STUDI O/I IMPERIALIS M/W ALLACE

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Introduction

This text will explore two aspects of Ian Wallace’s work: the relationship between the representations of the studio and the method/form of the pictures, as well as the relationship between the way his art functions in a globalized or imperial world order and, again, the form of the pictures. Wallace’s use of imperial or classical references, at times, plays off the studio as trope—the one grounding the other. The dyad or antinomy of the studio and gallery (or museum) forms a mediating linkage between the particular or individual and the global or imperial: it is this antinomy that Wallace’s work stages.

This exhibition of Ian Wallace’s studio works arrives at a current historical juncture—a telling time in the history of art. The position of Wallace’s art in this historical moment is ironic. For it is only now, as art and its pedagogy moves out of the moribund studio production model into the ether of either the “post” object (commodified academically) or the digital/virtual (commodified commercially) that this process of the post-studio takes place. We can look back with nostalgia to a time when real art was made in real studios; a time no longer with us, a time and a practice about to be interned in the tomb of art history. In effect, Wallace’s depiction of the studio—all cool, crowded, orderly; a working place, modestly comfortable, itself a canvas—comments on the decline and fall of the studio as the origin of artistic production. It is worthwhile to examine what is being lost. At a time when contemporary art now frequently discards the studio, and often the gallery, as sites of production.

We can do this first by looking at the trope or signification of the studio in Wallace’s work. The relationship varies from representation (pictures of Wallace’s studio, which become elements of larger works) to habitus (working in a gallery), but over the three or four decades that Wallace has been working with this problem, the studio as site or institution has been denaturalized through critique, and discarded—no longer necessary, as outdated as a nineteenth-century mill. These social and institutional changes can be matched, as it were, with the movement and tropology of the studio images in Wallace’s pictures. In an age of post-conceptualism, art can be made anywhere, out of anything, and has more of a relation to the artist’s everyday; thus, it does not necessarily require a specific space, but instead is to be found in transitory spaces, everyday spaces, bureaucratic spaces, postmodern spaces. Sites of production become sites of dissemination—the gallery is used as the space in which to make the work, et cetera. But this de-realization of the studio arrives concomitantly with the de-realization of work, or labour, under postmodern capital: even as the commodification of labour has spread. The de-realization of work entails a geographic dispersal of worship and artistic practice moving from the developed world to
developing countries, and, hence, requires its spatial de-mooring. Now a job could be in Bangalore or it could be in a home office; it could be privatized from the public sector or it could be publicized via The Apprentice. For the most part, work is still in traditional sites, but postmodernized with the 1990s dot-com bubble that saw the rise of both infantile and oral luxuries, such as foosball games and cappuccino machines in the workplace. These de-realizations of work and art accompany the de-realization of the imperial subject. The relationship is one of overdetermination: the American soldier in Iraq is praised in the business press for using the internet even while that same virtual subject/practice is integral to the “semiotic torture” of the Abu Ghraib photographic scandals. If the dissolution of the subject accompanies its globalization—economic, cultural, and military—then this condition is one of imperial hegemony. The subject has been flayed from Francis Bacon to “Tarantinization”; as well, the gas-station landscape betrays every living-room emperor in his post-colonial condo.


Studio

In looking at Ian Wallace's works depicting the studio, I would like to make the following arguments: first, that his working methodology—and, in particular, the decomposition of the image or what I come to call the “canvas-totality”—must initially be explained in terms of a shifting or recombinant (let us say “drifting”) image economy, as the images of various studio elements drift from work to work over a twenty-year period; second, that the depiction of the studio in a work of art forces us to rethink the institutional critique at the heart of “post-studio” theory as the studio emerges, à la return of the repressed, from its own erasure, much like pictorialism did in post-conceptual photography; third, that At Work (1983), in particular, by introducing the position of the viewer or gallery-goer, both posited a connection between the artist as looker and the viewer, and introduced the possibility of the dialectic of aesthetic and philistine; and fourth, that this dialectic, indebted to Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, and other better known lessons from Marxism (specifically, surplus value and the space of labour), necessitate a reconsideration of these theories of artistic production and dissemination in light of the present political juncture. I will then turn, in the second part of this essay, to just such a consideration.

