

# Archives and Photography Exhibition Review



## Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs.

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY. Mounted 25 January to 13 May 2007.  
Accompanying publication: Grant Arnold and Michael Turner. *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre and Vancouver Art Gallery, 2007. 160 p. ISBN 1-55365-255-X.

In January 2007, the Vancouver Art Gallery mounted the first major, solo exhibition of Vancouver photographer Fred Herzog. The exhibition, entitled “Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs,” spans fifty years of image making by this German émigré. In conjunction with the exhibition, the Vancouver Art Gallery co-published the first monograph of Herzog’s photography, which includes an interview with the artist and essays by Grant Arnold, Audain Curator of British Columbia Art, and Canadian author Michael Turner.<sup>1</sup>

Fred Herzog was born in 1930 in Stuttgart, Germany. Motivated by the successful emigration of a relative, Herzog arrived in Canada in 1952 hoping for adventure and work. By 1953 he had moved from Toronto to Vancouver and landed a shipping job in the Seamen’s International Union on the “SS Cassiar.” A self-taught photographer, Herzog did not start to earn his living from photography until a few years later in 1957, when he began working as a medical photographer at Vancouver’s St. Paul’s Hospital, an occupation he continued until 1990.<sup>2</sup> The one hundred and forty photographs in the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition are a selection made from over eighty thousand colour slides, and twenty-eight thousand black and white negatives held in Herzog’s personal archive.<sup>3</sup> These images represent Herzog’s unique style of street photography, which he created after work hours and during week-

1 Audain Curator of British Columbia Art is an endowed curatorial position at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The position is directed towards increasing research and scholarship into the art of British Columbia, and is made possible by an endowment from the Audain Foundation in 2004. See Vancouver Art Gallery, “Vancouver Art Gallery establishes Audain Curator of British Columbia Art” (February 2005), [http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/press\\_release/pdf/Audain.pdf](http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/press_release/pdf/Audain.pdf) (accessed 23 October 2007).

2 Herzog worked as a Medical Photographer at St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver until 1961. From 1961 to 1990, he was the Head of the Photo/Cine Division in the Department of Biomedical Communications at the University of British Columbia.

3 Fred Herzog, “Vancouver Flashback,” interview by Brian Lynch, *Georgia Strait* (18 January 2007), <http://www.straight.com/article/vancouver-flashback> (accessed 26 October 2007).

ends. These colour photographs portray urban neighborhoods, the armature of advertising evident in the architecture of Vancouver streets, and the leisure activities of the working and middle class in and around the city.



**Figure 1:** Fred Herzog, *Untitled [Hastings and Columbia Street, Vancouver]*, 1958. Chromogenic print, 76.3 x 50.1 cm, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. VAG 2005.13.3.

Until recently Herzog has remained on the periphery of the mainstream art scene, while his photographs have received attention mostly from historians interested in their documentary content. In mounting this exhibition, the Vancouver Art Gallery hopes to introduce his photography to a wider audience and to examine the broader context of his practice.<sup>4</sup> Curator Grant Arnold situates Herzog's work in relation to both street-scene photographers of the 1950s and 1960s, and to younger Vancouver artists currently working with photoconceptualism, providing insight into the nature of communication and, more specifically, the nature of photography itself.<sup>5</sup> The exhibition and monograph focus on the circumstances surrounding the creation of Herzog's photographs: his motivation, methods, and materials. This approach offers more than the typical art gallery experience and, as a result, the evidential value of Herzog's personal archives and an investigation into the photograph as an act of recording an event is emphasized.

The marginal position occupied by Fred Herzog's photography within the Vancouver art world is noted in the press release and the wall-mounted text at the exhibition, and is discussed further in the monograph by both Kathleen Bartels, who is director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, and Grant Arnold. The latter questions why Herzog's work has been neglected and, in doing so, identifies the struggle to categorize his photography in the dichotomy between art and documentation. The early assumption by galleries that colour photography was a tool for commercial enterprise but not a serious art form (such as black and white photography) is raised as an obstacle to Herzog's recognition as an artist. His choice of photographic media, Kodachrome slide film, is another potential barrier; although the medium does produce original images with exceptional detail and vast tonal ranges, these colour originals are typically viewed through light projection, not photographic prints. Prior to the exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Herzog preferred to project his original slides and provide personal narration. He explains that methods for optically printing reproductions from his transparencies produce inferior images that lack the tonal range and image sharpness of the originals.<sup>6</sup> However appropriate projection might have been for small groups (Herzog held teach-

