Scott Watson

IAN WALLACE:

CRITICAL POTENTIALITIES

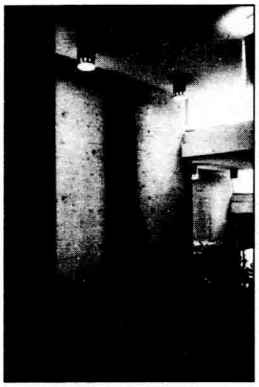
Ian Wallace has worked with various media but is known best for photographic works and, recently, paintings that incorporate a photographic element. The basis of his activity was largely established at the end of the sixties. At that time Wallace's interests in Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, semiotics, French Symbolist poetics and Critical Theory were directed to an understanding of the role of the artist in society and the potentiality of the avant-garde project for the present. Although his strategies for making a contribution to these discourses have changed and been refined in the last two decades, Wallace's project has from very early on been conceived along the Mallarmean/Duchampean ideal of a life-long work regulated by its own internal logic. This way of working naturally postpones a conclusion. Every work is potentially and possibly completed by the others, none of which contain the whole. This potentiality and possibility appears as utopian hope or desire without declaring its object to be outside the troubled self-sufficiency of art and the consciousness that attends to the reality of art. Throughout the last twenty years the idea of an index or semiotic field coupled with an attempt to objectify consciousness and witness modern life have been the primary philosophical and ethical guides for Wallace's work. While there is some justification for emphasizing the poetic, erotic and melancholy aspects of his work, it is important not to lose sight of the materialist and rational program that has informed Wallace's art from the beginning. For although the work has a conceptual base, it stops short at a refusal to objectify itself.

Wallace's first publicly exhibited radical works were a series of monochrome paintings he executed in 1967. These were pessimistic objects which placed Mondrian's utopian grid in a

IAN WALLACE: THE IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY
Exhibition catalogue
UBC Fine Arts Gallery Mar 1990

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

situation of alienation. Some of the works were site-specific. Unlike the assertive, absolutist idealisms of recent European work in which a monochrome element is placed in an architectural context, Wallace's architectural interventions were antimonumental and realistic. Wallace chose his colours arbitrarily in order to avoid any sense that colour or the work of art itself can be used as a stage for a subjective communion between the artist and viewer. "We have nothing to say," Wallace wrote in 1969.[1] For him, all rhetoric was exhausted; only art that meditated on its own emptiness and the qualities of form had the possibility of a truth value. The result would be tainted with irony, but nonetheless held out for the possibility of art as a para-philosophical activity.



1. *Untitled*, installed at Simon Fraser University, 1967

Following the Minimalists of the time, Wallace was engaged with the singularly physical, space-occupying status of the work of art as an object. Attracted to the redemptive and utopian significance of purely self-reflexive formal statements, he also felt it necessary to emphasize our contemporary alienation which makes the reading of such possibilities in works of art an unresolvable contradiction. Thus his work included a dimension of existential doubt not usually present in Minimalist work. This dimension was realized by the theme of "ruination" which can be seen in the 1967 painting, *Remote*, which disturbed the slick surface of hard-edge post-painterly abstraction. The anonymous, mechanical execution was spoiled by the human touch, which was registered only in the damage done to the pristine grid where the paint had bled underneath the tape. Thus the ruination of the work was embedded in its very fabrication. The title, *Remote*, commented on painting as a signaling device in which the only cipher of subjectivity remaining was the record of something amiss and uncorrected. Writing much later about this period of Wallace's work, Jeff Wall cited Benjamin Buchloh's description of Gerhard Richter's *Grey Paintings*, 1973–1975, in order to claim Wallace's monochrome also obeyed an Adornian ethic of renunciation: "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 that which reality can offer. Therefore the *Grey Paintings* still reflect as autonomous pictorial realities the real conditions within which they were elaborated."[2] Wallace's own writing from the

1. "Literature—Transparent and Opaque," in the catalogue for "Concrete Poetry", Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, 28 March–19 April, 1969.
2. Jeff Wall, "La Melancholie de la rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace 1967–82," for the

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

period indicates that he early on adopted a stance that was aligned with an aesthetic of melancholic indifference which the monochrome paintings embody. That is, he recognized that the transcendent and humanistic ideals that had founded the modern project were not at home in the postwar world and could be referred to only obliquely. A realistic presence will be a notation of absence. The irony, oblique self-referentiality and hermetic silence of the indifferent object, which were characteristics of the early work, paradoxically reflected Wallace's notion of realism. These works contained a critique of the real by refusing to represent it. Thus within the rejected redemptive potential of an ideal abstract discourse the possibility of an art that was critical, even an incitement to social change, remained alive but elusive.

