IAN WALLACE
SELECTED WORKS
1970 - 1987

Vancouver Art Gallery
Vancouver, British Columbia
February 5 to April 3, 1988

49th Parallel Center For
Contemporary Canadian Art
New York, May 10 to June 15, 1988

Mackenzie Art Gallery
Regina, Saskatchewan
June 28 to August 10, 1988

The Power Plant
Toronto, Ontario
September 16 to November 6, 1988

Mendel Art Gallery
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
January 6 to February 26, 1989

Winnipeg Art Gallery
Winnipeg, Manitoba
March 12 to May 21, 1989

IAN WALLACE: SELECTED WORKS 1970-1987

CHRISTOS DIKEAKOS

This exhibition is a recognition of Ian Wallace's role in the development of conceptual art in Vancouver. Since 1970 Ian Wallace has incorporated conceptual art strategies with the photographic image as part of a continuing tradition of avant-garde practice. After seventeen years it is now possible to assess the various contributions he has made, especially in the field of large-scale photography in contemporary art. The selection of work presented in this exhibition is seen as a seminal group of interconnected photographic projects that critically engage a number of modernist issues which include aspects of style, theory and politics of a critical avant-garde working within and legitimized by art history.

Despite an early involvement in art, his literary and intellectual interests led Wallace to choose a university education over that of the art school. But by 1967 an ambitious and radical painting practice began to develop simultaneously with his career in art history and modernist criticism. To this day Wallace continues to play multiple roles as an art history lecturer, writer of critical texts, and an active exhibiting artist with an international profile.

Ian Wallace conceives art history not just as an academic account of pre-existing objects, but rather as an active contributor to the actual production of contemporary art. This attitude is a consistent feature of his writing and lecturing. Similarly, as an artist he strategically engages in the critique of ideology, recognizing the relevance of theory and history in the formation of his artistic subjects.

During his years as an instructor of art history at the University of British Columbia, he commenced a series of monochrome abstract paintings and sculpture. This early conviction in the relevance of abstraction demonstrates one side of the dialectic that the artist continues in his current work. The other side of this dialectic is the ideological polarity of representation and subject matter and the image of everyday experience offered by the technique of photography.

Wallace’s refusal of a gestural figurative painting in favour of the factual aspects of photographic representation dominates between 1970 and 1980. Since 1980 with the Poverty series the dialectic has been established outside the image rather than inside it as in the previous decade. The incorporation of modernist abstraction with photographic representation reconciles these two modalities, i.e. the technical polarity between abstraction and the photographic image which signifies the limits of the real.

By 1970-71 late conceptual artists had played out the early formalist conceptual options and formulated through photography and text a new and more political position for a critical avant-garde. Hence the interest in the theoretical and political writings of Marx, Benjamin, Adorno, Derrida, etc. The practice and exhibition of discursive and conceptual photography developed within the regional artistic milieu of Vancouver. Some of its earliest practitioners included artists such as Wallace, Jeff Wall, Bill Jones, Tom Burrows, Duane Lunden, Dean

Ellis and Iain Baxter, along with invited non-Vancouver artists such as Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Ed Ruscha, Vito Acconci, Bill Vazan and numerous others. These artists participated in a number of early exhibitions commencing with the Photo Show (1969) at the University of British Columbia; 955,000 (1970) curated by Lucy Lippard at the Vancouver Art Gallery and other conceptual art exhibitions at the Ace Gallery and Simon Fraser University which included Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, and others. The advent of conceptual art introduced the negation and destabilization of outmoded formulas of academic modernism preparing the artist as well as the audience for new thoughts and new politicized ambitions within and without the art world. Likewise the late conceptual artists yearned for an idealistic return to a reality of productivist activism of the “heroic”, early modernist avant-garde as interpreted by Annette Michelson, Benjamin Buchloh, and Rosalind Krauss in their articles on Rodchenko, Eisenstein, Vertov Benjamin etc., in both Artforum of 1970-74 and later in the periodical October.

From its beginnings this loose group of artists viewed the photograph as a tool of enlightenment capable of revealing the web of reality. However, by 1975 the initial force of this movement was exhausted. Only a few artists understood and felt the power of its ability to form a critique of the given culture. Others became estranged from the movement and felt that the intellectual rigour of conceptual propositions were either too limiting or too demanding to pursue fruitfully.