4 Grant Arnold and Michael Turner, *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs* (Vancouver, 2007), p. 6.

5 Photoconceptualism involves the creation of conceptually-driven, photo-based artworks. Pioneered by Ian Wallace while teaching at the University of British Columbia in the 1970s and 1980s, post-conceptual photography developed from an exploration of the photographic tableaux (i.e., large format photography presented in the same way as painting), as a method for questioning the meaning of photography and the practice of making photographs. The images often depict urban Vancouver and address the passage of time, both as a pictorial element and an aspect of the photographic medium (i.e., still photography.)

6 Grant Arnold, "An Interview with Fred Herzog," in *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs*, p. 31.

ing positions in the art departments of the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s), it has very little application in the object-centric, commodity-driven art world. Therefore, difficulties in categorizing Herzog's work and the challenges presented by his preference in media have hampered the inclusion of his photographs in private and institutional collections.<sup>7</sup>

The Vancouver Art Gallery, noting in its press release that "... recent innovations in digital technology have allowed Herzog a new freedom to print his images on a large scale ...,"<sup>8</sup> heralds the presentation of his archival images in the form of digital reproductions on museum-quality, inkjet paper.<sup>9</sup> The Herzog exhibition presents one hundred and forty photographs (most in colour), a narrated slideshow, and a black and white film of Vancouver in the 1950s. The comprehensive treatment given to his photography is necessary considering the breadth of his documentation and the sheer volume of images. While perhaps initially daunting, Herzog's exhaustive visual exploration into the urban experience is organized chronologically, print sizes are kept small (i.e., 16" x 20"), and all images are accompanied by labels that list the image title (often truncated from text found in the image itself, or a direct reference to the subject matter), location, date, and the type of media used to create the exhibition print (e.g., archival inkjet, silver gelatin, or chromogenic).<sup>10</sup> The decision to present Herzog's work in this manner heightens the interrelatedness between the photographs, and provides the critical information surrounding creation, production, and provenance. Herzog's prints require viewers to stand near to the frame and peer into the scenes.<sup>11</sup> On busy weekends at the Vancouver Art Gallery, a degree of jockeying is necessary to afford a better sightline, as visi-

7 A major milestone for Herzog was the 1969 group exhibition at the National Gallery, curated by Alvin Balkind, in which Herzog had thirty-six colour prints in the exhibition. More recently, Herzog was included in group exhibitions at Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery in 1986 and 2003.

8 Vancouver Art Gallery, "Vancouver Art Gallery to Present Landmark Retrospective, Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs" (14 December 2006), [http://vanartgallery.bc.ca/press\\_releases/pdf/Herzog\\_Press\\_Release.pdf](http://vanartgallery.bc.ca/press_releases/pdf/Herzog_Press_Release.pdf) (accessed 26 October 2007).

9 Fidelis Printmaking produced the exhibition prints. The Vancouver-based company works closely with artists to produce museum-quality, digital prints for exhibition. Recent clients include the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Museum of Anthropology at UBC. See Fidelis Printmaking, "Fred Herzog chooses Fidelis for landmark exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery" (February 2007), [http://www.fidelisprintmaking.com/resources/archive/2007\\_02\\_01\\_archive.htm](http://www.fidelisprintmaking.com/resources/archive/2007_02_01_archive.htm) (accessed 26 October 2007).

10 The label also included a collection credit, which was mostly accredited to the collection of the artist, Fred Herzog.

11 Current museum practices exhibit contemporary photography on a grand scale akin to paintings.

tors point out their claims of familiarity. The print sizes complement the internal composition of the photographs. The majority of Herzog's subjects are captured at a distance that is proportionate to the human eye, as if they were standing nearby. The image composition combined with the crowded gallery environment, creates an effect that dissolves the formal constraints of the art gallery and heightens our experience of the recorded moment.

Fred Herzog, *Chinese New Year, Vancouver, 1964*. inkjet print, collection of the artist, courtesy of Equinox Gallery.

