Ian Wallace
Pan Am Scan, 1970
black and white photographs
80 x 48 in. (203 x 122 cm)
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York

Steiner, Shepherd. "v.s. a beginning of sorts." Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists.
v.s.
a beginning
of sorts

Shepherd Steiner
FOR THE SAKE OF CONVENIENCE (THE CERTAINTIES OF DATING, anecdotal as well as historical evidence, the parameters of the present exhibition, and not least for urging logical argument toward a rhetorical turn) take Vancouver’s response to the publication of Roland Barthes’ “The Third Meaning: Notes on Some of Eisenstein’s Stills” in Artforum in January of 1973 as the beginning of everything critical about the city’s art scene.

“APOCRYPHAL OR NOT,” dating the origins of the so-called Vancouver School to the publication and response to Barthes’ essay is all too appropriate given the commitment to politics, theoretical rigour, and responsibility to form for which the city’s diverse art scene has become widely known.3 Barthes’ own criticism has been praised for similar reasons, and certainly in “The Third Meaning” one encounters the unwavering—though not unfazed—critic of ideology effortlessly unpacking successive layers of cinematic meaning in order to get at, or free up, an underlying level of significance. That the response to Barthes’ polemical and curious version of “structuralism” roughly corresponds to a moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the relationship between art and theory was finally sealed, and coincides no less with the emergence of theory as an autonomous discipline, is reason enough to privilege the moment as inaugural. That references to Barthes’ theory of the filmic and his analysis of the film still crop up in various ways in the early years of the Vancouver School—most interestingly in the subtitle of one of three panels in Ian Wallace’s seminal work La Mélancolie de la Rue (1973); in relation to a collaborative project involving Wallace, Rodney Graham, and Jeff Wall, titled Stills from a Film in Progress (1973); and lastly as part of a general “frame of reference” for

writes: "I appreciated the way Barthes "stilled" the film experience and studied single frames as if they were more essential than the moving image. This emphasized the fact that films are made up of still photographs that we experience in a very specific, even peculiar way. We are looking not so much at the photographs but at flashes of their projection, too brief to permit the picture to be seen as it is, which is static, like all photographs. That helped me focus on the fact that the techniques we normally identify with film are in fact just photographic techniques and are therefore at least theoretically available to any photographer. But it was not a question of imitating cinematic techniques or making pictures that resembled film stills. It was only a question of following the thread of the recognition that films were made from photographs and were essentially acts of photography. I had no particular aim in mind, only my sense of the criteria of pictorial art as they had evolved and which stood over me as a standard of quality."*  
Jeff Wall, "Frames of Reference," Artforum (September, 2003), 152.

6. Artforum's special issue on cinema, organized and edited by Annette Michelson, should probably be seen as an indication of one of a number of compelling faces and directions of art in late 1972 and 1973; Wallace's willingness to reference Barthes that same year the sign of an extant dialogue in Vancouver on both the risks and possibilities opened up by such a prospect. The hesitations to fully embrace cinema for fear of losing contact with the history of art sheds light on a general historical backdrop for the early moments of the Vancouver School that significantly alter the space of ten years.


8. I take Wall's and Wallace's very different models of the critical as establishing the two pole positions of the early Vancouver School.

9. The "heavy" phrasing should be recognized as of "Benjaminian" origin, and I would wager that a serious diet of Walter Benjamin's works helped prepare the ground for the kind of reception of Barthes' text I argue for. And this, of course, would have been mixed in with the rich mulch already provided by the highly unstable dialectics around which both the influential examples of Robert Smithson's and Dan Graham's works turned.

Wall's notion of "cinematography"—is too good to be true.* But origins do not grow on trees, they spring up like flowers from the ground: thus, my particular focus and singular point of departure; Wallace's explicit reference to "Barthes' Third Meaning" in La Mélancolie de la Rue. Call it concomitance. If this subtitle did not appear that same year as Artforum's special issue on film, the happy union of theory and practice the moment figures would need to be invented.* So I take it as originary, knowing full well that founding the city's rich and varied art practices upon this fiction of mythic proportions, if horribly preliminary (not even preliminary) to a critical reading of the practices of Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, and Wall, among others, has its uses.