Wallace’s use of the “studio” as theme or content has taken various forms over the past few decades. Early in his career, in the 1970s, he manufactured a pastiche of Gustave Courbet’s studio, posing his friends as Courbet did his: the bohemian reinscribed as post-industrial bureaucrat. In the series of massive panels titled Image/Text (1979), photographs of
Wallace’s two rooms in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside are juxtaposed with typed text. In 1983, Wallace staged the At Work performance in the Or Gallery, and then began making pictures of his studio when he moved into the former Emily Carr College of Art and Design studios in Mount Pleasant, including In the Studio (1984). In the 1980s, Wallace also completed the monumental Studio/Museum/Street (1986), which staged aesthetic and spatial values in a relational, not to say dialectical, manner; both between the respective spaces and between their photographs and the painterly voids that abutted them. Then, in the 1990s, photographs of Wallace’s Mount Pleasant studio found their way into El Taller (1993) and Corner of the Studio (1993), and by the end of that decade and the beginning of this one, hotel-room images derived from Wallace’s peripatetic journeys, began appearing in his work, documenting the new use of the hotel room itself as a travelling studio—an artist’s take on the postmodern “business suite.”

Now, it is generally understood that the post-conceptual shift in photography to pictorialism or a return to representation was less a repudiation of conceptual critiques than a continuation of those critical practices by other means, carried back to the heartland of deceptive realism; like Al Qaeda hijackers, the photo-conceptualists brought the critique home. Thus, the “images” of the post-conceptual photographer are not monolithic, representational or mimetic: rather, they are composed of signs, of images-within-images; they are indexical traces, simulations that dissolve the binaries of semiotics. That is to say, the drifting of images from work to work in Wallace’s œuvre suggests less a necessary or determinate relationship between those images and a certain historical studio (either as idea or

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as place), but rather a setting-into-discourse of various fairly arbitrary signifiers. Thus, in Image/Text, two rooms are depicted: a work room with a long table and pull-blinds, and another room with venetian blinds. Throughout this series of large photographic panels, elements move around, so a calendar image of an Irish woman from 1913 appears behind Wallace and is also reflected in a mirror above a photograph of an aristocrat by Baron de Meyer, and again enlarged to the full size of the Image/Text panels; furthermore, according to Wallace, that image was an inspiration for the Poverty Series (1980–1988). Thus, we have a work depicting the studio, in which a degraded image appears “as itself,” but also reflected and then enlarged. It eventually served as inspiration for other work, like Poverty, which then appears in the studio images of the In the Studio and Studio/Museum/Street works. Similarly, the half-drawn (as in pulled-down) blinds in Image/Text recall Wallace’s 1960s hard-edged experiments in painting, as well as his turn, in the 1980s, using monochromatic paintings to separate photographic images.

This might be confusing, but it is actually very simple. The image economy of these works suggests less a straightforward depiction of the studio as space for contemplation or work, than a formal simulation of artistic production itself. This movement of images may be commodified as photographs-within-photographs (as are the pictures of the Irish woman and the aristocrat) or it may be the more properly formal elements (the blinds as “found” minimalism, and the doorway in At Work). In Wallace’s career such a decomposition of the image has emerged as a matter of


8. Ian Wallace, e-mail message written by the artist, November 19, 2004.

9. And the reappearance of certain images in Wallace’s work continued: for example, In the Studio was made up of four photographs; two of which ended up in Studio/Museum/Street. In the two Studio/Museum/Street panels, Wallace is looking askance or askew, away from the camera or “absorbed” in a sheet (from Poverty) that he is unfurling, while more obviously romantic or melancholic images were abandoned.

