LA MELANCOLIE DE LA RUE: IDYLL AND MONOCHROME IN THE WORK OF IAN WALLACE 1967-82

JEFF WALL

Ian Wallace's pictorial art displays a long historical relationship to two apparently antithetical forms of the radical art of the early 1970s. The polemical, photographic, documentaristic practice of such artists as Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin, Steve Willats or Allan Sekula, and the monochromatic and reductivist painting of Robert Ryman, Neile Toroni, or Brice Marden were recognized at that time as the antipodes of a radicality in which the possibilities of avant-garde art were recovered by a new generation. The contradictory solidarity between such works remains a central problem in the conceptualization of a possible vanguardist culture, one in which a transcendental poiesis of the art object is interfaced with neo-productivism and a polemical definition of art.

At the beginning of the '70s, the bond between reductivist, monochrome painting and polemical photography was legitimated theoretically in the argument that both practices constituted a critical reflection upon the process of institutionalization to which modernist art was being subjected by the “Ideological State Apparatuses” and the Culture Industry. It was not difficult to defend in these terms figurative work employing photographs, since this work drew quite directly on the activist political traditions of the vanguard of the 1920s; the names of Lissitzky, Tretyakov, Heartfield, or Rodchenko were correctly invoked as pedigree. Figurative, polemical art could be readily justified from the viewpoint of radical productivism, since it openly aimed at a social utility. But the hermeticism of monochrome painting created a more complex situation.

In his analysis of the work of Neile Toroni, Benjamin Buchloh describes a form of modernist painting “which, in order to exist, must confront both the menace of photography and that of the mechanically-produced object,” and which responds to this challenge by radically reducing its pictorial character. This reductivism expresses on the one hand a renunciation of the dubious effects of mechanical reproduction in capitalist society, and on the other, the desire to attain the status of the determinate antithesis of the photograph. The monochromatic canvas is for Buchloh this antithesis, the materially arrived-at negative form of the predominant culture. As such, it provides a silent, challenging emblem of a negation of the established logos.

Commenting on Gerhard Richter’s Grey Paintings of 1973-75, Buchloh wrote:

Contrary to appearances, these paintings are not related to the monochrome tradition whose great ambition was to incarnate for us the astral body in the salon. Their reality is totally original to them; it is that of the despair of painting. The fact that, for the first time, in the work of Richter, poetry and ideology, reunified, constitute a plausible, possible unity outside of the architectural dimension is conceivable only in the dimension of critical negation. Thus, by their radical refusal of any ideological appearance, and of the aesthetic of the pure poetry of painting, the works become the refuge of pictorial practice itself. Their elements... preserve the final trace of an authentic aesthetic procedure, and the first trace of a reality which is possible and liberated, joined in a state which is still unknowable.
The Grey Paintings when photographed, reduce the image to a neutral grey rectangle like themselves, which however cannot adequately reproduce them. The "pictorial practice" of which Buchloh speaks, is here condensed to an intense contemplation of the historical fate of painting as it has been determined by the division of labour. Richter's paintings contemplate their own self-alienation into a historically-evolved form of reproduction, from within whose space their own image is returned as a kind of disappearance. For Buchloh, Richter's paintings are a form of polemical historicism, an emblematic expression of the transformation of the status of the art of painting and the cognition traditionally identified with it, in the culture of capitalist technoscience.

