

MEDIA RELEASE

Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs 1955 to 1985
January 11 to March 2, 2003

Photographs by: Dick Bellamy, Michael de Courcy, Jack Dale, Christos Dikeakos, Fred Douglas, Svend-Erik Eriksen, Robbert Flick, Greg Girard, Fred Herzog, Curt Lang, N.E. Thing Company, Henri Robideau, Brian Stablyk, Bruce Stewart, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, Tony Westman, Paul Wong

Unfinished Business is a critical examination of the streets and street life of the City of Vancouver and its environs. It is, as well, a first effort at taking stock of the street documentation that exists in Vancouver and an occasion on which to explore the relation between documentary photographs and the photo-conceptualism that developed here in the post-1980 period.

Streets are the 'face' of the cities that they serve – they are a city's primary public spaces and are called arteries for good reason, as what happens on them is the life-blood of the urban spaces that they form. The photographs of Vancouver's street life in this show take the city's pulse in its last years as a 'small town on the coast', albeit with a focus on the Downtown Eastside resulting from the fact that so many photographers were drawn to the area. These images register Vancouver's sometime emptiness, its sometime lack of a vibrant street life as well as the kind of street activity that is commonly found in street photographs from other cities.

Vancouver's public spaces seem to differ from those in other cities, but in ways that are not easily defined. The depiction of our public spaces during the post-second world war period reveals, by comparison with the present, the 1955 to 1985 period as a stage in Vancouver's evolution from small town to city. All the signifiers that allow one to take stock of a place, whether fashions, the quality of the buildings or the expressions seen on people's faces, are here for the reading – including scenes of streets that could be described as 'empty'. 'The Street', empty or teeming with people, is a symbol for a city's functioning as an economic engine, a social space, and, as is the case with all cities, as a quasi-theatrical space in which the drama and the boredom of daily life are played out. *Unfinished Business* attempts to provide a photographic 'thick description' of Vancouver's transition moment from a resource-extraction-based village by the sea into the partially urban, modernist agglomeration that it is today.

Over the years there have been very few exhibitions of Vancouver street photographs, perhaps leading to the mistaken assumption that there have been few street images made here. *Unfinished Business* explores our history of 'street work' from a key period in the city's development, revealing that there have, in fact, been many photographers documenting our streets. This thirty-year period was chosen for several reasons, one of which is the acknowledgement that the work of Fred Herzog is one of the sources of inspiration for this exhibition. Herzog came to Vancouver in 1954 and has been tirelessly photographing the city ever since, more or less launching the post-war photo documentation of Vancouver.

At the other end of this thirty year period lies Expo '86, and regardless of what one thinks of that extravaganza, there is general agreement that Vancouver was forever changed by that 'World's Fair'. It could be proposed that Vancouver lost part of its innocence in

1986 and it seems clear that the changes in the fifteen years since Expo dwarf those in the previous fifty, in both urban change and in artists' approaches to picture-making. Many contemporary artists have recorded Vancouver's post-Expo history, but the opportunity for a reconsideration of street images made prior to Expo is one opportunity this exhibition affords. The main subject of *Unfinished Business* is quotidian Vancouver - our everyday urban reality as it happened to be captured on film.

The 'unfinished business' that is title of the show manifests itself in several ways. The building of the city itself is an unfinished project, or, if we wish to think of the city as a work of art, as a work in progress. Photographic documentation of a city can never be considered finished or complete. Vancouver's streets, regardless of the depth of the existing archives, are quite probably under-documented compared to many other cities. Research into the existing archival material is plainly an unfinished project. More exhibitions exploring this field are needed. Yet the scope and richness of the known image banks is sometimes vast. Photographers such as Fred Herzog and Brian Stablyk, for instance, have over 100,000 images in their personal archives.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a series of six mini-symposia – outlined on the next page. They will explore some of the issues arising from the images assembled as *Unfinished Business*. These events are open to the public and all but one are free. *Unfinished Business* is curated by PHG Director/Curator Bill Jeffries.

The exhibition is supported by all of our core funders, including the Canada Council for the Arts, the B.C Arts Council, The City and District of North Vancouver, the GVRD, the North Shore Arts Commission and the District of West Vancouver. The symposium series (see next page) is supported by the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation.