

Ian Wallace

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Aaron Peck

FOR TWO WEEKS IN APRIL 1983, Ian Wallace sat at a desk reading Kierkegaard's *On the Concept of Irony* at Vancouver's Or Gallery from midnight until 1 AM. The front door was locked, but Wallace was visible through the storefront window to occasional passersby. The performance, *At Work 1983*, also resulted in a film (later transferred to video), a backlit transparency, photographs, and prints. In 2008, Wallace restaged the performance, again transforming a gallery—this time Catriona Jeffries—into a kind of ersatz studio, with the change documented in four of his signature diptych canvases and a digital video. This elaboration of the artist as reader, researcher, intellectual—and ultimately, as *image*—epitomizes Wallace's decades-long exploration of artistic process, which is both ironic demystification and earnest examination. These two iterations of *At Work* shifted the perception of what an artist does in the studio, not only making the creative process transparent but also highlighting the role of philosophical and academic research: the studio as a place of ideas, not simply a site for the production of things. And it is these bodies of work that fittingly anchor the broad retrospective "Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography" at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curated by Daina Augaitis, the exhibition charts the artist's diverse meditations on the relationship between modernist painting, collage, and literature vis-à-vis Conceptual art and documentary photography—a practice that helped shape

a small group of artists that would become known as the "Vancouver School."

Wallace is best known for diptych canvases that montage photography with monochromatic painting. In his ongoing "At the Crosswalk" series begun in 1988, for example, each canvas juxtaposes photographs of pedestrians standing at street intersections with monochrome panels (*At the Crosswalk VII* and *At the Crosswalk VIII*, both 2011, are recent additions commissioned by the VAG for this exhibition). In every photograph in the series, male and female figures appear on opposite panels (and thus on facing sides of the intersection), separated by panels of color (hence the double entendre in the exhibition title). In a sense, the monochromatic parts also function referentially: Especially when they are white, they mimic the lines that demarcate crosswalks. Not only are the monochrome and photograph juxtaposed, but a tension arises within each work as this mimetic echo strains to unite the depictive space of the photograph and the pictorial space of the entire canvas (which includes both the monochrome and the photograph).

As Wallace noted in his 1992 essay "Photography and the Monochrome: An Apologia, an Exegesis, an Interrogation," these two modes of imagery reflect the dialectical opposition between modernism and what he refers to as postmodernism. For him, photography provided an indexical relationship to reality that modernist painting lacked. And conceptual photography, specifically, a practice that is characterized by an interrogation of the conventions of narrative and representation, is used to dismantle the privileged position held by modernist painting while at the same time engaging with its modes of abstraction. Throughout his career, Wallace has lingered on this divide between photography and painting, emblemizing it in his canvases and exploring it in his critical essays as well. Besides being lauded for his writing, he is, indeed, also acclaimed for his teaching, having spent the majority of his career as a lecturer in art history. Wallace has contrib-

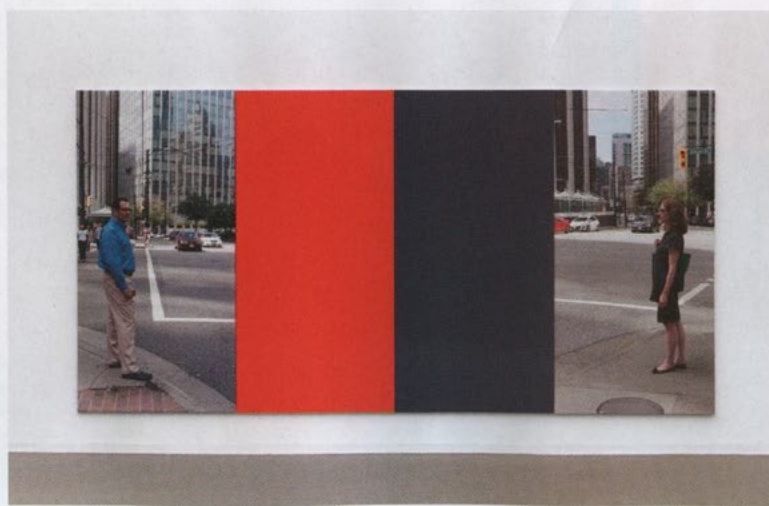
uted significantly to the discourse of contemporary art, particularly in Vancouver, along with colleagues (many of whom were, in some capacity, former students) such as Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, and Rodney Graham. By writing often about his own work and that of his peers, he helped establish an environment where artists could do the same in a sustained and rigorous way. Apropos of the *At Work* project, one may be tempted to consider Wallace's essays and lectures, in some sort of poststudio way, as a performative aspect of the work itself. But Wallace's textual practice has a more direct relationship to his visual work: It is often an explanation, a defense, or a working-through of it.

If the art of the late '60s challenged William Carlos Williams's dictum for poetry—"no ideas but in things"—Wallace's work attempts to synthesize that dialectic: both ideas *and* things.

Wallace's writing and pedagogy, then, help to frame the works in "At the Intersection." But if Wallace has often been identified as the "teacher" of the so-called Vancouver School (in tandem with Iain and Ingrid Baxter of N.E. Thing Co.), "friend" may be a better description of his role; rather than simply playing paterfamilias, Wallace and his work emerged from a scene that he was instrumental in initiating. Both Graham and Wall appear as models in Wallace's work, for example in his last major photographic work of the '70s: the pastoral *Lookout*, 1979, a panoramic, twelve-panel set of color-tinted photographs in which they appear as two among a group of figures on Hornby Island. Here (as was the case at his 2008 survey at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam), *Lookout* is presented with Wallace's test shots of all the models, so that the final work is now exhibited with procedural documents, highlighting the process of its conception and

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From left: Ian Wallace, *At Work 1983*, electrostatic and dye-coupler print, 8 x 10". From the series "At Work," 1983— Ian Wallace, *At the Crosswalk VIII*, 2011, four panels with photolaminate print and acrylic on canvas, each 7' 4 1/4" x 4', overall 7' 4 1/4" x 16' 3/4". From the series "At the Crosswalk," 1988—



production. Of works also made during his early phase, two large-scale handpainted photographs, *Summer Script I & II*, 1973–74—taken from video stills shot on the set of an unrealized 16-mm film made in collaboration with Graham and Wall—are notable absences from the exhibition.

