Q&A: Ian Wallace on making it – as an artist and a city – in the global scene (/blog/2015/03/18/qa-ian-wallace-making-it-%E2%80%93-artist-and-city-%E2%80%93-global-scene)

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These days everyone is a photographer. We share shots of the cherry blossoms on our street, the grandchildren in our backyards and the perfectly charred cauliflower florets on our plate. Social media is a photographer’s playground.

But the bulk of us remain amateurs with much to learn about shutter speeds and composition. We look to the professionals to learn what’s possible. This spring we’re celebrating some of photography’s greatest innovators – homegrown and foreign – with a series of documentaries.

From snapping mugshots (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/mugshot) to chasing icebergs (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/chasing-ice), we’ll examine the ways photography can both capture and influence. We’ll look at the people behind the cameras – from a reclusive urban street photographer (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/finding-vivian-maier) to an eccentric small town portrait photographer (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/disfarmer) to a Rolling Stone legend (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/annie-leibovitz-life-through-lens). Remember Polaroids (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/time-zero-last-year-polaroid-film)? We’ll look at those, too.

On March 24, we’ll take a look at the guys who put conceptual photography – and Vancouver – on the map. Picture Start (https://www.knowledge.ca/program/picture-start) documents the rise of local photographers Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, and Ian Wallace. You can learn more about the
so-called Vancouver School at the Capture Photography Festival (http://capturephotofest.com/) (April 2 - 29).

For now, we caught up with Ian Wallace at his Vancouver studio. (And what a studio – from the Danish teak chairs to the small jungle of plants to the cherry red drum kit and the napping corner, Wallace knows how to do it up.) His work as one of the founding conceptual photographers (and a teacher to many others) will one day be his legacy.

Here’s what he had to say about why he shoots and how he got to the point in his career where he could afford assistants and an in-office napping station.

(The following interview has been edited for clarity/brevity).

For people who aren’t familiar with conceptual photography, how would you define it?

Well, I pretty well originated that term. It came out of the 1960s when there was suddenly a development of what we’ll call conceptual art. Conceptual art, for the most part, was a critique of the art as object… mostly in very abstract, minimal and non-image-oriented work.

I felt like that wasn’t quite enough. There was so much going on in the world – especially in the 60s – that had to be talked about. Photography would be a way to register and make images of what was going on in the world and bring it into abstract art. And that’s what I’ve done ever since.

Photo conceptualism to me is the most ambitious art of today… the definitive art of this particular time… because it brings the history of modernity in an abstraction into the present, but includes with it what’s possible technically to do with photography.

100 years from now somebody will look at this [artwork on my wall] and say, okay there’s an abstract painting from 2015. That’s what cars looked like in 2015. Cars won’t even exist a hundred years from now, right? Who knows? I like that idea… that something real around me now can be something meaningful to somebody in the distant future.

When you install artworks like this in public are you hoping to spur some specific social change?

Art is for people to enjoy and to just relate to or make some meaning out of their lives.

I’m not one of these people who thinks that art can change the world. I don’t think it can.

But I think that freedom of people to express themselves and to make artwork that does express themselves freely is necessary for a progressive world. There are societies in this world that want to put prohibitions on what people can say about things, and I don’t think it’s healthy. I think it forces people’s subjective unconscious into inverted and perverted kind of underground levels that don’t allow them to be free. Art is all about that process.

How much background do people need to appreciate the work that you and your colleagues do? Can they just walk up to a piece and “get it”?
I think so. There’s nothing in my work that’s so difficult to get. If somebody wants to go the next step and say, why would he take this picture, what’s so important about that – that’s a good question to ask. But I wouldn’t want people to lose any sleep over it.

(Gestures to his current project, a photo of a woman standing in the golden hour at a city crosswalk)

This picture was taken at the place where Louis Daguerre had his studio. Daguerre is the inventor of photography. He did a famous photograph of a guy having his shoe shined on the street corner here in 1839. It was always considered one of the first photographs ever taken. So this picture is more than even what you see. She’s not standing at any street corner. She’s standing at the street corner where photography was invented.

How much of your success do you attribute to the community of artists that you guys built up together in the 60s?

It was a long development — over decades. I spent a lot of time writing about other artists, promoting other artists around me… encouraging younger artists.

I had excellent students in my teaching career. We connected to artists all over the world — writing to them, phoning them, meeting them, traveling. And so when the students graduated they would go to New York and they would already know people who could put them into shows. A lot of the Vancouver School artists… got started in this interchange with artists around the world.

So building community is something you’d advise young artists to do. Is there another set piece of advice you offer young photographers?

Go to the exhibitions when people are showing their work. Go up to that artist and talk to them. Say what you think about it, especially if you think it’s good. If you think it’s bad… you can challenge them. People develop a thick skin after a while. People tell me that they think my work is shit. I have to live with that sometimes.
Also, I always encouraged students to write. That would be their assignment: go and review this exhibition. If you can publish it, you’ll get an A.

You can have a scene like Vancouver where there’s like half a dozen internationally successful artists, but if you don’t have the next generation to follow up, you have a scene that just kind of ages and passes through and becomes nothing again. It’s really important to nurture the next levels.

If you had to define the art scene here to someone across the world, how would you characterize it?

It’s totally tuned in to the global scene – very open and growing. I travel around a lot and I always get this question...

How did Vancouver that’s on the edge of nowhere get to be so centrally positioned? Well, it’s because we travel... we’re showing everywhere. But also, it’s about not being afraid to be yourself. It’s the frontier spirit here.

I like to see people putting money into residency programs because there are a lot of super rich people here – buying apartments and bringing artists in from around the world to come and stay. Like Michael Audain has the one at Emily Carr (http://www.ecuad.ca/about/news/321329). People with money can write that off as a charitable donation.

We’ve got a really good art school here and a great community of younger artists that communicate with each other. I think I had something to do with setting that up, years ago, but it’s beyond me.

Is there one young local artist you’re particularly inspired by right now?

Well, at the Contemporary Art Gallery, there’s Jeremy Shaw (http://www.contemporaryartgallery.ca/exhibitions/jeremy-shaw-medium-based-time/). I haven’t seen the show yet because I was out of town, but I’m going to go down and check the show out. There’s a show opening up by an artist (Yedda Morrison (http://www.republicgallery.com/artists/morrison.html)) from San Francisco at Republic Gallery on Richards Street. There’s a show opening at CSA Gallery (http://csaspace.blogspot.ca/)... on Main Street off Broadway. Oh, Myfanwy MacLeod (http://catrionajeffries.com/artists/myfanwy-macleod/works/) at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, which is the gallery that shows my work...

Last question: what’s the one personal characteristic that really sets an artist up for success?

Determination. Nothing is sadder than seeing an artist with tremendous talent give up easily.
Some artists get very cynical. They think, oh, you got to know the right people, or you got to do this style because that's the style everybody wants. If you don't follow your own vision and you do the style that everyone else is doing, nobody's going to pay any attention to you. Why do they want what you're doing when somebody else is already doing it – probably better and ahead of you? You have to find your own personal vision and really hang in there.