Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace are photographers. Residents of Vancouver, they are also friends, mutual commentators, art historians and critics. They occupy an almost unique place in Vancouver — more famous for its low-key lifestyle than for the rigours of international exhibition and publishing deadlines. In fact, Wall and Wallace would be unusual anywhere in this country. Canada, always marginal in the power politics of European and American dealers, curators and collectors, has few contemporary artists with a similar international profile. Wall and Wallace may even be better known and valued elsewhere than at home: a classic Canadian dilemma, but one that gives them little discomfort. Friends since their university days in the late '60s (Wallace was Wall's thesis adviser), they see themselves isolated as artists from the rest of Canada by temperament and by the facts of their experience. They see Vancouver as a "modern" city without much past, isolated by the brevity of its history as much as by its surrounding mountains.

Yet Wall and Wallace, like fellow Vancouver artists Rodney Graham, Ken Lum and Roy Arden (all working with photo-related images and analogous intellectual constructs), have often found themselves quite detached from much of the Vancouver milieu. The situation is complex, and often disputed. But a look at these individuals and their interaction — and the varied roles they presently play — offers an insight into that broader art world we seldom see in Canada.

Both Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace are very busy these days. For example, Wall is one of a very few Canadians included at the prestigious Documenta 8 exhibition in Kassel, West Germany (June 12 to September 20), an important summary of leading art activity from the Western world presented every five years or so. Documenta's 1987 artistic director, Manfred Schneckenburger, has relied not only on a group of consultants but on personal contact and first-hand experience to make his choices and this time Jeff Wall is one of nine Canadians presenting sculpture, photography or videotapes there.

Though Wall maintains a full teaching load at Simon Fraser University, conducting classes in art history, theory and studio, Documenta is but one of his current commitments. He is taking part, as is Ian Wallace, in Zeitgeschichte, an international exhibition of photography and photo-based work by 20 artists that English speakers refer to as "Blow-up". It opened in February and travels from Stuttgart to four other major German centres, as well as to Lucerne, Switzerland. His work was at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris this spring for L'Epoque, la mode, la morale, la passion, and further, Wall is the subject of a new book published by Schirmer/Mosel (Munich) and Rizzoli (New York) entitled Jeff Wall: Transparencies.

All this activity in Europe can be traced to his inclusion in the much-discussed exhibition Westkunst (Cologne, 1981, organized by long-standing friend Kasper Koenig), which led in turn to an invitation to the 1982 Documenta and to solo shows in Chicago, London and Basel, and a two-person exhibition with German artist Günther Förg in 1985 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Yet Wall has been little seen in Canada, after a notable solo exhibition at Vancouver's Nova Gallery (1975) he was included in the National Gallery of Canada's centennial exhibition Pluralities (1980), had a solo show at the David Bellman Gallery (Toronto, 1982) and participated in the Montreal Centre for Contemporary Art's important Aurora Borealis exhibition (1985). Most recently, The Ydessa Gallery in Toronto presented six of his photo works (December 13, 1986 to February 28, 1987). His career has not been one of slow beginnings and modest increments, but has leaped ahead in a series of spectacular moves. It is especially the scale and boldness, the ambition and remarkable self-consciousness of Wall's work that have brought it to international attention. And there has been a certain amount of strategy on the part of the artist as well.

Jeff Wall makes very large Cibachrome photographic transparencies that make clear reference, with their massive scale and brilliant back-lighting, to the hard-sell strategies of big-city billboards and glossy magazines. The works typically contain figures, usually life-size and drawn from everyday life, yet often reminiscent of subjects and poses from the classics of art history. Delacroix, Manet and Velázquez are all there in Wall's work, not just quoted as a reference to the history of picture-making, but springing from Wall's own study and temperament. (In 1970-71, Wall worked toward a doctorate in art history at the Courtauld Institute in London.) The themes and compositional techniques of historical art are part of a tradition that is very much alive for Wall, not to be passed over in favour of rootless novelty. These works from the past are fertile sources of imagery and inspiration, ready for reworking or commentary.