2. *Magazine Piece*, installed at UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1971

Attempting to resolve these contradictions, Wallace executed *Magazine Piece* in various forms between 1969 and 1971. Using a mass-media publication as the material for a work in which the strategies of self-referentiality determined the form, this work departed from the purity of the monochrome by engaging subject-matter of a sort. It more deliberately imperiled and questioned notions of artistic subjectivity, personal expression and intentionality. Meaning was no longer contained by the intentionality of the artist, but erupted from the cultural debris he arranged. *Magazine Piece* was an "open-ended concept" that consisted of the exhibition of "any magazine or published media and taping it page by page to the wall in regular formation cover side facing out with any kind of adhesive tape."[3] The material aspect of this gesture owed much to Arte Povera, although the abstract and the ephemeral effect achieved with "poor" materials took second place to the effects of deconstructing an object as saturated with ideologically inflected information as a popular magazine. In a 1971 installation he used *Seventeen*, a journal devoted to the commodification and codification of teen-age female identity and desire.[4] As presented in *Magazine Piece* the code overtakes the

catalogue "Ian Wallace; Selected Works 1970–1987," Vancouver Art Gallery, 5 Feb.–3 April, 1988. Wall cites Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Ready-Made, photographie et peinture dans la peinture de Gerhard Richter," exhibition catalogue for "Gerhard Richter", Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977, p. 58.

3. Wallace's description of the piece from "Work: 1967–1983," unpublished catalogue of works. Ian Wallace Archive.

4. The role of sexuality and the representation of gender remains an interesting but unexamined aspect of many conceptual pieces from this period. Such a study would include Wall's *Landscape Manual*, which contains long passages of sexual fantasy, and Dan Graham's *(Base Ball) 'Piece'*, 1969.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

catalogue of icons, disrupting the narrative flow of the magazine with the overview of the grid. The dysfunctional but still-speaking result owed something to the cut-up techniques of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin and was evidence that, despite the purist appearance of the gesture, there was a romantic notion at work in *Magazine Piece*. This is the willing confusion between natural and cultural phenomenon and the search for situations where ideology collapses into nature by means of analogue. Arbitrary manipulations of cultural material, by emphasizing process, would reveal the natural underpinnings of culture and suggest the restoration of the broken continuity between the two; but only as failure; that is, as a realistic and pessimistic proposal. An aesthetic of form is inadequate to such an impulse. Both Wallace and Jeff Wall, with whom he was in close dialogue, found that they had much in common with artists like Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, whose work was also directed to the nature/culture problem.

By means of photographs of tract houses which had an uncanny resemblance to Judd's rows of boxes, Graham, in *Homes for America*, 1967, implicated Minimalist practice in the more general economy of capitalism. The rootless urban typologies of North America reflected "a larger, predetermined, synthetic order" that was both a phenomenon of capitalism but vaguely and mysteriously a remnant of the natural. The "synthetic order" of these typologies was the symptom of an economy that was destructive of nature and a product of an over-administered world in which the factory, the prison, the office tower, the hospital and suburban housing development were all refracting images of each other. There are echoes of Ed Ruscha and Robert Rauschenberg's fascination with these typologies in Graham's notations, but little of the concern for happiness which some sixties critics had tried to celebrate by characterizing the look of the North American suburban sprawl as a spontaneous American vernacular (e.g. Venturi and Oldenburg). They looked for monuments in highways and hot-dog stands. But Graham, Smithson, Wall and Wallace looked to the urban environment not as a monument, but as "wilderness" on the one hand and a "defeatured" field of energy on the other, as an anti-monument of ruination and emptiness.

