Then And Now And Art And Politics
Ian Wallace interviewed by Renske Janssen

Renske Janssen: You started your art practice in the late sixties. Can you describe how the conditions of art production then shaped your work?

Ian Wallace: The first conditions of production are those absolutely necessary ingredients of inspiration and motivation. I made my choice to be an artist when I was very young. Well, in truth, I had no choice. It is just who I am. But yes I only really began to clarify my vision in the mid-1960s when I was in my early twenties. I was lucky. Not only were the 1960s an amazing period of cultural transformation worldwide, but Vancouver was a great place to be at the time and remains so in my view. I have described it as the "frontier of the avant-garde." It attracted a bohemian and hippie culture which has had widespread influence throughout the globe. There were many specific regional artistic influences, including the local history of modernist art from Emily Carr to Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith, BC Binning and Iain Baxter of N.E. Thing Co., but the French avant-garde and the New York School painters were also a tremendous influence on me. And most important of all for a critical breakthrough in my art were the innovations of the art movements of the late 1960s such as Conceptual Art and Arte Povera. All of these influences had to be absorbed and transcended. The real challenge for me then and now has been to construct an original artistic language that will move forward the larger project of modernism and not just repeat the past. But perhaps what has been unique in the Vancouver situation is that my artistic vision has also been shaped by my intellectual, literary and art historical interests. This would also apply to Jeff Wall who was a student of art history and who like me was also an exhibiting artist. Neither of us went to art school. We were products of the university system. I was a lecturer in art history from 1967 until 1990. In order to communicate to my audience an understanding of the "bigger picture" of the art of the past as well as the present, I had to absorb and communicate a tremendous amount of information. My intellectualism helped me to connect my personal insights to the larger perspective of western art history – which to me included the Russian avant-garde (then in the Eastern Bloc). But a central idea that permeated through all of my work from the 1960s on, was that these cultural influences should not just be inherited and repeated as a given, but always had to be transformed and regenerated not only by my personal vision, but also by new conceptual frameworks and new technologies drawn from the world around me.

What was it that you encountered that made you decide to “make” art instead of writing books and essays about other artists and their practices, which is what most art historians and critics like to do? I always identified as a visual artist, although at various times I attempted to write poetry and be a musician. I still have a self-portrait of myself as a painter standing in front of an easel that I did when I was nine years old. But it was only in the mid-1960s that I began to understand art as a really serious life-long enterprise. I was inspired by my exposure to the best avant-garde art of the time, and this was encouraged by my friends, and Iain Baxter of N.E. Thing Co., first a teacher, then a friend, who was totally open to conceptual art and all forms of experiment. But literature, philosophy and art historical research, or the “intellectual arts”, were always an important source of inspiration for me. I never accepted that romantic idea that thinking was the enemy of creativity. The combination of photography and writing, what I call “the literature of images,” remain essential to my work to the present. But I think that it was conceptual art that made this possible.

You started off in the late 1960s as a painter with a series of vertical life-size monochrome canvases that you once described as “zero-degree representation.” Can you elaborate on this briefly in relation to the larger project of modernism?

I borrowed that term from Roland Barthes who referred to a “zero-degree” of writing as a new starting point for thinking modernist literature. I actually began exhibiting quasi-abstract paintings in 1965, but was not satisfied with the implicit complacency of my approach to painting, when in fact it had already been undergoing a long “crisis of representation” throughout the history of modernist art. This continuing crisis, which was a pictorial questioning of the foundations of pictorial truth, was one of the great strengths of modernist art. I had seen the Black Paintings of Frank Stella and the radical abstractions by Barnett Newman and Rothko as early as 1962 but did not fully understand them at the time. But as a result of my art history studies (I wrote a thesis on the evolution of Mondrian’s Neoplasticism from 1910 to 1920), and my gradual exposure to so-called Minimal Art of the mid-1960s, I began to comprehend the relevance of a “tabula rasa”, an erasure of the image in painting, that would free it from its historical burden as a strictly pictorial medium. Early forms of radically reductive abstraction, such as in the works of Malevich, Mondrian, through to Ad Reinhardt, were dominated by a quasi-mystical expressionism, an other-worldly zen-like spiritualism. Like Stella, I wanted to emphasize the radical “emptiness” of monochromatic painting, to “secularize” it, so to speak, not to indulge in the melancholic aspect of this emptiness, but to emphasize the material relations of internal pictorial structure to larger frameworks of support, including the institution of art in general. In the period from 1967 to 1969, this led to a series of experimental moves in my work from the deconstruction of the material support of the canvas field to the complete inversion of the monochrome into a pictorial documentation of these experiments by means of photography. My turn to photography coincided with the appearance of photo-conceptual art, as well as the tremendous pressure emerging from the dynamics of socio-political revolt. Photographic imagery, or what I called “photo-conceptualism,” therefore, not only resolved the impasse or “endgame” of late-modernist monochrome or “minimalist” art, but it also could participate as a “witness” to the political challenges of the time. In this process the “zero-degree” of much monochrome painting, which had drifted into a kind of “melancholic modernism”, was temporarily displaced by the politically-charged subject matter of so-called “photo-conceptualism”. In fact, however, even my most “political” photographic works of the time, such as Pan Am Scan or Street Reflections of 1970, through to La Melancolie de la rue of 1973, are relatively tame as far
as political imagery goes. I suppose that in order to avoid the banality of what passed for "political art" at the time, I turned to the radical banality of everyday reality. In any case, my work continues to be marked by the "crisis of representation" in late-modernist art.

