

Separated, We Are Together

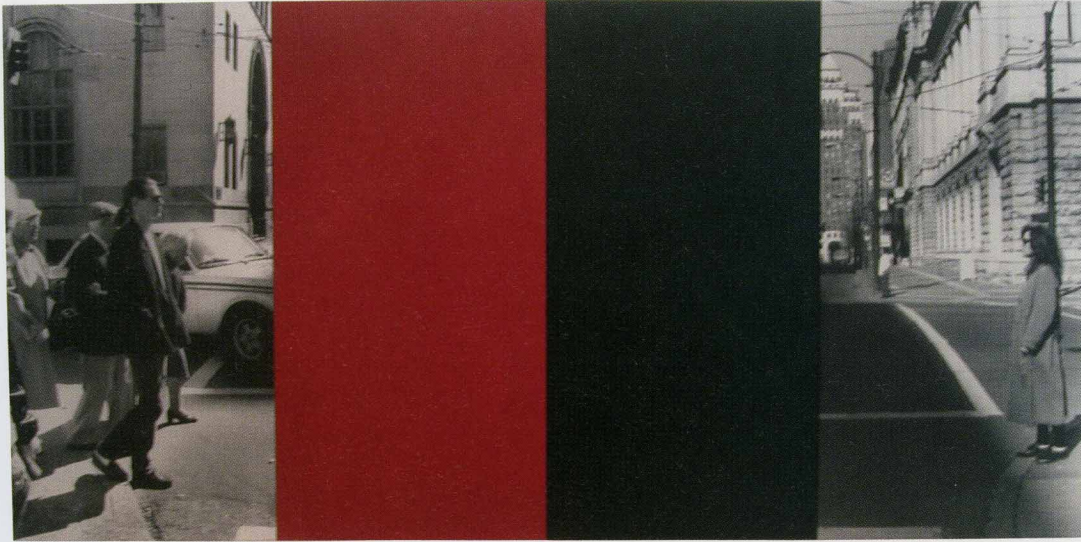
Jacques Rancière

She is about to cross the street and looks to the left – to our left. Her black sunglasses, her untied hair falling about to her shoulders and the long double-breasted trench-coat that flaps round her legs make her look intellectual, and this contrasts with the old-fashioned coat of the lady that stands behind her and the cloche hat that covers her face. The very short shadow – it must be the middle of the day – contrasts with the vanishing perspective formed by the white lines of the street markings and of the long façade that vaguely evokes a Renaissance Florentine palace: it may be a museum, but it could just as well be the headquarters of some powerful company. We are in the new world where art for art's sake, symbols of power and ostentatious consumption are intimately tied to one another. Here is a color photograph, but these colors – the grey of the trench-coat, the brown of the other coat and hat – verge on black and white, if not on the sepia of old photographs.

A bit further along on the left, another large photograph stands out on the same white wall: a man seems to be about to cross the street. He looks to the right – to our right. An elegant young man with sunglasses whose light jacket and black willowy figure contrast with the saggy, cramped figure of the young woman in the trench-coat. No vanishing perspective this time, but in front of him, blocking his way, is a bus adorned with blue and red stripes whose mass directs our gaze towards the only free space: the vertical lines of the glass-walled skyscrapers that stand out against the blue sky. The light is stark, the architecture modern, the space flattened, divided into vertical and horizontal lines and animated by bands of primary colors. Here everything is opposed to the other side's structure and tonality. But is it really another side? Are the two spaces really facing one another and are the characters meant to meet? Do they even intend to cross the street? Are they looking at each other or are they contemplating, each one independently, the contrasts of the urban setting of a new world which, on the right, stresses its relation with the old one, while asserting its originality, on the left? Or are they merely posing in the costumes and attitudes prescribed by the artist? Are they, in short, passers-by captured by a photographer of the modern metropolis, or are they already the elements of an artwork whose meaning transcends both their presence and the photographic medium?

The answer may be given by the two pictures hanging on the wall between the man and the woman, for these undoubtedly figure artworks: antique statues that one might imagine being housed in the nearby "Florentine palace": a feminine figure on the male side, a masculine figure on the female side, homogeneous in style yet enigmatic in their postures. We do not understand the purpose of the defensive gesture of the feminine figure; we do not see clearly the shape of the masculine figure nor what it is doing. The reason for this peculiarity is quite simple: these two figures are in fact the elements of the same sculpture, split by the photograph: the masculine figure is a centaur raping a virgin. What separates the "two sides" of the street is in fact sexual divide. The whole made up by these four photographs, the primordial violence concealed beneath polite urban manners and underscored by the ironic title *Untitled (Heavenly Embrace)* (1987) – this is what is at stake here. The work thus presents together the two poles of enduring separation and violent conjunction, which sum up the misunderstanding between the sexes that are supposed to unite in the same sexual relation. The work seems to prefigure a later series by Ian Wallace which borrows its title from Jean-Luc Godard's *Masculin/Féminin*. Let us recall that, three of the four films chosen by Wallace for this series – Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, Antonioni's *L'Aventura* and Godard's *Le Mépris* – use images drawn from stories of divided couples played in the setting of the old Greco-Latin civilization, with its stark light, its baroque palaces, its traces of Antiquity, its real or metaphorical lava flows and its religious frenzy. Behind the images shown by Ian Wallace of George Sanders and Ingrid Bergman sunbathing in deckchairs are the lava flows of Mount Vesuvius, San Gennaro's miracle of the blood, the colossally virile Hercules of the Archeological Museum in Naples or the skeletons of embracing lovers excavated in the presence of the heroine. In *Viaggio in Italia*, ancient eroticism and catholic devotion make for another kind of "heavenly embrace" in which the representatives of the modern civilization of money, distinction and boredom are ultimately taken adrift.

Yet Ian Wallace is not interested in the clash of civilizations staged in Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* – and in its wake, in Godard's *Le Mépris*. For him the centaur and the virgin are not mythical figures but museum works whose images recombine differently in a different museum. And he is less interested in the violent genealogy of sexual divide than in its structural aspect: the two of the union is also the two of separation. It is less the cause of some ethical-political concern than a factor of intelligibility – a privileged grid through which to read the signs of the undifferentiated spectacle of the downtown in the modern metropolis. Both couples – human and divine, empirical and artistic, modern and mythological – articulate less a reflection on the flight of the gods and the war of the sexes than a method for understanding how the ruling order that structures our world both unites and separates, and how we can respond to its violence by separating what it unites and uniting what it separates. A method is a general orientation as well as a specific principle for constructing works. The four panels of *Heavenly Embrace* already define the compositional principle of Ian Wallace's subsequent series, namely a specific use of dialectical montage. Wallace uses montage neither as an explosive combination of intellectually or visually heterogeneous elements, as in a Magritte painting or a John Heartfield photomontage, nor as a work which, for instance, by combining various materials, forms a sculptural relief on the surface of the canvas. From the perspective of meaning, Wallace's approach to montage emphasizes a gap in homogeneity – a sculptural group, a couple, passers-by on a street or people in a demonstration. From the perspective of form, it is an assemblage of elements drawn from various material sources then melded into the homogeneity of a unified medium or support. Here it is the photographic works and