The radical photography of the early '70s requires figuration for its exposures, deconstructions and pedagogics; its incriminations, its morality-plays; however, reductive painting must extinguish all such figuration for the projection of the "liberated possible realities" which its silence both announces and renounces in the name of a "state which is still unknowable". Buchloh's materialist and productivist study of Richter concludes with these lines, which seem like an echo of Ernst Bloch: "It is like something which risks losing itself, or like something that has renounced its own project so as not to prematurely engage in false reality. Like something which could only be born in a universality vaster than which reality can offer. Therefore the Grey Paintings still reflect as autonomous pictorial realities the real conditions within which they were elaborated."
This language bears within it the inner dialectic of the monochrome, the problematic terms under which it participates in the radical productivist rhetoric of the left vanguardism whose spokesman Buchloh has become. In their universal subsumption of mechanical reproduction and the ideological processing implied by it, Richter’s grey rectangles form rational emblems of concrete social and historical impasse. But, in their extreme self-emptying and reduction, they express also the longing to evolve into a completely new form of art, one unbounded by poetry or ideology, the pole stars of the bourgeois imagination. Thus, they arrive at a recovery of the conditions for transcendentalist aesthetics. The veering of Buchloh’s prose into the language of transcendental yearning reflects this, and marks it as an authentic, contradictory aspect of the social interior of the monochrome genre. Buchloh has attempted to expel this “part maudit” of the monochrome, splitting it off as a reactionary neo-avantgarde tendency exemplified by Yves Klein, “The monochrome in the work of Klein is now turned backwards, in the direction of the systems of transcendental and symbolist faith of the end of the 19th century.” No doubt Buchloh is correct to mark the ideological difference between Klein’s “spectacularization” and “fetishization” of the emblem of universal negativity, and the programmatic interrogation of the concept of universality in the monochromes of Manzoni or Richter. However, at least in 1977, when this text was written, Buchloh himself would implicitly, in the generic structure of his own writing, admit traces of transcendentalist aesthetics into the domain of negative productivism which he established for Richter. In the notion of “the despair of painting”, we can recognize that the radically emptied pictorial field of reductivist painting contains both productivist and symbolist-transcendentalist impulses.

The productivist current indeed derives from the example of early Soviet art, from the leftism of Punj, Ivanova, and Rodchenko, as Buchloh outlines in his study of Toroni. This tendency developed as a response of the young intelligentsia of the period to militant Marxist futurism and the constructivist ethos of technologically-progressive “world-reconstruction” and the building of socialism through planned modernization. At the same time, transcendentalism, the utopian projection of a human evolutionary leap out of a dying culture, has roots just as deeply embedded in the life-experience of the disempowered but literate generation of 1900, out of which the 20th century political and artistic vanguards sprung.

The re-emergence in the 1960s of a wave of radical contestation within the reconstructed modernity of post-World War II capitalism thus provided the conditions for a reprise of the vanguardist dialectic of the monochrome. The repetitions and ambiguities which Buchloh recognizes in the work of Klein, Manzoni, Fontana, Stella or Ryman, are sustained by the “social repetition” of capitalist culture, its survival without legitimation after the Holocaust, in particular its vigour in the boom period of the 1950s and 1960s. Productivism and mysticism are the militant emblematic products of the survival of capitalism. The monochrome may be the hieroglyph in which the two emblems are intertwined.
In 1967, Ian Wallace produced long, narrow, untitled, monochrome acrylic paintings as well as collages done in a manner reminiscent of Hausmann and Schwitters. In The Collage Show held at the Fine Arts Gallery at UBC in 1971, he exhibited all the pages from an issue of Seventeen magazine taped sequentially to the gallery wall. Figurative polemicism and the ambiguities of the monochrome are the foundation-stones upon which his practice is built, but the monochrome panel disappears from his work before 1970 and does not re-appear until 1982. Its place is taken firstly by a subdued variant of polemical photographic work, exemplified in this exhibition by Pan Am Scan (1970) and La Mélancolie de la rue (1973). In the former work, made in London, a corporate office and the street outside it is surveyed in a series of photos which reiterate the turning of the head across a short arc. The movement neither begins nor ends on any conventionally salient point of the architectural setting or the gestures of the figures included in the scene. It is an itinerant glance, apparently without aim and to no avail, in the random routine of the city. It makes no accusations, deconstructs nothing, expresses no moral. It displays its purposelessness, withdrawing from participation, turning away from a generic scene of modern life, and then possibly turning back to it. The office sells airline tickets. One is reminded of the lyrical backgrounds in the early films of Godard, of the immobile yearning for escape in Baudelaire’s Anywhere out of this world, or Mallarmé’s “Le Ciel est mort. — Vers toi, j’accours!” in L’Azur.
The motif of flight and secession from the city forms a central motif of
*Là Melancolie de la rue* (or, to use its original title, *La Melancolie de la rue +
Barthes’ Third Meaning... Early One Morning*), the work which most closely
approaches the norms of radical “photo-conceptualism”. The examination of
characteristic phenomena of the boom period of the early ’70s — 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.

