

**The Pleasures of the Text:  
Wallace, At Work**

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“When a fortunate age of pure production has passed, reflection enters, and with it an element of estrangement. What was earlier living spirit is now transmitted theory.”<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling  
*The Philosophy of Art*

My first in-depth encounter with the work of Ian Wallace occurred when I visited his hometown of Vancouver in April 2004, in preparation for an exhibition I was then researching that sought to offer a survey of recent developments in the city's celebrated arts community; this visit marked the beginning of a long-standing curatorial interest which continues to this day, and which inevitably helps to define the backdrop for my present engagement with Wallace's multifaceted artistic practice.<sup>2</sup>

Before this first-hand introduction, I had gotten to know Wallace's work mainly through reproductions, publications and furtive encounters in European galleries; through these various channels, I had become aware of the artist's seminal role in the emergence of Vancouver as a (from my admittedly Eurocentric perspective, somewhat unlikely) hub of conceptual and post-conceptual art activity. Wallace had taught many of the city's most celebrated artist sons (or at least written about their work, or invited them to write about his work in turn), and as such had definitely helped to establish the phenomenon that, sometime in the eighties, became known quite literally as the “Vancouver School” of “photo-conceptualism” or – a term much preferred locally – of “post-conceptual photography.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael Inwood's introduction to Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, (London: Penguin, 1993); xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition in question was titled *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists*, and took place at the Antwerp Museum Of Contemporary art MuHKA from December 2005 until February 2006. *Intertidal* was conceived in close collaboration with Scott Watson, director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who also co-edited the accompanying catalogue. My essay for that catalogue, “1,986,965 (2001 Census); An Intertidal Travelogue” forms the point of departure for the present reflections upon the art of Ian Wallace, whose work occupied a central position in the Antwerp exhibition. (See Dieter Roelstraete & Scott Watson (eds.), *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* (Antwerp & Vancouver: MuHKA & The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005).

In other words, the historical importance of both Wallace's "individual" work as an artist, as well as his "social" activities as an author, pedagogue and intellectual producer in the establishment of a distinctly West Coast/Vancouverite brand of post-conceptual art practice, could hardly be overstated – which is precisely why our Antwerp exhibition, taking the remarkable phenomenon of the aforementioned "school" as its pragmatic point of departure, was structured centrally around two distinct historical pivots, both of which were culled from Wallace's rich artistic legacy. The dialectical interplay of both these works is part starting point, part subject of the current essay.

The first of these "pivots" was a work well known in the Vancouver art community at the time: *La Mélancolie de la rue*. This photographic triptych from 1973 consists of three (hand-tinted) examples of the then "new" landscape photography that would later make this far-flung city in the Pacific Northwest into a world-famous center of a new, conceptually inflected form of photo-based art. Within this local context, *La Mélancolie de la rue* clearly represents a well-defined dimension of seventies, "post-studio" conceptual art practice (and the "post-studio" qualification is definitely key here) – that of the artist-*flâneur* as a social observer, amateur sociologist or historian, and urban psychogeographer, training the detached, mechanical gaze of his camera, *Neue Sachlichkeit*-style, upon the rapidly transforming (urban and suburban) world *outside* his studio.

<sup>3</sup> Wallace first taught at the University of British Columbia in the late sixties, eventually counting Rodney Graham and Jeff Wall – only six and three years his juniors at the time, respectively – among his students there. And while both Wallace and Wall were later part of the arts faculty at yet another Vancouver institution of higher education – the relatively newly-founded Simon Fraser University, where Ken Lum was a student – they and Graham would go on to form the short-lived new wave/art rock outfit "UJ3RK5" (pronounced "you jerks"). While Jeff Wall himself went on to teach at UBC's fine arts department, Wallace became an instructor at Vancouver's foremost art school, the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (formerly the Vancouver School of Art); his students there would include Roy Arden (who later also taught at UBC) and Stan Douglas. This exhaustive untangling of pedagogical relationships – the fictionalized subject of a photo suite from 1990, *The Idea of the University*, to which I will be returning later – certainly helps to add weight to the idea of a so-called "Vancouver School," no matter how ironic this formulation was originally intended to be. Finally, as a writer engaging with the work of his colleagues, peers and students, Wallace produced key texts on the work of Roy Arden, Ken Lum and Jeff Wall; Wall himself in turn wrote a substantial essay on the work of his former teacher for Wallace's Vancouver Art Gallery catalogue *Selected Works 1970–1987*. Rigorous intellectual dialogue, which carried on in both writing and informal gatherings, was at the heart of the development of this school through much of the eighties. Finally, I should also add here that, as a student at UBC, Wallace himself had been taught by local concept art pioneer, Iain Baxter, who soon afterwards went on to found N.E. Thing Company together with his then partner Ingrid Baxter (now Ovensen). The Baxters have often been eclipsed from historiographies of the Vancouver art scene which fail to mention their pioneering role in the development of photography as the medium of choice in this specific context; they helped to establish both the landscape as a primary aesthetic concern, as well as the backlit transparency as its exemplary format.