Along with experimentation in photography Wallace also used critical writing to pursue its ends. One such publication, the Free Media Bulletin of 1969, was printed and distributed free by Wallace, Wall and Duane Lunden; its contents included writings by the artists as well as the language-collage experiments of William Burroughs, notes on the ready-made of Marcel Duchamp, and source documents of numerous other writers and artists. In a 1970 group show by these artists, Jeff Wall also contributed the Landscape Manual, a work in the form of an extensive photographic essay on the suburban landscape which had a great bearing on Wallace’s work of the same period. These writings provided an open forum for the discussion of the critical function of photography. The ensuing dialogue presented a justification of an alternative aesthetic practice based upon the physical world; an investigation of intermediate experiences between sensation and image, where the photographic method became an offering of a never-ending succession of catalogued facts. However, these early photographic projects eventually took on a more precise formalist methodology and elicited new subject matter from the metropolis.

In Wallace’s 1970 work Street Photos, the candid, unframed and informal snapshot was used to see objectively and critically. The traditional modes of “artistic” composition and framing were abandoned in favour of structural semiotic and literal strategies of interpretation. In Wallace’s and Wall’s work at this time traditional photographic discourse in general and specifically documentary photography as a form of social commentary was given a new conceptual basis by informing it with methodologies drawn from formalist aspects of modern art.

For Wallace the modern metropolis, with its complex perspectives of the street and reflections in the store windows, etc., is a totally absorbing envelope of the everyday. The specific site for this work was Vancouver but it could also be any other modern city. As Jeff Wall wrote in his essay *Meaningness* (1969): "... the micro-identity, the focus upon the very procedures, quality and values of this new urban environment was to be discussed within a wider notion of regionalism but without attempting to turn the recorded banal imagery into a monumental pluralism. The specificity of the place was understood by the artist as a necessary and positive source of energy.”

In his *Street Photos* of 1970 Wallace reveals to us the urban metropolitan wilderness — that boundaryless urban/suburban city stretching horizontally across the map of North America. The repetition of this subject was the means by which this investigation could evolve as a metaphorical site out of which a new discourse on the real, the social real, could emerge. Taking a materialist and positivist philosophical stance Wallace proposed "... the primary notion that the world is real physical material, a physical space that recognized the psychic dimensions of itself... based on determinates that are urban, industrial, its panoramas and fetishes, all of the things that are not associated with taste-based artiness.”4 Wallace conceived *Street Photos* as free words in a “Literature of Images”, but transformed into ciphers of a raw urban visibility, he sometimes went venturing "... beyond contemporary cultural awareness and interpretation towards a Utopian wish for recognizable, universal, expressive context and form.”

By late 1970 his photographic projects had shifted to a less haphazard conceptual structure to gain more functionalist effect. By using a systematic photographic scan of street intersections the formal sequential structure enriched the collage effect of moving vehicles and pedestrian window reflections. In both *Magazine Piece* (1971) and *Pan Am Scan* (1970) exhibited during *The Collage Show* (1971) at the Fine Arts Gallery, U.B.C., the artist’s
intention in collage making is no longer a genre technique but a principle by which a semiotic intertextual order of iconic signifiers, through their points of intersection can reveal freshly juxtaposed images in time and space.7 Magazine Piece used a current issue of Seventeen magazine, taped to the wall in a horizontal grid formation, mimicking formalist painting, and acting as an interface between the reality of media materials and its conflation of identity and consumption. The formalist device of providing the “blown-up” layout of a taped and schematized grid of the magazine revealed a fragmented open reading.

The raw and direct approach of this arrangement had the effect of exposing the contradictions of advertising media concealed in the original layout. By juxtaposing the magazine structure and the found reality of its subject matter, this work placed the reader/viewer in a position of not merely receiving meaning, but contributing to its very formation.