Peering into the image titled *Chinese New Year, Vancouver, 1964* (see cover illustration), one discovers thirteen pairs of eyes staring out from a set of open windows. A few of the children appear to be standing on a knee or a chair in an effort to get a better view of the street below, while the taller members of the group, mostly young men, stand further back, losing the definition of their faces to the interior shadows. Each face offers a different expression: boredom, expectation, and recognition. The subjects are confined to the spaces within the window frames, yet Herzog deftly composes the rest of the image to include signage with Chinese characters, the flag of Taiwan, and the red ensign of British merchantmen, which defines the cultural politics that framed immigrant identities in urban neighbourhoods like Chinatown.

Herzog's art practice is one of purposeful engagement in the representational capacity of photography. His self-training does not limit his understanding of how to achieve his particular style of dynamic realism.<sup>12</sup> He uses different lenses, both long and wide; he works in low light and crowded locations, all the while producing images that achieve a rare balance of composition and spontaneity. The choice of Kodachrome slide media, initially released in 1935 as moving-image film, enables him to create originals with superior colour quality and image sharpness.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the previous inability of optically-made colour prints to reproduce the detail and vast tonal range present in the film originals that Herzog himself has acknowledged, has had an impact on his desire to exhibit and, in turn, restricted his sphere of influence in the art world.

If one compares Herzog's street photography with selected works of celebrated artists such as German-born Robert Frank (b.1924), American-born Walker Evans (b.1903) and Stephen Shore (b.1947), it is easy to see a shared

12 Herzog describes his photography as realism with dynamic content (i.e., people and action). Arnold, "An Interview with Fred Herzog," p. 29.

13 The emulsion structure of Kodachrome film is non-substantive, which means that the dye couplers are introduced during the development process. This produces a thinner emulsion layer producing a sharper image.

language of visual representation.<sup>14</sup> All four artists have turned their camera lens upon the daily lives of North Americans and have focused on recording the unconscious symbols of modern life: the lure of the automobile, storefronts jammed with second-hand trinkets, and frame upon frame of signage – all symbolic of a society characterized by mobility and materialism.<sup>15</sup> Herzog's *Robson Street, 1957*, presents two women pushing baby carriages and walking purposefully towards the camera along a busy urban street. The sun is shining and although other people on the street are wearing coats and hats, the two women are wearing summer dresses in pink and blue. The pair and their children are framed beneath a receding sightline of unlit neon signage catering to homemakers with claims of "keys cut in 1 minute," "buttons covered," and "international café." Street scenes such as this describe how people move within cities and reveal how environment shapes human interactions. In many of Herzog's images the subjects are either unaware or disinterested in the fact that they are being photographed. This effect draws our attention to the position of the photographer and the camera within the scene and the degree of intrusion they present. Herzog's images can inform viewers of social attitudes regarding photography, and being the subject of a recorded moment. To an extent, this type of analysis into how visual records are created contributes to a deeper understanding of their contextual framework. On this note, it would have been interesting if the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition had incorporated a contact sheet from one of Herzog's Kodachrome rolls or his black and white negatives. As seen in publications and exhibitions of Robert Frank and Walker Evans, the contact sheets reveal a far greater degree of background information about how photographers interact with their subjects and the mechanical methods employed to compose and frame the scene. From an archival perspective, the contact sheets would reclaim the archival bond stripped from the images during the curatorial process.

14 In the footnotes to Grant Arnold's essay in the printed monograph, he claims Herzog's images from the 1950s and 1960s to be the earliest extended body of colour "street" photographs. See Arnold and Turner, *Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs*, p. 19.

15 The similarities between the work of these artists are most apparent when looking at Frank's body of black and white photographs created in the late 1950s and published in *The Americans*, Evan's SX-70 colour polaroids created in the early 1970s and published posthumously in *Walker Evans: Polaroids*, and Shore's large-format colour photographs created in the mid-1970s and published in the monograph *Uncommon Places*.



**Figure 2:** Fred Herzog, *Untitled [Robson Street, Vancouver]*, 1957. Chromogenic print, 76.3 x 50.1 cm, collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, purchased with the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund. VAG 2005.13.1.