10. Wallace discusses the contradiction between the studio as a space for thinking and as a (more properly, in his view) space for production, or physical fabrication. See Wallace’s essay included in this publication. This dialectic has to do with a cultural anxiety over both intellectual work itself and specifically its function in artistic practice.

theoretical rigour and conceptual critique, and as an end product of his practice: repeating images, shifting the same images around in one work or from work to work.

Such image recombination derives from theory, as well; particularly the structural notions of difference or relationality. Such a theory, that value or meaning in the commodity, ethics, subject, and language is not substantive but based on difference from other terms, has informed the institutional critique of the museum or gallery. Studio/Museum/Street constructs such a theory by arguing visually and structurally that the value of a museum is not intrinsic, but based on its superiority to the street or studio. This critique deprives the museum of the semiotics of value, for that value is shown to be not based on its architectural grandeur or the aesthetic value of its contents, but is dependent on lording it over other spaces (the street or mob), being more hallowed than other spaces (the abject studio).11

The links of this signifying chain need to be elucidated, for it is here, in the structured relations suggested by Studio/Museum/Street, that the critique of institutionality lies. As contemporary critics noted when the work was first exhibited in 1986 at the Cold City Gallery in Toronto and again at Wallace's Vancouver Art Gallery retrospective in 1988:

"... two classical-style sculptures (of the Corsinis, a wealthy Italian banking family) are located in front of the museum entrance, thus directly linking the museum to the capitalist system"12 and

"... It is these monumental classical figures suggest a critique of the authority of capitalism over artistic production and its unavoidable connection to the museum system"13 or, most subtly,

"... the studio's repetition leads to the uncanny anguish of finding oneself alone again, while the stayer's opulence is now chiselled into the earnest anaesthetized gaze of the modern male pedestrian."14

Two slightly different interpretative strategies are at work in this analysis. First, Earl Miller and Christos Dikeakos do not concern themselves with the structured relation between the studio images, the museum images, and the street images. Instead, they both argue that the museum images "deconstruct the ... signs" (Dikeakos)15 of the institution, which becomes "a critique of capitalism's authority" (Miller)16 by photographically focussing on the positionality of the classical statue as patriarchal simulacra. William Wood, however, sees Studio/Museum/Street as "picture[ing] both the redemption and the damnation of the system of art production of late-modernity."17
While an intention attending to the production of Studio/Museum/Street might have been to rescue the studio as site for contemplation; its mobilization as sign or image deconstructed it as surely as the museum or the street. The banal cityscapes attest to the triumph of 1980s postmodernism.

That late modern feeling is nowhere so present in Wallace’s canon than in his performance piece, At Work. For this performance, Wallace worked at night in the Or Gallery, following his day job teaching at Emily Carr. He read and made notes, while the performance was documented in pictures and as a short film. This was a case of the academic sublime%; a teacher himself, Wallace knew how bureaucratic systems and teaching responsibilities can erode one’s art production. The implication of this work is that the only way to be an academic was to go off to a gallery to work. Wallace was

eroding the boundaries between the paid job and the avocation by maintaining the utopian 1960s ideal of eliminating those boundaries.

At Work was also about academic work itself—scholarly activities like reading, doing research, and whether it qualified as artistic practice. There were three things going on at once: the academic desire to be an academic; the artist’s desire to be an academic; and the artist’s desire to vacate the studio, which was accomplished here in a contingent way by occupying the gallery. Wallace was making art by reading—the artist does not need a studio, the work is no longer produced there, the studio is no longer that site of origin. The logic of this notion varies between the relation of artistic desires to be academic and the critique of the studio, for what Wallace ends up proposing is a combination of a private library and a print lab—the studio as node in a


18. Wallace depicts the groves of academe in The Idea of the University (1990), which was exhibited at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery. The difference between these two works is that At Work not so much represents, but emerges out of the practice of the artist carrying out academic work in a gallery-cum-studio, while The Idea of the University depicts those academic activities in-themselves—no longer a matter of desire—emerging as a commodified habitus.
decentred network. And, of course, the relegation of the studio to the gallery both reaffirms the gallery as institution and erodes its function, which, in part, is to conceal the bloody labour of art. The opposition of studio to gallery is, therefore, a key effect of the practice of *At Work.* And this is a historically accurate connection to make; the deconstruction of the gallery space accompanied, since the 1960s, by a critique of the studio.