*Là Melancolie de la rue* established a structure for Wallace, that of the
sequential grouping of large-scale, hand-tinted photographs, which became his
primary medium throughout the ’70s. This provided a format for the literary
grandiosity of works like *An Attack on Literature, The Summer Script, Lookout,*
and *Image/Text*, in which the affinity with strategies of polemical conceptualism
is dissolved, and the implications of Wallace’s Symbolist and secessionist
interpretation of avant-gardism are worked out.

During this period, the debate about photographic art centered on the
ideological nature of representation, particularly sexual representation. The
terms were set by the women’s movement, whose pictorial practice has been
realized primarily in photography, video and performance, rather than painting
or sculpture. The dramatization of social being was carried out in
Brechian-Freudian-Lacanian terms by the feminists and New Leftists identified
with the *Screen* magazine group, including Mary Kelly and Victor Burgin.

Complex responses to this liberal-Left position were developed by other artists
(mostly male) who did not accept this fusion of Critical Theory and polemical
psychoanalysis, and who consequently drew their inspiration from “dissenting”
cultural sources, often openly anti-feminist and anti-liberal. Gilbert and George
and perhaps Warhol are the most prominent figures in this direction, but there
are a host of other artists whose positions reject or contest the feminist-New
Left agenda. At the same time others, both male and female, did not contest
feminism, but diverged from it in the name of a more traditionally poetic and
Romantic concept of the image, which maintained a political component
combined with an emphasis on memory, physical experience and an alchemical
interpretation of the photographic process. Katharina Sieverding, Anselm Kiefer
in his photographic work, Susan Hillier, Jochen Gerz and, locally, Marian Penner
Bancroft are among many examples of this tendency.

The feminist, anti-feminist, and Romantic “centrist” currents all contested the
modes of dramatization, the mise-en-scène of social and sexual life. This is the
ideological content of ’70s art, which produced so much discourse and so much
discomfort, and which gave way to a counter-movement of affirmation around
1980.

It is important to recognize that throughout this period, Wallace, who was
making large-scale works which reveal an ambition equal to that of any
contemporary figure, specifically withdraws them from any polemical
dramatics. In *An Attack on Literature* for example, Wallace attempts to stage an
allegory of problematic, literary, visual art. Ambiguous figures, possibly an
artist and his female muses, seem not to interact with the invasion into their
space of an emblem of Literature, the blank sheets of paper which seem to have
fallen out of Mallarmé’s Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard. The
characters are profoundly introverted, sexual tension is nearly annulled, the
camera appears to freeze the human body as it sets in motion the inorganic
figurae of the silence of Literature. The ambiguity and obliqueness of Wallace’s
mise-en-scène reflects his renunciation of the front lines of the vanguardist
debate of the ’70s, his secession from the emerging feminist agenda, and his
drift toward a monumental art of high interiority rooted in a reprise of Symbolist
idealism centered in the aesthetics of Mallarmé.

It is not until 1979, with Image/Text, that Wallace is able to make an overt
expression of his substitution of Mallarméan poetics for polemical drama. Here
a mural-sized montage of panels is the form established for a statement of the
pleasures of withdrawal into the artist’s study, the arena of the solitary creative
imagination. Here, the de-dramatization and involution of the photographic
mise-en-scène is complete: the artist remains, but the women with whom he
interacts are only vestigially present as photographs on the walls of his
chambers.

The solitude of the artist-figure, content to be alone amidst his imaginings,
expresses Wallace’s radical interiorization and sublimation of the social
conflicts which make up the vanguardist dramatics of the period. Image/Text is
a manifesto on the pleasures of inwardness which are the essence of art in
Symbolist terms, on the austere voluptuousness of the self-conscious
autonomous imagination. The imagination exists in being beset by the crisis of
speaking, of the dread and fascination of the empty white page, of the
Institution of Literature and the Name of the Father, but at the same time it
luxuriates in its crisis and in the sensuousness of dispassionate reflection and
technical expertise.