This – what may be seen as Wallace’s foundational “text” – included a photograph of a newly built single family house in the Vancouver suburbs, in front of which we see a yellow Volkswagen Beetle drive by; a photograph of a crowd of onlookers – one of the archetypal figures of the modern imagination – gathering in front of a newly opened art museum (in Winnipeg this time) built in the international “brutalist” style that would eventually herald the demise of modernism in architecture; and a photograph of a ramshackle wooden squat built on stilts in North Vancouver’s infamous Maplewood Mud Flats, the so-called “intertidal” zone after which, incidentally, the exhibition in Antwerp was named. The title of Wallace’s work was clearly meant to invoke memories of Giorgio de Chirico’s ominous 1914 painting *Mystère et mélancolie d’une rue*. Much like de Chirico’s ambiguous pictures of apocalyptic desolation, which so often speak of impending doom and despair (it is hard *not* to see the gathering storms of World War I in de Chirico’s “signature” clouds), Wallace’s triptych has been read as a momentous allegory of the pervasive disillusion during the early seventies with the life-affirming, revolutionary zeal of the end of the preceding decade – of the retreat from both city and street as the paradigmatic arenas of an agonistic modernity. Here, perhaps, one may be tempted to locate the source of the subtle yet no less distinguishable mood of melancholy that is such an operative force in much (though obviously not *all*) of Wallace’s work. It may also be seen to account in part for the artist’s much-discussed debt to French symbolism and early modernism, and to the ubiquitous figure of Stéphane Mallarmé in particular. Melancholy also seems to be the dominant *humeur*, finally, in Wallace’s half-bored, disenchanting-looking series of self-portraits *In the Studio* from 1984, to which we shall be returning shortly. Indeed, Jeff Wall nominates “the motif of flight and secession from the city” as constitutive of Wallace’s photographic manifesto of 1973; elaborating that: “the examination of characteristic phenomena of the boom period of the early seventies – runaway suburbanization and the profusion of modernistic “palaces of culture” – is counterposed to the dropout “alternative” architecture of the already-defunct Dollarton mud flats, which had been a semi-legal community of bohemians, marginals and old-timers until it was forcibly cleared for redevelopment in 1971.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Wall, “La Mélancolie de la rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace 1967–1982”, in *Ian Wallace: Selected Works 1970–1987* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1988): 67. The dilapidated-looking wooden house in the picture of the mudflats to the right, looks very much like the home of Tom Burrows (just out of frame), another influential Vancouver artist of the same generation. Burrows and other, like-minded artists such as Dean Ellis, Glenn Lewis and Al Neil, would soon after their expulsion from the mudflat’s “temporary autonomous zone” go on to found various artist colonies on the bucolic islands that are strewn between the city of Vancouver proper and nearby Vancouver Island – Hornby Island being the most important of these. The dialectical opposition of a hippie, nature-loving island culture ‘versus’ a more sophisticated, ironic urban culture – a polarization which must be handled with a certain degree of relativist caution, given the “newness” of Vancouver as an urban center, as it was only founded in 1886! – is an important part of the city’s artistic self-image, and also recurs in Wallace’s own work of the seventies – *Lookout* from 1979 is an emblematic case in point. For this work, friends of Wallace (some of whom came to constitute the Vancouver School), were first photographed in his studio, and then montaged onto a composite vista shot on Hornby Island’s Halliwell Park.