Backpack (1981-82) is one example of such art-historical quotation, a full-length portrait of the artist's young son in casual and traditional three-quarter pose, arms folded, eyes watchful, a

Jeff Wall’s large-scale, back-lit Cibachrome transparencies use the hard-sell photographic techniques of big-city advertising while making clear references to historical works of art.

Eight works from Ian Wallace’s Poverty Series as seen at the Cologne art fair: the photographs are fabricated documentary shots screened onto canvas so that they become art objects.

disproportionately huge backpack in place and a freshly scraped knee evidence of his sense of adventure. Adidas shorts and Nike shoes are the boy’s insignia. The picture has been composed in a manner remarkably similar to Edouard Manet’s Fifer of 1866 with its red-grey-white-black colour scheme and its subject’s steady eyes and slightly turned posture, giving prominence to his musical instrument. Each model proffers his badges of identity.

A more recent portrait by Wall, The Smoker (1986), updates Backpack, for it shows us the same son at a later age, his emblem now adult: a cigarette. He sits at a table with a closed book before him, his gaze thoughtful as he muses into the middle distance. Empty shelves line the room behind him, but a warm light falls over his face and gleams on a table edge, recalling the golden browns and calm atmosphere of 17th-century Dutch interiors.

Jeff Wall builds his conceptions painstakingly, sketching out themes, identifying characters, scouting locations, finding actors or sitters, searching out costumes, discussing the effect he wants. For a single picture there may be several months of preparation, and the resulting photograph might be selected from several dozen slightly varied takes.

For Documenta, Wall has prepared The Storyteller, a piece that can only be described as a “grand machine” bringing together many current elements of his work. The Storyteller is presented in epic proportions (2.4 metres high and 4.3 metres wide). Wall’s storyteller is a woman, a choice that responds in part to recently published feminist texts, and is a symbolic acknowledgment of Woman as an active force in culture, with a clear and audible voice. He wanted also to continue his study of marginal figures in the city fabric, “ruined people as being images of potential”, and so visited a native Indian job-training centre to seek out possible actors. A number of the individuals he met there were auditioned; four were chosen for their age, appearance and attitude. Finding the right clothing was a delicate business, for each person was to suggest a character type, a particular background and personal history. Their interaction with the storyteller draws together the threads of meaning in the finished picture, just as their positioning and coloration suggest the look — compositionally and tonally — of 19th-century painters such as Gustave Courbet or Edouard Manet.

Wall worked several days with his actors, directing them via walkie-talkie from a raised structure that held his camera set-up. The scene takes place between an overhead viaduct and a strip of woods on a narrow slope with patchy grass and earth; a site for homeless vagrants but also a kind of Utopia, an idealized vision of social and political life. To shoot the actual photograph, passing cars and trucks had to be dodged and the precise weather and time of day taken into account — the length and angle of shadows is always a crucial issue in Wall’s compositions. The Storyteller, like all of Wall’s productions, is indeed an epic, a heroic work. For Jeff Wall, photography stands at a point “where painting intersects with cinema”. He sees this piece as a philosophical — as opposed to a documentary — image of culture, a sort of “artificial garden” projecting the persistence of an oral culture within contemporary society. Such work, for him, not only recognizes history but values meaning and instruction in the visual arts: the pictures are statements to be studied in detail.

Ian Wallace, friend and fellow artist, makes work that looks and functions very differently. Much of his production is photographic, but the inherent element of theory in his work lies much closer to the surface. Wallace does not make “grand machines”, but treatises with coherent and demonstrable rationales, images that respond well to exegesis, even decoding.

A 1986 work entitled Studio/Museum/Street ties together three themes of long-standing interest to him. For Wallace, the studio is a private space, a place for thinking and writing, the realm of the imagination. The street, in turn, is the public sphere, the territory of external, objective reality. It is where people enact their lives in the company of others, and in construing this environment he turns to images suggested by Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin: the flaneur and the effect of city life on the individual psyche. Between these two extremes of public and private is the museum, a point of mediation and a source of history and authority. Although the basis of a work will most likely be a black-and-white photograph, either an enlarged print or an image transferred onto canvas by silkscreen or laminate, colour is often introduced as a strong formal element.

