Ian Wallace

A LITERATURE OF IMAGES
8 NOV 2008 – 8 FEB 2009

Witte de With
Center for Contemporary Art
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Open Tue – Sun 11 a.m. – 6 p.m
NOTE ON THE EXHIBITION

The first time I traveled to Vancouver was in October 2007, when I went to visit Ian Wallace. It was the start of a remarkable collaboration with one of Canada’s most fascinating artists. This exhibition, forming part of an international trilogy of exhibitions organized with Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, and Kunsthalle Zürich, is the outcome.

The original motive for the threefold exhibition was a conversation with Nicolaus Schafhausen. He asked me what I thought of Ian Wallace’s work. I replied that I had actually seen only a few of his works in real life, and a lot in reproduction. I added that I had never been to Vancouver, where Ian Wallace has occupied a key role in the development of Conceptual Art since the late 1960s and is represented in all the important collections. Later I traveled to Vancouver many times for meetings with Ian, saw many of his works first hand and had some intensive discussions about them with the artist.

One of the first of Wallace’s works that I saw at first hand was his video installation At Work (1983), which is now also on show at Witte de With together with a recent re-make of the same piece (2008). At Work looks simple at first sight: a video showing the artist alone in an empty studio, reading Kierkegaard’s On the Concept of Irony. My first reaction was to wonder what was ironic about the work. Is it irony when an artist portrays himself deep in thought over a philosophical book? What does the image depict? Is it an illustration of irony as described by Kierkegaard, or is the artist playing with the normal ideological conditions of artistic production?

Given the date the work was made – 1983 – it could be a representative of one of the many facets of postmodernism. It goes beyond the rigidly conceptual genre in which the idea is elevated above the material execution of the work. What meaning can irony have in relation to conceptual art? Is it here a matter of introspection? After looking into Kierkegaard once more, it occurred to me that At Work could well be understood as probing a serious existential question – a question that could clarify the whole ambiguous relationship between art and life, or between the artificiality of minimalist thinking and the ideology of ultimate self-expression in art. Kierkegaard wrote that to use irony successfully, you must first master the concept. The technique of keeping irony in balance is not unlike the way a method actor tries to evoke and deploy authentic emotions. This introspection in action, or irony, is convincing only as long as it refrains from descending into self-deceit or slapstick. The art is here to direct introspection into artistic activity, into continually re-examining that activity and into creating the best possible conditions for the one’s own artistic production.

At Work is perhaps the most important work in the Witte de With show, for it not only contributes meaning to the works made before it, but it also places the works that follow it in a contemporary light: the context of an overpowering superstructure within which one tries to stand out as an individual.

At Work may be seen as a statement that both contests and legitimizes the contemporary conditions of artistic production. The reading of a book, an intellectual exertion, pondering, reflection, the making process itself and, especially, the status of representation after conceptual art, are all valid associations with At Work. In this
respect, it is a _pars pro toto_ of Wallace’s artistic output; it is founded in an underlying philosophical minimalism that nonetheless has an expressive consequence. The self-portrayal of the artist evokes various references and associations relating to the function of art, to its necessity and to the indispensable role of the artist in a social construction, whether that happens to be market driven or not, whether he was once young and now older.

Other key works I selected for the exhibition are _The Summer Script_ (1974) and _The Idea of the University_ (1990). _The Summer Script_ is a huge photographic panorama that is now displayed publicly for the first time in over 25 years. It consists of stills from an uncompleted film, which Wallace made in collaboration with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham. In _The Idea of the University_, Wallace presents a series of portraits of his colleagues at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. By so doing, he brings them into relation with dialogues on the ambiguity of both monochrome painting and documentary photography – two media which are themselves saturated in historical traditions and Greenbergian philosophies. The university, the pre-eminent institute of knowledge production, which functions largely according to its own traditional rules, is here infiltrated by the realm of contemporary art, where various disciplines have merged into a natural-seeming hybrid and where notions of categorization are no longer always applicable.

Wallace’s career began in the mid-sixties, when, alongside his artistic practice, he took up a teaching position at the University of British Columbia. Jeff Wall was among his students there. Parallel to his teaching duties, he built up a singular oeuvre in which he used avant-garde strategies as a means to analyze the contemporary conditions of artistic production. Since the 1970s, he has combined monochrome painting and documentary photography to develop a highly personal visual language. The resulting unique idiom interweaves a number of polar aspects of contemporary art: formal organization, minimalism and the internal monologue, mixed with the dialectics of freedom, improvisation and dialogue.