Robert Smithson's importance to the Vancouver artists was his framing of the urban subject within ontological and cosmological concerns. He was a visionary whose cosmology of entropy derived from Edgar Allan Poe's *Eureka*, but took on the character of a contemporary critique. Where others saw progress and dynamism, he saw repetition and ruination. Upon the mirrored surfaces of modernity he projected atavistic images of the prehistoric and geological. He gave to avant-garde art renewed strategies to tackle the big

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

issues that had been pushed to the side by Greenburgian formalism. Meditations on nature, ontology and the political were urgent presences in the work.

Jeff Wall's major work of this period, *Landscape Manual*, 1969, was, in part, stimulated by these characteristics of Graham's and Smithson's work. It appeared in the form of a cheaply produced book that had the appearance of a manual or "instructions for use" guide. The narrative began with the construction of a fairly straightforward proposition, although awkwardness and imprecision dominated what followed. A car ride through the suburbs was documented by photographs that emphasized the "defeatured" aspects of the urban landscape. As a Vancouver critic, Dennis Wheeler, commented at the time: "The featureless of this map is what becomes energy, and there is no attempt to turn the banal into a monumental popularism."[5] The pictures were "natural" photographs, arbitrary and artless. Each trip was completed when a roll of film had been used up. The photographs testified to the domination of a synthetic anti-organic order which determined the urban as anti-natural but wild. As concrete as this world appeared — ruthlessly ordinary, all-pervading and self-replicating — the mobility of the car and the use of the car's askew side-mirror introduced a spectral, disembodied element that constituted the drifting, decentred point of view which is finally what *Landscape Manual* is all about. The character of this defeatured landscape was abstract and generic. That is, it was the reflection of the effect of abstract capital on nature and people. Its features were therefore featureless and fungible.

A version of *Magazine Piece* and *Landscape Manual* were exhibited together in 1970, and in some sense they complimented each other.[6] The "wilderness of the urban grid" that Wall saw in the urban environment was duplicated in Wallace's network grid of media-images which flooded that environment.

Wallace also began doing photo works in 1969 that were strongly related to the images in *Landscape Manual*. In 1970, Wallace made *Elevator Piece*. For this he took photos in a moving elevator at each point the elevator stopped and the door opened. These were to be shown in a rotating slide tray whose mechanics presented an analogue to the experience represented in the images. At the time, Wallace's interest in semiotics had led him to the notion of the index. "Naked images" of the urban environment acted as elements in a primitive language of the visual. The elevator as it collected and dispersed its riders was a concrete effect of this "linguistic" index.

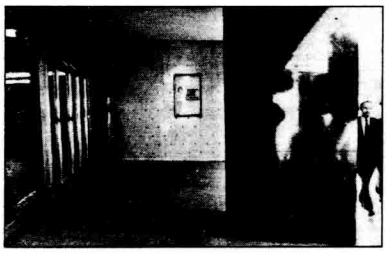
---

5. *artscanada*, June, 1970, p. 51.

6. In "Four Artists: Tom Burrows, Duane Lunden, Jeff Wall & Ian Wallace", Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, 1970.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

This photographic investigation of corporate architecture was continued in *Pan Am Scan*, executed in London in 1970. This work consists of a sequence of images that shift from the reflective surfaces of an airline ticket office to pedestrians in the street. For Wallace the reflecting surfaces off the new corporate towers created a "new disembodied universe composed of illusionistic spaces".[7] This new space was the disembodied reality of the street. The product of steel, concrete and glass, it declared the public space of the street to be a kind of emptiness where the possibility of meaningful action had been lost as the actors of the street came under surveillance.



3. *Pan Am Scan*, 1970 (detail)

While Wall's camera in *Landscape Manual* was "natural" and indifferent to the conventions of pictorial composition, Wallace's in *Pan Am Scan* was imitative of mechanical surveillance. Indifferent to the objects in its path, the camera gathered evidence in order to update Walter Benjamin's dossier of the mechanical gestures and urban intersections that define modern consciousness. The photographs had a linguistic and semiotic function for Wallace. "Language is real," he wrote at the time he was working on these early photographic works: "Images determine mentality, identity, life. Those who control images control the sources of life. Ethics enters here, meaningful choices. What are the linguistic sources of life in our society? The 'media', in content and distribution, television, magazines, films, recorded music (radio), paperbacks, newspapers, (trade journals) then perhaps 'the arts'."[8] Art, if it was to recapture its true subject — modern life — had to establish itself on a continuum with this world of images, for they had insinuated themselves into the core of modern reality.