Given all of the suggestions in this exhibition and Wallace's other studio works, including *At Work,* we need to consider whether or not academic and research activities constitute artistic work; in other words, is the act of "thinking" and reading another form of (art)work. Wallace's *At Work* is considered a conceptual success. Conceptualism and its imperialist art world aftermath has guaranteed that what was once repressed or marginalized is now hegemonic—the passage from modernism to postmodernism. But, what of the equalization or rationalization of work, where thinking is posited as a form of labour, as stated early on by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*—the commodification of labour entails the modern destruction of aura. There are nuances of this rationalization that demand clarification. For example, how does one distinguish between the alienated labour of preparing to teach (now reading that essay is work, before it was pleasure) and the work of preparing a canvas or reading Adorno for an artwork?

If we want to "see" the studio in a picture of the studio or what is repressed or marginalized in a realistic picture, we have to pay the price, the price of naive realism. To see the studio is to forget one hundred years of material critique, of social revolution, of world-historical progress intertwined with the deepest atrocities of capitalism and fascism: ecological and genocidal rationalism. This reading depends, like much of Wallace's current practice, on the Frankfurt School, and, in particular, Adorno's revision of Duchamp or Danto: "what is self-evident is that there is nothing self-evident about art." Adorno's view of the dialectic of barbarian and aesthetic means that the barbarian view is not totally wrong and the aesthetic view is not totally right. What this means is that the barbarian or philistine distrust of art is not paranoid, only misplaced. The artwork is not reducible to oppression or privilege; rather, that very dematerialization of the art object since the 1960s has meant the turn to an institutional critique which focused on the very structures whereby art accrues privilege.

**Imperialism**

The Vancouver School is a leading example of Canadian art that has conquered the global art world of biennales and art magazines. A quick survey confirms such a stereotype. The work of Ian Wallace, for instance, by 1989 was represented by seven galleries in six countries: Cold City Gallery in Toronto, Galerie Meert Rihoux in Brussels, Jahn & Schöttle in Cologne, Galerie Rudiger Schöttle in Munich, Studio Caselli in Milan.
Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie in Paris, and the Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery in New York. Wallace’s work also functions at both the high and low end. While he produces works that are just ideas that can be adapted to local situations, like Magazine Piece (1969—), he has also created commissioned works for developers, including the installation for the newly constructed Miro building across the street from the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver, as well as for global capitalists like the NASDAQ building in New York. These examples demonstrate the dialectic of local and global that characterizes the present—they are the new antinomy, replacing presence and absence or identity and difference.23

Today, for a variety of reasons, cultural and political analysts are using a vocabulary of “empire” and “imperialism” to replace that of globaliza-

![Magazine Piece, 2006](image)


Suddenly the old-fashioned term “globalization” is associated with 1990s dot-com arrogance. The tragic outcome of 9/11 accomplished what the political left spent years trying to do in a Leninist fashion: it revealed the military and violent repercussions of globalization and the imperial core of present-day global capital. In their book, Empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri analyze globalization as a response to the global popular, the multitudes, that they saw emerging with anti-capitalist struggles; one versed in postmodern technologies and posting a new kind of vertical/molecular revolution. Their models were Machiavellian and Wired-era or rhizome-McLuhan, but their use of a Roman conquest-style of violence recalled the Gulf War and predicted the war on terror. The new imperialist discourse ranges from a CIA operative’s Imperial Hubris, to classic liberalism, like Michael Ignatieff’s Empire Lite, and films from the past to the present:

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This new vocabulary or discourse will not “correspond” with some pre-existing reality. The point is not to refer to American actions in Iraq as imperialism. Nor is it more accurate to call them benevolent or well-intentioned, or even criminal, profiteering or capitalist. For surely American actions are all of these at the same time—to speak of an imperialism at present is not to label or characterize, but to detect a structure at work. Imperialism is a structure with an absent centre: once Rome stops being a republic, with some citizen democracy, it becomes a mongrelized centre full of foreigners, ruling a (global) empire, necessitating the imperial structure of communications, capital and cultural flows, and regulated movements of peoples.