Wallace makes abundant references to the concept of modernity or modernism as his “project”. In this context, tradition and history have little bearing on his art. Before he can establish a definite method, he investigates its effect and then relinquishes it, to take a fresh look at himself, his own work and his environment. It is this continual and indeed irresistible transitory nature that has been his principle source of inspiration and motivation since the start of his career in the mid-sixties. It allows him to create his own culture, his own visual idiom and his own sustainable economy. This perpetual evolution in Wallace’s aesthetic and ethical standpoint only admits such values as “change” and “redefinition”. He approaches painting and documentary photography in the same way, treating them as two distinct media, each with its own traditions, history and ideology, but hierarchically indistinguishable:

“The monochromes are only painting, but they question painting. And my photographs probably question photography. [...] My approach is much more general, more conceptual: to stand outside of pictorial practice and, only in a sense, to reflect the photograph almost as an incidental aspect to the total relation to the performance; to put exactly that into motion.”

The simple gesture or arbitrary moment that brings a work of art into being has
some parallels in making music. Wallace, who drums in an ensemble which is a spin-off from his earlier New Wave band U-33RKS (pronounced "you jerks"!), said in an interview last summer that art, like music, is chiefly a matter of improvisation and dialogue:

"What I like about making live music is spontaneity. When we play there are no songs; somebody starts and other people have to figure out where they can fit in, or change it or whatever. It's a dialogue where as a group we listen to each other closely, and then either synthesize to create a harmonic sound or create a non-harmonic sound, but when sometimes we get too much into a groove I change the drumbeat suddenly and throw everybody off, just to take it to another tension."

This metaphor of music, the reliance on the instrument and on dialogue, also underlies the structure of this trilogy of exhibitions, and the way the works were selected. The favorite key works of the curator and the artist, from different career phases, with different contexts and background, make up the compilation A Literature of Images in Witte de With. The exhibition is playfully structured with reference to two opposing but related poles in Wallace’s work. On the second floor, a selection of works has been assembled around the concept of "iconography" – literally, the "writing" of images. Both versions of At Work are included, as is The Summer Script and The Idea of the University. The second floor represents Wallace's personal, intellectual ponderings on the conditions of his own artistic practice, but the third is about the implications or consequences of that introspection for public space. It is a transition from aesthetic considerations to "real life". Clayoquot Protest (1993), another essential work for the Witte de With installation, deals with the direct relation between aesthetics and activism, by focusing on the role of the individual in a collective action. The photo/paintings on nine canvases show images of the Canadian landscape in which protesters are trying to protect the wilderness from commercial exploitation. It raises the question of where the presumed functioning of art, the main issue of the modernity concept, takes place. Is it in the brain, in the studio, in the street, at the university or in an art institute? Wallace moreover refers to the idea of the city as Baudelaire saw it, as a forest of symbols, a theme addressed in the series My Heroes in the Street (2008):

"My approach is to realistically accept that, and live with it in some way or another, to maintain our ability to have a fully functioning potential as human beings and to develop the potential of the life we want to lead. Within that we have to find our ethical relationships to that. That was what My Heroes in the Street is all about: just crossing the street is a heroic act, what it is to lead a modern life. They are my friends, who are not heroes in the normal sense but are heroes who survive in the modern city. Life is a heroic act. That is the relationship to irony: what is heroic about it, what is it to be in the city, what is it to live a modern life, what is it to be dignified, to live in dignity, in a society that is full of compromises."

The city, where modern life plays out and sometimes frays apart, may be thought of as the totality of relations between a monumental public realm and the individual presence, between macro- and micro-economics. The individual could perhaps play a crucial part in the formation of his own ideal living environment, if only he can curb his irony.

Renske Janssen
1. Søren Kierkegaard, on the concept of irony: "Irony is a disciplinarian feared only by those who do not know it, but cherished by those who do."

2. The quotations are from a recorded interview held by the author with Ian Wallace in Vancouver, June 2008. This conversation forms the basis of Then and Now and Art and Politics, an email dialogue between the author and Ian Wallace reproduced in the book Ian Wallace: A Literature of Images, WDW Publishers, 2008.
LIST OF WORKS:

ON THE 1ST FLOOR

Declaration V. 2008
Lettering on wall / Tekstletters
Dimensions variable / Afmetingen variabel
Courtesy of the artist

ON THE 2ND FLOOR

The Summer Script I & II, 1974
Hand-coloured photos, Silver print / Hand ingekleurde foto's, zilverdruk
Dimensions / Afmetingen 119,6 x 175,3 cm to
tot 120,1 x 176 cm
Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg

Untitled (in the Metro/Protest Squat), 1971
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen 171 x 125,5 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Vancouver

Schema for Magazine Piece, 1970
Paper on vellum / Papier op vellum
Dimensions / Afmetingen 192,5 x 61 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Magazine Piece (1970), 2008
Paper and tape / Papier en tape
Dimensions variable / Afmetingen variabel
Courtesy of the artist