What is the difference for you between the notion of representation then and now? Is it still in a continuing crisis? Or could we talk about the current crisis in a different way?

My concept of the "crisis of representation" is based upon this simple thesis: that before the era of "mechanical reproduction" – all the mass media of information and entertainment – the only pictorial means of representation existed in the domain of painting. But while throughout the previous five centuries painting also functioned as a vehicle for information such as portraits, landscapes, historical events, etc, it was also the domain of meaning as a mystic event, as a repository of iconographic truth, and thus the symbolic space for the total logos of western rationalism. Painting was always something more and other than the pictorial information it conveyed. This is what I have often referred to as the "idea of the Picture." I have also sometimes ironically referred to this space as the "landing pad of subjectivity." However, throughout the history of twentieth century modernism, when the arts of mass media displaced painting as the necessary vehicle for functional information, painting was left only with the space of its mystique. The early avant-garde such as the cubists understood this well, and collapsed the space of their pictures accordingly, in a gradual process of what I have always referred to as "the evacuation of the image." This led eventually to late modernist abstraction and its radical forms of the monochrome, and most extremely in various conceptual gestures. The importance of conceptual art for me was its effect of opening up the space of "art" from being dominated by a technical practice to its practice as a critique of language, and the mystique of art itself. Yet this critique originated from within the position of the ideality of painting. This was Duchamp's great achievement even if he never intended it.

The significant next stage for me, and I seized upon this in a very self-conscious way, relied on the opening offered by the linguistic critique of pictorial space within conceptual art. This effectively allowed the entry of the domain of the vulgar – and by that I mean the secular and "un-mystical" – technique of photography, and implicitly all pictorial media, to re-occupy the evacuated space of the ideal quadrant of painting. This is a long-winded way of saying that the photographic has superseded painting in the cultural domain of the picture. In the art of today, with the ubiquitous presence of media art of all types, this is almost self-evident, but I still see in painting the repository of what I call the "ideal horizon of art," not because I want to see it there, but because the larger culture still sees it there, and expresses it in the pure, ideological, abstract, but nevertheless real, value inscribed into it by the market. This is partly what has been described as the "mystery" of contemporary art – referring to it as the expression of a belief system. Despite the fact that this belief system remains in permanent conflict with its very foundations, its own "truth", it is nevertheless very much alive and continues to offer a refuge for the roving spirit of alienated subjectivities. This is the nexus of avant-garde practice and the logos of western rationalism. In my view this is what continues to make contemporary art increasingly relevant, and, for me personally, this is the driving concept in my attempt to make work that engages the "bigger picture". So yes, the "crisis of representation" is still being lived out. And in my view that is not a bad thing, despite the many inherent contradictions in my argument. Of course we can talk about it in another way, and I would like to hear an alternate discourse.

I am just confused by the word “crisis” – it can be read in different ways. It can mean a severe emergency situation that is distorting a given system, but if the word “crisis” is used to point at a moment of truth which determines a standpoint for the future, then we have to imagine the “bigger picture” that we want to divert ourselves from. Crisis sounds like stress, an urban word; it implies radical breaks with the past. But dialogue, improvisation, spontaneity, reflection, going with the flow, doing your thing, doubt, are the opposite …and I also perceive these impulses in your work.

Perhaps I exaggerate by using the term “crisis”. But by this I imply that there is a point when things cannot continue as they are, when radical change is necessary for the survival of art. And that is the way it seemed to me.

I would like to know more about the changing role of the still photograph in your work. From a seemingly formal approach to photography in the late sixties and early seventies with Pan Am Scan and Street Reflections, you seem to have shifted in the mid-Seventies towards a more symbolist approach to imagery. I think of photo narratives such as The Summer Script. An Attack on Literature and Poverty. Can you elaborate on this shift?

In my own historical analysis, and remember that being educated as an art historian I cannot avoid a self-conscious self-critique, I refer to my work of the late 1960s as the “structural” period, and that of the 1970s as the “semiotic” period. By 1970, I had pretty much abandoned painting for photography and certain “conceptual” text-based appropriation strategies, such as the Magazine Piece of 1970. As the opportunities for exhibition and the range of my ambitions expanded, the scale of my work expanded accordingly. After being limited by the smaller scale of commercial lab printing in Vancouver I started buying my photographic paper in one-hundred foot (thirty meter) rolls and creating very large mural-sized photos that I printed myself. I used my art history lecture room as an after-hours studio and darkroom and the marks of unprofessional clumsiness still show in the work. By 1972 I did La Mélancolie de la rue, a relatively large three-panel photo sequence that I first showed in Paris in the spring of 1973. I had my first solo show in 1974, for which I made The Summer Script, and another in 1975, for which I made An Attack on Literature. These latter two works were twelve-panel photographic sequences twenty meters long. They were conceived specifically to present a spectacular pictorial imagery structured like cinema, but exhibited as still images in a brightly-lit white-wall contemporary museum environment. In order to compose such large panoramic murals I drew from cinematic narrative and montage theory that was appearing in the art magazines, particularly Annette Michelson and Roland Barthes’ articles on Eisenstein in Artforum magazine, and writers who specialized in the analysis of the film still such as Raymond Bellour, as well as Screen magazine which had a lot of analysis of Hitchcock’s imagery. As an undergraduate in comparative literature, in 1966, I wrote a thesis on cinematic technique in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet. I also drew from my earlier experiments with time-based sequential photo-conceptualism, as well as my diptych pieces from the very early 1970s. My main problem, however, was finding a thematic subject that was adequate to the scale of the work. My themes were a sometimes eccentric but always personal amalgamation of the intellectual and theoretical discourses of feminism, cinema, semiotics, psychoanalysis, literature, classical painting, early photography, etc., etc. – everything that was in the air intellectually at the time. This was the time when continental European intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes were first translated into English, and this had a tremendous influence on the artistic discourse of the English-speaking art world. All of these ideas were immediately introduced into my teaching program at the Vancouver School of Art.
where I started lecturing in art history and theory in 1972, and where I was given complete carte-blanche to create an intellectual program as I saw fit. It was a real mish-mash of intellectual influences adapted directly to artistic practice, and in retrospect I am amazed that it all came out as coherently as it did. I must also cite the collaborative film project that I worked on with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham in 1973 to 1974, from which I derived The Summer Script. Jeff in particular was adamant about the central role of cinema in new art discourses and our discussions were a great stimulus for my ideas about photo-conceptual montage on a large scale. But this is only the tip of the iceberg.

How did the initial idea for the collaborative film project come together and how did The Summer Script derive from it exactly?

Although I was already very primed to tackle film-making – by 1973 I had already made some rather crude short films and in 1971 was even interviewed to study at The American Film Institute in Los Angeles – in the instance of the collaborative film project with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham, which we began in the summer of 1973, it really was Jeff who was the motivator of the concept. He had just returned from London where he was studying for his doctorate in art history at the Courtauld Institute and was full of enthusiasm for the potential of making a real film. We had many energizing discussions and differences of opinion. None of us had made a real film before, so we were learning in the doing of it, and our technical and financial resources were completely inadequate. This experience certainly left its mark on Jeff’s work and I suppose Rodney’s as well, but I was more interested in the idea of montage and the syntactical semiotic potential of a sequentially structured still imagery. Frustrated by my sense that as a film the project was doomed to failure, and convinced that we should work within our means, I convinced the others to use the imagery that we accumulated in the video sketches to make a synoptic photomontage. This we did and it was exhibited in the fall of 1973 as Stills From a Film in Progress. Due to Jeff’s persistence the script was rewritten and reshot over the next year. However in the fall of 1973, I appropriated photographs from the earlier video sketches and combined them with production photos that I took during a second shooting, in which the script book, which contained the same photos and dialogue, was featured on a table around which the actors were assembled. This work became the large photo-mural which I titled The Summer Script, and which I exhibited in that first solo exhibition in February 1974. This work of course was done completely on my own and, although it was drawn directly from the early stages of the film concept, it was something completely different from the film project itself. What was really different was that my aesthetic remained committed to a “modernist” project, even though I was moving in the direction of what eventually came to be known in part as “post-modern” or “post-conceptual” developments. I was always very interested in the various propositions of Clement Greenberg’s, and particularly as articulated by Michael Fried in his essays on modernism in the mid-sixties: particularly which took up concepts of self-reflexivity and syntax, both of which were essential to the structure of The Summer Script. I would also add the concept of “intertextuality,” which is, in effect, a “montage of references,” that I came across in the writing of the French literary criticism of Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, although I had already come to that in my earlier work.
Did the same transitoriness of language not only in how you describe The Summer Script but also in how it came into production as well, lie at the heart of Poverty?