A further example of the use of minimalist and formalist devices is the installation of Pan Am Scan, executed in London in 1970. This work consists of a sequential scan of photographs arranged to mimic a shift of view from reflections in an airline’s ticket office window to pedestrians in the street. These large window reflections of street surfaces intersect and fracture the slick corporate-international style interiors, creating a work which functions as a reading of the language of mirroric architecture as a disembodiment of the real information of the street. In this way Magazine Piece and Pan Am Scan determine a frame of reference both outside and inside of what is defined as art, erasing the boundaries between these two areas, between a gallery art and art as communication about reality.8

Wallace’s contribution to the development of mural photography as an important medium in contemporary art is demonstrated by La Mélancolie de la rue (1973), his first large-scale, hand-coloured photo work. This piece is a significant step in the overall development of his work as stated in a recent letter by the artist, “It is a transition point between my use of sequential photo

enlargements as a form of conceptual/political practice mirroring aspects of the urban environment, and subsequent work which touched upon a more literary/expressive spectacle of the artwork itself, scale and colour being a prime consideration of later works.\(^9\) This work was originally titled La Mélancolie de la rue + Barthes' Third Meaning ... Early One Morning, but this was considered too awkward and it is now referred to by its shorter title. The reference to "The Third Meaning" alludes to Ronald Barthes' research into film stills of Sergei Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible, where the author discusses the potentiality of images for ambiguous, marginalized and subterranean meanings beyond their original didactic purpose.

Wallace's interest in the symbolic critique of the urban image and his interest in semiotics provides a structure for an interpretation of the three conflicting images in La Mélancolie de la rue. Wallace's self-conscious use of a semiotic/political analysis appears again in his unpublished notes where he comments on the social and economic subjects of this piece as "... symbolic forms of architecture seen as an index of socio-economic plateaux; institutional, corporate architecture; the city and the crowd in the street expressed as a form of melancholy with domestic/suburban architecture. The family unit searching for a home, and the imaginary palace, the fourth world of the marginalized "invisible" squatter shack in the cool light of dawn."\(^10\)

The work reads like a rebus in which different architectural orders function as a symbolic analogy to different social orders. This tendency recurs as a frequent theme in the artist's more recent work such as the Poverty series (1980-82), Studio/Museum/Street (1986), The Imperial City (1986), and My Heroes in the Street (1987). The effect of reading the work in the visually horizontal arrangement of adjacent images carries forward his original concept of the "Literature of Images."

During the period 1973-75 the introduction of photographic murals added epic dimensions to Wallace's work. The expanded photo-narratives of the 1970s such as The Summer Script (1974) and An Attack on Literature (1975) are panoramic.

spectacles both more than twenty metres in length. These large installation pieces act as readable texts of a “Literature of Images” not only from the discursive symbolic level, but also as a purely visual, suggestive, literary reading. The Summer Script is a narrative fiction of teasing uncertainty. The original concept came out of a collaboration with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham on a film about marriage. Although the film project was never completed, stills from a videotape used in the trial stage of the film remained to form the basis of The Summer Script in which a new narrative was constructed from rearranged sequences of the original action. The second section shows the scriptbook spread out with accompanying photographs, providing a self-reflexive commentary on the narrative. The large-scale of this work with its liberally applied use of shocking and vibrant photographic tinting oils in hot pink and lipstick red, created a heavy and seductive quasi-cinematic installation when it was originally installed within the U.B.C Fine Arts Gallery in 1974.

In an article in Artforum in 1979, Eric Cameron discussed this narrative photomural and suggested that “…a summer sexuality pervades the whole surface of the work…” In Cameron’s opinion, he felt that the meaning of the work was obscured by the uncertainty of an intensified romanticism, so that when the writer attempted to bring the subject into focus, he found that it crumbled into fragments and ultimately lapsed into solipsism. But since his investigation of content could not explain the meaning of the work, a different approach using semiotic principles would illuminate what is behind this facade of staged gesture. Barthes suggests that the “third meaning” of the film still is the counter-narrative of the image, within its own temporality, appearing and disappearing, creating a shifting field of permutations of images. According to Barthes, a third meaning theoretically can be located but is not describable; it is an “obtuse” meaning that vanishes in disguised language, vaguely referring to its intentionality. It is an evident but obstinate meaning giving the viewer a compelling interrogative reading suspended between the image and its description. Ultimately this obstinate meaning seems to “sterilize” criticism and by its interrogation reveals a poetical, non-intellectual grasp. In The Summer Script the critic and viewer are asked to experience the structure of the artist’s thoughts rather than their content. The work ultimately abstracts and redirects this experience to a staged romantic uncertainty of cosmetic and ornamental connotations analogous to human artifice and emotion. The subject of the cosmetic in this narrative itself forms a resonance with the techniques of hand-coloured photography.