Image/Text is thus an erotic work, and is related to the essays in dreamy
eroticism Wallace produced in 1977, L’Après-Midi, Colours of the Afternoon, and
Blue Sleep in particular. In those works, as in Image/Text, the hand-colouring of
the photographs is restricted to a monochromatic suffusion of the whole
image, rather than an articulation of local colouring defined by objects and
figure-ground relationships. In a work like L’Après-Midi, the influence of Warhol
is perhaps evident in the decomposition of the image into two parts: a
photograph or film still, and a chromatic field which is conceptually separable
from it. The ground begins to show through the photograph, and the interior
structure of the work is altered. The erotic pictures were an oblique provocation
within the ’70s context, a re-statement of a mode of sexual representation which
the liberal-Left allied with feminism found unacceptable. Wallace has responded
to this reception of these works by exhibiting them infrequently. In Image/Text
he retreated from provocation to a highly-distantiated evocation of the
feminine.

“Intellectual erosexual” was the term Wallace used in 1979 in discussing
Image/Text.7 The Symbolist atmosphere of this work is most perfectly evoked in
the purple panel in which a vase of roses sits on a table. On the wall behind it is

Gallery, 1988
a photograph of the Marquesa Casati by Baron de Meyer, a showpiece of nostalgia for the fin-de-siècle and its cult of aristocracy. Above that, a mirror reflects a poster reproducing another picture, this one from a distinguished collection of early 20th century photography. The image, under the heading Ireland in 1913, is of a forthright young peasant woman. Another panel, in orange, enlarges this picture, and makes the peasant woman the most prominent human figure in the work. Barefoot, ruddy, and extroverted, she forms a complete antithesis to the narcissistic egotism of the haut-bourgeois Marquesa. The conservative, even reactionary identification of pseudo-aristocracy and peasantry in Image/Text is striking. Wallace replicates precisely the anarchist, anti-urban, anti-bourgeois sentiments of the Symbolist cénacles in his banishment of bourgeois-progressive and proletarian women from his interior. In the 1970s, it is of course these classes of women who are the leading ideologues of the women’s movement and whose own pictorial practice is set on the radical deconstruction of peasant-aristocratic nostalgia for the Female as “Nature”, seeing in that symptomatic iconography the kernel of repressive bourgeois and patriarchal culture. Wallace’s restoration of this complex is anti-feminist in the context of the ’70s debate; its anti-feminism is articulated by the strict and erudite elaboration of its Symbolist concept of art, which is focussed on the absence of women, who form the evanescent body of the introverted desire identified with artistic creation in general.

Image/Text’s panels construct neither proto-cinematic sequences, as in The Summer Script or An Attack on Literature, nor a composite single space, as in Lookout. Wallace returns here to the polemical montage-character of La Melancolie de la rue, to the abrupt juxtaposition of disparate elements. However, the formal disparity of the text-panels with the images is carefully circumscribed. Collision between antagonistic, alien fields of life or signification is rejected for an allusive, but discursive cohabitation of harmonized difference. Picture and text contemplate one another, they do not clash; a mirroring, symmetrical evocation on the level of content emerges from a blunt formal confrontation of the physical parts of the work. Image/Text concludes the period during which Wallace’s work is dominated by a dramatic-pictorial structure, in which the photographic frame corresponds to the boundaries of the signification process. The panels of text in Image/Text are the first instance of the recurrence of the “radically emptied field” which was expelled from his work in 1970 in favour of the pictorial plenum of photographic space and the dramatic mode apparently corresponding to it.

That a printed text on a page could constitute first and foremost an experience of absence, the blossoming of the conditionality of what is written, of a vanishing of language, was established by Mallarmé in his preface to Un coup de dés jamais n’abîmera le hasard, the structural model for Wallace’s texts. A copy of the poem depicted in Image/Text is open on the table in the studio. In Mallarmé’s poem, it is the “whites”, the spaces between the words, which must be stressed if there is to be “a simultaneous vision of the Page”, a dialectical recognition of the absence of writing which allows Literature to come into being. Similarly, in Image/Text, the panels of writing signify above all their own — still incipient — identity as “whites”, blank panels whose emptiness alters
fundamentally the generic nature of the accompanying photograph. With 
*Image/Text* Wallace proposes that photography exists for him aesthetically by 
being bonded to a passage of non-representation. This passage is other than 
photography, and could be conceived of as the mode of disappearance of 
photography, the disappearance which validates photography within a 
Symbolist aesthetic of high interiority.