27. Freud says resistance comes from the ego; thus, it is our desire for Lenin that leads to his exclusion—we are afraid of our social desire.

And then the vocabulary of Lenin and the marginalized left of the 1960s and 1970s must be returned to our theoretical hard drives for all of our wishes to bury the stern Russian.

What does it mean to consider Wallace’s work in terms of imperialism; to say that it partakes of an imperial moment? It is telling that this question overlaps with the studio motif in Wallace’s work, and the local, particular or personal character of the studio anchors the works vis-à-vis the global or ancient character of empire. A mapping of the images in Studio/Museum/ Street, The Imperial City (1986), Untitled (Heavenly Embrace) (1987), and Olympia I & II (1987), teach us much about the status of classical sculpture and architecture.

Therefore, what are the effects of our current imperial moment, not in references but in the social context of Wallace’s LA Series (2003–2004)?

Four pictures depict the still-under-wraps Frank Gehry project for Disney, a concert hall in downtown Los Angeles. Wallace’s paintings return Gehry to the social-Canadian roots or origins of his high postmodern vernacular. These formal accomplishments are made possible because of how Wallace’s photographs use, as compositional elements, the hoardings surrounding the building: hoardings that a young Gehry working today might have used as a final element in his work, as he did with chain link fences and plywood in the 1970s. That utilitarian ornamentalism then torques or confounds Gehry’s own 1990s use of titanium.

The social context of Gehry and Wallace—both internationally recognized and of Canadian origin—leads us to the irony of gentrification in Los Angeles. This is ironic in the global sense that the urban malaise of the LA area, from its declined downtown to the revolution in South Central, and the suburban wealth in Orange County to the defeated landscape around Torrance, surrounds the dream factory of Hollywood in much the same way that a ghetto will often surround a prestigious American university, like Columbia, Yale, or Chicago. The Disney Concert Hall is part of the process whereby the capital generated in the region decides to recolonize the downtown core.

That gentrification of necessity reasserts urban regions into the imperial image and finance economies. As sure as you have to evict crackheads and convert S.R.O.’s into boutique hotels, you have to import global architects and spend money on art. For gentrification returns the region to a current, image economy: new architecture, new advertising, indie rock, fashion, and literature all scurry to inhabit the lofts, turn skid-row bars into lounges, and shiny Tinseltown buildings in the middle of “nowhere.” From Strathcona in Vancouver to Williamsburg in Brooklyn or the Mission in San Francisco and on and on, urban renewal is the new global provincialism. The process possesses the logic of the simulacra: in the imperial postmodern present, there is no Rome, no centre as suggested by Hardt and Negri; instead of many Romes, there are many provinces, all seeking to look like each other. Distinctions between “false” or western fronts and “actual” buildings disappear. If concrete is the modern version of marble, then hoarding for Wallace and Gehry is the postmodern version of canvas. How is this social context, this materialist base, related to the specifics of Wallace’s work, if it can be talked about in such a functionalist way?

Looking at Wallace’s works Construction Site, LA I, II, III and IV (2003), we can detect an anti-imperial logic at the heart of the image economy. This reading is possible first by discarding any kind of literalism of the works: that is to say, they do not “really” show what is going on within the construction of the Disney Concert Hall. For as much as we may want

to see a photograph in terms of its referent (this is unavoidable, Barthes says), Wallace’s framing of his photolaminates on canvas with monochromes already destabilizes the image externally, as it were. Then, within the image, the very abundance of signifiers and layers further destabilizes a monolithic reading. For not only do the cranes, scaffolding, ribbing, hoardings, and other surfaces/structures of the work effect a vacillation of the picture plane (always to be brought back into focus by the effect of the monochromes that surround the photolaminate), but then their social connotations also work against any final meaning of the pictures. By the latter, I mean the lowness of the material depicted is connected to the very process of capital wrapping itself in culture.