I think that Poverty was a shift away from the focus on language that motivated the work of the 1970s. As I mentioned before, in these works, from La Mélancholie de la rue of 1973, through to Image/Text of 1979, I turned to language theory as a model for the organization of photographic imagery in my art. In doing so, I had to engage the iconic nature of the photographic image, its ability to function as a “sign” for a complex set of social and cultural references, and therefore this “semiotic” period involved the opening up of a discourse of subjects: photography innately contains subject references, all pictures are about something other than the picture itself. But through the 1970s my approach to photographic subject matter was influenced by both a modernist aesthetic, which was expressed in the self-reflexivity of the very act of image-making, and in a “symbolist” aesthetic, which was strongly tied to a literary tradition. And it was this combination that gave my work of the 1970s such a strong “post-modern” ambience. In Poverty of 1980 I tried to turn my attention away from the poetics of language and performance, and back to the social and the image of the “street” that had appeared in my photographic work of the late 1960s. But even Poverty was an extremely mediated relationship to the “real.” The photographic images of Poverty were derived from a short 16 mm film in which I had friends model in scenes of transients wandering through an abandoned industrial district that suggested the setting of a type of early “social realist” photography. It wasn’t until the My Heroes in the Street series of the mid-eighties that my imagery directly engaged the “social subject.”

Can you elaborate on the key cultural and social references in Poverty?

To begin with, the title, Poverty, is somewhat inaccurate. My first intention was to create a work that linked the photographic subject matter to an Arte Povera aesthetic, to link a formal and technical aesthetic of minimal means to an image of an economy of minimal means – hence the title Poverty, which stuck. At that time, I was researching early examples of Social Realism in the history of photography, and was inspired by the work of the 19th century Scottish photographer Thomas Annan, who documented the poor working-class slums of Glasgow. This suggested scenes for the short film that I made, from which the photographs of Poverty were derived by a copy process. On a sunny weekend in the spring of 1980, I dressed up some friends in old clothes and had them pose in an abandoned warehouse district of Vancouver. But as the theme evolved in the shooting process, it became more about a kind of bohemian fantasy of homelessness. The imagery turned out to be more about transience than “poverty.” Many people, including Jeff Wall in his 1988 essay, found it more about romantic escapism than social critique. I have to accept the legitimacy of these interpretations since this work does in fact reveal the strong “symbolist” poetics that carried over from my language-oriented work of the 1970s, but it was this response, which was not what I was intending, that finally pushed my work towards the more direct, more “phenomenological” and less “linguistic,” documentary approach of the street series that followed. The Poverty series, though, was a very productive piece. I really squeezed the maximum results from the eight images that form the subject, and made a variety of works related to it right through to 1987. Poverty was not only important to me as a strategy for the turn to the “social subject” and the image of urban alienation, but it was also the point where I returned to painting, or at least to paint on canvas as a support for the photographic image, that has dominated my work since. Poverty 1982, a series of silkscreened images from the poverty series on monochrome painted canvases, in quite decorative coloring à la Warhol, is one of my favorite works, in part...
because in it the contradictions between form and content are most apparent. These collisions of aesthetic ideologies, between form and content, between abstraction and representation, or aesthetics and politics constitute what I call "contradiction in suspension," which has been a foundation of my work ever since.

One of your most fascinating and largest works, also a key work in the Witte de With presentation, is the nine-part "history photo/painting" Clayoquot Protest (August 9, 1993). Here we see a group of individuals set against the background of an old-growth Canadian forest that they try to protect against logging. To me, this work represents how aesthetics (the ideological discourse between photography and painting) and activism are combined. Would you agree that this piece is in a way your most socially engaged or "political" work?

