his revelation of form in the Toronto skyline continues to make the case for the unmanipulated camera. Stan Denniston’s work carries the same argument by default, as his one purely topographic photo, a look down King Street West, makes his snapshot views look banal and boring. Clarkson is by far the most accomplished technician in the group, and his collages were the most ambitious pieces in this exhibit. But Clarkson was not well served by the cramped space given his pieces, nor by his inclusion of sculpture in a work entitled Unnumbered Sounds. The problem here is that Clarkson’s collages play a number of visual and art historical reference games dealing with elevation, scale, site, architectural views, and the nature of perspective as a grid system; the sculptural objects however are visceral, agonized, and emotionally striking. The odds are stacked against the photos.

Moving even further away from MacCallum’s prints, the visual centre of gravity for this show, Salloum presents an assortment of photographic cartoons, mock-serious situations rendered on an enlarged scale, and in garish colours. Most of this work looks derivative, though Salloum is trying hard to be original. But table-top photography using toy soldiers was a fad that peaked in California five years ago, and enlargements from colour television images are a cliché in the aftermath of Robert Heinecken. Salloum’s work feels very young rather than experimental, and his inclusion here underscores the danger, to photographers in early developmental stages, of premature public exposure. Finally, Applebaum’s giant prints are a test case of the emperor’s new clothing — seemingly ‘profound’ in an art gallery context, they might just as well be hung in a hairdresser’s salon to illustrate hairstyles. The high coolness of Applebaum’s Man to Man series makes the prints read like art world in-jokes, and they sit uneasily opposite Clarkson’s screaming ceramic faces. Like the old saw about rock bands — “if you can’t play good, play loud” — the sheer size of these photos highlights the fact that these images don’t have much to say for themselves, or about photography either. This sense of emptiness in Applebaum’s work is reinforced by his Found Poster Series, reproductions of advertising posters which any member of Toronto’s Greek community might experience as a form of condescension on the part of the artist.

Underlying the selection of all these images is curator’s Rhodes’ argument with straightforward photography: the old Greenbergian idea that the “unmanipulated” use of the camera is too aesthetically simple and simplistic to participate in modernism and the avant garde. As expressed in the catalogue: “And this is art’s major problem with photography: this ease with which it seems to content itself with ‘effects’, with ‘striking pictures’, with images that seem only to live by their graphic wits. There’s none of the starting-from-zero grappling going on that marks art with its existential power.”

The rejoinder to this idea is, of course, that photography is deeply suspicious of “existential power”, and far more attuned to the realities of the kinds of power expressed in politics, economics, technology, and interpersonal relations.

Unlike Abstract Expressionist painting, for example, photography cannot pretend that the act of artistic creation begins from anything other than the raw substance of the world, and of human experiences of that world. Photography recognizes that the canvas cannot ever be blank, and that none of us starts from a weightless “zero” position from which aesthetic decisions can flow. Photography’s modernism is, by and large, an ‘alternate’ modernism, investigating the contextual relations between art and society, and exploring the social nature of the unconscious — aims unattainable by a paradigmatic view of the photograph. Rhodes demands that photography interact with painting, sculpture, performance and video, in order to remain an art, but this particular show is a narrow interpretation of that interaction. If anything, Rhodes’ choices of photographers indicates that the production of an alternate photography cannot rest simply upon the making of images about other images which, after all, is what formalism wants to be all about. The retreat from human experience, as opposed to media experience, is probably not where aesthetic alternatives are to be found.

Peter Wollenheim

Ian Wallace
Or Gallery
Vancouver
April 16 to 30

If I could simply describe Ian Wallace’s show of April 1983 it would issue the directive to work from Wallace. Of course (to rephrase from Wallace), to do so encourages the inadequacies of image or language re-presentation to essentially connote the ineffable. Wallace remains the conceptual artist questioning the confluence and the source of image-making.

In Art Work, Wallace sent mailers to his art associates inviting them to share in his working process between midnight and 1 a.m. in the gallery for five days of the week during the last two weeks of April. This invitation was not a directive to merely extend the finished object, but was integral to the general working processes of the reification of the concepts. On the mailer (and the poster as well) is a blackline drawing traced from a photograph Wallace has staged of himself, seated at a table with connotations. This source suggests the concept and the procedure in the gallery.