In much of Wallace’s production over the past couple of decades, including the works, El Taller, Corner of the Studio, and Studio/Museum/Street, there is the role of structure, a shifting composition or compositional device, and a continuous modernist aesthetic. This totality impinges on the integrity of individual elements (the bars, the plywood-printed canvas, the lamination), so that what is or is not a border is difficult to distinguish, or the pattern of the photographic image comes to repeat that of the overall picture, or the pattern of the overall artwork reduces down into the photograph’s hectic nature, à la fractals or chaos theory. The canvas-totality is an overdetermined effect: it is a matter of method, including Wallace’s working between different countries, and the ease of transportation or a canvas roll versus a framed image, his Warhol-esque subjectivity via studio as factory, and a formal analogy between the Mallarméan scatter or dissemination and the “open field” of the constructivist plane.

The constructivist fragmentation endemic to Wallace’s work reminds us of that heroic moment, when the destruction of an empire of tyranny had been accomplished and the difficult work of building a fair society faced Russia. That post-imperial moment promised a radical contingency—that the whole was the false. And Adorno’s late Hegelian theory that “form is sedimented content” would see the canvas-totality as both autonomous and a social fact; aesthetic relations of production are a matter of the sedimentation or imprinting of social relations of production. The symptoms—“social fact”—of a dying Europe that informed Mallarmé’s decadence and that early Soviet art only survives in the formality of Wallace’s art.
Conclusion

The formal sedimentation of imperial globalization as method or canvas-totality in Wallace's pictures coincides in its logic with the tropology of the studio, whereby the de-realization of that space is accomplished or allegorized by the artwork's formal semiotics. If Wallace's work threatens the sanctity of the studio via the strategies of the gallery, then, by way of conclusion, a mapping out of what is at stake in Wallace's play is useful, and from this we might ask whether his work is positing that the studio and the gallery are antinomies?

This mapping owes to A.J. Greimas, who proposed that ideologies depend on unstated dualisms, not so much a Hegelian dialectic or a post-structuralist binary, but a categorical difference. In Wallace's At Work, the antimony of studio and gallery, the way in which they rely on each other both to function and in terms of value, then, is made apparent. The logic works in the following ways:

Studio and not-gallery: this is the myth and practice of the "real" studio, the proper artistic site of production. Wallace's works critique and abandon...
the studio proper. They critique it by depicting a site of either Mallaméan contemplation cum study, or postmodern work space (the latter accomplished by the muted tones, the careful disarray). They abandon it to work in the gallery or hotel room, the diasporic spaces of the imperial subject.

**Gallery and not-studio:** this is dominant or hegemonic institutional space for cultural exhibition: the neo-classical or Gehryesque architecture that represses the moment of production in favour of oculocentric display. Such museums canonize at the expense of historical accuracy (from First Nations collections to Greek statuary). In *Studio/Museum/Street* and the LA Series, institutional architecture becomes raw material for a historicizing canvas.

**Not-studio and not-gallery:** this dystopian position first of all designates all that falls into neither category: the world, the street, nature. But, this is also the ideological position of the radical who either works outside these institutions or wishes to destroy them, whether by compulsion or choice, from the anarchist black bloc to outsider artists.

**Gallery and studio:** this utopian position—occupied by such moments as Wallace's *At Work*—signifies the radical possibility that a space may fulfill two similar and/or opposite functions at once. This is both sublime and necessary: sublime because Wallace's artistic practice here simultaneously produces and exhibits the work of art; necessary because it is this multitasking, as it were, that characterizes the imperial present. And, thus, it is all the more vital that we determine precisely how such social effects occur. It is to Wallace's credit that such a determination emerges through his art.

*Untitled (Heavenly Embrace)*, 1987