Archive:
Selection of
Letters from Wallace S. Rudiger Schöttle, 1986
Letters about Postmodernism, 1974
Letters on The Summer Script, 1970
Paper / Papier
Dimensions variable / Afmetingen variabel
Courtesy of the artist

For an Ethic of Ambiguity, 1969
Collage on paper / Collage op papier
Dimensions / Afmetingen 32,5 x 23,5 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (in the Studio), 1969
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen 126 x 83 cm (framed)
Courtesy of private collection, Vancouver

Untitled (in the Studio, with table), 1969
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen 107 x 74,5 cm (framed)
Courtesy of Moshe Mastal, Vancouver

Installation diagram for Image Text, 1979
Collage elements on paper / Collage elementen op papier
Dimensions / Afmetingen 94 x 124 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Vancouver

Support/Surface I & II, 2007
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 152 x 152 cm
Courtesy of Nuyten and Dime collection, Toronto

The Idea of the University I – XVI, 1990
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 152 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the Rennie Collection, Vancouver

Emmett Williams Speaking at the Opening of the Artist’s Museum, Lodz, Poland, October 14, 1990, 1990
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 150 x 157,5 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

At Work, 1983
Video
Poster/Surface 55,5 x 70,5 cm (framed)
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto 137 x 197,5 cm (framed)
Backlit transparency / Lichtbox 37 x 33,5 cm
4 drawings 71 x 101 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the Rennie Collection, Vancouver

At Work, 2008
Video
Digtvlh / Tweeluik
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 203 x 305 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

White line, 2008
Wood and paint / Hout en verf
Dimensions / Afmetingen 10 m x 31 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (Grey monochrome with White), 1967-2008
Untitled (Grey monochrome with Yellow), 1967-2008
Acrylic on canvas / Acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 203 x 203 cm
Courtesy of the artist

ON THE 3RD FLOOR

Jazz Street I, 2001
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 244 x 152 cm
Courtesy of private collection, Paris

Jazz Street II, 2001
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 244 x 152 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

In the Street (The Brussels Series), 1988
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 242 x 242 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Greta M. Meert, Brussels
Freestyle I - III, 1996
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 198 x 122 cm
Courtesy of Sylvie Froux, Caen

Freestyle II - IV, 1996
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 198 x 122 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

At the Crosswalk IV, 2008
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 243 x 484 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Silver print / Zilverdruk
Dimensions / Afmetingen 46 x 58 cm (framed)
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Untitled (Heien), 1971
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen 104 x 79 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (Miki), 1971
Black and white photo / Zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen 104 x 79 cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Game, 1983
Newspaper and acetate on paper / Krantenknipsel en acetaat op papier
Dimensions / Afmetingen 54,5 x 39 cm / 41 x 33 cm (framed)
Courtesy of The Apartment, Vancouver

Study for My Heroes in the Street (Stan), 1986 – 1992
Monoprint with ink on canvas / Monoprint met inkt op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 104 x 79 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Poverty, 1980
Black and white photos on RC paper / Zwart-wit foto op RC papier
Dimensions / Afmetingen 32,7 x 29 cm (framed)
Courtesy of The Rennie Collection, Vancouver

Construction Site LA IV, 2003
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 183 x 183 cm
Courtesy of Freybe Collection, Vancouver

La Malancholie de la rue, 1973
Silver gelatin prints on paper / Gelatine-zilverdrukken op papier
Dimensions / Afmetingen 158 x 104,5 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Vancouver

My Heroes in the Street (Gareth), 2008
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 91 x 121 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

My Heroes in the Street (Una), 2008
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 91 x 121 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

My Heroes in the Street (Aileen), 2008
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 91 x 121 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

My Heroes in the Street (Christian), 2008
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 91 x 121 cm
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

10 studies for My Heroes in the Street (1986), 1988
Photo laminate with acrylic on canvas / Fotolaminaat met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 46,2 x 58,7 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Pan Am Scan, 1970
Silver gelatin prints / Gelatine-zilverdrukken
Dimensions / Afmetingen from 32,2 x 47,8 cm to/ tot 32,7 x 51,5 cm
Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Vancouver

Study for Pan Am Scan, 1970
Model paper with black and white photo / Papier model met zwart-wit foto
Dimensions / Afmetingen framed: 16,5 x 19,5 cm
(framed)
Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Chromogenic print and acrylic on canvas / Chromogene druk met acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen from/van 183,5 x 305,2 cm to/tot 122 x 152,5 cm
Courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Gift of the Artist, Vancouver

44 jailed, 1993
Newspaper / Krantenknipsel
Dimensions / Afmetingen 35,5 x 23,5 cm (framed)
Courtesy of the artist

Untitled (Yellow monochrome with Black), 1967-2008
Acrylic on canvas / Acryl op canvas
Dimensions / Afmetingen 228 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist