



Demeter and Persephone (?)



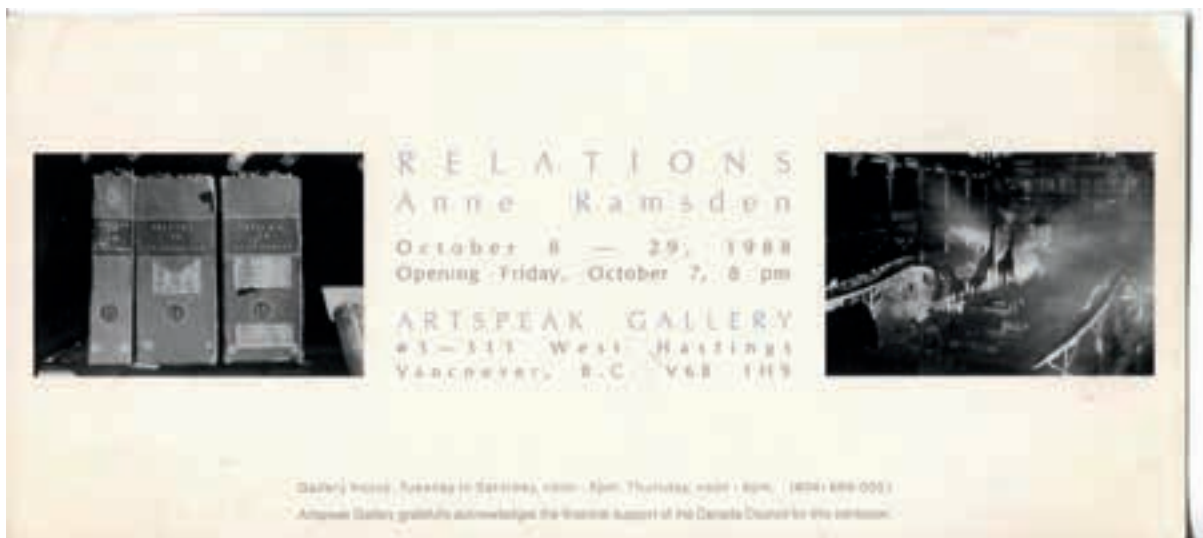
P O S S E S S I N G A

Detail, Anne Ramsden, *Relations* exhibition catalogue, 1988, detail. With permission of Anne Ramsden and Artspeak gallery. (Photo: author)

Relations, 1988: Photographic, postmodern, feminist

JOHANNE SLOAN

In 1988, when Vancouver's Artspeak gallery presented Anne Ramsden's (b. 1952) photo-based exhibition *Relations*, also producing a catalogue with a featured text by Reesa Greenberg, they were giving West Coast audiences a taste of Montreal's postmodern feminism (Fig. 1). Ramsden was one of an impressive roster of women artists who undertook experimental photographic work in Montreal during the 1980s: Jocelyne Allouche (b. 1947), Raymonde April (b. 1953), Céline Baril (b. 1952), Dominique Blain (b. 1957), Geneviève Cadieux (b. 1955), Sorel Cohen (b. 1936), Moyra Davey (b. 1958), Martha Fleming (b. 1958) and Lyne Lapointe (b. 1957), Lorraine Gilbert (b. 1955), Angela Grauerholz (b. 1952), Nicole Jolicoeur (b. 1947), Nina Levitt (b. 1955), Lani Maestro (b. 1957), Sylvie Readman (b. 1958), Cheryl Simon (b. 1955), Cheryl Sourkes (b. 1945), Barbara Steinman (b. 1950), Nell Tenhaaf (b. 1951), and Jin-me Yoon (b. 1960).¹ I want to argue that these women were part of a network of artists, writers, curators, magazine editors, gallerists, translators, teachers, students – all committed to expanding the field of photography, all engaging with feminist ideals, all caught up one way or another in the fever of postmodernism. This burst of innovative photo-based activity in Montreal never coalesced into an identifiable, nameable movement, and what I'm describing has not yet been fully written into histories of Canadian or Québécois art. Using the term “network” makes sense, though, because of shared concerns, and because there was never more than two degrees of separation between all the women “actors” active in the Montreal artworld of the 1980s. In 1989, the artist, curator, and writer Cheryl Simon spoke to the intellectual and aesthetic impulses that predominated at this time: “Sifting through the libraries and archives, *re-viewing* the image banks of our histories and folklore, we began to *re-search*, *re-write*, *re-present* and *re-address* the underlying mechanisms of power in the anticipation that there could be . . . other truths.”² Whether through visual art or writing, this network was indeed producing knowledge (“other truths”) about gender, representation, power, and historical consciousness. Ramsden and Greenberg were both embedded in this Montreal network, and so my article does circle back to Montreal. The Vancouver context for the *Relations* publication also matters,



1 | Invitation to *Relations* exhibition at Artspeak, 1988. With permission of Anne Ramsden and Artspeak gallery. (Photo: author)

though, not least because there too the post-conceptual status of photography was being interrogated, and also since Artspeak was one of the city's recently launched artist-run centres (ARC), dedicated to fostering "dialogue between visual art and writing." Artspeak's mandate, and their publication of the *Relations* catalogue, attest to how the print culture of contemporary art was reinvented during this period as artist-run centres increasingly embarked on publishing ventures. Circa 1988, questions were being posed about what arts publications looked like, what their purpose was, what community they served. The visual and material properties of an exhibition catalogue were not to be taken for granted.