The city as a construction and network of modulating systems of circulation and exchange revealed the crisis of the era as no other subject could. The early seventies were a time of construction and expansion in Vancouver, the second such boom since the end of the Second World War. The first, in the late forties and early fifties, had been guided by modernist ideals of architecture and planning which drew much of their ethical appeal from an association with a purge of the past executed in the name of anti-fascism. The building activity of the fifties had concentrated on public institutions like schools and rental housing. Private suburban dwellings embodied a design ethic that was meant to improve life. The

7. Unpublished letter to Gene Youngblood, 1969.
8. Letter to Gene Youngblood.

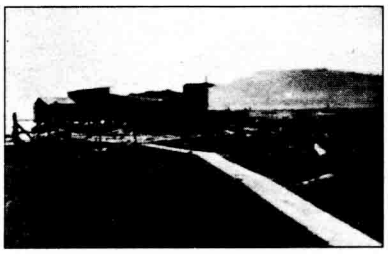
Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

building activity of the seventies, which introduced corporate and bank towers, condominiums and suburban tract developments, marked the demise of modernist ideals as a guide to civic planning. It was the beginning of the late-capitalist generic city. The indexical realism of Wallace's photo works and Wall's *Landscape Manual* was carefully chosen to emphasize that which any and all modernity produced. Topographic and climatic elements particular to Vancouver were avoided. The vista, the bird's eye view, the happy park — usually used to represent the governmental and corporate view of a community integrated with nature and at peace with itself — were eschewed and renounced as false. This was an attack on the failed middle-class modernist aesthetic that had guided and tempered much of the city's first period of postwar development. This had been fixated on the creation of an Oz-like skyline to be contemplated from suburban forest slopes, far from the derelict streets of the disenfranchised. In the anti-picturesque of Wall and Wallace, the natural setting is very much background, as it is in real experience of the city and its social dynamic. However, details of nature, banks of trees, distant slopes and slices of ocean viewed between glass towers register as an obscured pastoral. A romantic undercurrent that contested the ownership and use of these typologies emerged, to be fully explored in the seventies and eighties.

This mixture of critique and elegy was most apparent in *La Melancholie de la rue*, 1973, Wallace's first large-scale photo-mural. In this work, Wallace continued to explore the urban situation, but the notion of a defeatured and wild region has been replaced with specific subjects. The title, an allusion to Baudelaire and Benjamin, is ironic. The work consists of three "street scenes" but the streets here are not the source of surrealist hallucination or the melancholy of love at last sight. The first scene is the facade of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, an example of what was then called "Brutalism"; its Inca-inspired facade was a blunt symbol of authority. A street lamp intersects a window in the facade to create an accidental constructivist sculpture, as a lost utopian potentiality that is not embedded in the subject itself but is an "accident" of the act of observation. The middle panel depicts a newly constructed suburban house. The house despoils a landscape to which it has utterly no relation; the house itself being a pastiche of earlier and other styles that nonetheless can not completely disguise the garage which reveals the suburban dwelling as a function of the highway. The third panel depicts a hand-built cluster of shacks on the Dollarton mud flats, in Vancouver's inner harbour. The dwellings Wallace depicted sprang up in the sixties and were occupied by squatters, some of them artists and all of them living out an alternate lifestyle. Wallace himself lived there for several months in 1970 when he took this picture.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