Because of their emphatic and romantic positioning, Hypnerotomachia (The Staircase) (1977) and Colours of the Afternoon (1979) form a discontinuous interval in the artist’s overall development. Both works emphasize a visual sensuous experience with an interiorized allegorical potential. The artist’s social, critical subject matter shown in La Mélancolie de la rue has receded to the background. Instead, this period of work reveals an introspective, melancholic, literary atmosphere. Hypnerotomachia (The Staircase) presents a Freudian drama, a frozen moment within an anecdote in which the actors of this oneiric episode seem ready to collaborate with chance and the unconscious.
In this work an elegant woman in a black coat turns apprehensively away from an unseen staircase. Wallace’s interest here is in the quasi-surrealist enigmatic architecture of human gesture. But it also foretells his more recent interests in the posing and framing of the human gesture in the urban context as represented in My Heroes in the Street (1986-87).

What is perhaps the most “cinematic” of the narrative photomurals of this period is An Attack on Literature (1975). This panoramic work is best described as a confrontation between formalist concerns and the reintegration of a literary reading into a semiotic and performance aesthetic. The narrative begins with a man, symbolically the artist/writer, dramatically bending over a typewriter with a blank sheet of paper as though to type it with the shadows of his hands. In the following scene a female figure emerges and successfully generates from the stubborn machine an automatic explosion of blank sheets of paper. This beginning sequence occurs in a dark void, creating a sensation of blankness and darkness, a sensation of something that is missing. In the second sequence a woman in the foreground is shielding her eyes from a blazing light in an elegant, almost erotic pose of suffering and redemption, while the male throws bundles of blank pages which fall in front of her, obscuring much of the image.

An Attack on Literature is an oblique reference by Wallace to the blank pages of Stephane Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard and his essay The Book: A Spiritual Instrument. Mallarmé’s attack on vulgar language is symbolized by a flying newspaper soaring in the air on a windy day. The effort to confine the fragmented being of language, a yearning for a universal
formalization of all discourse, became Mallarmé’s lifelong project. In his discussion of *The Book*, Mallarmé rejected the conventional book format and pagination techniques so as to free the printed “... black characters of the words themselves and to expand and mobilize the letters and words to project a spaciousness that would establish a nameless system of relationships ... embracing and strengthening all writing.”12 His total reabsorption of all forms of discourse into a single word, of all books into a single page, and of the whole world into a single book was a project dedicated to enclosing all possible discourse within the fragile density of the word.

For Wallace as for Mallarmé, the “word” stubbornly refuses to appear on the page. As Michel Foucault suggests in *The Order of Things*, this invisible and obstinate word is the word itself, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness; not its meaning but its enigmatic and precarious being. The ritual exorcism intended to receive the printed word on the blank page where discourse would compose itself, where language would appear in itself to discover the vast “play” or language, is enigmatically absent.13

*Colours of the Afternoon* (1979), a work arranged in a horizontal format, was conceived in part as a response to Mallarmé’s poem *L’après midi d’un faune*. This work falls into the category of a symbolic dream-picture, where poetry and its oneiric surface create a textual reading of the image. It is an Orphic reverie located within the west coast landscape. The grainy texture of the image was the result of transferring 16 mm black and white film to a 92 cm x 122 cm photo enlargement which thus created a degeneration of the image. The resulting coarseness and loss of definition adds a symbolizing aspect of ruination and the hand-tinted monochrome intensifies a sense of sentiment and melancholy in this romantic fantasy.

*Lookout* (1979), Wallace’s most often exhibited work, marks a clear break from the romantic, symbolic, literary schemes of the preceding works. It depicts a forest landscape where figures are participating in a “viewing party”, observing nature and simultaneously involved in an interpersonal exchange of glances and gestures of discussion and interplay. Upon examination, the viewer realizes that this panorama is not a document of an actual event or a naturalistic landscape. The figures have been montaged into the scene, and the entire work hand-tinted. As in *An Attack on Literature*, the figures are a construction, a fiction set within the real landscape. In each case the artist has selected the placement and configuration of the montaged figures as part of a predetermined plan. This imaginary activity of a viewing party occupies a real forest landscape devoid of culture, and yet through their “gestures and glances” the figures manage to bridge the distance between nature and culture. In addition, these figurative images further act as a pseudo-narrative of fictional relationships.

