Tacked outside the door to Ian Wallace’s Vancouver studio is a poster by the artist Kathy Slade that reads “I WANT/IT ALL/I WANT/IT NOW.” It could be the personal motto of any number of ambitious artists, but success, for Wallace, has been achieved by working steadily over time: by creating an internationally recognized body of work and the legacy of a photoconceptual tradition, by 35 years spent teaching and mentoring successive generations of artists. Wallace, who lives part of each year in Paris and holds a lifetime residency at the University of Valencia in Spain, has devoted his life to art, and to the art of fostering new artists.

I am ostensibly here to talk to him not about his recent Governor General’s Visual and Media Arts Award or even about his role as a founder of photoconceptualism, but about the way artists collect art. Having spoken with numerous art collectors, I found myself curious about the circuitous, often random route many artists follow in creating their own collections of art objects, a route usually hampered by a lack of funds but blessed by friendships with other artists and a keen understanding of what constitutes good work—long before it may be recognized. Artists tend to acquire work by others where it creatively informs or inspires them; Wallace carries a book of poems by the French Symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé wherever he goes. As we talk, it becomes clear that any discussion about artists collecting art is merely a conceit that allows us to talk about the evolution of the artist and the exigencies of a profession that has a daunting attrition rate.

As with many artists, Wallace’s personal collection includes his own work—crates are stacked to the ceiling, archival boxes of pet research subjects are labelled with titles like “Goethe” and two semi-autobiographical works from his ongoing Hotel Series hang on one wall. He also exchanges work with friends. A drawing Ken Lum left behind after borrowing Wallace’s studio hangs on the wall next to where we sit sipping cold Italian water on a scorching summer day.

“Exchanging work is a common practice for artists,” says Wallace, leaning forward in his chair, which, like most of his studio furniture, is modernist. He has exchanged work with Christos Dikeakos, and the late

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AN ARCHIVIST'S IMPULSE UNDERSORES WALLACE'S AFFINITIES WITH ART HISTORY

Jack Goldstein gave Wallace a series of his '70s-era conceptual sound effects (on vinyl 45s) with self-descriptive titles such as Wrestling Cats and Three Felled Trees. Wallace has also purchased work from students, many of whom are friends. My talk with Wallace confirms how his students feel about him: he treats them as equals while generously dispensing ideas, opportunities and carefully considered insights.

Teaching led him to procure a small collection of important classical photography from the 19th and early 20th centuries, much of it purchased in the 1970s, before vintage photography acquired its modern price tags. "I didn't have much money but I was really interested in photography and realized it was connected to my work," he says, "I was also teaching the history of photography at Emily Carr [where he taught from 1972 until 1998] so I built up a collection."

Wallace hastens to add that, like most artists, he is by no means a serious collector. In fact, most of what might constitute a collection is unframed and kept in storage. "Serious collectors need a work to fulfill a picture of their idea of what art is about right now," he says. "There are collectors who buy art to cover wall space or because they happen to like this, that or the other, but the really serious collector participates in the production of the work, which is about a certain social and cultural concept of how we create images that represent the world around us. The collector participates in what it is to have something to say about our culture."

An archivist's impulse underscores the part of Wallace that is an art historian (his training came through academia rather than art school). Wallace mentions a Julia Margaret Cameron photograph buried somewhere in his studio as he pulls out Alvin Langdon Coburn's wonderful 1908 portrait of the sculptor Rodin, then a striking 1912 Baron Adolf De Meyer photograph of the delicious and dangerous Marchesa Casati, the Italian bohemian and artists' muse. An 1870 albumen print of whirling dervishes by the great Turkish photographer I. Pascal Sébah was acquired for twenty dollars in 1975. The following year, Wallace purchased a self-portrait by the early photographer Hippolyte Bayard (who organized the world's first photographic exhibition in 1839) from the Société française de photographie in Paris, which he visited while preparing to teach courses on the histories of media and

photography. Wallace found the society’s collection in shocking disarray—a reflection of the lack of value accorded photography at the time—and immediately volunteered to organize it. While visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum in London soon after, he found its collection of photographs by Lady Clementina Hawarden in a similar state, and organized them as well.

Over the years Wallace has amassed an extraordinary collection of art catalogues and artists’ books. From his extensive studio library he retrieves Seth Siegelaub and Jack Wendler’s 1968 The Xerox Book, one of the first conceptual artists’ books. Wallace also collects vintage film posters. He carefully unfolds that of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1963 film Le Mépris, starring Brigitte Bardot and Fritz Lang (as himself), and an enormous poster for L’Empire des sens, an erotic film by Nagisa Oshima that was shut down by police in Vancouver after its first showing (which Wallace attended).