The settlement was razed by the authorities shortly before Wallace made *La Melancholie de la rue*, thus it had a local, elegiac topicality and immediacy to a local viewer. The juxtaposition was meant to refer to well known typologies by means of local and specific images. The museum, a public building in a public place, embodies the frozen classicism of the bureaucratic order. The private dwelling on a tract of real-estate represents the erasure of nature by entrepreneurial capital. The shacks, private dwellings in a "park", are the ruination of a classical pastoral and confirm a lost utopian idyll not as a positive model but as a specific loss of a local zone outside the system of private property and urban planning. The scene is antagonistic to the modernist plan which was to divide classes into districts under the spell of a park-like integration of city and natural setting. Wallace later wrote about the subjects of *La Melancholie de la rue* as "symbolic forms of architecture seen as an index of socio-economic plateaux; institutional, corporate architecture; the city and the crowd in the street expressed as a form of melancholy with domestic/suburban architecture. The family unit searching for a home, and the imaginary palace, the fourth world of the marginalized 'invisible' squatter shack in the cool light of dawn."[9]



4. *La Melancholie de la rue*, 1973 (detail)

While *La Melancholie de la rue* made uneasy associations by forcing the viewer to relate the images to each other by recognizing the character of property, works that followed were more withdrawn and inward looking. That is, the city and the society it represents disappeared from his work and Wallace began a series of romantic pastorals. Even though these idylls were also marked by a theme of ruination, they marked a break "with the strategies of polemical conceptualism". Jeff Wall saw in the work of this period a working out of "the implications of Wallace's Symbolist and secessionist interpretation of avant-gardism."[10] That is to say, the works turned to a contemplation of the bereaved and alienated condition of the artist. In these works nature appears as the setting for a distant and impossible condition of redemption. Parallel to this change in subject-matter, Wallace shifted his photographic model from the index or documentary to cinematic narrative in which loss and desire played a role. Mallarmean interiority was invoked by repetitions of figures and elements throughout cinematic or panoramic sequences. The banal and artificial

9. From a letter to the Vancouver Art Gallery, 1986.
10. Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

"art for art's sake" character of these idylls asked for a suspension of disbelief while simultaneously revealing themselves as illusions. In *Summer Script I & II*, 1974, Wallace used images from a video sketch for an uncompleted film project that had been undertaken in collaboration with Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham. The video images of an alfresco summer meal were decayed by electronic interference; thus signaling that ruination occupied this site of artistic collaboration and contemplation as much as it coursed through the social network of the streets.

The cinematic model was even more in evidence in a work with "actors" shot in the studio in 1975. *An Attack on Literature I & II* was a narrative sequence in two parts. In the first, two figures approach a typewriter and appear ready to rip out a page from the carriage. They are interrupted and distracted by a flurry of pages thrown at them from an off-stage, unseen force. In the second work, a woman shields her eyes against the light that illuminates her, while a figure behind her throws pages at her. A third figure, looking somewhat Pre-Raphaelite-like and somnolent, perhaps an icon of Symbolist other-worldly indifference, ignores this scene. The baroque light is a source of discomfort and pain, a dialectical symbol of blindness as well as illumination. The blank pages are a wild and chaotic ruin of Mallarmé's book. As blank pages they invoke both the origin and the impossible completion of the text, which in this context is associated with a baroque drama of light and dark. The emptiness of the pages is also the site of fullest illumination; again calling forth a negative representation of the Symbolist ineffable.

Although it is not readily apparent, a work like *An Attack on Literature* bears relationships with earlier works. The monochrome is given its full import as a transcendental signifier of Kant's categorical imperative and the refusal of illusion in the energized swirl of blank pages. The notion of an index of signs, a proposition for a somewhat open and shifting language in the early urban photo works, receives here its theoretical justification in a Symbolist allegory about the origin of the world and the truth of art. But however much a work like *An Attack on Literature* contains metaphysical emblems, it, like all of Wallace's work, exhibits a concern for process that is never very far from the allegories and analogies of the narrative being represented. It is, in fact, by representing process that *An Attack on Literature* claims a truth-value for art that is based in reality and "denounces" the mask of literature.