The invitation to mount an exhibition of Herzog's street photography at the Vancouver Art Gallery brought additional challenges to the forefront, such as the condition of his archive. Details of the storage conditions in which the Kodachrome originals have been kept are not discussed in the exhibition, but Herzog does explain that his originals demonstrate widespread colour fading, scratches in the emulsion, and fungal growth. His past practice of using the originals for projection would have increased the risk of colour fading (light damage) and warping (heat deformation), two factors that contribute to the overall deterioration of the image substrate.<sup>16</sup> The omission from the exhibition of any Kodachrome slides with fungus or colour fading was an unfortunate oversight and a missed opportunity to educate the public about the fragility of photographic media and the damaging effects of improper storage over the long term.<sup>17</sup>

This exhibition could not have been realized without the extensive participation of the artist in the (re)creation of the images that were displayed. Herzog explains in the monograph that digital intervention was necessary in order to create print reproductions true to the colour saturation, tonal range, detail, and contrast of his originals.<sup>18</sup> The digital-imaging process, which he oversaw, involved scanning the selected film originals and using software to correct for colour loss, lens drop-off, surface dust, and scratches in the emulsion. In preparation for the digital process, Herzog selected the images from eighty thousand slides and twenty-eight thousand black and white negatives.<sup>19</sup> The entire process took nearly four years and over five hundred hours of scanning, re-mastering, and printing to produce the pigment-based inkjet prints in the exhibition.

Yet Herzog is quick to add that alterations beyond restoring the images to original quality are not permissible, regardless of temptation. This raises an interesting question regarding the degree of alteration permissible before the digital image ceases to be an authentic copy of the original. Herzog seems to acknowledge that a level of digital alteration is acceptable, and because he is the creator he can determine exactly where that threshold is; however this is not the case for curators, archivists, and museum professionals working with archival holdings. He asserts that the colour dyes in inkjet prints and sensitized papers currently available offer better longevity than traditional, colour

16 Kodachrome rates well for dark-storage longevity; however, it performs poorly in resistance to colour fading when exposed to high levels of light.

17 The likelihood of art gallery attendees having aging colour-slide film is high considering the medium's widespread use in amateur and professional photography since the 1950s.

18 Fred Herzog, "An Interview with Fred Herzog," p. 31.

19 Fred Herzog, "Visions of Vancouver," interview by John Mackie, *The Vancouver Sun* (13 May 2007), <http://www.canada.com/vancouvernews/arts/story.html?id=b3f9d7cb-281c-4446-ae84-3cb65fa6d8f5> (accessed 26 October 2007).



printing papers (i.e., chromogenic prints). Recent years have shown a growing acceptance of inkjet technologies for photographic reproduction within the art world. The combination of pigment-based inks and ph-neutral rag paper provides artists with optional avenues for presenting and disseminating their photography. Additionally, the intervention of digital technology in an effort to increase access to an artist's work, which in the case of Fred Herzog is an invaluable archive that chronicles five decades of economic, social, and political changes in Vancouver, deserves serious consideration.

Fred Herzog's participation in the selection, digital re-mastering, and reproduction of his images for the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition is key to their reception. Without his guidance, the reproduced works would not accurately represent his artistic intentions and the integrity of the exhibition would be called into question. "Fred Herzog: Vancouver Photographs" presents archival photographs in the context of a contemporary art gallery and creates a unique opportunity to explore how photographs function both as record and art. A walk through the exhibition confirms the power of visual images to materialize a time and place, and to enhance our understanding of how people live.<sup>20</sup>

**Jessica Bushey**  
**University of British Columbia**

20 The Herzog exhibition draws attention to the participation of artists in studies directed towards the discovery of how to re-produce and re-present artworks that are created in vulnerable media, such as technological formats no longer supported, consumable materials, and performance works. Collaboration is critical to establishing the intention of the work and to determine acceptable levels of deviation from the original artwork. The information being gathered by this type of interdisciplinary investigation may set the parameters that will enable cultural custodians (i.e., archivists, curators, educators), to provide ongoing access in a manner that does not compromise the integrity and authenticity of their holdings. Work developing new methodologies and tools to address the issues of preserving and documenting digital, technological, and electronic works of art is being done under the DOCAM (Documentation et conservation du patrimoine des arts médiatiques) Project, headed by the Daniel Langlois Foundation. See Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, "DOCAM" (2007), <http://www.docam.ca/en/?p=28> (accessed 27 October 2007).