The *Relations* catalogue is 24 pages long, staple-bound with a paper cover, and is unusually wide when open: 24 × 65 cm; it was designed by David Clausen, who worked on a number of Artspeak's early publications. Ramsden's sixteen black and white photographs from the exhibition are presented in pairs across four double-page spreads (Fig. 2). (The catalogue uses the venerable art-historical term *diptych* to describe this systematized pairing.) This sequence of photos offers glimpses of museums that house ethnographic displays, historical documents, natural history, decorative art, and so-called fine art. Below each pair of photographs the catalogue reproduced Ramsden's textual fragments that in the gallery had taken the form of vinyl lettering affixed to the wall. The exhibition title, venue, and dates are inscribed on the first page, while the last page has acknowledgments and a sentence about

the original dimensions of the photographs. Otherwise, the only text in this catalogue is Greenberg's piece of experimental writing – an associative, sometimes-rhyming riff on the interconnectedness of museums and photography, which appears in the form of isolated paragraphs, laid out in the catalogue in such a way that mimics the arrangement of photographs on the page.³ It must be noted that Greenberg's text never mentions Ramsden or the *Relations* exhibition directly, and in this way avoids the most conventional attribute of the exhibition catalogue – ie. the scholar's authoritative explication of the artwork on show, which, in turn, is supposed to suture an individual artistic practice to the institution, to national narratives, to formulations of genius, to the market, etc. Because of the oversize format, the artful documentation of exhibition material, and the experimental text, this publication can be deemed a "photobook." According to Di Bello and Zamir, editors of a volume on this topic, one of the most salient features of the photobook genre is that "image and text work within a dialectical relationship."⁴ They also note that, while sometimes linked to exhibitions, "photobooks speak of a tactile engagement with images beyond the visual, for which there is no equivalent in the gallery space."⁵

This hybrid exhibition catalogue/photobook *Relations* was but one result of the publishing initiatives flourishing across Canada's artist-run centres, circa 1988; Artspeak was a leader in this regard, producing numerous catalogues based on solo exhibitions (by Allyson Clay [b. 1953], Mark Lewis [b. 1958], Christine Davis [b. 1962], and Roy Arden [b. 1957], all in 1988)⁶ while the form and content of arts publishing was being reimagined elsewhere, too. For instance, A Space gallery in Toronto produced a multi-authored catalogue for a group exhibition, *Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation*, an example of the socially-engaged practices espoused by many ARCs, while the publication's inclusion of "artworks," "textworks," and artists' statements, along with a free-standing bookwork by Montreal artists Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, helped to erode the barrier between artists and voices of critical authority to be found in more conventional exhibition catalogues. ARC publications weren't always tied to exhibition programming, and so (still in 1988) YYZ Gallery in Toronto published a book of essays by curator/critic Philip Monk, while Artexte in Montreal put out an artist's book by Nicole Jolicoeur. In such ways the seemingly dispersed publishing schemes undertaken in dozens of artist-run centres across the country had a cumulative, re-territorializing effect. This cultural model is precisely what the *From Sea to Shining Sea* project from the year before (1987) had so persuasively demonstrated with its list-like presentation of small-scale exhibitions, performances, publishing initiatives, and one-off events – that contemporary art in Canada was a tremendously energized field, and that this far-flung,



Demeter and Persephone (7)



In the Metropolitan Museum of Art

P O S S E S S I N G A N T I Q U I T Y

2 | Anne Ramsden, *Relations* exhibition catalogue, 1988, detail. With permission of Anne Ramsden and Artspeak gallery. (Photo: author)

dispersed activity should be celebrated and not synthesized into a uniform national narrative.⁷

This doesn't mean that the ARC system was ever fully alternative or autonomous, and in fact an "umbilical cord of gold" (Clement Greenberg's way of referring to patronage) would lead directly back to the state.⁸ If the first ARCs were ad-hoc initiatives, by the 1980s the federal government was responding to the collectively-run organizations springing up across the country with sustained lines of funding. As Anne Whitelaw explains elsewhere in this issue, the Canada Council for the Arts' funding of art magazines and exhibition catalogues would initially be justified according to a nationalist rhetoric, in that each new publication was supposed to contribute to a strengthened national culture. The distribution of small-press or one-off publications would remain unpredictable, however, and even today it is difficult to track what was produced over the years and where it



Darwin in his study



In the British Museum (Natural History)

P R E S E R V I N G O R I G I N S

ended up. Such is indeed the case with the *Relations* publication, which for some reason was not entered into the *Journal of Canadian Art History*'s 1990 comprehensive-looking overview of "Recent Publications on Canadian Art, 1987–89," even if another Artspeak catalogue from 1988 does appear.⁹ And then, it turns out that the library at Concordia University (where I work) doesn't own a copy of *Relations* – a reminder of how easily ARC initiatives could remain off the radar of the country's major public institutions.

AA Bronson has remarked that in its earliest manifestations Canada's artist-run movement amounted to a "countercultural cross-country tsunami."¹⁰ His language is apt because the initial desire to launch new art spaces occurred alongside countercultural, genuinely utopian ambitions to re-imagine education, work, family structures, sexuality, and so on. Both Vancouver and Montreal are integral to this early history because of Vancouver's fabled Intermedia (formed in 1967) and Western Front (founded

in 1973), while in Montreal it was the launching of the equally mythic Véhicule Art, Optica (both in 1972), and Powerhouse (1973) that signalled a seismic shift in the local scene, with art spaces that were neither commercial enterprises nor state-run museums.¹¹ A second wave of artist-run centres emerged in the 1980s, though; in Vancouver, Or Gallery was founded in 1983, grunt gallery in 1984, while Artspeak was launched in 1986 – which is to say, only two years prior to Ramsden’s exhibition there. Founded by writer Jeff Derksen, artist Keith Higgins (b. 1959), and curator Cate Rimmer, Artspeak was initially affiliated with the Kootenay School of Writing (ksw), another collective whose artist/writer founders had announced: “the Kootenay School of Writing is a response to the failure of most public institutions to serve their artistic communities.” If serving a community was considered the ultimate goal, ksw proposed that writing would be a key part of this process, alongside the creation of new exhibition spaces and the recognition of artists as cultural workers. This emphasis on writing can be understood using the (Foucault-derived) concept of discourse that cropped up everywhere throughout the postmodern 1980s: and so one could say that writing was a way to actively intervene in the dominant discourse about art. It is striking, though, that ksw did not conceive of language/writing in purely discursive or de-materialized terms, as they insisted on the hands-on skills and technical knowledge that would permit a still-emergent alternative artworld to flourish. They deliberately set out to provide “instruction in manuscript preparation, copyediting, book and magazine production, layout, design, typesetting, word processing, marketing, journalism.”¹² Many of these principles carried over to Artspeak, which would without hesitation launch its own publishing programme.