At the Crosswalk, 1988

the photographs of works that find a homogeneity on the museum's white walls. In *At the Crosswalk* (1988), a work that followed soon after *Heavenly Embrace*, we find the same two characters again, each standing on their own street corner; the woman is now alone while the man is surrounded by pedestrians. They are composed into a four-panel montage wherein they are now separated, no longer by the representation of an artwork but by two painted monochrome canvases: by a red panel on the male side, and by a dark green panel verging on black on the female side. As these two monochrome panels have replaced the photographed sculptures from the previous work, it is now photography and painting that confront one another on the panel. Yet this kind of painting has contradictory functions: it is an abstract red-and-black composition, like those which, in the museum, occupy the place of figurative works of the past. But it is also an assemblage of two separate monochromes: two monochromes, that is to say two colored forms that, in their indifferent homogeneity, abolish the modernist dream embodied in abstract painting of replacing the female nudes, the horses, and the battle scenes of salon painting with pure assemblages of color. Yet these two selected colors are not arbitrary: the quasi-black draws the color band toward the structuring binary of black and white; as for the red, it asserts its belonging to the triangle of primary colors (in later montages, the color band will often respond to a white band); but also both are symbolic colors: the red and the quasi-black evoke war banners (of sexual or class war), revolutionary banners (communist or anarchist), but also post-revolutionary moments epitomized by Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*.

Division and separation are thus inextricably entangled. On the one hand, the painted panels separate the two photographs. Their abstractness disrupts the self-evidence of the photographic representation, but also the two figures who actually posed for the artist. They too are artists, lending their own performance to this performance that consists in simultaneously representing the sexual divide and the anonymous flows in metropolises. Yet separation is also what brings together: it is by no means insignificant that the monochrome bands should have taken the place that was initially occupied by the two separate figures of an antique marble statue. The centaur and the virgin separated by the artist remind us of the inaugural role played in the aesthetic regime of art by Winckelmann's account of Greek statues, especially that of the Belvedere Torso, the mutilated statue of an idle Herakles, whose thought was only expressed through wave-like muscles: a figure separated from its action, an expression of the Greek people's vanished liberty. What we call modernity has its origin in this dual separation between figure and action, between art and the expression of a people. This dual separation forms the ground of aesthetic experience as the experience of a new sensible community, open to all and prefiguring a freedom to come. A poet, halfway between Winckelmann's time and our time, halfway between a time nostalgic for lost Greece and a time that has disowned modern revolutionary hopes, provided the most exact formulation: "Separated, we are together."

We owe this formula to Stéphane Mallarmé's *The White Water Lily*, a prose poem seemingly alien to any political concerns. If Ian Wallace does not care about Winckelmann, he strongly asserts Mallarmé's legacy. The two members of the couple are together on either side of the red and black bands that separate them, they are together by virtue of this very separation, just like the author of "the Faun" and the lady whose footsteps he only heard – as he recounts in the poem – carrying with him the "virginal absence dispersed in this solitude." They are together, for they participate in the populous solitude of the city, in this "modern heroism" inherent in the art of being both alone and part of the crowd, of both pursuing one's dream and being able to associate it with the figure of any lady passing by or with some peculiar shop sign. Such modernity is that of the "prose poem": the ability to find the fulfillment of a dream as well as its subversive power in what seems to deny it – absence and desuetude, but also the triviality of shop windows, popular shows, posters and graffiti. Mallarmé shares this with Baudelaire but also with Breton's *Nadja* or Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*. Yet for Ian Wallace, this kind of modernity cannot be disassociated from another, seemingly conflicting, modernity, where Mallarmé also stands as the hero: one that tries to give art its proper space through expunging the anecdotal content from the poem and, from painting, the claim to reproduce the objects of the world as well as the three dimensions of Euclidean space.

The problem is that this modernity is supremely equivocal. The author of *Igitur* and *Un Coup de dés* has been made the paragon of modernist autonomy, asserting the materialist primacy of the signifier over any conveyed meaning, just as Mondrian or Kandinsky have been held to have asserted that a painting consisted entirely of the canvas and color pigments, or Schönberg that music's own language was separated from any expressive functions. In *Un Coup de dés*, the double page takes on an exemplary function with respect to this analogy as it marks both the affirmation of language's own materiality and the negation of the world's empirical confusion by the pure surface of the page. Depending on whether one insists on the primacy of the surface or on that of the signifier, Mallarmé can become either the hero of a medium-specific Greenbergian modernity, or that of a conceptual critique of this very modernity. Yet Mallarmé does not belong to any of these modernities. His insistence on

