

IAN WALLACE

MY HEROES IN THE STREET

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In the spring of 1986 I participated in a two-person show with Vikky Alexander at the Coburg Gallery in Vancouver. The single work that I presented was a frieze of photographic enlargements that extended across both ends of the exhibition space and which was titled *My Heroes in the Street*. These photographs were portraits of friends as "heroes of modern life" surrounded by the dynamic energies of the streets, wandering through the "forest of symbols", the confusion of advertising signage, monumental architecture and traffic that comprises the urban environment. As in similar photographic works that I made in 1970-71, I was using the city street as a setting for a meditation on modernity. But in this more recent work I wanted to introduce an image of urban individuality, to reflect upon how we negotiate our experience of the density of the modern city through self-consciousness. I attempted to invoke those moments in which we are absolutely ourselves and thus absolutely alienated, and therefore separated out as unique presences in a world saturated with organizational demands of the superstructure, that is, of all those forces in the modern city that are other than who we are as individuals. These portraits were very informally composed, and were taken at a distance that would suggest an accidental encounter, sudden recognition or indirect observation. I thought of them as a kind of urban realism or documents of a transitory existence. Following this exhibition I dismantled the frieze-like arrangement of photographs and laminated them separately onto canvas with an exposed white monochrome bordering the image. This combination of photography and painting was made possible by the recent availability of a large-scale laminating press at Colorific Photo Labs in Vancouver. A selection of these works were then exhibited at Johnen & Schottle Gallery in Cologne later that spring.

In the fall of that same year, Bill Jeffries, who was the director of the Coburg Gallery, invited me to produce a series of photographic prints for the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society. For this project I expanded on the theme of the earlier show and produced a series of ten *studies* for the larger finished works also titled *My Heroes in the Street*. This portfolio consisted of standard-sized c-

prints collaged into a lithographic schema of a larger painting format. These works on paper in effect combined techniques of photography and printmaking in order to visualize a future body of paintings. Subsequently I have produced six finished paintings from the original folio of ten: three in the winter of 1986-87, and which were shown in the *Stations* show of CIAC in Montreal, and three in the winter of 1988-89, which are featured in this current installation at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery. By referring to these finished works as "paintings", or more precisely, "works on canvas", I am emphasizing the fact that they were the first sustained examples of my interest in monochrome painting as a 'ground' for photographic imagery since the *Poverty* series of 1980-2. This development of a hybrid practice between painting and photography has been the mainstay of my work ever since, although I continue to develop new work in a variety of media.

For this portfolio project of 1986 I included a preface that explained my intentions. This text, which was serigraphed onto a sheet that preceeded the ten maquettes, read as follows:

This work is part of an ongoing series of pictures on the theme of the street as the metaphoric site of the relation of the individual to the space of the city. These prints are studies or models for larger works which consist of photographs laminated onto canvas in a size averaging about two meters by three meters. The portion of the canvas not covered by the photograph is painted a flat white.

In these works I am attempting to position the photographic image, which is loaded with specific references to reality, common experience, and the human subject, in relation to the ideal space of painting in its purest state as the horizon of art. My interest is not exclusively directed to subject matter as such, or to the concept of art as an abstract idea: I am trying to mark a meaning across the space of representation. The photographic image, already full of 'signs', gains its meaning as a whole when it is positioned as a signifying 'figure' against the 'ground' of painting, which while itself is empty of signification, is nevertheless the representation of the ideal of meaning, that is, of the ideal of art.

I thus conceive the painted canvas as the site of the history of representation as a value. The blank white canvas is the tabula rasa of modernity which mystifies itself as the primal field of art as an ideal. By traversing the space of this ideal with the gestural mark of

the individual in the street, I am attempting to inscribe across the surface of modernist counter-representation a reminder of the modernity of the social subject.

The street is the site, metaphorically as well as in actuality, of all the forces of society and economics imploding upon the individual, who, moving within this dense "forest of symbols" of the modern city, can achieve the status of the 'heroic', that is, as the subject who can transcend and reconstruct these forces by the act of will.

Apart from the flaws in phrasing, this text in substance continues to stand as my aesthetic-philosophical position and my artistic program. And although I certainly concede that there is much to question about the logic, the politics, the philosophical assumptions and the aesthetic relevance of this program, this very questioning, even as self-questioning, has been carried out primarily through the continuing production of work on the same theme in such series as the *In the Street*, *The Idea of the University* and *Construction Site*. But the basis of my position remains as follows: that the conceptual thrust of my aesthetic project be grounded in 'reality' (my code-word for the actual, the material and the experiential) as represented by the photographic image, and specifically the image of the street, with the human subject as a sign of consciousness of the experience of modernity. Moreover, I propose that the photographic 'sign' can only be understood as such when it is grounded in a field that is its 'alter-image,' that being the pure pictorial field of late modernist monochrome painting that signifies the fundament of art as an 'ideality.'

But there is also a political dimension to this work that becomes clearer when compared to my series titled *Clayoquot Protest* (August 9, 1993) made almost a decade later. The subjects of *My Heroes in the Street* are "heroic" in an ironic sense. While these subjects appear as individuals immersed in but not overcome by the monumentality of urban space and the economic superstructure, just as anyone might find themselves in any everyday situation, it is not self-evident that they can escape their situation or alter the terms by which they can assert their freedom. Yet they are also more than subjects in the abstract sense, although that is how they function in the logic of the image. They are real people being only themselves, but selected to stand both for themselves and everyone else.

Clayoquot Protest, in contrast, shows individuals in collective action, gathered together against a backdrop of the wilderness which they want to protect in its pure state from exploitation. They are also real people, for the most part not known to me, who are representing in the act of protest an image of active defiance against the given order of things. *My Heroes in the Street* has an existentialist overtone in its image of presence and self-consciousness. But this invokes a sense of the contingent and the unstable that is the actual experience of the transitory state of being, expressed in the fact that these images, taken "on the run" as it were, are only incomplete moments excerpted from the flow of life. This is why the photograph is no less and no more than a 'sign', an abstracted figuration taken from the complex narrative of everyday life and raised to the level of an emblem of presence fixed within the rectangle of monumental history painting. In this way the photographic image reifies the space of painting with the specificity of the everyday, just as the heroic space of painting reifies photography with its historical ideality. This mutually supporting dialectic, this collision of histories of representation, can only be sustained by an attitude of skepticism and irony, so that what is there to believe is also there to critique.

In the current state of a confusion of modernist, post-modernist and post-post-modernist ideologies, such loaded terms have to be read with immense skepticism. Yet they remain, in my view, as the conceptual fulcrum that still is relevant to the sorting out of this confusion. They certainly, for me at least, provide the conceptual tools for taking the artistic project beyond the aesthetic, beyond the limits of the beautiful, as rewarding as that may be, and into the realm of critical philosophy, which, however flawed, can open up frameworks of understanding that gives hope to the project as a whole.

Ian Wallace
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