The language-image interplay explored by Ramsden and Greenberg was particularly welcome at Artspeak and, indeed, the exhibition preceding *Relations* had been a group show, *Behind the Sign*, which showcased the material and semiotic attributes of language through collaborations between writers and visual artists.¹³ It must be stressed that the notion of artists and writers collaborating, whether in a gallery or in a publication, is a far cry from the conventional practice of having experts critically comment on an artist’s body of work. The Ramsden exhibition would be equally at home when the exhibition was re-mounted in Montreal at Dazibao gallery – a photo-centric ARC founded in 1980 with an in-house publishing mandate. Today the gallery’s website states: “Dazibao posits the book as an alternate space for the diffusion and discussion of contemporary image practices.”¹⁴ Here we encounter the utopian remnants of ARC print culture – the possibility that a book, magazine, or exhibition catalogue produced on the cultural margins, for and by a specific community, could itself open up a genuinely “alternate

space.” A similar vocabulary is deployed by Gwen Allen in her recent book about artists’ magazines launched in the 1960s and 1970s, when she discusses these as forms of “alternative space . . . [that] challenged the institutions and economies of the mainstream art world.”¹⁵ This line of questioning about what constitutes alternative spaces and practices is periodically rekindled, in Canada and elsewhere. In 2012 Bronson could gloomily conclude that “alas, the artists of Canada have transformed themselves into bureaucrats,”¹⁶ implying that the countercultural fervour of the early days was no more, and that artist-run centre culture had inexorably calcified. The American artist Andrea Fraser, an important contributor to the “institutional critique” debate since the 1980s, is more matter-of-fact and ultimately more generous: “It’s not a question of being against the institution. We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”¹⁷

And so Ramsden’s exhibition was staged in assertively alternative institutions even while powerful mainstream institutions are the very topic of *Relations*: her photographs adopt the guise of informal snapshots taken during visits to Vancouver’s Museum of Anthropology, the British Library in London, the Musée d’histoire naturelle in Paris, the Musée des arts décoratifs in Montréal, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, amongst other examples. However fragmented these photographic glimpses might be, when assembled pictorially and conceptually by the artist it becomes evident that these sites are linked, that they are nodes in a Eurocentric system of knowledge-production. In a contemporaneous review of the exhibition published in *Vanguard* magazine, William Wood astutely described Ramsden’s photographs as “subjective views from within the institutional memory of museums.”¹⁸ More recently, the curator Marie Perrault has observed that Ramsden’s “*Relations* presented the museum as a viewing machine.”¹⁹ Both these comments identify Ramsden’s critical positioning *inside* the museum, whereby her camera seemed to merge with this ideological viewing mechanism, even while the project as a whole points to the possibility of a reimagined spatiality. In keeping with the tenets of institutional critique, Ramsden bears witness to the power wielded by museums as they produce historical knowledge, taxonomize natural phenomena, establish hierarchies of value across diverse cultures, and assert aesthetic value amongst a heterogeneity of objects and images. We see a manuscript in the form of a flagellum (Fig. 3), a stack of plates decoratively painted with scenes of war, and from Vancouver’s Museum of Anthropology, First Nations ceremonial objects absurdly overcrowded and hermetically sealed in glass boxes. *Relations* thus calls attention to moments of historical friction that are not



3 | Anne Ramsden, *Relations* exhibition catalogue, 1988, detail. With permission of Anne Ramsden and Artspeak gallery. (Photo: author)

convincingly resolved by these cultural institutions. We also become aware of the epistemological power plays that underwrite even the most casual museum visit.

Ramsden didn't lay bare museological authority in a straightforward way, though, and it is here that the changing status of photography becomes tremendously important. Throughout *Relations*, Ramsden deployed photography to subtly destabilize the visual field, through oblique perspectives onto displays, the embrace of distracting reflections and shadowy pictorial effects, blurred foreground objects, and other phenomenological features – for example, one British Library label is almost obscured by Ramsden's shadowy reflection as she leans over the vitrine to take the photo. All these effects serve to emphasize contingent moments of encounter instead of reinforcing the transparent veracity of photographic documents and the atemporal promise of museums.

The photographic imagery in *Relations* was subject to an unusual form of doubled captioning, moreover. Each photograph (measuring 84 × 94 cm) had an ample white border on which a caption minimally identified object or site: “in the U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology,” “Demeter and Persephone(?)” for example. And then, large vinyl lettering on the gallery

Museums and photography cut. Cut up. Cut apart. Cut out. Sever. Fragment. Fragment families. Museums and photographs frame. Frame families. Families of fragments. Museums and photographs focus. Focus on fragments. Focus on framing fragments. In museums and photographs framed fragments become familiar. Family. Sometimes framed fragments are put together. Paired. Donor and Saint. Mother and child. Husband and wife. Dyads. Whole and part. Near and far. Before and after. Contrast and compare. Break up the pair. Reframe. Move it around. Loved ones once lost are rarely found.