What are they? First, to recover from under the veil of what has been widely acknowledged as an exemplary model of the critical, Jeff Wall's powerful recuperation of Baudelaire's idea of "The Painter of Modern Life," another vision of critical modernity rooted in the hermetic tradition of Mallarmé that is equally viable, and from the looks of a developmental perspective established a project (with an origin, tradition, and future attached) strong enough to operate as a lightning rod of reaction for the galvanizing of new and entirely other critical positions.* Second, to posit this singular moment of the critical as accessible only in terms of a close reading, by way of dialectics, and as inherently totalizing in its implications. Third, as a note on dating critical origins and exposing oneself to the charge of methodological bad faith, I should say that for the purposes of demonstrative argument, and to shed light on the special crisis of historical memory that weighed so heavily on early dialogues, I graft a performative act onto a constative moment of language and proceed by prying this apart in order to reproduce on the level of criticism a dynamic variously played out in work from the Vancouver School; work that begins in 1973 to dig the line between death and signification.*

With these qualifications in mind, I take the initial response to Barthes' essay as setting an early example for engagement on the local level with dialogues of an international scope and importance. I take the event to signal a moment when a very particular purchase on canonical practices and high dialogues occurring in the centres of New York and Paris are given a compelling and idiosyncratic form. Even more, call Vancouver's response to Barthes' essay the very moment when theory as we know it today (for example, structuralism) is injected into art; when concerns for poësis or art-making become one with the problems of interpretation we now confront; when the everyday becomes a topic, photography a


possibility, when a critique of media, cinema, commodity, and "state apparatus" are first confronted head-on, and not without the slightest loosening of grip on formal issues intrinsic to art. Finally, it is a moment when debates within modernist history (both poetic precursors and art historical precedents) are rekindled amidst the "ideological battles" of post-1968 by confronting the crisis precipitated by the neoclassical avant-garde. Large claims for a potentially fictional moment, but then if one is at all sensitive to the uses of theory in Vancouver art—specifically structuralism or the science of semiology, Russian formalism, questions specific to the medium of painting, as raised by Clement Greenberg, or later articulated by Michael Fried as "the current of antitheatrical critical thought and pictorial practice"—one has necessarily to recognize that an interest in grammar, or signs independent of their meaning, if representative of a spectrum of hands-on concerns for practically working with language, also serves, postscriptum, as a figure for the difficulties of recounting this variable and complex history in any terms other than an "allegory of reading." Take, for example, Wallace's La Mélancolie de la Rue, the long title of which reads "La Mélancolie de la Rue & Barthes' Third Meaning... Early One Morning." In its gentle turn away from painting toward the prospects of photography, it stands as a breakthrough piece of major ambition. In terms of scale, transparency of theoretical and political engagement, as well as its balanced conjuring of an inward formalism and the concerns of the everyday, the work far outdistances anything produced in the city of Vancouver up to that time. No doubt the title's explicit reference to Barthes was in part intended as a register of Wallace's ambition, but its succession of hard to consume images points to something far richer in his approach, something like the figure of a restless spirit. Robert Linsley and others have identified this as the genre of the bildungsroman, or novel of education. No doubt a gesture in the right direction, but one that falls short of capturing the experience at hand, which seems more an incarnation of the genre's effects than the genre itself, more like the index of a mind in deep thought, just now moving over fresh ground, just here in the process of becoming something else, something larger and more self-conscious.

Reading from left to right the breakdown is clear: the square, British-type oldsters, who look as if they are snooping into the goings-on in the other two panels, leave one cold. A happening, well a half-happening, Peter Fonda-like character in a Volkswagen Bug, perhaps a homeowner and not on a chopper, disappoints. And at last, set in the distance (indeed, set at a

10. As a response to conceptual art that accesses painting, Wallace's La Mélancolie de la Rue exists alongside what Wall argues to be the negative knowledge revealed by "photography in, or as, 'conceptual art'," and is thus supplementary, as well as of an entirely other trajectory to laying the groundwork for photography's emergence as a modernist art. Jeff Wall, "Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, 'Conceptual Art'," Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press and Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993), 246-247.


14. Each panel is 41 x 71 inches, making the work almost eighteen feet long when mounted. Recounting the moment, Wallace has said he 'wanted to do a large work of museum scale because this work was first shown in a group show at ARC in Paris in May 1973.' Ian Wallace, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 2005.

distance from the previous two), heavy with the stilted air of countless idylls and with no figures in sight, one is drawn toward, but can only balk at the final alternative. For the viewer who comes at the work cold, the careful animation of a formal dialogue that runs vertically between an upper and a lower section of each panel complicates, and at times undermines what would otherwise be a more seamless narration across and between panels. This is not the movement of “protocinema,” or metonymic association born on the wings of counter-culture stream of consciousness. Yet neither—and here is the real difficulty and strength of Wallace’s work—is it jarring montage arrived at through rigorous thought and strung out or literalized as dialectic alone. (The interest galvanized by the central panel—the white horse, the passing car, the dialogue between it and the yellow tint of the recently turned soil and rocks behind and left—is proof enough of this.) Certainly, the work operates within each panel as distinct moments intended to tease out the contradictions and disjunctions of three subject positions at very particular, even singular moments of capitalist development, but there is also some dramatic movement across and between the images that must be registered.

