CAMERA CAESURA

Cindy Richmond

New works of art are often a series of departures, continuations, and returns. MASCULIN / FÉMININ, the recent series by Ian Wallace, is no exception. The seven photo-based works comprising this installation continue the development of formal elements familiar to his work of the past decade, and the theme of sexual politics recalls his work in the 1970's, but as always, experiment and maturity, rethinking and recombination, have led to new questions rather than resolutions. In returning to something temporarily suspended, what emerges is neither reducible to nor explicable solely in terms of what has come before.

The images in this new series are photographs taken from a video monitor, of scenes from classic European avant garde films of the 1950's and 1960's: Godard's Masculin Féminin and Le Mépris, Antonioni's L'Avventura, and Rossellini's Viaggio in Italia. However, the images are torn completely out of the original cinematic text of these films. Wallace subjects them to a process of excision, displacement and recombination into disjointive relations to one another through which the citation is cast as a new text altogether, reproducing themes of anxiety and autonomy that arise in the space of difference between the male and the female. Hence, while the title is taken from Godard's Masculin Féminin, Wallace has introduced the solidus that accentuates the gap that stands between the sexes, not only as we construct it culturally, but also as it is constructed as a
dialectic or binary opposition in the composition of the work itself. There is a heightened intensity in the dramatic relations the images have to each other and to the abstract compositions of acrylic monochrome against which they are juxtaposed. This sets into motion narratives generated both from the subjects in the images and the formal techniques that ground them as works of art, a dialectic forged between the various elements internal to the work, but at the same time not so explicit, so self-enclosed that the imaginative participation of the viewer is excluded.

Nevertheless, even if technique remains intimately bound to his presentation of the concept, MASCULIN / FEMININ is a departure from Ian Wallace’s other work, not so much in terms of its formal components as in terms of its subject matter. Such a straightforward binary construction of the opposition between masculine femininity, and the emotional, erotic and political intensity this evokes, is something of a departure for Ian Wallace. The dialectic within MASCULIN / FEMININ engage a number of issues: sexuality, power, autonomy that have been important but largely implicit in Wallace’s art. This engagement, while in no sense didactic or transparent, is an attempt, as Wallace has put it, “to pry open a set of terms, both visual and conceptual, by which such a shift in the construction of the gender self can be ‘imagined’ (‘imagined’) on the level of appearance, or even ‘thought’ in the form of an articulate communicative projection.”

MASCULIN / FEMININ invites us to engage the complex dialectic of gender difference: its economy of power, its shifting and unstable implications for subjection, its utopian promise and inescapable limits.

The relation between image and narrative has been a constantly recurring theme in Ian Wallace’s work, one that tends at times to be overlooked in favour of his complex relation to modernism and the philosophical sophistication of his aesthetic strategies. Yet Wallace is, it is fair to say, the most literal of artists. From early works like The Summer Script (1974) and An Attack on Literature (1975) to later ones like The Idea of the University (1990) and In the Museum (the Musée d’Orsay) (1988), Wallace has explored the cinematic, visual and philosophic dimensions of the relation between image and narrative. He says of his work that it “revolves around the notion of the world as text. ‘Through photographic representation and the construction of a syntax of images, what I called the literature of images’, I have tried to draw from the conceptual ‘micro space’ of language a political/expresive embodiment of the reality principle, the logic of the world of everyday action.”

Wallace’s project is at root a philosophical one: it reaches deep into the cognitive and affective processes of ordinary life, in order to mimic the logic of everyday reality and by doing so transform the life-world. But it does not do so in order to be philosophy, even though Wallace has referred to art as “philosophy embodied”: it is rather that art and philosophy share for Wallace a similarly redemptive and utopian project. Despite the alienation and contingency of our political and social life, despite the apparent failure of many of the ethical and intellectual aspirations of the Enlightenment, the notion of a redemptive reason and its attendant aspiration to an emancipated subjectivity, so long the impulse fueling both artistic and philosophic practice, still has a place in Wallace’s project.

In the intellectual and cultural context of post-modernism, and particularly post-modernist attacks on the authoritarian implications of Enlightenment notions of reason and the autonomous subject, this aspect of Wallace’s project is neces-

sarily polemical. Yet the unique nature of Wallace’s intervention in this debate is to conceive and represent the underlying dialectic of the modernist/post-modernist debate. Much of his work attempts to accentuate and contrast the differences between these movements within the space of a single work. Yet rather than resolving their dialectical opposition he would rather suspend them there, simultaneously different and unresolved, and in this opposition constantly suggesting new meanings or interpretation.

In MASCULIN / FEMININ, images excised from cinematic texts are suspended against the abstract white ground, of the painting. For Wallace the white canvas, a sort of monochromatic zero out of which meaning may begin, represents the central insight of modernist abstraction. It proposes that we think meaning from a blank beginning, that we start with a primal mark which initiates potentially new orders of meaning. Yet these are fields in which he is constantly drawn to intervene with allegorical evocations of narrative or meaning. Form and content; abstraction and image; the esoteric language of pure aesthetics and the contingent, shifting, fragmented language of post-modern allegory exist simultaneously in each of these works.