Since the 1960s, Wallace had been extremely aware of the methodological 
significance of Warhol’s work, but a direct interest in it surfaced abruptly in 1981. 
That year, during a visit to the *Westkunst* exhibition in Cologne which he 
reviewed for *Vanguard*, Wallace was struck by Warhol’s two-panel disaster 
paintings, *Silver Car Crash* and *Orange Car Crash*, both of 1963. In these works, 
both panels are painted the same colour, but only one has been silkscreened 
with Warhol’s characteristically repeated images. The other is blank. A more 
precise formulation of the polarity between polemical imagery and the 
ambiguity of the monochrome could hardly be imagined.

The influence of Warhol’s structural and technical approach marks the paintings 
Wallace did in the *Poverty* project, begun at that time. *Poverty* began as a short 
16 mm film, conceived of as the source for a group of stills which would become 
photographic prints and silkscreens. Wallace made a photographic assembly of 
eight such stills; a small book from these images, photocopied onto coloured 
papers and hand-bound; a videotape of the original film, splitting up the shots 
with inserts of pure colour; and a group of 20 paintings. This “multi-media” 
approach is characteristic of Wallace’s work of the past 15 years; in this context, 
it too acknowledges Warhol’s problematic relation to painting as expressed in 
the integration of that art form into the continuum of his “enterprises.”

For Wallace, Warhol’s example was important not only for the reconfirmation 
of his own intellectual relationship to the painted canvas, but also because, 
although Warhol’s art indulges completely in the polemical mode, it does not 
participate in the liberal-Left consensus. Thus, in his work, the effects of 
polemical representation of the existing order are muted even as images which 
seem open to an interpretation sympathetic to Critical Theory are presented. 
Warhol’s effect—that of stifling the implications of the social catastrophes he 
was compelled to depict—was well-known to Wallace, and at this moment it 
provided him with a structural model of the polemical anti-polemicism toward 
which his own work was developing. Like Warhol’s work, *Poverty* exists in a 
state of tension with the liberal-progressive consensus of the art world, and 
brings forward the expression of a doubt about the nature of that progressive 
consensus which is evident in more veiled form in *Image/Text*.

In February 1987 Wallace published an essay in *Vanguard* which, although it 
post-dates the production of *Poverty* by several years, provides the outline of a 
critical rationale for it. *Image and Alter-Image II: Roy Arden*, was the second half 
of a study of the work of Arden and Ken Lum, two of the younger Vancouver 
artists whose production is informed by issues closest to Wallace’s concerns. 
Thus, in writing about Arden, Wallace could contemplate some of the problems 
buried in his own earlier work.
Wallace characterizes Arden’s work as the expression of “an outlook that is essentially melancholic and skeptical.” In his analysis of Arden’s Rupture (1985), a work in which archival photographs of the riots and arrests of unemployed workers in Vancouver in 1938 are mounted beneath colour photos of the empty blue sky, Wallace recognizes again the collaboration of polemic and monochrome. Linking Arden’s approach to the examples of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, Wallace writes:

The images in Rupture, then, point to two sides of politics: that of history, as an ideal of emancipation which is objectified as an archival tombstone, as documents of resistance and defeat; and that of the abstract, transcendent, ahistorical plenum of the “natural”, which is embodied in actual photographs of the sky, but which also mimics an ideal, abstract, reductive, formalist tradition of modernist art. This latter tradition, in its negation of the literary, narrative and discursive image, has attempted to install a transcendent history, an amnesia of politics and an erasure of opposition, an emptiness that occupies space.