These roughly montaged figures emphasize an intent to return to a formalist analysis, through the architectonic poses of the group and individuals in the act of viewing. Thus, we are given a panoramic composition which offers the gallery visitor a spectacle of spectatorship itself. Writing of this work the artist comments on: “... the location in the landscape (nature) where we engage in

---

the spectatorship of the space of nature from an established and organized viewpoint. But within this activity of spectatorship of art and nature, there is the inevitable discourse between the spectators, hence the title Lookout. In Lookout the figures play out their gestures and body movements in relation to the openness of nature, while in recent work such as My Heroes in the Street (1986), the figures become the subject of social discourse within the cultural fabric of the city.

Wallace’s use of the gallery context as a mediator (between the viewer and the work) or the arbiter of the work itself is found in Image/Text (1979), At Work (1983), and In the Studio (1984). In At Work Wallace takes on a conceptual strategy that positions the gallery as a stage for the representation of the working processes of intellectual art. In At Work Wallace converted the gallery space, which is the place of exhibition, into a studio, the place of production, thus displaying himself in the activity of artistic and intellectual work. The studio within the gallery thus collapsed the contents into one, encouraging the viewer to question the role of the artist as a producer of ideas in the context of public display.

In Image/Text the studio is made to serve as a metaphor for the mind itself. Again, the overall plan of this work invites the spectator to examine the studio as a location for a critical and intellectual artistic praxis. The studio becomes a demystified place of production, and does not rely upon the paraphernalia of art or conventionalized signs of artistic identity. By using images such as the bookshelf, reading material, and the table as the plane where image and language are predicated, the artist constructs a work that affirms reading and contemplation as legitimate activities of artistic production.

Although conceived as a continuation of a “Literature of Images”, Image/Text also prepares the groundwork for Wallace’s return to painterly interests, as demonstrated in the Poverty series beginning in 1980. These works evolved from a melancholic notion of ruination, a process at work both in the city as a socio-economic environment and that of art as well, through the transformations of mechanical disintegration. Beginning with a group of lithographic studies, Wallace made a short 16 mm black and white film from which he derived the images of eight “scenes” that were the basis of further works in the Poverty series. These included black and white photomurals, an edition of small xerox books, and an ongoing succession of paintings. Throughout the entire series of Poverty, Wallace deliberately creates numerous permutations of the original, thus revealing a multiplication of interpretations of technique and form. This work also signifies a return to the symbolic site of the street as subject matter as well as the reinstatement of the abstract monochrome as a “field” against which the image is placed.

Poverty is a dialectic between painting and photography where the act of formalist painting is made to intercept the cinematic images of the original film version by combining the technical polarity of modernist painting with the photographic image of historical, industrial and urban poverty. In the film version of Poverty the artist created a dramatization using actors mimicking traditional documentary depictions of the poor and transient. By fabricating this

fictitious simulacra, Wallace engages problems of personal intrusion and the possibility of misrepresentation of real poverty. This dramatization calls up the problematic contradiction of middle class moralizing and guilt, through an attempt at a subjective reflection on poverty from outside the condition of poverty itself.

The representational function of the photograph and its ability to bring forth subject matter is the focus of Wallace’s urban/street works. From the early work such as *Sketch for Street Reflections* (1970) to the more recent works such as *My Heroes in the Street, Untitled (Heavenly Embrace), Studio/Museum/Street*, the sprawling metropolitan grid of the modern city is represented as it would be experienced by the pedestrian. The social exchanges of the street, reflections from store windows, intersections of pedestrian signals and moving traffic, the gestures and movements of the body in relation to architecture: all symbolize the public space of the everyday city. Providing an important critical frame of reference for discourse about society and art from both inside and outside gallery definitions, this urban metropolitan grid becomes Wallace’s model for contemporary experience in the public sphere.