Certainly Wallace’s interest in the narrative potential of images, in particular his collaging together of disjointive yet in themselves densely significant fragments of photographic images, anticipates what Craig Owens has argued is the central place of allegory in the aesthetic strategies of the post-modern. Yet Wallace resists the pessimism that Owens finds at the heart of post-modern allegory. Owens cites Walter Benjamin’s emblematic identification of allegory with the ruin, remarking that “ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay.” Yet Wallace’s works go well beyond mere affirmations of their own contingency and arbitrariness to reveal something more abstract, more enduring, and more utopian in the logic of the everyday.

It is possible, as I noted above, to read MASCULIN / FEMININ as both a continuation of this larger project and a return to its origins in the cinematic character of Wallace’s work from the 1970s. In Summer Script (1974) Wallace used a number of video stills taken from an uncompleted film project that he made in collaboration with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham in the summer of 1973. These video stills were enlarged, hand-coloured and arranged in a montage sequence twenty metres long. Wallace employed a number of cinematic techniques such as close-ups, montage, reverse shots and “photos within photos.” The resulting works are panoramic murals which evoke a visual narrative which is at once banal in its ordinariness (some young people sitting in a garden; the stills and a script for the film spread out on a red and white chequered table), and yet at the same time obliquely erotic. The work invokes an entire range of techniques for constructing narratives from images. As film rushes the images suggest action unfolding in the real time beyond the photographic frame. They are spread panaramically around the room, suggesting the seductive size of cinematic representations, though without the irresistible authority to demand obedience to a preordained narrative. Yet, for all these cinematic tropes, and their literary associations, repeated or recapitulated in An Attack on Literature and Lookout, the narrative of these works remains oblique, constituted internally from relations between the parts of the works rather than through some putative representation of the world beyond the work of art.
There are clear parallels between *Summer Script* and *MASCULIN / FEMININ*. Both are attempts to construct a literature of images, both employ cinematic techniques, and both approach the complex emotional dialects of intimate male/female relations. They seem to suggest a certain pessimism about relations between men and women; they are suffused with a mixture of anxiety and loss which also manages to imply a subtle, almost languid eroticism, as though desire continues and disrupts even the pain and insecurity of our endings. Their subject matter is opaque, implied rather than obvious, and yet at the same time the total effect is emotionally and intellectually powerful. In this respect both works parallel the realism of Godard, who sought to construct a "language of reality" in images, which conveyed as it was perceived by the artist, not as a mere reproduction of events.7

Like *Summer Script*, *An Attack on Literature* explores the syntax of images within the pictorial frame, this time by means of an explicit reference to the blank pages of Mallarmé's revolutionary Symbolist text: *Un coup de dés jamais n'aboli-ra le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Never Eliminates Chance). Again, the work is in two monumental parts, a distinct if oblique narrative formed out of a series of photomontages. Jeff Wall has characterized this work as a retreat from the front lines of the vanguardist debate of the 1970's, a "secession from the emerging feminist agenda, and his drift toward a monumental art of high intention that is consistent in its reprise of Symbolist idealism centred in the aesthetics of Mallarmé."8 Both Scott Watson and Jeff Wall have argued, in somewhat different ways, that Wallace's aesthetic strategy owes much to Mallarmé's privileging of the artist's interior vision of the abstract forms underlying everyday reality; that work brings that vision, in its abstract, detached distance from the immanence and contingency of the quotidian, to the fore.9 Yet it must also be insisted that *MASCULIN / FEMININ* can be seen as a continuation of Wallace's dialogue with feminism. The interiority of his vision is less a retreat from the world than a point of departure to a way of developing images, from his own lived experience; the making of images being for him both a reflection of the real and an imagination of the possible.

How then, are we to read the objects *MASCULIN / FEMININ*? The signs, themselves are obvious enough: images of men and women separated and laminated onto a white field, accompanied by monochromatic sections of colour, and sometimes by texts, though these are at the same time ambiguous both in terms of their meaning and the questions of whose speech they represent. There is evidently a frisson of tension between the two images in each work. The characters seem emotionally connected but they also seem to be in moments of estrangement or mutual incomprehension. The movement between them is dialectical: their emotional connection implies its opposite, estrangement, estrangement of experiencing the intensity of their connection without the anxiety of loss. This dramatic tension arises in the first instance from the formal process of coupure and montage, cutting into the images in order to separate and then rejoin them in a new kind of relation to each other. This process adds to the complexity of the work's visual narratives rather than delimiting a privileged meaning.

Nevertheless, there is a residue of tension, or perhaps better, estrangement, which seems important. In *Viaggio in Italia*, two figures from Rossellini's film of the same title are apparently sunning themselves; alternately lost in their memories and sharply aware of each other. Their memories are inscribed in their faces: desire, mistrust, rapture, disappointment, memories of love lost or finished. The narrative of their estrangement is developed through a syntax of ges-

4. Ibid., 28-29.
7. Ibid.
9. Wall, "La Mélancolie de la rue", 68.