4 | Detail from *Relations* catalogue: fragment of text by Reesa Greenberg. With permission of Artspeak gallery and Reesa Greenberg. (Photo: author)

wall spelled out more didactic phrases, such as “CLASSIFYING EXTINCTION,” “PRESERVING ORIGINS,” or “REPRODUCING LUXURY,” the latter appearing below the soldier-adorned Sèvres china. Thus an interplay was set in motion, between the linguistic and pictorial elements in each diptych. It was Roland Barthes – an author whose influence on this generation of artists cannot be underestimated – who described a paradoxical feature of the so-called “image-world” we inhabit, which is that almost every instance of photographic display or reproduction involves titles and captions, with “the linguistic message . . . constituting a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating.”²⁰ Ramsden’s double captions point to the overdetermined role accorded to language, even as it becomes clear that such linguistic information will inevitably fail to explain and contain the photographic meaning; take away all captions and labels and it becomes apparent that there is a semantic excess latent even in the most ordinary of photographs. Moreover, the very title of Ramsden’s exhibition, *Relations*, evokes the foundational semiotic insight, that meaning is derived relationally. Greenberg’s text for the publication would also call attention to linguistic captioning: “Photography and museums isolate words in discrete spatial zones. Captions below photographs. Labels beside exhibits. Captions and labels contextualize. Captions and labels change. Captions and labels are rarely photographed. Museums do not collect captions and labels.”

Greenberg’s text was a genuine companion piece to Ramsden’s artwork, even if, as mentioned earlier, neither artist nor exhibition is addressed directly in her text. This “essay” actually consists of sixteen paragraphs, most

beginning with the phrase “Museums and photographs . . .” or “Photographs and museums . . .” (Fig. 4). Each paragraph is made up of short, choppy phrases and sentence fragments, some of which are scholarly-sounding propositions: “Museums and photographs establish claims.” “Museums and photographs co-exist uncomfortably.” But these bold statements do not lead to conventional expository prose complete with footnoted justifications. There is no “I” pronoun in this text but it is nonetheless deeply idiosyncratic, combining a free-association mode with a sustained tempo and the occasional eruption of rhyming, as in the following passage: “Photographs of museums are presented with tact. As fact. A positivist act. With staged scenes. No comedy routines. Motionless vitrines. Glassed screens.” This was a concerted break with the neutral-sounding and authoritative voice usually considered appropriate for institutional publications.²¹ If her text can instead be described as “poetic,” it is in the sense theorized by Julia Kristeva, who proposed that poetic language has an ethical dimension, while explicitly connecting this to rhythm. Poetic language can disrupt ordinary language in productive ways, through “the advent of a semiotic rhythm that no system of linguistic communication has yet been able to assimilate.”²² With its rat-a-tat pulsation, it is indeed rhythm, more than rhyme, that characterizes Greenberg’s text for the *Relations* catalogue.²³ Syntactical and discursive patterns are provisionally reshuffled, allowing new insights into the power wielded by both museum and photographic practices.

I have indicated that the *Relations* project coincided with the image/text preoccupations of KSW and Artspeak, and was in such ways connected to Vancouver’s artist-run centre scene but, as noted at the beginning, the *Relations* exhibition and publication were even more profoundly rooted in Montreal. At the time of the Artspeak exhibition, Anne Ramsden was fairly new to Vancouver, having taken up a teaching position at Simon Fraser University the year before. Prior to that she had lived in Montreal for many years, exhibiting video and photographic work at ARCs such as Vidéographe and Article, working for a time as an assistant editor at *Parachute* magazine, and playing a vital role in the city’s contemporary artworld as one of the co-founders in 1980 (with fellow artist Angela Grauerholz and art historian Francine Périnet) of the documentation centre/bookstore Artexte, where she remained a co-director until her departure for Vancouver. Ramsden would be included in Grauerholz’s striking portrait series of 1984 (Fig. 5). When she returned to Montreal about 10 years later, it was to join the School of Visual and Media Arts at UQAM (the Université du Québec à Montréal); she is thus an anglophone Canadian who became fully integrated into the city’s francophone artistic and academic *milieux*. Reesa Greenberg also looms large in the Montreal scene of the 1980s, through her teaching, mentoring,