Yes I would say that Clayoquot Protest has certainly been my most ambitious attempt to make a political statement, but not my only attempt. My earliest photographic works, including La Mélancolie de la rue of 1973, were also overt political statements. Other works, such as Magazine Piece, first shown in 1972 and remade several times, The idea of the University of 1990 and even the Intersection series, are political in an indirect way, which I feel more comfortable with. But I must admit I have always had an ambivalent attitude about the relationship between politics and art. I always felt that the statement that "the best intentions don't necessarily make the best art," held an important truth in it. In essence, a political position is concerned with promoting value judgments about society. And likewise a work of art by its manipulation of technique and subject matter also asks for a value judgment. I am therefore wary of reflecting my work with political intentions that were not in harmony with the aesthetic intentions of the work. Nevertheless in the early 1980s, after a series of works dominated by themes of artistic identity and studio practice, I felt that I had to take up the challenge of making a major work that addressed directly what was happening in the world today. I wanted to make what I thought of as a contemporary version of a "history painting," a work that would monumentalize a contemporary event that was of historical importance. Jeff Wall had made Dead Troops Talk in 1992 and I had also seen Gerhard Richter's 18 October 1977, from 1988. These works opened up a discussion about the possibilities for a contemporary form of "history painting".

How did you choose your subject?

I began by looking at the Oslo Peace accords in 1993 as a possible subject, but I felt personally too distanced from this to be able to make a convincing statement. I finally decided to consider a topic closer to my own experience, closer to home – the ecology movement and the protests against the cutting of old growth forest in British Columbia which led in 1993 to several critical incidents, and arrests of the protesters. So I decided to document one of the more critical stand-offs between a large group of protesters and the police in the late summer of 1993. While I personally have had little to do with ecology activism I supported the politics of it. I felt that I could contribute something as an artist. Photography acts as a witness to modern history, and the media monumentalizes it. While I photographed the protest at Clayoquot Sound, I realized that photography was the only witness, since this protest was in an isolated wilderness, and since a protest is in essence a communal performance of an image of an idea of resistance, it was my challenge to convert this image of resistance and of this particular incident of it into a work of art that would carry its political meaning into the future, and to address an audience who could reflect upon the meaning of the event in an aesthetic as well as a political context.
This is one of your most prescient works, as concerns of ecology seem to be a highly charged but underestimated force in world politics as well as in art politics again today. I wonder in this context, what made you decide recently to remake At Work from 1983 as the At Work of 2008, and not, for example, another Clayoquot Protest – another ecological protest?

Yes, a good question. This occurred to me as I was making the 2008 version of At Work. Why as a remake, and why right now, and why this work and not another? The remake of the 1983 version of At Work was a very spontaneous decision. The concept came as a flash almost out of nowhere and I acted upon it very quickly. I like working in a very spontaneous way. And at the time when I thought of it, it didn't have to mean too much or be too important. It was a work that I felt quite free about, although I had second thoughts about fetishizing myself again in this way. As it turned out, by coincidence the remake happened exactly twenty-five years to the month, in April 2008, after the original version, which was in April 1983. This was enough to convince me that it was the right piece for the time. And I also had to deal with the reality of aging, of time, and wanted to test or question the consistency and the repetitions in my work. But to address the substance of your question, regarding the relevance or the appropriateness of a remake of Clayoquot Protest, I am fully aware that the political significance or content of that piece still remains to be resolved in the political sphere as well as the artistic sphere. First of all, because the rampant exploitation of the forestry reserves has continued despite the protests, and therefore although the protests of the 1990s were certainly important and focused public attention on the issues of ecology and preservation of a very important natural resource, the political work is not yet over. With that in mind, I would say, yes, another work like Clayoquot Protest would be appropriate. On the other hand, I am very careful not to exploit the political content in a way that would be more self-serving to my career as an artist than it would be to the political cause of the ecology movement itself. Work like this cannot be done too often. Nevertheless, I do feel that it is time to address such an issue again in a major work of "history painting," or whatever other form it would take. It could be a different subject even. This is something I give serious thought to and I appreciate that you bring it to my attention in this way. For a number of years now, I have been exhibiting a work I call Declaration, which is simply the installation of the website address for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in an architectural context. This document is the most astounding expression of social and political ideals ever written, whether it can be realized or not. But so far this work has raised no discussion whatsoever, and understandably so, for the hermetic inscription of a website address, no matter what its content, cannot compete with large-scale photographic imagery.
Poverty, 1980