Wallace makes no use of the backlit transparency and avoids the slick finish that characterizes Wall’s work, and thus his work seldom recalls or implies advertising imagery. It suggests the illustration of ideas rather than explicit polemic, and his works are usually about interior states, as opposed to the historical or social constructions of Jeff Wall. Wallace attempts to isolate the very impulse to make art, to understand and to embody this impulse. For all his concern for the interior life, however, Wallace surely exists in a public world, for since 1967 he has been a teacher: first
JEFF WALL,
BACKPACK (1981-1982),
BACK-LIT CIBACHROME
TRANSPARENCY,
213 x 119 cm (84" x 47"),
COLLECTION:
VANCOUVER ART GALLERY.

at the University of British Columbia, and since 1972 at the Emily Carr College of Art & Design in Vancouver where he teaches art history. Moreover, he has published critical texts and reviews regularly for more than 20 years.

Ian Wallace’s list of exhibitions runs well beyond 50 shows in the past two decades, and has included solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario (1975) and the Vancouver Art Gallery (1979), where a major survey of his work is scheduled for 1988. He plans shows in Munich and Caernarvon, Wales this year and at the 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art in New York next year. His appearances in group exhibitions have been equally impressive, including Trajectoires 73 in Paris, an Australian exchange in 1977-78, Focus at the Cologne Art Fair (1986) and Zeitgeschichte in Stuttgart this spring.

In the early years Wallace made minimalist paintings and sculptures relating to Italian and German Arte Povera, and since 1969 he has made photo-related works. In 1971 he began incorporating video and film into his working method — either as source material for individual images, or as supplementary elements in exhibitions. Though Wallace has continued to favour large-scale photographs, he has also worked regularly in a smaller, serial format, as in Portrait Gallery (1984-86), a work recently purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario. He has also branched out into additional media, as in the version of Studio/Museum/Street designed for the magazine Photo Communique, and into repetitions of works introducing variations in scale and materials.

Ian Wallace is interested in the documentary look, and many recent pieces pose as very large snapshots or man-in-the-street photos. In fact, they are highly constructed forms of non-fiction, every detail accounted for. One example is My Heroes in the Street (1986), an extended series of seemingly casual shots, but with each person being in reality Wallace’s personal friend or colleague. In each case the situation, activity or placement of the person has been selected for its archetypal quality. Not one of those characters appears by chance. Similarly, another serial work, In the Studio (1984) depicts the artist writing at a desk, seated on a bed reading, looking at a sheaf of large-scale photographs and contemplating a blank canvas — but in each of these cases the image is a fabrication. These photographs were actually created in a borrowed space — not the artist’s studio. (Prior to this work, Wallace had used an inverted strategy, setting up his desk and working materials in Vancouver’s Or Gallery, opening the curtains to allow passers-by a view of the artist at work.) Wallace’s interest in creating mock documentary can be confusing for the uninhibited. As Linda Genereux summed up in a recent Vanguard review, he is “using strict formal and conceptual guidelines in an attempt to forge a link between the private enterprise of production and the public understanding of the art object. This is smart art, tightly programmatic, although yielding enough to provide ample clues to its meaning. Wallace’s is the language of signs, rooted in the semantics of art-historical thought.”

A conversation with Wall and Wallace flows naturally toward a discussion of their art. Jeff Wall notes the scale and centrality of the human figure in their respective works, proposing such an approach as a fundamentally Catholic habit, common to artists from France and Italy and in contrast to the isolation and emptiness of the landscape tradition of northern Europe. In this he feels he is to the art of the Italian Baroque period, allied to southern traditions, while eastern Canada has always been linked to the north. It’s an interesting although very debatable notion, an indication of Wall’s sense of himself as an outsider, determined to maintain his individuality, even uniqueness, at any cost.

Yet the point is an important one, for Jeff Wall counts that northern stance as typical of what is commonly called Canadian art, and which he and Wallace would rename simply the current “Toronto scene”. Wall in particular claims no part in it, and for both of them eastern Canada is as far away — both physically and conceptually — as Europe. If an effort at breaking in is to be made, why not look to Europe directly where they, in any case, would be no more marginal? Toronto, to outsiders, is famously chauvinist. And they’ve been visitors to Europe ever since 1970, when they were both living in London.