the power of the page is not consonant with any “modernist” idea of the surface as anti-theater, as a principle of autonomy and limitation. Rather, it aims at turning language inside out, at turning the word into a physical reality, at pushing the text beyond the limits of the grammatical assemblage of sentences, and at making surface the theater of an action. Without even mentioning the dreamt-of public staging of the reading of the pages of *Le Livre*, solitary reading is already a theater in which many things participate: the setting that surrounds the book, the pedestal table on which it is placed, the knife that cuts the pages open, the gesture of unfolding the double page, as well as the dreamy attention of a reader bringing his inner harmonies in tune with those of the poem. In *Un Coup de dés* the different sizes of the typography, the contrast between roman and italicized letters, the variable arrangement of the lines, the blank spaces on the page, all those singular formal features that announce the appearance of poetry, are chiefly a way of transcending the flatness of the sheet of paper, of inscribing onto it the theater of reading and reverie. Indeed, for Mallarmé, the plane surface of the page is primarily the anti-poem, the flat unfolding of the reportage which he opposes with an upward movement. A poem is a firework or an elevation, the consecration of the community’s symbolic gold as opposed to the indifferent circulation of money. *Un Coup de dés* must “raise a printed page to the power of the midnight sky,” and this is why the poet readily gives the lines of his poem the shape of the Big Dipper that they evoke. In this sense, the future Mallarmé opened up by thus spatializing the poem is neither the glorious affirmation of the pictorial surface nor the pedagogy of conceptual art. Rather, this future is that of Apollinaire’s calligrams where words take the shape of flowers, birds or waterfalls, or that of the surrealist collages of words and images. As for Ian Wallace, he seems to privilege two forms in Mallarmé’s “legacy”: on the one hand there is the cubist collage in which newspaper headlines and product names are smoothly integrated within the distribution of the surfaces of the representational objects that are assembled on the painting’s surface. Is not the “Coup de thé” that a Picasso painting borrowed from a headline that was presumably about a *coup de théâtre*, he asks, an allusion to *Un Coup de dés* whose final version Mallarmé had given to Ambroise Vollard, a publisher who was later to become the preferred dealer of Picasso and others? On the other hand, there is the juxtaposition of text and image as illustrated in 1913, one year before the definitive edition of *Un Coup de dés* was published, by the long unfolding scroll of *Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France*, where Sonia Delaunay’s color spirals respond to Blaise Cendrars’ text.

This is where the pieces of Ian Wallace’s complex modernism slot together. And it is hardly conveyed through words. Here Mallarmé’s poem is only featured through its formal presence – the open double page, unreadable for the viewer, being unconspicuously shown in one image of Wallace’s *Corner of the Studio* (1993). Wallace’s reference to *Un Coup de dés* occurs in an earlier work, *Image/Text* of 1979, where something makes even more sense than the words themselves – the very montage structure of the work. Here the surface of the Mallarméan double page turns into an assemblage of two sets of six images representing the space of the studio, the artist’s work table, along with the visual and textual elements that he manipulates. There are two images of space (a window and the perspectival interior of the artist’s studio that may allude to an Albertian pictorial world abolished by modernist flatness), three images of typed texts, one image of a library, three adjoining images of a plane that is both the work table and the plane of the page, an image of the artist at work in his studio. And amidst this, two subjects of representation seem to organize the defining tension of artistic modernity from the two symmetrically opposed corners of the “double page” in the lower left corner, a Mallarméan bouquet and mirror, with

