

**Leah Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-Garde: The Unsettled Landscapes of Vancouver Photo-Conceptualism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018, 296 pp. 41 b/w illus. £ 80 (hardcover) ISBN 9781526101198**

Christine Conley

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Ray Ellenwood, Professor Emeritus and Senior Scholar at York University in Toronto, is an award-winning translator and author of *Eggregate: A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement*. In 1998, he organized a symposium, exhibition, and concert at York University to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Refus global, and he continues to write and publish extensively about the Automatistes.  
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1. For a much more detailed account than I can offer here, see Sophie Dubois, *Refus global, Histoire d'une réception partielle* (Montréal: Les presses de l'université de Montréal, 2017), or François-Marc Gagnon's *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois, 1941–1954* (Montréal: Lanctôt Éditeur, 1998).

2. See, for example, Philippe Dubé, «Quand le culte occulte,» *Le Devoir*, July 8, 1998.

3. As a sign of the general acceptance of *Refus global* as a historically important document, consider the fact that Françoise Sullivan, one of the signatories, was invited to read from the text during celebrations in Quebec City to mark the 250th anniversary of the battle of the Plains of Abraham (see Jérôme Delgado, “Borduas, héros oublié?,” *Le Devoir*, February 20, 2010.)

4. *Borduas, les femmes automatistes* et Refus global, at the BAnQ Vieux-Montréal, September 11, 18 and 25 from 13:30 to 15:30.

5. *François-Marc Gagnon et l'histoire de l'art au Québec*, held at the Musée de l'imprimerie du Québec on October 19, from 9:00 to 14:30. [Editor's note: Professor Gagnon died March 28, 2019. See the memorial note in this issue.]

6. *La tendresse des nuages* (Fernand Leduc), Galerie Catalogue, Montréal, August 25 to November 10, 2018. Curator: Pierre Bourgie.

7. *Marcel Barbeau: en mouvement*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, October 11, 2018 to January 6, 2019. Curator: Eve-Lynne Beaudry. 240-page catalogue.

8. This part of his work is well described by Rober Racine in “Danser la peinture,” one of the essays included in the catalogue of the exhibition.

9. Not surprisingly, that exhibition made little or no mention of Riopelle's Automatist past, in part because he himself tended not to give it much importance, but also because it was not relevant to the period of his relationship with Joan Mitchell.

10. *Françoise Sullivan*, The modern.toronto, Toronto, September 20 to November 17, 2018. Curator: Paul Bradley.

11. We have since learned that this gallery is closing, which is a shame because it was certainly an attractive exhibition space.

12. *Françoise Sullivan*, Galerie Simon Blais, Montréal, October 10 to November 24, 2018. Curator: Paul Bradley. No catalogue.

13. *Refus global—70ième anniversaire*, Galerie Simon Blais, Montréal, September 6 to October 6, 2018. No catalogue.

14. *Les Automatistes en trois temps*, Galerie Michel Guimont, Montréal, September 23 to October 23, 2018. 36-page catalogue.

15. *Refus global: 70 ans*, Québecor espace musée, Montréal, October 2, 2018 to January 9, 2019. Curators: Simon Blais, Paul Bradley, Claude Gosselin. 24-page catalogue.

16. *Françoise Sullivan*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, October 20, 2018 to January 20, 2019. Curator: Mark Lanctôt. 286-page catalogue.

17. Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*. October 20, 2018 to January 20, 2019. Curator: Lesley Johnstone. No catalogue.

18. *Partitions*, October 20, 2018 to January 20, 2019. Curator: François LeTourneux. No catalogue.

Leah Modigliani

**Engendering an Avant-Garde:  
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Photo-Conceptualism**

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Christine Conley

In *Engendering an Avant-Garde*, Leah Modigliani examines the absence of women artists in Vancouver photo-conceptualism, from its inception in 1968 to its identification as the “Vancouver School,” a global brand that emerged in early 1990s writing about Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace and variously encompassed Ken Lum, Christos Dikeakos, Rodney Graham, Roy Arden, Arni Haraldsson, and Stan Douglas. Modigliani positions this self-declared vanguard within a critical discourse generated by the likes of Andreas Huyssen, Johanne Lamoureux, T. J. Clark and Griselda Pollock, who have revealed how the historical avant-garde perpetuated patriarchal privilege through dichotomous thinking (the feminine as alterity) that situated “women or others as oppositional to the mission of a self-selective male group identification.” (9) Her study considers how this dynamic was manifest in Vancouver photo-conceptualism. Male artists, consciously engaged with the concerns of the historical avant-garde, explored social alienation in the urban landscape in the absence of female agency, yet maintained images of women in their work. How did this happen during a period

of feminist political and cultural agitation?