In the mid-seventies, themes from the history of art also served as a refuge from the metropolitan grid; although Wallace re-emphasized the problem of modern alienation through an exploration of two originary and paradigmatic pictures. These two

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

"recreations" of paintings as fake movie stills were made in 1977. Using Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and other friends as well as himself as models, Wallace photographed stagings of Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew*, and Courbet's Studio, in which Wallace himself posed as Christ and Baudelaire. Both pictures can be taken as parodic assertions of the artist's position. Taken together they also suggest that an artist concerned with modernity will look to Baudelaire and romantic realism, but also to the baroque, Mannerist realism of Caravaggio.[11]

5. *An Attack on Literature*, 1975 (detail)

Other works executed in the late seventies contrasted the plenitude of nature with the impoverishment of culture as a site where nature is constructed as a kind of urban decor. *Lookout*, 1979, continued an examination of the conventions of the pastoral and picturesque by means of the technologies of montage and the panorama. The studio, where the pastoral was constructed and where the photographs of posed models were montaged into the landscape, became a subject in itself. It was the private domain of artistic creation and an antipode to the urban street and its intersections. The idylls were studio works constructed on a scale only a museum could handle, but they bypassed the street that had been the subject which inaugurated the photo-murals in the first place.

The studio as the space where the objectification of artistic consciousness is played out was the subject of the theoretical work, *Image/Text*, also made in 1979, when it was exhibited with *Lookout* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. This mural-sized work combined panels of text with images from the artist's studio where, for example, one can see a maquette for *Lookout* and a pre–First World War photograph of an Irish peasant woman as Muse and guide. A bank of windows invokes the ideal and abstract architectonics of Mondrian in one sequence and the negative ineffable of Malevich's *Black Square* in another. Both passages recall the earlier alertness to the photographic registration of constructivist order in the photographs of the urban semiotic. The large "blank" photographic panels, as pages from the Mallarmean book, are another

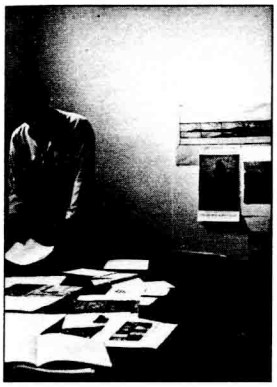
6. *The Calling of St. Matthew*, 1976

11. Arnold Hauser had analyzed the Mannerist period as prefiguring modern models of alienation and as the first index of modern consciousness. Jeff Wall's *Faking Death*, made the following year, 1978, was based on David's painting of Marat and is further evidence of how important a re-assessment of art historical pictorial sources had become for these Vancouver artists.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

expression of emptiness as a radical field of artistic origin. The text itself confirms "a Symbolist aesthetic of high interiority."[12]

Shortly after he made *Image/Text*, Wallace began another series that referred to old photographs. *Poverty*, 1980–82, took various forms as film, lithographs, photo-murals and, most important, painting, which had not been part of his work for over a decade. Through "experimentation" and stimulated by a reappraisal of the monochrome/image diptychs of Warhol, Wallace had serigraphs made from the original 16mm film, then printed directly onto a specially prepared canvas covered with flat, uninflected colour. Each canvas was a unique, intense monochrome from a seemingly arbitrary range of hues.



7. *Image/Text*, 1979 (detail)

Poverty also signaled a return to those thematics of the early seventies which involved urban figures and the intersections they inhabit. Only now the pastoral interpenetrated the urban and the urban appeared as a ruin. *Poverty* was misunderstood by some as a comment on the plight of the urban poor and thus criticized as "unrealistic" and romantic. Read as a representation of the urban poor, *Poverty* lacks bitterness and indignation, picturing poverty as an idyll. By

12. Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 69. Jeff Wall interpreted the images of women in *Image/Text* as evidence that the work was "anti-feminist in the context of the '70's debate; its antifeminism 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." The basis of this reading was twofold. The women represented are a peasant and an aristocrat and thus banish representations of "bourgeois-progressive and proletarian women from [Wallace's] interior." The women are distanced from the scene and are "present" in the studio as photographs. Although she is absent from the studio that the work represents, the Irish peasant, a detail on the wall in one image, becomes a whole panel of *Image/Text* in another section and thus, along with the artist, the leading protagonist of the work as a kind of Muse. But it is difficult to see how a work that has substituted a "Mallarmean poetic" for "polemical drama" can be said to engage, either as "anti" or "pro", a feminist analysis of representations of women in works of art. Neither woman is a nude and neither is portrayed in a semiotic of seductivity or enslavement to her own appearance. Both are represented by old photographs and one presumes that the sitters are dead. This is more to the point, as these photographs in *Image/Text* are meant to invoke the poignance inherent in old photographs and by extension raise the question of photographic truth and essentiality as it had been discussed by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag. Furthermore, if these two images are embodiments of the artist's desires, then the complexity of those desires would include his whole notion of the pastoral and idyll as well as aristocratic notions of artistic independence, in which case the two old photographs return us the nature/culture problem by invoking and simultaneously doubting the idyllic representation of the past as the ideality that informs the impetus for social change today. The primary note these pictures strike is loss, not exclusion.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