A frieze-like photomural installation, *My Heroes in the Street*, first shown in March of 1986 at the Coburg Gallery in Vancouver, signalled a full return to the use of the casual snapshot image within a monumental public context. Here, solitary figures were depicted in a multiplicity of urban spatial perspectives. The contemporary *flaneur* projects a quality of introspective detachment, a private introspective journey carried out within the crowd but devoid of the romantic interiorized adventurism of Baudelaire’s original cosmopolitan *flaneur*. Wallace’s portrayal of the individual in the crowd or alone in the street appears austere and melancholy. These individuals are specifically known to the artist and are depicted as “... Heroes of modern life in a journey of visual inner thoughts, sometimes expressing a melancholic stoicism but remaining as

individuals, with a self-conscious will, undaunted by the urban wilderness."\textsuperscript{15} This sense of the urban "wilderness" resonates with the symbolist vision of the city found in Baudelaire's \textit{Les fleurs du mal}; "... where man wends his way through forests of symbols which look at him with their familiar glances." Here the architecture of the modern city constitutes the symbolic "wilderness" where the diffuse language of advertising creates an overwhelming clutter of signage and architecture which provides the backdrop to the social narrative of the new urban hero. Like the pedestrians of his earlier works, these figures remain as individuals within the overwhelming presence of the city. In this recent work, the hero/heroine takes on the persona of office worker, commuter, shopper, etc. In one canvas a solitary heroine, set off by a warm late afternoon light, is juxtaposed against the blemished walls of older city buildings covered with the cultural surfaces of graffiti, symbolizing ruination and resistance. Wallace posits this modernity of urban language as a complexity of surfaces and perspective in which "... all the materials and colours that assert the luxury of commodity are internalized and objectified as sensations, sometimes transformed by desire and negation, sometimes sliding behind assumed values, sometimes standing in opposition."\textsuperscript{16}

In recent versions of this series the artist has laminated colour photomurals across a monochromatic canvas field. By transferring and photolaminating these solitary figures onto a canvas field and bracketing them with white monochrome, he positions photography again within the discourse of modernist art. The result is that the generic literalist aspect of the photograph takes on the role of an architectural sculptural objectivity but without jeopardizing its ability to represent subject matter. The figure in Wallace's photographic field is thus treated as an architectonic signifier overlaid upon the white field of painterly abstraction. The viewer who steps within the perimeter of these large painted fields inadvertently joins Wallace's heroes and appears to become part of the urban scenography for the other gallery observers. As in \textit{Lookout}, Wallace provides an interesting spectacle for spectatorship itself as the architectural concerns of the installation become apparent.

In \textit{Studio/Museum/Street} (1986) Wallace deconstructs the cultural signs of the studio (the private area of artistic production), the street (the topography of the public space) and the museum (the mediator between the two). Wallace constructs a socio-cultural narrative that takes on the characteristics of a symbolic exegesis on the mode of artistic production. The first panel, \textit{Studio}, is a genre work depicting a self-portrait of the artist at work in the private space of the studio reminiscent of the romantic positioning in Wallace's earlier works. This idealization of artistic identity is treated ironically and exposes as mystification the outmoded ideals of artistic "creativity". By depicting himself in a frozen state of deliberation staring at the symbolic blank canvas, an attitude of both doubt and certainty prevail. In the second set of panels representing the \textit{Museum}, two statues acting as phallocentric symbols of patriarchal authority frame an open field of white acrylic. These monumental classical figures suggest a critique of the authority of capitalism over artistic production and its unavoidable connection to the museum system. Finally, the \textit{Street} panels depict
portraits of youthful individuals acting as ciphers of meaning within the urban landscape as in My Heroes in the Street, resonating with the motif of the standing male figure and repeated within the same stationary pose of the artist himself.

The introduction of the figure as an architectural motif was followed up by a series of works beginning with The Imperial City (1986). The dialogue in this work is now between figures of transients (a detail extracted from the Poverty series) and the classical portraiture of imperialistic authority. The Imperial City is clearly meant as a critique of capitalist society. It reveals within the image of the dispossessed urban figure the alienation and psychological fragmentation of a subject removed from an economic system that destroys values and traditions in the name of efficiency and profit. The point is further emphasized by the fact that the panels of classical statuary are spatially as well as ideologically separated from the scene of homelessness in the centre panels, thus demonstrating that the two sectors are unable to share cultural aspirations and ideas.