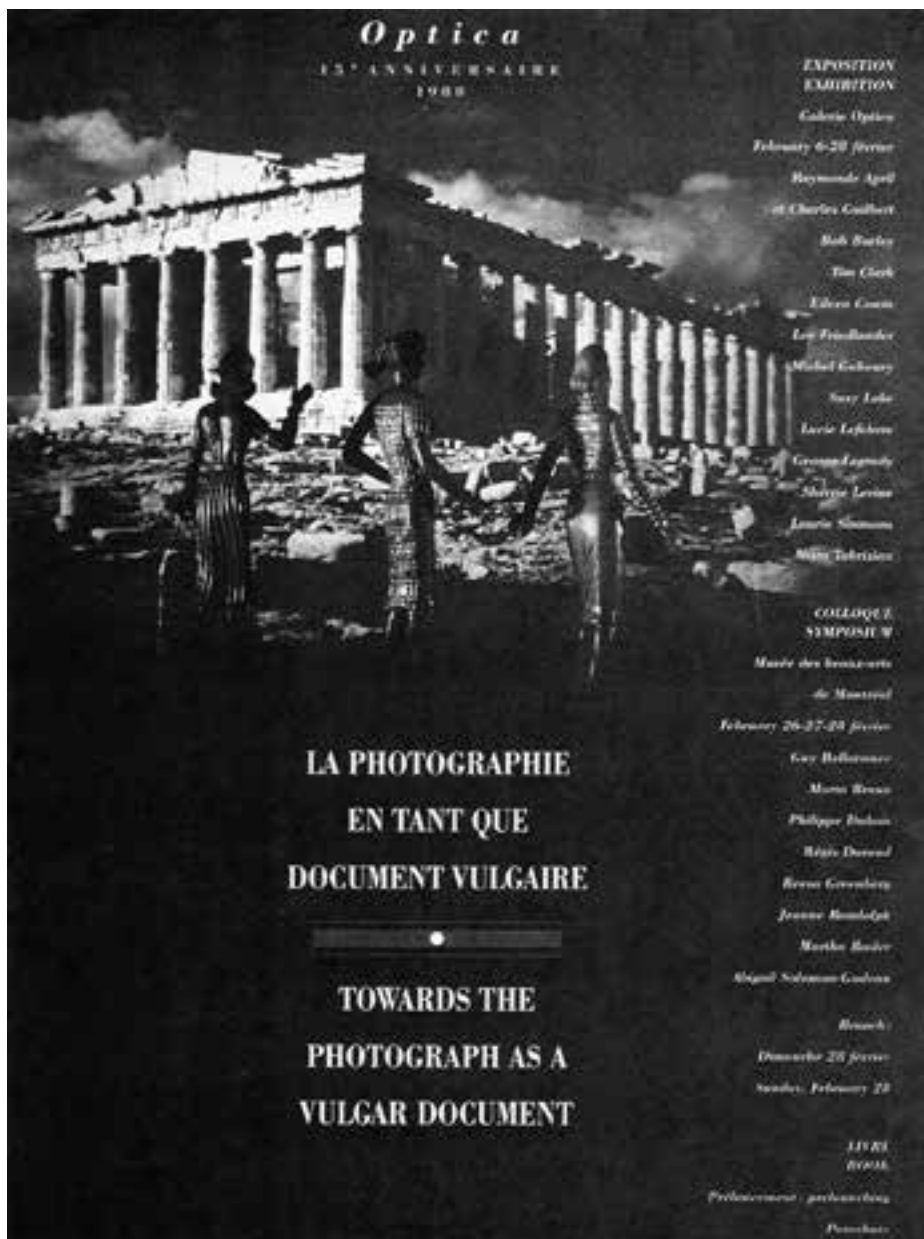


5 | Angela Grauerholz. *Anne Ramsden*, 1984. Gelatin silver print from a series of ten portraits of women. Dimensions variable. With permission of Angela Grauerholz. (Photo: author)

scholarly contributions, and critical writing. As professor of Art History at Concordia University in Montreal, she had co-taught (with colleague Catherine Mackenzie) one of the first “feminism and art history” courses to be offered in a Canadian university. She is well known today for the groundbreaking publication *Thinking about Exhibitions* (1996, co-edited with Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne), which is to say that her *Relations* text was part of a sustained commitment to thinking about museological experience and exhibition practices. Indeed, the acknowledgments page for the 1996 book begins with the following statement: “*Thinking about Exhibitions* originated and is based on the seminars on exhibitions taught by Reesa Greenberg at Concordia University, Montreal, in the 1980s.”²⁴

The same year that she wrote for the *Relations* catalogue Greenberg participated in a symposium on photography held at Optica Gallery in Montreal, giving a paper on installation photographs, understood as one of multiple ways that photography is enmeshed in the daily operations of galleries and museums.²⁵ By the end of the 1980s the Montreal artworld's fascination with photography had yielded numerous institutional results: besides Optica, two other artist-run centres were devoted to photographic practice, Dazibao and VOX; the magazine *CV Photo* first came out in 1987; while 1989 saw the first *Mois de la Photo à Montréal*, an international, biennial, themed exhibition of photography. The Optica conference and exhibition, *La photographie en tant que document vulgaire/Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document*²⁶ had some high-powered American artists and writers in attendance: Sherrie Levine, Laurie Simmons, Martha Rosler, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau (Fig. 6). The concern with representation and the politics of gender voiced by these women did permeate the network I'm describing, but the intellectual terrain in Montreal was also activated by French feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, whose theorizing was related to philosophy, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. And so, while every iteration of the Montreal artworld has entailed complicated negotiations over language, the linguistic/cultural admixture of the postmodern 1980s was unique in certain ways. The Montreal-based *Parachute* magazine was an important venue in this respect, as it showcased both local and international art, while allowing French and Anglo-American discursive positions to appear side by side. Two Montreal bookstores also played an important role: Arttexte carried international books, journals, and exhibition catalogues in both languages, while a couple of blocks away on St-Laurent, L'Androgyne was a gay and lesbian bookstore that stocked the latest feminist theory, also in French and English. It must be remembered, too, that Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (which became an iconic text worldwide) had local roots, having initially been written for the Quebec government as a report on the state of knowledge.²⁷

The twenty-plus women artists listed at the start of this article were at the forefront of the postmodern turn that made photography an essential component part of contemporary art, including the crucial notion of artists who "work with photographs" rather than self-identifying as photographers.²⁸ I cannot here do justice to the breadth of these art practices, which included photos backlit or blown up to commercial proportions, photographic imagery explicitly colliding with language as seen in Ramsden's project, projects that emphasized the diverse material circumstances of photography. And then, many artworks produced in Montreal during this period reveal an archival imperative, in that artists unearthed, re-photographed, and re-presented already-existing material. Of course "appropriation" was a signature strategy



6 | Poster for *La photographie en tant que document vulgaire/Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document*, symposium held at Optica Gallery, February 1988. With permission of Optica Gallery. (Photo: author)

of the postmodern movement in art more generally, but what is striking across many Montreal art practices is their historical consciousness, in that the iconography of gender is shown to have complex historical roots.²⁹ For example, Nicole Jolicoeur immersed herself in the photographic and textual archives of Dr. Charcot, the nineteenth-century physician largely

responsible for the discourse about “hysteria” in women, but she then tampered with this evidence in order to imaginatively liberate the female bodies constrained by medical science. Nina Levitt proposed a queer genealogy through her intervention in Montreal’s Notman archive, creating a portrait gallery of anonymous women with whom she sensed kinship. Sorel Cohen would re-use a range of historical material, such as a naked woman from Muybridge’s motion studies, whose gestures acquire layers of new meanings when framed by the artist. Sylvie Readman and Moyra Davey (b. 1958) both transformed vernacular photographs as found in family albums, disrupting nostalgic sentiment to instead focus on how gender calcifies in conventionalized views and poses. Cheryl Simon reassembled sequences of women posing for the camera, blurring the boundaries between criminals, small-town beauty queens, and other types of extreme femininity. Anne Ramsden herself would on occasion borrow photographic documents from colonial archives in order to defamiliarize this historic material.