a portrait of an artistic celebrity of the time, Marchesa Casati, photographed by Adolf de Meyer; in the upper right corner an Irish peasant woman, the very image of the hardship of labor and exploitation, whose portrait also features in the lower right corner of the image of the artist's studio. But this is not all: the seeming tension between the composition with the bouquet and the Irish peasant woman is itself canceled out as these two images that are opposed in terms of their content find themselves united through the use of color. Six out of twelve images making up *Image/Text* are in black and white and six others are in color. But here color has nothing to do with the clear colors that Ian Wallace uses in his photographs of urban settings. Instead, it is the artificial color that characterizes the autochromes of the pictorialist era, and in this case Wallace has literally hand-colored black-and-white photographs. The photos' brown and ochre tints indicate it clearly enough: the Irish peasant woman staging an opposition between the hardship of a life of labor and the aesthetic flowers and mirrors was herself an art image formerly shown in an autochrome exhibition. Let us add that this took place in 1913, that is, a few months before the publication of *Un Coup de dés* and that the portrait of Marchesa Casati was made in 1912. In short, *Image/Text*'s "double page" sums up all the inventions and all the tensions that made the year before World War I the great moment of triumphant modernism.

The plurality of meanings that the artist has inscribed on his surface may of course go unnoticed. Even though he claims to follow Mallarmé's legacy, the visual artist, however conceptual, goes against the grain of Mallarmé's project of generating space out of words; indeed, he uses the plane surface of the image to absorb meanings. Before Ian Wallace, Marcel Broodthaers had worked in this direction. He also claimed to follow Mallarmé's legacy, understood as a primacy of language over visible forms, and upheld *Un Coup de dés* as the modern treatise on art henceforth canceling Leonardo's Renaissance precedent. Yet Broodthaers' tribute to Mallarmé consisted in separating what Mallarmé had put together, in presenting on the one hand the words on a single double page, and on the other twelve plates corresponding to Mallarmé's twelve pages, where the written lines were replaced with black rectangles. To challenge the modernist dream of a fusion between words, forms and acts, Broodthaers strictly reversed Mallarmé's project.¹ Ian Wallace's strategy is even more complex, since he tries to play both on the separating power inherent in the white page and on the power of fusion of heterogeneous elements coexisting on the same surface. Painting then has to assume the role of the white page, and photography that of the text. Thus the very same surface can lend itself to the fusion of the elements and to their mutual critique. Since photography always has a narrative content, the monochrome bands will always be there to recall that the very subject-matter, what the photo tells us, is not present on the surface of the image and that its meaning is always a matter of interpretation. This critical function is accompanied by a promise: the purity of the color rectangles that separate the image from itself also promises a human world beyond separation. But this promise of autonomy is itself to be criticized: the monochrome is both the materialization of a dream of autonomy and the very limit of this dream. The promise of redemption carried by aesthetic separation stands only if art merges into the ordinary beauty of the streets and gets involved with the worries of the passers-by that inhabit the concrete jungle. Sometimes this reconciliation presents itself as already there: Wallace's *Jazz Street* (2001) is framed

¹ For my account of this visual art version of *Un Coup de dés*, see *L'espace des mots. De Mallarmé à Broodthaers* (Nantes: Musée des Beaux Arts de Nantes, 2005). Translated in Jérôme Game, (ed.), *Porous Boundaries, Texts and Images in Twentieth-Century French Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

with bands of color that evoke Mondrian, the emblematic figure of the autonomous pictorial surface but also the painter of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. Most of the time, however, photography rebukes the promises of pictorial autonomy in the most formidable fashion: by showing its pure forms as already there, realized in the derisory straightness of the white lines of the street markings. In a recent Parisian version of his ongoing street works, *At the Crosswalk II* (2007), Wallace photographed his “separated couples” in the Place de la République, just opposite the French tricolor: here, the standard white rectangles of the crosswalk are accompanied by modern squares of beautiful green that seem to allude maliciously to the blue and white panels which the artist uses to separate the figures; meanwhile the perspectives onto the converging avenues show them emptied of the masses of demonstrators who, for decades, had made of this crossroads a rallying point for campaigners. And the blue and white panels now massively occupy the center of the composition. They seem to separate not only two sexes but two eras: on the right, a man in a cap who seems to be from a populist movie of the era of the great workers’ demonstrations, while on the left, a blonde young woman with a fur-lined jacket looks like some postmodern doll from Eastern Europe.