The use of the figure as an architectural element is further extended in Untitled (Heavenly Embrace) (1987), which consists of four vertical panels, the middle two of which are black and white photographs of classical Greek sculpture, flanked by colour images of a male and female figure in a modern street. The central image of a classical sculpture shows a centaur forcibly carrying off a goddess. This image originally was singular and was split to separate the male and female into independent figurative elements. Historically this particular series of sculptures from the Temple of Zeus from Olympia signals the emergence of the classical period in the fifth century B.C., especially in its depiction of human drama within the relationship of the figures, with their facial and gestural characteristics of majestic calm and stately tumult. On the other hand, the contemporary couple that brackets this classical image are urban “heroic” figures allegorically mimicking the Greek kore and kouros-generic, heroic, figurative sculpture from the archaic period. An ironic, thematic comparison between the theme of rape in classical art and the alienation of the modern urban couple is suggested by the spatial separation between the male and female figures as “architectural” elements in the space of the city, while the female deity is freed from the savage embrace of the centaur. Moreover, a reinterpretation can be undertaken with each installation of this work since Wallace allows for a variable arrangement of the panels in subsequent installations.

A further series of smaller cibachrome works relating to themes of the museum includes: From the Glyptotheke (1984), From the Pinakotheke (1984), 1900 (1984), Portrait Gallery (1984), and more recently Olympia I and II (1987). These utilize a small, portable, serialized, minimalist format representing art historical works from museums or their reproductions. Wallace’s treatment ranges from an implicit critique of the authoritative, historical role of the masterwork, and its institutional context, to an allegory on the ruination and loss of the classical idealized body. Just as the humanist model of God in man’s image and God himself (as described by Nietzsche) was lost in the culture of modernity, the neo-classical imitation of antiquity proved nothing more than the impossibility.
of achieving true resemblance. The renewed ideal of classicism produced both anxious reflection and a calm acceptance of the loss of the ideal body that could only be recaptured, not in its original wholeness, but in fragments. Following from this Wallace uses images of classical painting and sculpture as symbols of industrial society’s anachronistic ideology of the ideal as simple nostalgia. Questions of memory, concept, critique and spectacle surround the merely aesthetic aspects of this group of works.

In this work the generic formal models of classical portraiture and sculpture, especially the study of its authoritative interpretation are, according to the artist, “...flattened out through the mediating, metacritical and concealing technique of photography.”17 Through the process of photographic “generation loss” (through xeroxing and colouring) the original source image of classical sculpture is subjected to a ruination. This disintegration of the image through mechanical processes, combined with the original blemishes and cracks of the original archaic work, presents a critical interaction between an aesthetic technique and an abstract interpretation of the original work. Similarly, the site of this critical discourse in its modernist condition, the position of the wilful individual subject in relation to the modern city, is found in such works as My Heroes in the Street. The recuperation of an historical ideality within the terms of modernity requires a re-examination of the concept of individual will by which the task of “... modern heroes overcoming and transcending forces of subjugation through the acts of self-consciousness of will, although not without the hint of skepticism and irony, is now to retrieve this ideal and to communicate it as an image, as a discourse, and as politics.”18 This statement by the artist is historically rooted in the invention of liberty, with its ideals of individuality against oppression and the restriction of freedom. Thus the task of producing an art of aesthetic value cannot be undertaken without the critical awareness of modern art practice which recognizes the limits of this ideality. But Wallace further comments that this ideal is not just “the recuperation of the ideal of art as an heroic enterprise in itself or the subjectivity of art as the idea of expressiveness in form where the vocabulary and strategies of modernity are absorbed into a vernacular language drained of polemic and saturated with subjectivity.”19 Nevertheless, he also insists that a work of art must function as “A conduit, as a point of contact between the imaginary territory of the artist and the space of the world determined by the signs of the everyday where awaits the expectant spectator ... and in affirming this point of contact, the work of art functions as a tool of enlightenment ... communicated and stimulated by our own awareness and enlightenment.”20

In Ian Wallace’s work we are constantly reminded of the fundamental dialectical conflict of modernism where socio-economic realities do not have a priority over that of the aesthetic and the intellectual spheres. The integration of these opposing modalities into a unity emerges as the positive reification of subject matter within modernist technique, a renewed strategy for a critical avant-garde.
Notes


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


17. Ian Wallace, unpublished manuscript on *Notes on Olympia I and II* and *My Heroes in the Street* (May 1986).

18. Ibid.


20. Ibid.