The dialectical tensions that surround Wallace's use of melancholy as both subject and trope are rendered present, indeed physically so, in the artist's love of *trmesis* and jarring juxtaposition – of narration through collage. The sequential, cinematic structure of *La Mélancolie de la rue* provided the blueprint for much of the photographic work that was to follow, its use of montage revealing Wallace's formal debt to the vanguard art movements of the teens and twenties – which, it should be remembered here, comprise an art tradition that was wholly and unequivocally devoted to social and political change, doubling as an early harbinger of the utopian aspiration to dissolve the supposedly opposing realms of “high” and “popular” culture into one force field of emancipatory, revolutionary cultural energy. Finally, *La Mélancolie de la rue*, along with earlier works such as *Pan Am Scan* from 1970, also established the loose rules for Wallace's life-long engagement with the “humanist” tradition of snapshot and/or street photography, examples, derivatives and permutations of which would continue to pop up in the artist's body of work into the twenty-first century. [Interestingly, if in more recent years both public and critical attention has definitely shifted away from his attention to public space towards its foil, namely the studio, the street nevertheless continues to be one of Wallace's two great, all-consuming passions.] Entire suites such as *My Heroes in the Street* (1986-ongoing)– which also constitutes early examples of Wallace's programmatic juxtaposition of monochrome painting and straightforward street photography – or *Clayoquot Protest (August 9, 1993)* (1993) clearly belong to this quasi-journalistic strand of “documentary” field work. Herein the artist plays out his activist engagement with the outside (“real”) world and with the public sphere of a shared everyday life as it is performed (“staged”) and politicized in its most paradigmatic space: the street.<sup>5</sup> In these works, and in *Clayoquot Protest* most emphatically – Wallace's most directly journalistic venture to date, as a record of the largest act of peaceful civil disobedience in Canadian History – the artist appears to profess his continuing (although obviously far from unshakable) faith both in the resilience and political potential of the public realm, as well as in the possibility of art to bear witness to, and participate in, the critical enterprise of a truly public culture, reminding us of the Adornian quip that “the reality of artworks testifies to the possibility of the impossible.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Here again, Wallace's work is partly imbedded in a remarkably rich local tradition, explored in greater depth in Bill Jeffries (ed.), *Unfinished Business: Vancouver Street Photographs 1955 – 1985* (North Vancouver: Presentation House Gallery, 2005). Early forays into post-conceptual photography by Iain Baxter, Christos Dikeakos, Jeff Wall and Wallace himself were clearly informed by street photography conventions as they were deployed by local postwar photo luminaries such as Fred Herzog. The transformation of these conventions into a specific type of “anti-photo” art was particularly important for the development of West Coast conceptual art, as is evinced by the pioneering subversions of canonical art photography by the likes of John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 1997): 122.



However, all these dramatic, authoritative claims, stemming from the elementary confidence and optimism of the artist as an activist or public intellectual, seem to be either questioned, reversed or denied, in a later work, the second historical "pivot" around which *Intertidal* was organized, and a central point of reference for our current reconsideration of Wallace's body of work: *At Work*, an ensemble that consists of a color photograph, a performance/installation, and a Super 8 mm film, all made in 1983 – exactly ten years after *La Mélancolie de la rue*. The immaterial core of this ensemble is a "quasi-performance" Wallace staged in the exhibition space – viewable from the street through a large glass window – of the Or Gallery in Vancouver in 1983. This performance simply consisted of the artist taking his place on a chair behind a desk, apparently "working" for the entire duration of the exhibition, for all passers-by to see – the artist in retreat, observing the world (if at all) from the sidelines, sheltered and engrossed in the realm of inner experience.