While this question forms the crux of the text, successive chapters elaborate an extended discourse analysis of how international critical acclaim has embraced Vancouver photo-con-



ceptualism as a continuation of European investments in and perspectives on the modernist avant-garde—with frequent analogies to nineteenth century French painting, for instance, in the case of Jeff Wall—rather than considering how the specificity of Vancouver production might illuminate the global possibilities for that project as a social process. Modigliani claims this exclusionary dynamic parallels the “exclusionary structure of settler colonial populations’ need to control territory,” hence her understanding of art discourse as a “transfer narrative” (17) linked specifically here to the absence of local inhabitants, including Indigenous peoples, in the “defeated” landscape of Vancouver photo-conceptualism.

The first chapter focuses on Wall's early transparencies *Picture for Women* (1979) and *The Destroyed Room* (1978) to consider how the feminist content of these works was overlooked due to the hegemony within art history of “patriarchal experiences of public space and theoretical knowledge production” (16) over feminist critical approaches, such as Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Reviewing analyses of these works by prominent critics Donald

Kuspit, Arielle Péleuc, and Kaja Silverman, Modigliani counters their reluctance to acknowledge the violence of representation that is spelled out in Wall's back-lit photos. *Picture for Women* reveals the vectors of vision that position woman as object of the gaze, yet Wall clearly retains control of the camera's shutter release. Similarly, *The Destroyed Room* stages a scene of violent destruction against an absent woman in what is visibly a stage set constructed by the artist. Not documentary then, but what? Fantasies of control? The author argues that both photos visualize "struggles over social and artistic space between genders" (8) for, indeed, these works were contemporaneous with burgeoning debates in Vancouver on the fate of modernism under the combined pressure of critiques by feminists and other exogenous groups.

The following chapter provides the necessary historical context for conceptualist approaches to landscape in Vancouver and draws upon critical writing by Robert Linsley, Scott Watson and others to illuminate how colonial interests intersect with gender. The formation of a nationalist school of painting was shaped by the desire to forge a uniquely Canadian identity apart from British traditions, while furthering the colonial project of rendering Indigenous populations invisible. Ignoring the innovations of the urban-based contemporary avant-garde, Group of Seven members and Emily Carr embraced the spiritual possibilities of Theosophy—a philosophy antithetical to the rise of Communist sympathies associated with the influx of non-British immigrants to urban centres—and produced landscapes emptied of human presence altogether. Modigliani expands on how settler colonial theory illuminates the correspondence of these pictorial strategies with the project of sovereignty, as settlers worked to wrest control over land without honouring the

British Crown's contractual promises to Indigenous peoples.

A related strategy was the dislocation of Indigenous art works from their sites of origin to museum collections. Disconnected from the specificity of land and embodied subjects, such artifacts could be displayed and promoted as remnants of a bygone era, rather than living cultures, and promoted for their aesthetic qualities independent of symbolic or ceremonial value. The presentation of Emily Carr's paintings alongside Indigenous visual culture in *The Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern* in 1927 at the National Gallery of Canada is presented as an exemplary moment in this appropriation of Indigenous aesthetics into the fashioning of an "imagined community of Canadian nationalism." (67) While Carr's view of the Indigenous people she encountered in her field trips was decidedly more sympathetic and respectful than her contemporaries, after her death in 1945, any departures from the nationalist script were obscured by the romanticizing of her work and herself as an intuitive, eccentric outsider, though never, apparently, a genius. By the time Jeff Wall and his contemporaries were considering a critically engaged photographic practice shaped by conceptualist debates in the 1960s, Carr's reputation as an icon of West Coast Expressionist painting and national cultural treasure had reached its apogee, rendering her artistic approach to the specificity of the region and its Indigenous residents—what Wall later dismissively termed the "hegemonic inner landscape"—anathema (79).

The following chapter considers how the pushback of young conceptualists against Carr and the tradition of regional landscape painting, as well as prevailing notions of "home" in the local Vancouver scene, was spurred by Wall's MA thesis on Berlin Dada. In contrast to European critical strategies, the approach to land and location by non-urban hippie culture, performance and media-based

groups, and visiting artists such as Robert Smithson were dismissed as ahistorical and romantic. Notably, a significant proportion of the artists singled out for their lack of criticality were indeed women, including Liz Magor, Marian Penner Bancroft and Joey Morgan.

Chapter four concerns the "Defeatured Landscape" of photo-conceptualists in the 1970s, who garnered international recognition and commercial success in tandem with the opening up of Vancouver to intensive capital investment and development after Expo 86. Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966–67) and the depopulated suburban photographs of N. E. Thing Co. (NETCO), a collaboration of Iain and Ingrid Baxter, are identified as important precedents for the defeatured landscape, while the artists' navigation and naming of urban space is connected to the formal concerns of concrete poetry, the perambulations of the Baudelairean flâneur, the Surrealist encounter with the marvellous and the *dérives* of the Situationist International, whose strategies of détournement and psycho-geography were performed by way of the ubiquitous automobile. Modigliani punctuates her account with a parallel commentary on the status of women within this process, principally, the invisibility in critical writing of Ingrid Baxter's contributions to NETCO as an artist, not a wife, and the insertion of erotic images and fantasies of women as chance encounters within photo-conceptualism's "urban semiotic." The point is well made for a process of artistic formation in which there was no space for female photo-conceptual artists.