In other works, the photograph seems to reduce the artist’s work to its caricature: *At Work* (1983) thus shows us the artist reading Kierkegaard’s *On the Concept of Irony*; he is photographed through the window of a store-front gallery in front of his own representation that is hanging on the wall, forming a spectacle for night walkers, an element of the urban setting. He stands out in the light thanks to the symmetrical bars, as does the pair of students that play anonymous city dwellers in the shadow of a nearby porch. Elsewhere this logic seems to be inverted: the problematic heroism of the passers-by is opposed, in a wildlife setting, to the determined protest of the demonstrators who have come to oppose deforestation: *Clayoquot Protest (August 9, 1993)*, strikes us as a large history painting that comes to replace the previous urban landscapes à la Baudelaire or conceptual self-portraits of the artist. But the history painting is itself stripped of all heroism, if not of all dramatic action: the photographed demonstrators are not active; no fists are raised; in this empty place, no crowd surrounds them; not a single police helmet or grenade launcher appears. Against a background of misty fir trees, the demonstrators sit or stand, peacefully awaiting those who will come and arrest them. And this “united people,” whom traditional slogans used to declare invincible, is also subjected to the critical operations of separation. Not only has the great history painting been divided into nine sections, but on each section, color bands remind us of the fact that this is a representation, in two different senses: on the one hand, the colored bands summon the abstraction of the image, which further emphasizes the demonstrators’ presence as image; on the other hand, the demonstrators are seen to carry out an action of pure representation – in the wilderness, in the absence of witnesses, only the photographic image will testify to their protest. But here the bands do not create a symmetrical division of space. Rather, they resemble screens or *trompe l’oeils*. In the place of the homogeneous color of monochrome paintings, Wallace inserts the irregular patterns of monoprints created by direct contact with the uneven grain of plywood, thus evoking the veins of wood that the demonstrators wish to preserve. The separation indicates it clearly: it is always individuals, singular passers-by who gather together to make up the represented whole of a people.

And it is no accident if a female figure carrying a poster with a German inscription features twice in the center of the selection: “Die Bäume gehören zu uns alle!!!” [sic] – an inscription which obviously stands in the place of another slogan, one that inspired the great gatherings of a time when demonstrators dealt less with trees than with bread and freedom for all: “Proletarier aller Länder, vereinigt

euch!" There is no irony in this emphasis. Ian Wallace does not mock the demonstrators who come to protest for the forest, with just the trees for a crowd; he does not complacently represent a Place de la République where well-behaved passers-by awaiting the green light have replaced the militant crowds of workers. He firmly remains on the side of those who fight for trees as well as of those who are struggling to find their way through urban solitude. More than a modernist position perhaps, this is a materialist position. Nothing is more utterly alien to his thought and art than the account of a postmodern world in which all that is solid melts into air and all reality becomes liquid or gaseous. A photograph of resting demonstrators is surely not reality, yet it is a materiality that adduces itself to that of the trees and demonstration, to that of the bands of acrylic paint, to that of the ink patterns and plywood, to that of the intact plane of the work table, to that of the documents that cover it, to that of the hands that handle them, to that of the image that represents them. Thus, from one separation to another, the Mallarméan arrangement of the double page and the two hands that hold it expands to the point where it fills up the gap that separates the studio from the world, the solitude of the artist from the solitary gathering of the campaigning demonstrators. This is another Mallarméan commandment: for want of a present, for want of a self-declared crowd, to preserve oneself and to be there, to pursue white on black, matter on matter.

Translated from the French by Nicolas Vieillescazes