In such ways the photographic images that lay slumbering or ideologically fixed in historical archives could be dislodged and brought back into circulation – calling attention to the construction of personal and collective identities in the past, but also demonstrating the possibility of using historical fragments to conjure up new stories. The artists invariably committed a kind of violence to these found photographs, but each gesture of slicing, cropping, fragmenting, tinting, or overwriting could redirect the gaze, and announce a new desiring subject. As suggested above, the collective project undertaken by Montreal artists (as well as curators, writers, etc.) was in dialogue with both Anglo-American and continental feminisms. If everyone concerned seemed to care about the representation – in the broadest sense of the term – of the female body, the Anglo side tended to focus on viewing mechanisms, pop-culture templates, and institutional practices, while French theorizing encouraged the dream of a (visual) language that didn’t replicate patriarchal power relations, as epitomized by Hélène Cixous’s discussion of *écriture féminine*.³⁰ The question of how these artists approached historical material can be linked to Lyotard’s insight that master-narratives could be unravelled.³¹ Feminists of this generation made it clear that the master-narrative most deserving of implosion was the position of centrality historically occupied by a Euro-American male subject, which meant that the history of the world has been told from that viewpoint. Postmodern feminists insisted that the acts of representation undertaken, and the knowledge amassed in the name of this purportedly universal subject, could be reconfigured. History could be rewritten. Working with and through photographs, artists were able to critique an inheritance of visual culture while also generating something new that could be described as feminist knowledge. It is this set of concerns that connects the Ramsden-Greenberg collaboration on the *Relations* catalogue

to the Montreal network. Ramsden infiltrated the system of power relations vested in documentary photography, and Greenberg circumvented the voice of museological authority; at the same time the *Relations* project became an opportunity to claim creative space inside the museum, the ur-site of knowledge and cultural memory.

How did this network cohere, and under what circumstances does it become intelligible? It's possible to consider the artist-run system, specific curatorial projects and publications, instances of pedagogy, activism, as well as friendships. I'd like to note that I consider myself to be part of this network; in 1988 I was living in Montreal, doing my MA at the Université de Montréal and beginning to write art criticism. The initial copy of the *Relations* catalogue I consulted a few years ago, loaned to me by my friend Cheryl Simon, had a warmly-expressed handwritten inscription, from Reesa to Cheryl. Reesa Greenberg had been my much-admired Art History professor at Concordia, while a few years later I wrote about Anne Ramsden's work for a *Mois de la Photo à Montréal* group exhibition curated by Simon. Greenberg's acknowledgments in the catalogue thank several women, while Ramsden's connections at *Parachute* and *Artexte* open up to other groups of women. I could keep going: thus a social network becomes visible once we begin mapping such overlapping connections between people, between actors. The term "actor" is part of Bruno Latour's conceptual vocabulary, in his actor-network theory (ANT). This theory is appealing in methodological terms because Latour insists that the term "network" does not refer to a pre-existing social formation but, rather, it is the very description undertaken by the researcher to address a situation in flux: "network is an expression to check how much energy, movement, and specificity our own reports are able to capture."³² This is to say that the network becomes intelligible when someone successfully observes and describes the interaction of moving actants (whether human or not). The postmodern/feminist/photographic network I'm attempting to describe was certainly a dynamic field, with ideas being exchanged, allegiances provisionally forged, creative sparks flying, and concentrations of productivity. One of the more radical features of ANT is Latour's insistence on following non-human actors in the constitution of networks, regarding them not only as mediators between people, because "objects too have their agency."³³ This insight, which has been inspiring for many scholars, is particularly relevant to this episode in the history of photography, shortly before the digital revolution, when acts of archival borrowing and pictorial manipulation involved a panoply of photographic objects, techniques, processes, and materials. It's also instructive to try following a small material artefact like the *Relations* exhibition catalogue, to regard it as a node in a complex network – a crystallization of (human) energy and imagination in some ways, but also a material object with its own

life story, so to speak. This publication was at times put on display, bought and sold, or mailed; it passed from hand to hand, was taken out of a bag to be read on a bus trip, found a home on an artist-run centre bookshelf, in a library, in a second-hand bookshop or alongside personal effects in a home office, etc. It was materially embedded in both Vancouver and Montreal artworlds, as I have suggested, but since the *Relations* catalogue might have ended up anywhere across the country, and even beyond its borders, each one of those material presences can be thought of as a small extended tentacle of the network in question.

Many authors have contributed to the contemporary discourse on networks in ways that illuminate this case-study, even if such texts are concerned with digital and new-media networks. For instance, Anna Munster has argued that networking – as action, as verb, as performative gesture – has perceptual and aesthetic dimensions that must be studied.³⁴ Geert Lovink contends that, “what we need to defend is the very principle of decentralized, distributed networks.”³⁵ The recently-devised concept of “network archaeology” is also important as it implies a continuum between old and new media.³⁶ In this sense, the print culture of late-twentieth-century contemporary art can be lauded precisely because of the unique “perceptual and aesthetic” features of magazines, artists’ books, and exhibition catalogues (which become more and more perceptible in contrast to dematerialized forms of communication), and also because even the most modest little publications bespeak efforts to create “decentralized, distributed” networked practices.