*At Work* showed precisely this: the artist at work. [The deadpan is no stranger to Wallace's practice, and there is an element of Beckettian or Keatonesque comedy operating in *At Work* in particular.] However, Wallace's scenario featured none of the conventional trappings or markings commonly associated with the often messy business of making art: no easels, paint brushes, crumpled pieces of paper or stretches of canvas draped across the floor to be discerned here (even though one might argue that painting really forms the bedrock of Wallace's artistic practice); no lumps of clay, marble, stone or wood either; no slabs of Cor-Ten steel, no film canisters or film lights; not even (and this is all-important of course) a photo camera. It just showed an imperturbable Wallace sitting behind his desk, in an impossibly clean, starkly-lit environment, reading and writing, acting and/or performing the role of the artist as "intellectual worker."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, *At Work*, as a performance piece pure and simple, clearly reveals the extent of performance art's influence on the development, throughout much of the seventies, of Vancouver's own brand of conceptual art – a "genre" too often wrongly associated, especially within the relaxed context of its West Coast incarnations, with a puritanical denial of embodiment. This bodily notion of performance is directly related to that of "theatricality", a key term, moreover, in the conception of the photographic tableau which Wallace, along with Jeff Wall, helped pioneer – one that is inextricably linked with the polemic surrounding the advent of minimalism and various post-minimalist practices (such as post-conceptual photography) in the late sixties to early seventies via Michael Fried's seminal essay "Art and Objecthood" from 1967. Finally, when discussing notions of performativity and theatricality we should also note the importance of the new post-war cinema – represented most clearly by *Nouvelle Vague* icon Jean-Luc Godard, a long-standing source of inspiration for Wallace's work – as an influential new paradigm for the development of certain strands of conceptual art, especially in a city such as Vancouver, which has always felt the proximity of the American culture industry just to the south more keenly, and has in recent decades often been referred to as "Hollywood North" because of its role as a hub of the global film industry. In the mid-seventies, Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham were briefly involved in a collaborative film effort in the summer of 1973 which failed to produce the projected feature film from which Wallace derived the stills that would later become *The Summer Script I & II* 1974 to a suite of twelve hand-colored black-and-white photographs. For an extensive assessment of the influence of performance and body art on the evolving Vancouver art scene from the 1970s onwards, see: Monika Szewczyk, "At What Distance... (Between pictures and performance in Vancouver)," Dieter Roelstraete & Scott Watson (eds.), *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artist*, (Antwerp & Vancouver: MuHKA & The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2005).



This powerful image, reproduced on film and as a small, back-lit transparency, encapsulated everything that I had come to appreciate about the singular nature of so much Vancouver art practice; it portrayed the artist as an intellectual for whom reading-and-writing was as important and integral to one's artistic practice as more plastic forms of creation and production; and it simultaneously highlighted the proverbial flipside to an activist participation *in* the world through a detached "commitment" to interpreting it (or the work) rather than merely transforming it. In this sense, *At Work*, not unlike *La Mélancolie de la rue*, resembled a reflective manifesto of sorts, the subtle militancy of which was obviously not without its knowing ironies: the clincher, unknown to the uninformed viewer, being that the book on the artist's reading table is none other than Søren Kierkegaard's treatise *On Irony*. Certainly this helps to subvert the slightly presumptuous claims of snooty intellectualism and puritanical, "anti-retinal" elitism that have been the bane of so much conceptual art – it even lends the piece a wry element of (deadpan) comedy, reminding us of Hegel's remark that "taken in the abstract, irony comes to border closely on the principle of comedy."<sup>8</sup>

Yet much more than a manifesto or a piece of ironic theater, *At Work* is first and foremost a picture of absorption and introspection, of the solitary enjoyment of the manifold pleasures of the text, so to speak – in short, a "primal scene" of the new type of studio (or, better still, "post-studio") experience that would go on to dominate all subsequent, i.e. post-conceptual art practice.

To be sure, when Ian Wallace first started work on the series of photographs, paintings and drawings that would much later result in the body of work assembled under the general rubric *In the Studio* – the first such photograph I know of, *Untitled (In the Studio)*, was taken in 1969 – he was neither the first, nor the last artist to take up the iconographic motif of the artist's studio as a means of staging (once again, understanding the work's essentially "theatrical" nature is key here) the self-awareness and auto-reflexivity typical of so much modernist art and of modernism in general – the very tradition that, for most of this artist's forty-year-plus career, has been the one defining point of historical reference.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The full title of the book – in fact, Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis from 1841 – is *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*; in it, Kierkegaard defines Socratic reason as an early instance of dialectics: Socrates is declared the wisest man in Athens by the Oracle because he, at least, is aware of his own ignorance. *On Irony* clearly belongs to the first phase of Kierkegaard's intellectual development, his so-called "aesthetic stage," and the book is peppered with passages extolling the virtues of a life lived poetically, that is, detachedly. I might note that the opening quote from Hegel is taken from a chapter in his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, which is devoted to "The Irony" as a defining feature of art's modernity, i.e. it having reached the final stage of philosophical self-awareness.

