

LONDON

Keith Arnatt

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

"I'm a Real Photographer" trumpets the title of this first survey exhibition by Keith Arnatt. Presumably we are meant to see this as a proud assertion of identity by a man who started the '60s as a painter and entered the next decade as one of Britain's best-known Conceptual artists (participating in such shows as "Information" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970 and "The New Art" at London's Hayward Gallery in 1972) yet in 1973 decided to bid farewell to all that. "Would you help me to become a photographer?" the already forty-three-year-old artist asked David Hurn, then a teaching colleague at Newport College of Art in Wales and now the curator of this exhibition.

Despite his change of medium more than three decades ago, Arnatt's best-known work remains his 1972 *Trouser—Word Piece*, the one remnant of his Conceptual career allowed past the threshold of the Photographers' Gallery. A photograph of the artist holding a placard emblazoned with the words I'M A REAL ARTIST, it was originally juxtaposed with a text taken from philosopher J. L. Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* (1964), exposing the indeterminacy of the meaning of the word *real*. If much of Arnatt's conceptual work was wittily bound up with the epistemological uncertainty of art—and of being an artist—his present insistence on the word *real* signals that today he is in a similarly productive quandary about photography and what it means to be a photographer.

Still, Arnatt has continued to work conceptually in the sense that he has always used predetermined schemata to pursue an investigation of the activity of picture making. In his black-and-white work of the '70s, however, the concept can be too understated, too elusive—few viewers of the 1976–79 series "Walking the Dog" would easily recognize that his concern was how to get a dog to look at the camera so that it would appear, impossibly, to be "posing" in the same sense as its human companion. Instead, the pictures come off looking like an

affectionately wry portrayal of British identity, something halfway between Mass Observation and Martin Parr by way of August Sander. More successful, perhaps, are the black-and-white landscape-based series of the '80s, like "A.O.N.B. (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty)," 1982–84, in which the odd and inconspicuous details become more disquieting because less interpretable; Arnatt has spoken of being inspired by Eugène Atget in making these works, and like Atget's pictures, his too might (as Walter Benjamin put it) "begin to be evidence in the historical trial."

Arnatt really came into his own, however, when, in 1986, he began using color. The blunt title of the series "Pictures from a Rubbish Tip," 1988–89, gives no idea of the chromatic radiance and luminous nuance that Arnatt finds in decaying refuse. Suddenly one becomes curious about those forgotten paintings of his. Again, there is a vaguely forensic connotation to the idea of poring over castoff clothes and rotting fruit that connects to Atget, but the intensity of attraction/repulsion embodied in these works seems very much of its time, recalling contemporaneous work by Helen Chadwick (e.g., "Meat Abstracts," 1989)—though Arnatt's images are far subtler and more powerful—or Cindy Sherman (compare *Untitled #175*, 1987). In "Notes from Jo," 1991–94, Arnatt photographed messages left for him by his wife, thereby chronicling what was apparently not an easy marriage (WHERE ARE MY WELLINGTONS YOU STUPID FART?). While the deadpan presentation of text recalls Arnatt's conceptual period, his eye for specifically pictorial effects is razor-sharp: Only in a photograph could the red-marker ink of TURN OFF ONIONS IF BURNING collide so devastatingly with the green lining of the envelope on which the words have been scribbled. Having stopped worrying about being a real artist in favor of worrying about being a real photographer, Arnatt leaves us in no doubt he's still a real artist.

—Barry Schwabsky

Keith Arnatt, *Untitled*, 1988–89, ink-jet print, 19% x 23%. From the series "Pictures from a Rubbish Tip," 1988–89.