In Vancouver these two artists have a position of importance, in part because of their teaching and their regular invitations to noted artists and critics to lecture at their respective institutions. Erudite, often outspoken, they have contributed critical articles to

Canadian, American and European magazines as well as to various exhibition catalogues, Wallace provided an extensive introductory text to Wall’s solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and the Kunsthalle in Basel, and Wall will return the favour for Wallace’s survey show at the Vancouver Art Gallery next year. They know each other’s work well, and find such writing an opportunity to explore shared intellectual history and common perceptions. Writing about the work of a friend in this way can be a way of investigating one’s ideas: an illumination of one’s own sources and concerns. An example of this critical procedure was Wallace’s recent two-part contribution to Vanguard on the work of Ken Lum and Roy Arden. Wallace was no doubt including himself when he noted, “Ken Lum and Roy Arden are certainly not the only artists who have centred their work around the dialectic of abstraction and representation, around the juxtaposition of opposing tendencies issuing from the modernism/post-modernism debate.”

In an introductory text for a 1985 exhibition of photo-related work by Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall and himself at the 49th Parallel, Wallace referred to a dialogue between the artists, “enriched by a wider circle of artists and acquaintances in and out of Vancouver with whom we communicate. We take an intense interest in the production and exhibition of each other’s work, providing an immediate intellectual rapport and spontaneous interdependence. Moreover, within the scope of our common outlook, we encourage and emphasize our differences, conceiving and producing all works independently of each other. Thus our activities form a micro-politics built out of the regular personal contact that is only possible in a localized environment.”

For others in that environment, such camaraderie is wishful thinking rather than fact, and they would rather agree with Wallace’s later observation in the same text that “working within the regional cultural milieu of Vancouver, the bias towards the critical function of art has given our dialogue direction and necessity. It has also put us into long-standing conflict with a culture that excludes the nature of that dialogue.” The self-consciously critical and modernist position staked out by Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace has little relevance for those outside the circle, and the various artistic communities in Vancouver maintain quite separate existences.

Nevertheless, Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace — both in theory and practice — are firmly linked to a large body of contemporary work involving investigations into the nature of art and photography. In this vein, the late American photographer, teacher and scholar Hollis Frampton wrote in 1981, “The photograph is a chimera: two beasts, pretext and text, occupy the fragile body of the image, contending for space in the spectator’s consciousness. The photographer is a similar monster: carnivorous perpetrator, slicing raw artifacts from the optical continuum... and agrarian wit, domesticking the exotic, hybridizing the familiar.” Wall and Wallace work with the photograph as “text”, an articulation of perceptions and ideology carried by an image rather than by the written word. As much as possible they remove elements of chance from the construction and presentation of their work. They post an ideal audience, and aim to speak in terms that audience will comprehend. But the photograph is also a “pre-text”, for it does represent a fragment of the visible world, no matter how contrived or pre-planned. Beauty vies with rationality, and physical scale with precision of content. When all the elements making up a work are in place, the eye is seduced as much as the mind is engaged.

If Hollis Frampton’s “chimera” is a hybrid animal with mixed or incongruous characteristics, it is also a creation of the imagination, a fancy, possibly grotesque or absurd, possibly a passing vision or dream. And the photographer? He takes part in both text and pretext, willing their convergence. He originates the conception, produces the conditions, selects the tools and fixes the view. The photograph he creates is not precisely what he saw, nor simply what had been there, for the mechanism of “making” or “taking” the photograph will change both the look of the image and the meaning it contains. The location and conditions of its exhibition will further alter its meaning.

In a world of power and commodity, the photograph itself is commonly undervalued, seen as a mere tool. But in the hands of Jeff Wall, the iconic, the powerful, the useful are compounded in large and brilliant photographic images. In Ian Wallace’s work, coolly detached, the intellectual, educator and flaneur note the city and history. The work is making its impact, but elsewhere.

Peggy Gale is a Toronto critic and curator and a contributing editor to Canadian Art.