<sup>9</sup> A survey of these various references would stretch far beyond the scope of the present essay; suffice it to point out three historical figures, however, who have accompanied Wallace on his forty-year-plus trajectory as an artist: Mallarmé, Malevich, and Mondrian (the latter, the subject of his Master's dissertation in Art History) have each been great inspirations for Wallace's systematic investigation of chance, the monochrome and the grid respectively – three key figurations of modernism's foundational mythology.



Depictions of studio life and atelier activity, preferably of the artist him- or herself at work in the mythic smithy of invention (so that the view of the studio's interior inevitably also becomes a self-portrait of sorts), can pride themselves on a long history in the traditions of Occidental art, one that is punctuated by some of that canon's greatest works – for it is in the various displays of a dramatically heightened self-awareness, in “painting about painting,” “photography about photography” or “film about film,” that art sought to secure its vanguard participation, at all costs, in the experience of modernity. Diego Velazquez' monumental *Las Meninas* (1656) is perhaps the oldest – and arguably still the best – example of exactly such an artwork, the imperious greatness of which is so clearly and directly derived from its dizzying play of auto-referentiality. More than just once, it has been called – by those who value the worth of such odd statements – the greatest painting ever made. And the case for this claim is of course inextricably tied in with the work's allegorical complexity, within its *simply* being a “painting about painting,” about the painter “at work.” Almost exactly two hundred years later, Gustave Courbet took up the same motif to produce one of his century's greatest artworks, *L'Atelier du peintre: Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* [*The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life*] (1855). With its programmatic conflation of realism and allegory proving an especially influential example for a generation of artists to come (many of them within the conceptual “art about art” orbit), Courbet's importance as one of the progenitors of modernism in art can perhaps be derived exclusively from this spectacular piece of painted performance art, which is well and truly riddled with characteristic manifestations of modernist irony (Courbet himself paints a Barbizon-style landscape while the nude model, which he is clearly supposed to paint, stands behind him; all the while Baudelaire reads in the far left corner – a true poet “at work”). Finally, in more recent decades, the conception and creation in the studio of art about art has grown into a fully-fledged micro-genre, spearheaded by Bruce Nauman's groundbreaking works from the late sixties such as *Falling to Levitate in the Studio* (1966) and *Playing a Note on the Violin While I Walk Around the Studio* (1967), which would ultimately lead Nauman to conclude, with an odd mixture of exhilaration and pragmatic resignation, that art simply is “what an artist does, just sitting around the studio.”<sup>10</sup> And if this seemingly flippant “sitting around the studio” is precisely what Wallace does in *At Work*, it hardly seems work at all: Other than the obvious, idling joy of absorption, other than the leisurely “pleasure of the text,” what most palpably animates Wallace's take on the hallowed tradition of working “in the studio” is the ghost of Naumanesque failure, of boredom and an impending sense of the end, of the arbitrariness and hence inevitable futility of all art (and art-making), a studied sense of detachment that becomes all the more overpowering in the “empty” views of the studio that Wallace continues to produce to this day.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Nauman, quoted in Helen Molesworth (ed.), *Work Ethic* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003): 101.

Of course, not all depictions of art as intellectual labor in Wallace's oeuvre revolve around his oft-deployed (and unmistakably romantic) view of the artist as hermit locked inside the ivory tower of hieratic gestures – an important source of the perceived mood of *mélancolie* referred to above. In this context, it is worth recalling a body of work produced in 1990, under the general title *The Idea of the University*. This suite of photo-paintings, not only had a pedagogic environment as its subject (i.e. sites on the campus of the University of British Columbia where Wallace studied and taught); it also foregrounded the notion of art as a form of knowledge production that is entirely determined by the communal, collective experience of *teaching and learning* – a dual set of activities that clearly transcends the narrow confines of the teacher/pupil binary. *The Idea of the University* functions as a group portrait of a community of artists and art professionals (artist Mark Lewis and art historian John O'Brien among them), but it is also an allegorical portrait of the Idea of Art as a “collective” intellectual endeavor.