It is difficult to say exactly why this memorable moment in Montreal’s contemporary art history has not been adequately named, referred back to, and otherwise accorded art-historical legitimacy. Over the years some writers have successfully analyzed aspects of this period; for instance, in the early 1990s Johanne Lamoureux addressed the foundational role of language in the visual art of Quebec – but she did not identify a specifically photo-centric or feminist grouping of artists.³⁷ In retrospect, it’s possible to compare how the Montreal scene has entered the historical record (or not) with how experimental photographic practices of the 1980s were narrativized elsewhere. New York’s so-called “Pictures Generation” is firmly inscribed in the art historical canon, while in the Canadian context it was a select group of artists in Vancouver who rose to fame as the “photoconceptual” school, to the point that even today it remains an internationally-recognizable city brand. I remember how sceptical some people were at the time about the international artworld’s embrace of the Vancouver “boys’ club” even as Montreal’s women-dominated scene was passed over.

A number of scholars have argued that 1989 was a game-changing moment for contemporary art, just as it was in a larger realm of global geo-

politics.³⁸ It is interesting, then, to consider that Ramsden and Greenberg's *Relations* publication might have been contributing to the end of an era. It is certainly true that the term "postmodern" very rapidly fell out of fashion amongst artists and writers in the 1990s, to the point that postmodernism could be treated as an embarrassing art-historical moment, or as a fever that people miraculously recovered from. It is surely time to reassess this legacy; just as a singular definition of modernism (based in New York or Paris) has justifiably been expanded and complicated by scholars, so, too, should we consider that postmodern art and ideas took root and became meaningful in specific places. The network of women I have described in this article can certainly be/become part of bigger stories about twentieth-century art and twentieth-century feminism. But something unique occurred in Montreal, as postmodern ideas and a commitment to experimenting with photography fused with the city's linguistic ecosystem, with multiple branches of feminist knowledge, with an archival consciousness. 1989 was when the *Relations* exhibition was remounted at Dazibao gallery in Montreal, and 1989 is also seared into the collective memory of Montrealers because on December 6 of that year a man entered the Université de Montréal and massacred 14 young women while proclaiming his hatred of feminists. This traumatic event would touch every woman mentioned in this essay, while rendering any expression of feminism – before or after 1989 – that much more political. From that moment on we understood more fully that all visual images and gestures of representation take place in a terrain of power relations, but also that postmodernism's "crisis in cultural authority,"³⁹ as enacted in Montreal, was a powerful fusion of aesthetics and politics.

NOTES

- 1 My cut-off date for the "long 1980s" is 1992, and my provisional list includes some artists who moved away or only spent a few years in the city, as long as they made a significant contribution to the convergence of photography, feminism, and postmodernism.
- 2 Cheryl SIMON, *The Zone of Conventional Practice and other Real Stories*, ed. C. Simon (Montreal: Optica Gallery, 1989), 13. (Italics belong to original text.)
- 3 Greenberg's text also appears in French translation in a reduced font, taking up two pages instead of eight. Serge Bérard took on this challenging translation job, achieving a sense of tempo without, however, attempting to recreate the author's rhymes.
- 4 Patrizia DI BELLO and Shamoos ZAMIR, *The Photobook: From Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond*, eds. P. Di Bello, C. Wilson, and S. Zamir (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 4.
- 5 Ibid. 10.

- 6 See Allyson Clay: *Lure* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 1988); Mark Lewis: *Burning* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 1988); Roy Arden: *West* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 1988); Christine Davis: *Beauté Convulsive* (Vancouver: Artspeak, 1989). The last of these was published in 1989 but the exhibition took place in 1988.
- 7 *From Sea to Shining Sea*, ed. AA Bronson et al. (Toronto: Power Plant, 1987). *Sight Specific: Lesbians and Representation*, ed. Lynne Fernie (Toronto: A Space, 1988); Philip MONK, *Struggles with the Image: Essays in Art and Criticism* (Toronto: YYZ, 1988); Nicole JOLICOEUR, *Charcot: deux concepts de nature* (Montreal: Artexpte, 1988).
- 8 Clement GREENBERG, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 8.
- 9 Loren LERNER, "Recent Publications on Canadian Art, 1987–1989," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 13:1 (1996): 98–111.
- 10 AA BRONSON, "The Transfiguration of the Bureaucrat," in *Institutions by Artists, Volume One*, eds. Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva (Vancouver: Fillip Editions and Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres, 2012), 36.
- 11 Important artist-run centres also emerged elsewhere during the 1970s – such as A Space in Toronto, 1971, The Photographers Gallery in Saskatoon, 1973, and Eye Level in Halifax, 1973, for instance.
- 12 From the first Kootenay School of Writing brochure, 1984; available at: <http://www.kswnet.org/fire/aboutksw.cfm>.
- 13 For a discussion of *Behind the Sign* see Nancy SHAW, "Expanded Consciousness and Company Types: Collaboration Since Intermedia and the N.E. Thing Company," in *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991), 96–101.
- 14 Dazibao website. Accessed 12 Feb. 2015, <http://dazibao-photo.org/en/mandate-history/>.
- 15 Gwen ALLEN, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 7.
- 16 BRONSON, "The Transfiguration of the Bureaucrat," 43. Bronson reminds readers that he'd "warned of this danger" in the 1980s; that was in his essay "Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-run spaces as museums by artists," in *From Sea to Shining Sea*, ed. AA Bronson et al (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987). Other authors in the 2012 volume argue for the continuing vitality of artist-run centre culture.
- 17 Andrea FRASER, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Minneapolis: MIT Press, 2011), 416.
- 18 William WOOD, "Being There," *Vanguard* 17:6 (December/January 1988/89): 36.
- 19 Marie PERREAULT, "La collection et le quotidien," in *Anne Ramsden* (Musée régional de Rimouski, 2007), 42.
- 20 Roland BARTHES, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978), 156.
- 21 Other Canadian authors who experimented with introducing fictional or poetic elements into writing about contemporary art are Jeanne Randolph and Cheryl Simon.
- 22 Julia KRISTEVA, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 24.