After the late '70s, Wallace shifted from large-scale photographic works, such as *Lookout*, to more open-ended serial projects. These became increasingly self-referential, with Wallace often integrating sketches and documentation of process into the final work itself. He repurposed test prints, drawings, and documentation, exhibiting them adjacent to finished works; in later pieces, he incorporated photographs of sketches as documentary images. His abstract drawings, for example, have appeared in various photoworks, and in "At the Intersection" the actual drawings are hung next to those panels from the 1986–"Hotel" series in which they are pictured. In this way, an image of one piece often will reappear as a detail in another, so that the works relate to, or even mirror, each other, if sometimes only obliquely. His visual references create feedback loops, the work referring to itself as a system—or, as Wallace has called it, a "literature"—of images.

Studio/Museum/Street, 1986, provides another example of this textual and visual structure. This large-scale work consists of a triptych of panels, each one broken down into four vertical parts: two black-and-white photographs (each pair depicting one of the three eponymous locales) juxtaposed with two white monochromes. In one panel, the two photographs depict Wallace in his studio considering photographic prints from the "Poverty" series, 1980–87. Wallace, however, had already used that image in a previous work, *In the Studio* 1984, so that this specific photograph appears in two different works. The central panel presents two images of classical sculptures sandwiched between white monochromes. (The same pictures of sculptures reappear in other museum-themed works of the '80s, such as *The Imperial City*, 1986.) Meanwhile, the third panel continues the motif of juxtaposition, in this case with photographs of passersby in the street, a milieu echoed in other street scenes found in his "At the Crosswalk" series. Not only does Wallace continually cite previous works, then, but by exploring the same motifs and themes consistently, he establishes his oeuvre as a system that constantly unfolds. Images become traces of other images, the way a letter traces a sound.

Wallace's use of the word *literature* is telling, because if process is understood to be a key element of his oeuvre, so is poetry. In particular, his work considers the affinities between poetry and collage, a consideration that finds its precedent in Stéphane Mallarmé's work, with which Wallace has had a career-long engagement, in ample evidence here. *Image/Text*, 1979, for example, montages color-tinted photographs with pages of Mallarmé-inspired poems, in twelve large-scale, hand-colored gelatin silver prints (which was also published as an art book that same year). If *Image/Text* mimics Mallarmé's verse, numerous other

photographic works depict the poet's texts: *In the Studio (Le Livre)*, 1993/2005, is a photograph of Wallace's desk, on which sits a copy of Jacques Scherer's *Le "Livre" de Mallarmé* and *Un Coup de Dès* open to the "N'ABOLIRA" page; more recently, works such as *Document (Les Biffés with Scribble)*, 2012, contrast photographs of Mallarmé's original handwritten manuscripts with monochrome panels and enlarged scribbles.

Wallace's apprehension of Mallarmé's work is manifest not only through his photographs of the poet's texts, which are a kind of trace of a trace, but also through Wallace's understanding of collage, which is particularly apparent in many of his earliest language- or literature-based works of the late '60s. In 1969, Wallace contributed the essay "Literature, Transparent and Opaque," to the "Concrete Poetry" exhibition at the University of British Columbia's Fine Arts Gallery; it is among five of his major essays reprinted in the VAG catalogue. In it, Wallace argues for a literary practice that uses language in ways that make its meaning "opaque" instead of "transparent." The year before, Wallace demonstrated what such opacity might look like, in his untitled collages of crossword puzzles, all of which are currently on display at the VAG, and which appeared as concrete poems in *bleuointment*, a magazine published by Canadian poet bill bissett; in "At the Intersection," they are exhibited as collages. These visual-poetic alloys continued a year later with works such as *Literary Influence, John Locke Divided and Reconstructed*, and *Geometric Pessimism*, all 1969. Each began with the reproduction of a single page from a text—usually a theoretical or philosophical work that presumably influenced Wallace in some way—which the artist then cut up and collaged, thereby using the page on which the text is printed as the raw material for the work. Such shifts from medium to medium, publication to publication, were also evident in his 2009 exhibition at CSA Space in Vancouver, "On Surplus Value," for which he created the majority of the works from collaged pages of Dierichsen's essay "On (Surplus) Value in Art" (2008). Apropos of his depictions of process, an ink-jet photographic print with the same title as the text-collage, also included in the show, documents a studio table on which pages from Dierichsen's book are being collaged.

If the art of the late '60s challenged William Carlos Williams's dictum for poetry—"no ideas but in things"—Wallace's work attempts to synthesize that dialectic: both ideas *and* things. In Wallace's oeuvre, a series of articulations ricochet between object and idea, word and image, the ephemeral and the material. He does not want to abandon these dualities; he oscillates between them, in the interim revealing the process of aesthetic labor. So the best way to grasp the full import Wallace's work has had on the legacy of Conceptual art may be through a retrospective like this one, because—not unlike sounds in an echo chamber—each piece or series resonates with those that have come before, an unabating reverberation even within the strictest of structures. □

"Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography" is on view through Feb. 24, 2013.

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