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In his *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* from the early years of the nineteenth century, Hegel famously noted that we are currently living the End of Art, that “art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny” – the representation of the highest Ideas in sensuous forms – “a thing of the past.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, however, “the science of art” – meaning here: Hegel's own aesthetic – “is a much more pressing need in our day than in times in which art, simply as art, was enough to furnish a full satisfaction.”

Whether or not Hegel was right to make such lofty claims is partly irrelevant here – he was proven wrong, in any case, by some of art history's most astute readers of his philosophy, i.e. those very same conceptual artists who successfully complicated the defeatist, fatalist master narrative of his art-historical telos by conceiving and presenting as art what both *looked like* and *acted like* a science of art. To the Hegelian hypothesis that, *pace* Michael Inwood, “thought about art, and philosophy of art, arise only when art is in decline” and that “reflective thought is inimical to artistic creation and impairs the art into which it intrudes,” these artists responded with a new type of artistic practice that simply equaled art with reflective thought about art – and thus ensured an unexpected flowering of art after the End of Art.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, (London: Penguin, 1993): 13. All subsequent quotes are taken from this volume.



Ian Wallace clearly belongs to this generation of brilliant escape artists. Yet his work, like that of so many of his peers (Nauman most emphatically among them), is haunted by a pessimist sense of impossibility and aporia born from the suspicion that Hegel may have been right after all – that all we are left to engage in are ultimately meaningless variations on the great Hegelian endgame. In emphatically and theatrically (“ironically”) turning his back on the very world so passionately documented in works such as *La Mélancolie de la rue* or *Clayoquot Protest*, Wallace’s various works from the *In the Studio* cycle, with their heterotopian dreams of absorption, disappearance and escape, exude an understated but unmistakable air of resignation that leads me to suspect Wallace’s reading habits center on Hegel rather than Kierkegaard indeed. [True enough, in a recent conversation with the artist I found out that he *still* hasn’t finished reading *Phenomenology of the Spirit* – and that is the book’s exact point of course.] Surely Hegel himself would have qualified *At Work* as an apt emblem of art made after the End of Art, that is, as an outstanding feat of arch-irony.

Let us then consider more closely, by way of conclusion, the great German philosopher’s thoughts on irony, which are closely related to his view of art’s inadequacy in fully expressing “ironical modernity”, i.e. the era of Spirit’s triumphant self-awareness, a task which only philosophy (and Hegel’s philosophy at that) can fully assume and bring to a successful conclusion. “Genial God-like irony” is, in Hegel’s opinion, essentially determined by the “concentration of the I” into a self “for which all bonds are broken,” an I left to its own divine devices. This extreme solipsism ultimately “amounts to making all that is actual in its own right a mere *semblance*, not true and real for its own sake and by its own means, but a mere appearance due to the I, within whose power and caprice it remains, and at its free disposal.” And finally, “to admit it or annihilate it stands purely in the pleasure of the I – which has attained absoluteness in itself and simply as I.” Such an irony can and will “only endure to live in the bliss of self-enjoyment.” If the I finds itself unsatisfied in its enjoyment of itself, however, the truly tragic nature of this process of concentration is fatally revealed, for the subject naturally “desires to penetrate into truth and has a craving for objectivity,” and the subject’s inability to abandon its isolation and retirement into itself in search of this elusive truth will only cause mourning and melancholia – an aporetic situation further exacerbated by the fact that “the reflection of the ironist never ceases.”

But what if the breaking of the bonds, what if the subject’s isolation and retirement into itself – such as in his or her absorption in work – and the awareness of this state of isolation more specifically are thus transformed back into a source of pleasure, of enjoyment and bliss? What if this joy is produced, say, by reading Hegel’s very thoughts on the subject of the end of art (or Kierkegaard’s on irony) – what if melancholia itself becomes the site of a certain range of improbable pleasures? For that is surely what happens, for example, in the art of Ian Wallace – and in *At Work* perhaps most convincingly so.



Photograph for At Work 1983, 1983

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