This said, and confronted by the choice of cold modernist monolith and upright suburban palace, the morning stillness and lonely bliss of a shanty in the Dollarton Mud Flats is a bit of a charmer. But identity is in no way confirmed: even if the litoral setting it presents is posited as a way out or a final alternative (still today) one’s gaze does not find fulfillment. One goes back to the beginning to retrace steps, or jumps around between panels in order to generate meaning from material that was assumedly missed or elided on the previous pass. At cross purposes, at times without relation, but equally working in unison to mutually inflect and deflect object choices across the three panels and variously registered in each as possible horizons of meaning, the semblance of a conceptual content consisting of sociogeographical investigation and architectural study becomes visible. But given the absence or poverty of meaning in individual panels, and the pressure placed on these categories of knowing (not least through muddying by the lyric mode) these conceptual certainties have the feel of hermeneutic traps.

This mobility or mutability of content ought to be a worry for interpreters, but just as when one first stumbles across the subtitle, or fixes upon a genre like the bildungsroman, it is precisely meaning that is secured. The problem is simple: in Wallace’s work the unstable nature of content simulates—one could expand on this to say, in Wallace’s corpus the hollowness

of meaning simulates—less the definitive movement of a mind from error to truth (say the horizon of truth within an object like Barthes' "third meaning"), than an infinitely repeated circulation of this movement of overcoming error for truth, that reflects far less on the object than on the mode of thought of the subject. Already it seems that we are quite a distance from what Barthes calls *significance,* privileging as self-referential, unintentional, and ends up identifying as the "Third Meaning." Or are we?

Recall that one of the more curious moves that the reader sees Barthes making in this late text is the bracketing off of the durational aspects of cinema to define what he calls the "filmic"; something that requires a critical pressure placed on the film still. Beginning with a still from Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible,* Barthes' virtuoso reading cuts a path through three levels of meaning: "1. An informational level;" "2. A symbolic level;" and ultimately a "third," or "obtuse" level of meaning. Though the number "3" is present in the original publication of Barthes' text in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1970 and in *Artforum's* 1973 translation, I take its strange disappearance in my translation as helpful. Presumably this third level of meaning is maybe not quite deserving of the epistemological ceritude attached to the number because "supplementary" to "2." The implication being that the operational logic of the "third meaning," defies the corruption of semantic reference, exists in autonomy, but can be well-enough described nevertheless. For a critic like Barthes, elsewhere so sensitive and infinitely responsible to language, defining the "filmic" thusly seems to run counter to the grain of much of his thought, not to mention flying in the face of duration, which we know to be essential to the medium. But he is responding in his own way to intellectual developments in France, as his recourse to terms like "supplementary meaning," the "parodic and disseminative," and the "trace" suggest.

Moreover, the critic seems to be pushing toward a subtle movement traceable back to Mallarmé, and variously registered in the text as pointers to a possibility to come: "the signifier . . . a rare thing, a future figure," "the projected . . . as yet" of the still, "the authentically filmic (the filmic of the future)," "the adult birth of film." This said, it is uncertain whether the text marks a moment in which the critic, rather than recant upon a former optimism in the science of semiology, salvages the assumed epistemological efficacy of the structuralist project by artificially bracketing off the film still and turning or digging up the phenomenological content of Eisenstein's symbolic intention as grammatical fragments of truth; or if the project of reading is knowingly staged as an impossible reading, but *still* reading just

19. Ibid., 41-44.
20. Ibid., 44.
21. Ibid., 44-46. See also Paul de Man who tells us that by 1972, Barthes early "concept of reading . . . the model of an encoding/decoding process" had already come under serious attack: "The Challenge reached Barthes from the somewhat unexpected quarter of philosophy, a discipline that earlier structuralists had discarded in favour of the so-called sciences of man: psychology, anthropology, and linguistics. The dismissal proved to be premature, based as it was on an inadequate evaluation of the specifically philosophical ability to put the foundations of its own discipline into question in a self-destructive manner that no science could ever dare to emulate. The work of Michel Foucault and especially of Jacques Derrida (whose determining influence on literary theory is confirmed by the recently published book *Dissemination*) treats the problem of linguistic delusion in a manner which semiological critics of Barthes' persuasion cannot afford to ignore. Barthes' intellectual integrity is apparent in his reaction to this philosophical challenge. For the time it has taken the form of a retreat from the methodological optimism that still inspired S/Z" Paul de Man, "Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism," *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. E.R. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 174-177. See also Paul de Man, "The Dead End of Formalist Criticism," *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, intro. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 339-345.


25. Ibid, 54-55. Barthes writes: "The obtuse meaning is not structurally situated, a semiotologist would not acknowledge its objective existence (but what is an objective reading?), and if it is evident to me, this is still perhaps (for the moment), because of the same "aberration" that compelled the unfortunate Saussure alone to hear an eristic, obsessive, and unoriginated voice, that of the anagram in ancient poetry."