Wallace was mentored by Iain Baxter (of N. E. Thing Company) and went on to teach Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, Roy Arden and Arni Haraldsson. This esteemed group rose to international prominence in the 1980s, forever linking Vancouver with photoconceptualism. “I am the oldest one, but, in fact, I didn’t teach them,” says Wallace of the group. “All I did was help them make things possible. They were already quite brilliant. There is always the ten per cent of students who are really special. You have to identify them and encourage them along and get them to have confidence in themselves—then they take the ball and run with it.”

Wallace was barely older than his students when he began teaching in 1967. Beneath the turntable beside his chair is a vinyl record collection that includes a vintage album by U2SRK5, an art/punk band that included Wallace, Graham, Wall and David Wisdom (now a host on CBC Radio). In a corner is a drum set, and Wallace still occasionally jams with a couple of Vancouver sculptors. “None of us are professional musicians. We just make interesting noises, have fun. Nobody lives around here so we can make as much noise as we want.”

Discussing the path that took him from his early experimental days to the present, he says, “At the beginning you have to really be resourceful. You have to create your own situation. I saw sets of possibilities in the ’60s, and in my teaching I mobilized...
ARTISTS HAVE TO GROUND THEIR VISION IN SOMETHING SOLID AND LONG-LASTING

students who would see things my way.” The rest is art history.

I mention a recent conversation with a gallery owner who commented that many younger artists seem well versed in the language of marketing, but few have the literary and cultural education of someone like Wallace. Has the commodification of art replaced the education of the artist with a market-oriented mindset? Are good artists being shoved aside by those better able to sell themselves?

“Artists have to ground their vision in something solid and long-lasting,” Wallace says. “It’s very easy to lose heart, especially when you’re spending money on your work and no one is paying attention. Some younger artists have ideas about making it. Two friends come out of art school and one sells a piece for a thousand dollars, which is a lot to a young artist, and the other may become discouraged. But the guiding force of a work of art has to be the truth of the art itself. The money and fame come along, if you’re true to your work. Though not necessarily: luck plays a part, and bad luck does too. But all the fame and money won’t mean anything if you’re not true to your work.”

He advises young artists to leave Canada and see the world. Early attrition is seen among those who can’t ride out the periods in which their work is ignored, or who don’t have enough faith

in their own work to sustain themselves through dry periods or the initial establishment of a reputation.

In Wallace’s own early career, he used the snapshot as a tool for social and aesthetic analysis, later gravitating toward staged tableau works in which friends acted out scenes (such as the wonderful 1975 work An Attack on Literature, which features Rodney Graham and is now in a Swiss collection). It was an evolution toward his current work: photographs laminated onto canvas, juxtaposed with painted areas. Some of these works have been more marketable than others. He sometimes spends thousands of dollars on ideas that don’t come out as planned, and his income is often funneled directly back into his art.

Works like Clayoquot Protest (1993), his most overtly political to date, may be less marketable than, say, his aesthetically beautiful Hotel Series or his urban street scenes. Yet it’s arguable that works like Clayoquot, which bring together the traditions of documentary photography and history painting to memorialize a socially galvanizing moment, may be more enduring.

Is political art out of fashion? No, says Wallace, “It’s just that certain people would like it to be. So if they have any kind of power in the art world, they like to spread the idea that it’s out of fashion so people who fall for that won’t try to make art that has a political content. Those are what I call ‘nudging statements’ that unconsciously intimidate and nudge people in the way they should go. But all art is political in a way. If it has a social profile.”

Photography has been the means by which Wallace the artist could engage with social subject matter and translate the ideas of Wallace the academic and art historian. “I didn’t want to be the artist in the ivory tower isolated from the world with these very over-intellectual, perhaps rarefied artistic positions like minimalism and conceptualism, though I still found them valuable. So my idea was to try to convert the ideas in minimalism and conceptualism through photography to create a new language of modern art. I wasn’t the only one doing that, but I did it my own way.”

On a table are recent photographs of the studio next door, which is shared by the artists Vikky Alexander and Elspeth Pratt. Wallace often documents the artist’s work space, his own and others’. In one image, tools are scattered on an unswept floor, and I am reminded of the work involved in creating a career out of one’s own vision. Wallace has accumulated art objects that inform his work and others that he simply likes, much like his library of art books, or his drum set, or the Kathy Slade poster on the door. As the afternoon fades, sparkling water turns to wine and talk turns from art to an upcoming trip to Cortes Island.

Wallace has it all and he has it now. ■

Studio view of Wallace’s library and archive with Rodney Graham’s Citation (1988) on table.