- 23 It is worth mentioning that Greenberg did on occasion deliver comparable pieces of writing orally, standing at a podium; in these cases she transformed the art historian's learned discourse into a kind of spoken-word performance.
- 24 *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, and S. Nairne (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), xiii.
- 25 Reesa GREENBERG, "Optimum Optica: Notes On Installation Photography," in *Towards the Photograph as a Vulgar Document* (Montreal: Optica, 1990), 18–23.
- 26 The exhibition was held from 6–28 February 1988, and the symposium took place on 26 February; both were meant to commemorate Optica's fifteen-year anniversary.
- 27 Jean-François LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Lyotard's book was first published in French in 1979, but once translated into English it reached an international and interdisciplinary readership far beyond that original context.
- 28 Numerous male artists were of course active in Montreal during the postmodern 1980s, but aside from David Williams's work there was little photo-based exploration of gender.
- 29 Even if not all the artists on my list considered themselves to be feminists and/or postmodernists, these were nonetheless dominant intellectual paradigms that often accompanied the critical reception and circulation of contemporary art in the 1980s.
- 30 See Abigail BRAY, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- 31 LYOTARD, p. xxiv.
- 32 Bruno LATOUR, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 63.
- 34 Anna MUNSTER, *An Aesthesis of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
- 35 Geert LOVINK, *Networks without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 31.
- 36 See the special issue of the journal *Amodern: Amodern 2: Network Archeology*, eds. Nicole Starosielski, Braxton Soderman, and Cris Cheek, based on a 2012 conference. Accessed 15 Aug. 2015, <http://amodern.net/article/network-archaeology/>.
- 37 Johanne LAMOUREUX, *Seeing in Tongues: A Narrative of Language and Visual Arts in Quebec* (Vancouver: Belkin Art Gallery, 1995).
- 38 See, for example, the exhibition *The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2011), as well as two books in Afterall's exhibition history series: Rachel WEISS, *Making Art Global, Part One: The Third Havana Biennial 1989* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), and Lucy STEEDS, *Making Art Global, Part Two: Magiciens de la Terre, 1989* (London: Afterall Books, 2013).
- 39 Craig OWENS, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 57.

Relations, 1988: photographique, postmoderne, féministe

JOHANNE SLOAN

Le catalogue produit pour l'exposition d'Anne Ramsden (v. 1952) à la galerie Artspeak de Vancouver, en 1988, et qui reproduisait des photographies d'intérieurs de musées accompagnées d'un texte expérimental de Reesa Greenberg, était un exemple de la culture de l'imprimé qui se développait dans le contexte de centres d'artistes autogérés. Cet article traite aussi le catalogue comme preuve matérielle de l'existence d'un réseau qui s'est développé à Montréal durant les années 1980, composé de femmes artistes, écrivaines, conservatrices, éditrices de revues, galeristes, traductrices, étudiantes – toutes décidées à étendre le champ de la photographie, toutes engagées envers des idéaux féministes, toutes prises, d'une manière ou d'une autre, par la fièvre du postmodernisme. Cette explosion d'activité photographique à Montréal ne s'est jamais fusionnée en un mouvement identifiable, nommable. Ce que je décris n'a jamais encore été pleinement écrit dans l'histoire de l'art canadien ou québécois.

L'interaction entre le langage et l'image explorée par Ramsden et Greenberg était bienvenue à la galerie Artspeak de Vancouver laquelle, quelques années auparavant, avait émergé avec le mandat de promouvoir le dialogue entre les arts visuels et l'écriture. Artspeak a rapidement commencé à publier des catalogues d'exposition et plusieurs autres centres d'artistes autogérés se sont joint à cette production de catalogues, de livres d'artistes, de recueils d'écrits, etc. Si le catalogue *Relations* tenait davantage du livre photo que du catalogue d'exposition traditionnel, cela est dû au fait que, vers 1988, on se demandait à quoi ressemblaient les publications artistiques, quel était leur objectif, quel était leur lectorat.

Les photographies de Ramsden se présentaient comme des instantanés pris au cours de visites au Musée d'Anthropologie de Vancouver, à la British Library de Londres, au Musée d'histoire naturelle de Paris, au Musée des arts décoratifs de Montréal et au Metropolitan Museum of Art de New York, entre autres exemples. Aussi fragmentaires que puissent être ces aperçus photographiques, lorsqu'ils sont rassemblés picturalement et conceptuellement par l'artiste, il devient évident que ces lieux sont connectés, qu'ils sont des noeuds dans un système de production des connaissances eurocentrique. Le

texte fragmenté, parfois rimé de Greenberg explorait l'interrelation entre les musées et la photographie. Ainsi, le catalogue *Relations*, dans son ensemble, contribuait aux débats sur la « critique institutionnelle ». Il y avait un aspect féministe dans ce projet, en ce que le féminisme postmoderne était très critique à l'endroit du métarécit patriarcal et s'intéressait à ce qu'on pourrait appeler une production des connaissances alternative.

Le postmodernisme, le féminisme et la photographie se sont rencontrés à Montréal d'une manière distinctive, informée par la théorie et les pratiques artistiques anglo-américaines aussi bien que françaises. Ramsden se situait ainsi en relation avec un groupe de plus de vingt femmes artistes qui utilisaient la photographie de manière expérimentale. L'idée de réseau me permet d'aborder les liens sociaux et professionnels entre ces femmes, d'entreprendre une étude inspirée de Bruno Latour de la culture matérielle de la photographie et de suivre la diffusion et la cristallisation d'idées et de principes esthétiques. Et si l'appropriation était une stratégie privilégiée par les artistes de la génération postmoderne, pour plusieurs Montréalaises cela coïncidait avec une conscience historique permettant la production d'une imagerie féminine remise en cause et réimaginée.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette