthur Jamieson's portrait studio in Boston. She went on to study at the Clarence H. White Summer School in Maine where she produced increasingly disciplined, lucid views of the landscape at water's edge. The reader begins to see something of the talent that would make Watkins' reputation over her next thirteen years in New York.

Three chapters of the book are dedicated to the New York period from 1915 to 1928. This is the Watkins that Canadian photographic specialists may have thought they knew. Of the eight works by Watkins held by the National Gallery of Canada, six belong to this time. The context of their creation is clearly illuminated by O'Connor and Tweedie, who patiently trace the evolution of Watkins' style from Pictorialism into Modernism along with her intelligent application of advanced formal and philosophical ideas to the burgeoning world of photographic advertising. Watkins' work was widely exhibited during this period, winning many prizes; and she was increasingly active as a teacher, executive member of the Pictorial Photographers of America, and personal assistant to Clarence White, an involvement that would blight the end of her New York career and effectively drive

her from the field. The ins-and-outs of the legal battle are evenly handled by the authors and none of it is too surprising given the stinginess of human affairs. Far more interesting are the authors' analyses of Watkins' pictures, using background information on the cult of healthy bodies and materialist appetites to inform our reading of nudes and domestic still-lives. To understand *Still Life with Mirror and Flowers* (1925-27) as a study for Macy's department store advertising, enlarges our appreciation of the intersections between photographic art and photographic experience in the pages of a "woman's magazine." Appreciation for the finer things, instilled in Watkins as a girl, persists in these photographic objects and makes the transition from her Victorian upbringing to her Modernist attitude rather more predictable than puzzling.

Watkins left for Europe in 1928, another rupture in her life in that she never worked in advertising or editorial photography again. She continued to photograph, however, in bursts of activity on her travels through Europe and in the former U.S.S.R. Although a tourist, she thought as a photographic artist, exploring interior and exterior spaces for their interesting conjunctions of soft light and modern engineering. In Leningrad and Moscow, she favoured signs of the "new society" such as reconstruction projects, massive posters, and child-care arrangements for the workers. In Glasgow, between stints as a caregiver for her aging aunts, she photographed the industrialisation of shipping on the Clyde River. The authors explain Watkins' attraction to the river as a way of breaking out of her aunts' claustrophobic environment – one that she would herself perpetuate as an isolated woman in her last years. The river seems also a reminder of other picture-places – the water's edge in Maine, the Seine in Paris; dappled light and patterned reflections being the attractors for a photographer of Watkins' predilections.

Seduced by Modernity is a biographical treatment of Watkins the creator. Her affective life inside and outside the family or within photographic circles is considered only as it intersects with periods of creativity. Even her stint as a landlady after World War II is narrated in terms of intellectual growth and musical appreciation. The authors immersed themselves in the legacy of Watkins' "daft solitary enthusiasms" (p.261). Watkins accumulated books, magazines, newspaper clippings, cards, and programmes, annotating these things with comments and exclamations. She also wrote poems and letters, maintaining some Canadian friendships from girlhood to the end of her life. These things contextualise Watkins' photographic production and contribution to photographic Modernism, and the biography is richly informative on those levels. Despite Watkins' early exit from Canada, the book can also claim a place in Canadian cultural history. It adds a photographic chapter to the history of expatriate Canadian artists and writers whose resonance in the Canadian imagination is perhaps heightened by their decision one day to leave.¹

O'Connor and Tweedie take a balanced look at Watkins' legacy. They describe her photographic work with close, loving attention. They identify

better-known American photographers Margaret Bourke-White, Paul Outerbridge and Ralph Steiner as her students. The authors also note that Watkins' work was out of circulation from the 1930s to the time of her death, and only came to light gradually through exhibitions and books on the influence of the Clarence H. White School of Photography and the work of women photographers, research conducted mainly by feminist cultural historians. Watkins' inability to stick it out in New York or reluctance to return might have been framed by O'Connor and Tweedie as a personal tragedy and a collective loss. That they stay their hand is the very strength of this biography, honouring Watkins for the fine work that she did and leaving her more ordinary moments open for ordinary people to walk in.

Born 1930, in Bad Friedrichshall, Württemberg, Germany, Fred Herzog's early life was full of the violence of war and the upheaval of displacement. By contrast, his ideas about photography and the body of work that he began to produce in the 1950s appear to have been formed with remarkable coherence and confidence, despite the lack of critical and institutional attention. Herzog immigrated to Canada in 1952, and was established in Vancouver by the following year. He began making colour photographs at that time, and eventually found a job as a medical photographer, in 1961, becoming head of the Photo/Cine Division, Department of Biomedical Communications at the University of British Columbia. He held that post for twenty-nine years, retiring in 1990.

In between, Herzog occasionally exhibited his photography – there was a solo exhibition at Mind's Eye Gallery in 1972 – and he also did some teaching in fine arts departments at Simon Fraser University (1967-69) and at the University of British Columbia (1969-74). He was active during the first stage of the West Coast Photoconceptual movement and is indeed credited for his participation in the N.E. Thing Co. (Iain and Ingrid Baxter) *Piles* project of 1969. Just prior to retirement from the Photo/Cine Division, Herzog's photographs began to attract the level of attention that would lead to the Vancouver Art Gallery's 2007 retrospective. His work was included in thematic exhibitions organized by Helga Pakasaar (Presentation House, 1986), Roy Arden (2001), and Bill Jeffries (2003), as well as in exhibitions whose titles hooked into a growing appetite for colour among photographic theorists and collectors.

Herzog's street photographs were colour slides, which in the fifties and sixties were mainly identified with such popular themes as fall foliage and football as well as advertising. Street photography was an important genre for photographic artists, but it was practiced almost exclusively in black and white. In the collection of Herzog's work edited by VAG curator Grant Arnold, that rule is reversed. Colour not only predominates but it also seems right, so that Herzog's own black and white images (and there are some) stand out as curious bits of punctuation – reminders of a photographic regime that ruled by standards of monochromatic seriousness.

Grant Arnold reviews this history in his introduction to the book, explaining the neglect of Herzog's work in terms of institutional collecting policies, the association

of colour with advertising and by gatekeepers such as the critic A.D. Coleman who in 1971 admitted his "blind spot" about colour photography, declaring it "too damn 'realistic' for its own good." (p.5, 19) Herzog shot Kodachrome and presented his images in sequenced slide shows of the originals. Arnold states that this would have been impossible in a gallery setting: "the shuttling clicks and turns of the projector, the sudden appearance and disappearance of images in a darkened room." (p.5) This explanation is not quite right. At one end of the spectrum, Michael Snow was producing work in the sixties that included colour slides in carousel projectors (*Sink*, 1969-70, *Slidelength*, 1969-70). At the other, there were scores of slide shows produced by the Still Photography Division of the National Film Board to be shown in theatres and darkened gallery spaces. Strikingly close to Herzog in both subject matter and style, Helen Levitt, a highly influential New York street photographer, began working in colour in 1959. Fifteen years later the Museum of Modern Art presented her images in a continuous slide presentation. So it could be done and the reasons that it was not done have not been run to ground in Arnold's essay. Indeed, it is only in the interview that we learn that Alvin Balkind included thirty-six of Herzog's colour prints in an exhibition organized in 1969 for the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, an exhibition that subsequently went to the National Gallery and then toured to various cities in Canada (p.29). The reception of this exhibition is not discussed in the interview and the record shows that National Gallery did not acquire any of those prints. But there was some interest in Ottawa: in 1976, the Still Photography Division purchased twelve of Herzog's Ektakolor prints and sixteen have recently been added to the collection, now held by the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. Further complexifying this legend of neglect are Arnold and Herzog's reminiscences about his connections – social and professional – with the Vancouver arts community. Herzog found that photographs were accepted: "No different from now. You know, it is amazing the way photography burst upon the scene in the '60s. It was quickly accepted...." (p.29) This period of photographic history has been opened up by Arnold's probing and genuine affinity for Herzog's work, but there are many questions left unanswered by the writing in this book.

In interviews, Herzog and Arnold touch on the cultural trope of the *flâneur* and there is in fact an image that situates that figure on a Vancouver street: *Flâneur, Granville*, 1960. Inarguably appropriate to street photography, the figure leads Arnold's essay from Charles Baudelaire through Walter Benjamin's contagious melancholy to the socio-spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre. For Arnold, the figure is also a *modus operandi*: he understands Herzog's street photography as formally expressing attachment to an embodied vision. Herzog supports this in interview with references to literary realisms – John Dos Passos, for example – and his desire "to know what the city feels like" as both *flâneur* and actor, by seeing and sometimes by *being seen* in a way that generates encounters and enriches the visual narrative. Some of these encounters are with the self. In the late fifties and sixties, Herzog

made a number of images of shop or restaurant windows in which a person looking out may or may not be aware of Herzog taking the picture, but the spectator most certainly sees the photographer-actor as a shadowy reflection in the windowpane. In the early sixties, American photographer Lee Friedlander took a number of self-portraits in this manner and in similar circumstances, by haunting working people's main streets, though never *ever* in colour.

At the end of his interview with Herzog, Arnold asks the inevitable question about the relationship between Herzog's work and that of the Vancouver school of photoconceptualists. As curator for the Vancouver Art Gallery, Arnold is interested in making those kinds of connections and filling gaps in the timeline of Canadian photographic history. Herzog's answer is considered. He admires the work of a number of these artists, especially their realist images or images addressing issues that effect real people – images that intersect with his own formal and social concerns and anchor them in a particular place.

Michael Turner's essay focuses on the representation of Vancouver in Herzog's work. Herzog's pictures are so taut, so perfectly framed, so complete as Modernist visual statements, that one might forget the conditions of time and place from which they were extracted. Turner makes us see the importance of the vernacular, not only as something recorded in Herzog's work but as its motor. The street life of Vancouver in the fifties and sixties inspired Herzog in its particulars: the vitality, the grit, the blaring graphics, the cheesecake – signs of plenty and signs of want compressed in the same window display of second-hand watches, gadgets, wrenches, and cameras. Turner uses Herzog's imagery to understand better the transition that Vancouver has gone through, from its resource-based past to its future-minded global economy.

Will the history of Canadian photography be rewritten by the appearance of these revisionist collections? No, for there is no canon to revise. The coincident appearances of *Seduced by Modernity: The Photography of Margaret Watkins* and *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs* allow us to consider just what kind of photographic history we should be writing.

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Note

1 An excellent recent study of this phenomenon is Nick MOUNT, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Dealing primarily with writers, Mount nevertheless includes illustrated books and periodicals published in the late nineteenth century when Watkins was growing up in Hamilton.