failing to depict degradation the work offended those who felt that such a subject could not be represented without an appeal to the moral conscience of the viewer and an "objective" critique of the problem of poverty. But the poverty in *Poverty* is not meant to document the plight of the urban poor. The dressed-up figures are fictional. They are meant to represent the fantasy of bohemian "homelessness", thus the allegorical "poverty" of the intellectual, artist, poet or other marginalized non-conformist.[13] As *Poverty* depicts its figures as inheritors of the urban ruin and as sensuous, erotic presences within the anonymous grid, it could be said to be more openly utopian than much of the previous work.

8. *Poverty*, 1982 (detail)

In the series of paintings that came out of this work the reappearance of a monochrome element, which had been pre-figured in monochromatically coloured photo-panels of the late seventies, restored to Wallace's project a formalist aesthetic. As Jeff Wall commented, this restoration was not meant as a triumphant reassertion of the self-sufficient autonomous object whose only subject is its own internal laws; instead "it is organized as a crisis, not a triumph; an experiment, not a homecoming."[14] The crisis was manifested not only in the arbitrary juxtaposition of monochrome and figure, but in the artificiality of these figurative subjects themselves, who resisted an exact ethical description.

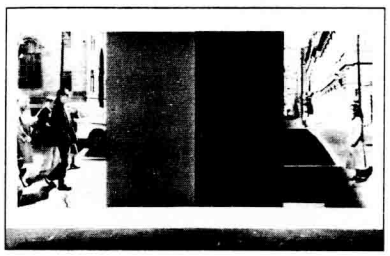
During the years that Wallace worked on the various manifestations of *Poverty*, he was also re-evaluating his past production. This came to a climax in a performance/installation at the Or Gallery in 1983 entitled *At Work*. In this piece, Wallace used the gallery as an office/studio for the duration of the exhibition. He emerged from this experience confirming that his work would continue to revolve around three sites: the street, the studio and the museum. This would allow him to continue to address his central concern. By witnessing the contradictions between public and private spaces, especially as they are reflected in the institution of art, he could continue to define the role of the artist in society. The mid- and late eighties saw the production of several works on these subjects which had, in fact, been organizing principles of his work from the beginning.

Usually in photographic form and often installed directly on the wall, these pieces attempted a specific and material integration of the piece with its architectural setting; a

13. These groups tend to be materially as well as allegorically poor. This compounds the problem of the ethical character of these images.
14. Wall, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

return to the site-specific placements of some of the early monochromes. In *The Imperial City*, 1986, images of classical statues flanked two street scenes recycled from *Poverty*. This use of classical sculpture with its complex aura of calm, restrained eroticism and those humanist standards of ideal beauty that represented artistic authority in a pre-modern period, served as a foil to images of the contemporary urban scene and its inhabitants. Thus the street was juxtaposed to the museum. In *The Imperial City*, the "order" of the classical pervades the modern grid and freezes modern alienation in a timeless, monumental pose. The "heroic" of the everyday is almost annihilated by the weight of the dead statues whose world is severed from our own. A kind of entropy appears in a work that uses the blank white wall of the modern museum as empty ground. It is easy to read the classical statues, who inhabit darkened museum spaces, as the oneric and erotic interior life of the moderns on the street. It is as if the "defeatured field of energy" could be applied to the historical reception of images and be deployed (as in Smithson's work) to record atavistic layers of consciousness. They could also be read as a parody of Freudian interiority with its classical bric-a-brac. Whatever interpretation one wishes to bring to a work like *The Imperial City* and its provocative title, it is aloof from the street that Wallace had earlier depicted. The quotidian features of the street are interrupted by the monumental past: nonetheless the quotidian remained a central issue in the work and erupted again with *My Heroes in the Street*, 1987.