Wallace emphasizes the unreconcilability of this dialectic, its introversion and rejection of a discursive and practical resolution. He traces this in part to the excision — the “appropriation” — of the historical images from their informational and organizational context. The practical political value of the images is muted almost to the point of silence by this excision. This muting of the discursive potential of the image which is an outcome of its method of display is the spectacle created by Arden. It is a Warholic effect. The inclusion of the blank half of the diptych is therefore an allegorical display of the agent which silences a dissenting political expression.
Wallace recognizes that the defeatist nature of Arden's work is expressed above all by the presence of the monochrome panel:

The "melancholic" dialectics of these images is ultimately pathetic insofar as the viewer wants to fill in the emptiness of the images and bring some form of redemption to the interpretation. But when we turn to the title of the piece (Rupture), we can ultimately sense that no healing of the fissures emerges from the dialectic of the image, and perhaps there may be no redeeming suture in the political sphere either.  

In the structure of Arden's work the blank field, an emblem of transcendental negativity, is obliged to display its own socially questionable character in the starkness of its conflict with the partisan representation of oppression and revolt. By this means, Arden quite candidly makes perceptible his own sense of the socially questionable nature of his art. His situation is one of incurable disharmony and unrest which is unable to break from immobility, and which sees this distressed stasis as the only authentic position. Both art and the artist are incriminated in the structure of the work itself. Thus, a final and despairing phase of the avant-garde autocritique of art is formulated: the artist recognizes the insoluble nature of social contradictions and is mortified by that recognition. For Arden, it appears that the ethical world of art is crucified on the horns of the dilemma which mysticism and productivism oblige the artist to confront. Wallace places Arden in this position through a sympathetic critique, and delineates precisely the predicament which he himself wishes to avoid.

For Wallace, art is in fact not a socially questionable institution, and this is a typically Symbolist position. For him, it is rather society itself, the root of polemical imagery, which is socially questionable. The creative, hermeneutic, hermetic process of this aesthetic, by its inner nature, is capable of realizing the harmoniousness which class society has repudiated and disavowed. From the Symbolist point of view, art is objectively ideal and objectively valid and the social order is not. Art's validity is proven over and over again by its fertility in the creation of Language, and the image is, in Symbolist terms, a phenomenon of Language. Mallarme's Objective Idealism was precisely the consequence of his unpreceended study of Hegel in the early 1860s, and his symbolism is Objective Idealism in which Hegel's Absolute Spirit is withdrawn from the public Imperium and identified with the private regime of poesis. Here stands the mirror of Igitur.

The Symbolist aesthetic insists therefore that any contact with polemical figuration ruins the special nature of art. Its transcendent essence is precisely that which could not co-exist with the debased representations emitted by social conflict. But the indifference of escapism is contradicted in the utopian view of humanity implied in the notion of survivability of the artistic essence. The vision of the survival of what is most fragile and precious is, at bottom, a fata morgana of the transformation of the world. In this sense the Symbolist aesthetic is a weapon of the weak, and a form of ineffable refusal.

For Wallace, the "mute ideal" of the blank surface, rather than araigning itself, expresses the sublime refusal of the unwinnable struggle, a strategy essential
for survival. Art is to be preserved as inwardness for the foreseeable future, and this future stretches back to the fin-de-siècle. Superficial critics (who are always agents of the Imperium in their apostasy in regard to Language) see this introversion as a social defeat for an artistic ideal. But, for the Symbolist, it is within the cells of this defeat that the ideal of art preserves itself as the cipher of human potential, unknowable, utopian and real. Symbolism is the sublimation of the introversion of those who recognize the objectivity of defeat but not its permanence.

So little do the monochrome grounds in Wallace’s Poverty paintings function as incriminations of the supervening representations that the works have been looked at as cynical decorativism. This response tends to overestimate the affinity with Warhol, and misses the movement in which Wallace recovers the ideal potential of the radical monochrome with which his work began.

In this process of recovery, Wallace moves to adjust the generic nature of the imagery. His problem is to construct an image, or an image-type, which does not incriminate or polemicize. Such an image permits the rescue of the “mute ideal” of inwardness and the recovery of the radical ambiguity of the monochrome.