The following chapter focuses entirely on Wall and Wallace, arguing for the continuity between the early conceptualist photographs and the larger photo works that emerged in the late 1970s. Here, Wall's study of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946–66), to which he had privileged access in Philadelphia during his PhD research, is viewed as a bridge between

conceptualism and the return to pictorialism in *The Destroyed Room*, with emphasis upon mutual connotations of sexual violation. The argument here is that Wall and Wallace, specifically in the latter's extended photographic installations *An Attack on Literature* (1975) and *Image/Text* (1979), were attuned to current feminist debates on representation and engaged with the dynamics of male-female relationships in charged ways effectively overlooked by critics.

Despite the extended contextualizing of Vancouver art and history that will certainly broaden its readership—the emergence of a West Coast school of painting, the careful tracing of visiting artists and other communities' activities as they intersect with the artists under discussion, and the debates within the community in relation to art institutions, especially the shifting role of the Vancouver Art Gallery—the text to this point still feels like a book about Jeff Wall. Indeed, it is an adaptation and expansion of the author's PhD dissertation on Wall. In this extended discussion, his work remains paradigmatic of the central thesis, notwithstanding the attention paid to Ian Wallace and Christos Dikeakos.

Shifting gears, the final chapter engages entirely with feminist challenges to this narrative. It sets out a welcome chronicle of diverse activities in dance and performance, filmmaking and experimental video, production spaces such as Women in Focus, Reelfeelings and Womens Inter-Art Society, influential guest speakers, programs at the VAG, community-building festivals and the critical voices of Avis Lang Rosenberg and Sara Diamond, among others. While these developments took place parallel to the activities of the avant-garde under discussion, Modigliani claims male photo-conceptualists assimilated feminist critiques of representation in the 1970s that emerged from psychoanalytic discourse and from theories of the gaze and sexed subjectivities. In other words, this

integration of the feminine into the "creative masculine bachelor-subject" involved the "theoretical/feminist" rather than the "maternal/feminine" (202) strain that characterized earlier modernists, fending off unwanted criticism of their avant-garde gambits and assuring institutional and market support.

This assimilation, though, did not include the significantly aligned production of women such as Marian Penner Bancroft whose photographic series, engaged with local Vancouver sites and incorporating text and sculptural aspects, were not unlike the defeated landscape photos of her male peers. Her use of the medium to negotiate subjective experiences of the urban environment, however, disqualified her from being associated with their conceptualist strategies. Reviews and catalogue essays failed to discuss her work beyond the local and the personal, rendering her work irrelevant to larger artworld concerns. These are the pitfalls that Liz Magor navigated in her attempts to elude perceptions of her work as "romantic" or "sentimental" or being about nature rather than a mediation of the environment through material processes shaped by phenomenological concerns. At the same time, the controversy sparked by her photo series *Fieldwork* (1989) over the appropriation of Indigenous cultural practices marked a collision between a modernist art discourse that married formal innovation to social progress and the politics of representation, where those left out of the picture claimed their space.

This is a deeply researched and carefully argued account of how avant-garde formations have continued to marginalize women's artistic production even during periods of feminist agitation, though any one of the chapters could be a stand-alone reading at the graduate level. In her conclusion, Modigliani's considers the publication of *Vancouver Anthology* in 1993, which includes Carol Williams' "A Working Chronology of Feminist

Cultural Activities and Events in Vancouver: 1970–1990" and Marcia Crosby's "Construction of the Imaginary Indian," as an intervention into developing regional histories of art. But by this time the critical edge of local photo-conceptualist photographers had been subsumed by an outstanding level of international success commensurate with intense local real estate development and global expansion of art brands compatible with neoliberal values. The book could well have ended there, but Modigliani chose to end with a reading of Jeff Wall's *The Giant* (1992) as a feminist tableau, a conclusion that confounds feminist analyses of the nude in representation and seems to me needlessly conciliatory. That said, this is an admirable work that brings dispassionate clarity to persistent hegemonic structures in the art world. ¶

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Dr. Christine Conley is an art historian and independent curator with expertise in issues of feminism and gender, the ethics of difference, cultural translation, political violence, and armed conflict.  
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#### ***Aki Odehi: cicatrices de la Terre-Mère***

Centre d'exposition de Val-d'Or  
22 juin au 26 août 2018  
commissaire: Sonia Robertson

Julie Graff

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Durant l'été 2018, l'exposition *Aki Odehi: cicatrices de la Terre-Mère* présentait au Centre d'exposition de Val-d'Or un projet de performances réalisé l'année précédente dans la région de l'Abitibi-Témiscamingue sous la direction de l'artiste et commissaire innue Sonia Robertson, avec la collaboration du Centre d'amitié autochtone de Val-d'Or. L'exposition *Aki Odehi, «lieux de cœur»* en langue anicinabek, a été conçue en deux