The Or gallery is a small intimate space. Arriving from the outside one sees through large front picture windows. The interior is brightly lit; the inside shows Wallace, his work table, and scattered derivatives of the source image from which the mailer and poster are traced; these are drawn or made by other means of mechanical reproduction. At this perspective the work has the quality of a living and three dimensional tableau. Inside one is conscious of the artist engaging in the process of showing his work.

Important to Wallace are the current and historical theoretical positions that transcend within his own visible work. The relation of form and concept is, to quote from Barthes (and I acknowledge taking this slightly out of context), “the qualitative poverty of the form, which is the repository of rarified meaning, there corresponds the richness of the concept, which is open to the whole of History”. In a sense all Wallace’s forms remain subservient to the concept.

Wallace never intends social or political instruction per se. What he pursues involves the intellectual premises of society (specifically of artistic importance) made physical. While I have a personal bias against procedures emanating with the negative (the concept) to the positive (the actual) — Wallace does attempt to intertwine the two — I cannot discredit his conclusion. One thing I think that the relationship between the two is the crux of all his work and that is...
POLAR PLEXUS

"you know Riddley there is some thing in us it don't have no name." I said. "What thing is that?"

He said, "its some kind of thing it don't us but yet fits us. its looking out thru our eye holds. May be you don't have no name of it only some times. Say you get wake up sudden in the midst of the nite. 1 min you're a sleep and the next you're on your feet with a spear in your han. Well weet you put that spear in your han i 12 that after thing what looking out thru your eye holds. Its dont you don't even know your name. its in us i am and lean and sheltering now it is not there.

I said, "If its in every 1 of us theree more 1 of it theree got to be a manin more ther got to be a manin a manine and more."

Hoban, B. RIDDELY WALKE, Pan Books Ltd.

Vince Varga, Polar Plexus, installation, courtesy: the artist

Vincent Varga
McPherson Library Gallery
Victoria
March 28 to April 11

Vincent Varga's piece, Polar Plexus, opens with a pun. With a slap of the signifiers, solarplexus (gut reaction) becomes perplex us with polar playing on the opposition between the two. The semiotic transformations of the title metonymically suggest the dualistic infrastructure of his conception.

But puns are derived from contrast as well as similarities in dual polarities. A pun on site plays an equally important role in Varga's work. Indeed, galleries are never neutral but impose modifying contextual connotations on displayed work. Conversely their semi-sealed isolation can render pieces critically impotent by denying larger contexts. Installations must overcome this paradox or exist merely as collision or material and spatial articulation.

Varga both assesses and assimilates these problems. He appropriated the space by erecting screening walls and creating a vestibule which functions as a network of dual conceptual initiation.

For example, a photograph of a divining rod, magnifying glass and the two tied together in white silhouette (a light shadow) plus a 'Burning Schoolhouse' firework is coupled to a passage from Hoban's post-apocalyptic novel Ridley Walker. The latter expresses in patois a confrontation and defensive reaction to an unknown, unnameable 'other' lurking within Walker's primitive character. Underlying semiotic relationships unite these elements with their concept:

"text. The literary text, magnifying and miniaturise work are all semantic equivalents signifying, metaphorically, scientific and differentiated information at the levels of acquisition, storage and transmission. Conversely, patois or language dissolving into non-language through its denial of specific signifying function and syntax, divining rod, firework and the 'other' signify non-structured, non-scientific and nondifferentiated information in terms of the non-signified, intuition, explosive energy and the unknown. As his title suggests, Varga's systematic joining of these semantic equivalents transforms and resolves conflicting dual oppositions through secondary codes.

In any language system every element here takes its significance from its context and its relation to every other element. The real magnifying glass, divining rod and Burning Schoolhouse lie on a central "Stonehenge" miniature. This conjunction mitigates against a paranoid but commonplace interpretation of the firework as an adolescent attack on structured learning. Taken in context, it functions as a unifying element in a systematic exploration of multi-tiered transparent and opaque semantic codes, each of which incorporates and transforms an identical message.

In one corner a metal frame trestle supports a horizontal conveyor belt on which rotate sequentially the symbolic motifs of the magnifying glass, divining rod and the two tied together. This mechanical apparatus introduces a second stage in the conquest of nature while preserving the initial science/intuition opposition/reconciliation. Diagonally down the room three video monitors sit on a black and white striped beam precariously balanced