Poverty extends the introversion of Image/Text into the streets. Externalized introversion — the modern spectacle par excellence — here takes the generic form of the idyll. The idyllic, the dreamy, pastoral and placid depiction of social relations exists as an undercurrent in most of Wallace’s work of the 1970s, reaching a conscious expression in the “grand machines” of 1979. The traditional setting of the idyll is rustic and picturesque, a bucolic nook far from the city, its conflicts and its “heroism of modern life”. Its drama is usually a love story.

In Poverty, the idyllic mode is applied to the representation of the homeless vagrants whose image is conventionally registered in the polemical manner. This urbanized rusticity was elaborated first in Image/Text, in the figure of the monumentalized Irish peasant woman. Poverty’s indistinct, reprocessed film frames construct a Victorian city, and a view of things reminiscent of the work of an early photographer like Charles Nègre, one of Wallace’s favorites. Although the heartlessness of the environment is acknowledged in the typology of the setting, the behaviour of the figures conforms to the idyllic conventions. Bliss appears in the two images of the couple reclining in flowering weeds, in the serene browsing of the young girl on piles of trash, and the man in the overcoat, engrossed in a book. These scenes contrast across the horizon of the work with others in which the characters seem more abruptly abandoned to their fates, but the contrast is muted because the abandonment is not resisted or lamented. Wallace’s vagrants are arranged like the pastoral rustic who abide among the sedentary ruins of antique architecture in traditional treatments of the genre.

Thus, where Arden displays a specific moment of concrete social conflict, and thereby produces his dilemma, Wallace carefully extinguishes the specificity of his representational panels by means of an erudite and recondite methodology. The image is cancelled as polemical construction and appears in the work as its determinate negation, its Other.
Wallace recognizes conceptually the dangers and attractions of this procedure:

The mood of defeat that pervades the archival photos becomes more acute in relation to the repeated image of the blue sky that overhangs them like an oppressive mockery of the suffering they depict. The cheerful indifference of the blue sky forms an antipode, a transcendental signifier accountable to nothing, and which the tragedy below will not change. It also offers an erasure, an amnesia of the historical image of social tragedy made possible by casting one’s eye to the sky in an act of contemplation or despair. In either case, it is a release from the contingencies of the world.11

The presence of the image of “the tragedy below” is the specific condition under which the image of the sky’s emptiness becomes cruel, “a transcendental signifier accountable to nothing”. The brutality of actual social indifference and oppression which Arden exposes and broods over (even as he, following the lead of Bataille, mythologizes it into a force of nature) casts the shadow of remorse and powerless indignation over the sublime vastness and serenity of the heavens. We are obliged to perceive that the desire for sublimity may itself emerge from real social indifference, and become its banner, a screen for repressive acquiescence which is always smoothed over with mellifluous evocations of “inevitability” and “just cause”. But where Arden brings the sublime to book, Wallace seems to wish to rescue it from the service of cruelty, to which polemical figuration has condemned it. In Poverty, by bonding his monochromes to the idyllic, Wallace proposes a kind of redemption for the transcendental hieroglyph.

In this process, the Symbolist character of the monochrome ground is preserved. The blank surfaces bearing the images cannot be perceived as having annulled the political protest of the scenes because the scenes have been designed to contain no such protest. Wallace dissociates himself from the conventional imagery of protest in honour of a utopian cipher of introversion. The montage in Poverty, having rejected the self-accusatory spectacle of Left-liberal vanguardism, appears as its inner antithesis, the spectacle of reconciliation, inhabitation, and preservation.

Poverty is the culmination of a long process in which Wallace seems to disconnect his art from social realism, and possibly even to a concept of social truth. The return of the monochrome as a structural element not only expresses the desire for “release from the contingencies of the world” and a restoration of transcendental and formalist aesthetics. Its manner of restoration is itself vanguardist; that is, it is organized as a crisis, not a triumph; an experiment, not a homecoming. The social and historical content of the dialectic of the monochrome, its neo-productivist potential, also necessarily makes its re-appearance at the moment of happy synthesis, and it disturbs the moment. The monumental composure of Wallace’s works of the past few years rests comfortably on the cushion of restoration. That composure is vexed by polemic, its memory.
Notes


4. Ibid.

5. Buchloh, Neile Toroni, 44.