9. *At the Crosswalk*, 1988

The aggressive pastoral of *Poverty* attempted conquest of the intersections of alienation by the figure of the artist or his representatives. This "conquest" was complete and in evidence by 1987 with the work, *My Heroes in the Street*. In this series, which began as a sequence of large photographs mounted in mural form, the grids and intersections of the "generic" urban space are inhabited by friends, some of whom, like Jeff Wall, Wendy Elliott, Wendy Dobereiner, Stan Douglas, Roy Arden and Arni Runar Haraldsson, are artists. *My Heroes in the Street* clarifies and amplifies what was suggested in *Poverty* by dropping contentious allegory and representing real, recognizable artists who serve as the focal point in compositions about intersections.

10. *My Heroes in the Street*, 1987

Between *Poverty* and *My Heroes in the Street*, Wallace's strategy as an artist changed. He emerged from this period of development as a "photographer-painter". This awkward term

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

is meant to describe an integrative activity that attends to the nature and status of painting as an object and uses photographs to represent a subject. The form taken by the current work was prefigured in *Poverty* and realized in *My Heroes in the Street*. A photographic image occupies a vertical or horizontal band on the canvas which is monochrome. The colours are chosen to harmonize with the image whose composition also determines its placement and the area of the monochrome sections. This format replaces both the monochrome photo-mural and the experimental strategy of recycling images through various mediums in changing formats. While this earlier tendency, which originated in an Arte Povera aesthetic that blended idea and process, had the benefits of provisional experimentation, the consistency of the current strategy reflects the clarification of Wallace's intentions.

The subjects of the recent works reprises Wallace's career-long concerns with studio, museum, street. The former studio of Lucio Fontana is the basis of one series, the Gustave Moreau Museum another. In the latter series, the image was focused on the space between the paintings on the wall, suggesting an analogy with the intersections of the street. This dialectical device serves at once to turn attention to the detail as sign and index, and suggests that the various indexes that have occupied Wallace would reveal the same abstract structure if they were decoded. This abstraction is concretized in the material of the paintings as objects and within the dialectical, yet seemingly irreconcilable, tension between abstraction and figuration which has been enacted in them. This contradiction, which has pitted two opposing notions of the real and its representation against each other, is in fact "resolved", but only within the autonomy of art where it prefigures a utopian resolution of the social contradictions that are reflected in the condition of art itself. It is "the autonomous clarity of the work of art" which despite "autonomous ruination can still effectively convey meaning" that offers sufficient, if ironic, evidence of the potentiality inherent in the modern artistic project. For Wallace, this potentiality "has to do with the power of the 'revealed' reality of the 'everyday' represented by photography when its image is 'abstracted', (removed) from the 'immanence' of the world by a clarity of form offered by abstract painting, and by extension, by the space of the gallery itself."[15]

With his current project, *The Idea of the University*, 1990, Wallace has made a further shift by extending the terms of the studio/museum/street subject. The university is an institution which, like the museum, has a validating function in the culture: it is therefore

15. Note to the author, January, 1990.

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.

subject to a critique. The critique is created by viewing the university through the indexes of prior concerns, including the idyll or pastoral which informs ideal notions of the academy. The emphasis on intersections reminds us of the administrated streets Wallace had earlier portrayed. The notation of architectural details and spaces, the gestures of people and texts on walls are signs of potentiality inhabiting a ruin. There is nothing special or "artistic" about Wallace's images. Their banality in terms of the manipulated imagery of advertising or high art is their most remarkable characteristic. Yet they are quite typical of him for what they focus on and how their content becomes implicated within his aesthetic. By being so specific, that is, by portraying the university in an exhibition at a university gallery, Wallace asks for a place for aesthetic discourse within the academy. What falls between this request and actuality (for who could hear such a request?) is the space of "emptiness", of forms whose meaning has been pushed aside to be replaced by terms that function for the deployment and administration of other interests, which are, in turn, not accommodated by this emptiness.

Scott Watson, *Curator*, UBC Fine Arts Gallery

Watson, Scott. "Ian Wallace: Critical Potentialities."
Ian Wallace: The Idea of the University. Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1990. p. 7-21.