27. Derrida describes the mystery of this quintessentially Christian event thusly: "... the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear, and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift. This trembling seizes one at the moment of becoming a person, and the person can become what it is only in being paralyzed [trance], in its very singularity, by the gaze of God." Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6.


the same. In Barthes' favour, he describes his move as "an authentic mutation of reading." The distinction is crucial. The point being that it is worth recognizing Barthes as much more than a doctrinaire structuralist; here, potentially operating well beyond the limits of structuralism and responding to his hardest and closest critics, as a reference to Ferdinand de Saussure, mediated by the curiously de Manian word "aberration," suggests. In fact, Barthes' sympathies do not lie with the application of any one methodology, but with the unique "adventure" (from the Latin compound *advenire*, to come) each encounter with language offers up. Above all else, he is a close reader of texts, and if sensitive enough to the language at hand believes himself capable of establishing both a common ground with authorial intention and, more fantastically, something that far outstretches intention: the likes of a symbolic communion buoyed up by the *mysterium tremendum*. Inasmuch Barthes' "The Third Meaning" might very well stand as a classical example of an incarnational model of criticism.

A working hunch would be that this fully dialectical waffling on the key point of linguistic reference and its other—and only as embodied in an incarnational model of language—was part of the attraction Barthes' text held for the then band members of the v3k5 (pronounced "you jerks"), especially Rodney Graham, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace, who rehearsed after hours in the Water Street studios. Perhaps in Wallace's case, Barthes' text gave a face to the kind of future reader he might expect standing before his work? Certainly a theoretically oriented North American reader of Barthes, but given the works destination, a group show at ARC in Paris in May of 1973, perhaps also a French reader of Barthes—a reader more sensitive to the uniquely situational problems of his interpretation, politics, and ethics.

Content, to return to the line of argument, is a slippery fish in Wallace's work. At least as slippery as in Barthes' "Third Meaning," and this in spite of the distance that separates what readers on either one of two continents know to be true. Pushing these differences a bit further (urging them, as it were, into the murky waters of the Dollarton Mud Flats or, better still, into the deep waters between continents) one could say that given the practice of industrial fishing or "drag netting" for all manner and species of things linguistic by structuralism here versus the solitary, Romantic, and incarnational of Barthes' structuralism there (and *vice versa*, for there are "good" and "bad" exemplars of fishing in both places), content in Wallace's work, if treated as one more old boot to be thrown out with the dolphins, is also the fish that got away. With every thought—
catch and release—"un coup de dés." Addressing this two-fold meaning in Wallace's work, but especially putting pressure on the negative moment opened up by content in order that it be used to dig the line that separates signification and the easily parasitized form of the performative—a line that always collapses the distance between reference and act—is central to understanding the origins of criticality in the Vancouver School. As a problem of dialectics it runs parallel to the task of rooting Barthes’ "Third Meaning" in the mythic texture of cinema, but also exiling that origin and grammar to a space beyond the phenomenal limits of structuralism’s grasp. A question necessarily asked of La Mélancolie de la Rue, then: if for Barthes there was a purely self-referential meaning that lay "beyond the symbolic or indexical... in the realm of texture" (Wallace’s words), what species of “content” did Wallace think himself in the vicinity of, by stopping or stilling duration, and further, enlarging and "nudging" himself away from what he calls "big attack painting" to “big attack photography?”

The answer relates to Wallace’s “literary ambitions,” which for our purposes we should flag as the onset of less a dialogue with deconstruction, than the teasing out through pictorial means and from the remains of language-based Conceptual art, a set of concerns that run toward the materialist end of deconstruction—alternatively, the trace of the endgame of late modernist formalism. We need not look away from the work toward topical problems in theory to tease out this troubled dynamic! The experience of looking at La Mélancolie de la Rue should be recognized as both sufficient and unique.

Two things to note, both of which should be acknowledged for the mediation of language they convey, as well as the sense of an intertwined future they seemingly share. First, as with Barthes’ bracketing off of the film still from the effects of ideology, interpretation of this work naturally proceeds on the suspicion that the experience of everyday life is an implicit backdrop to the series of fragments isolated here, and that these images have been fenced off from the larger whole for critical scrutiny. Thus, we found ourselves keying in on an annoying lack of fluidity between panels that block an easy entrance to the work as mimetic or of the world, and which is felt or narrated as a kind of “uprooting” or “cropping” experience, manifest to some degree on the level of subject matter. It is in this vicinity one touches upon Barthes’ play of the signifier—a vast outline which, by difference, compels a vertical reading (Eisenstein’s word), prohibits the “aleatory combination” of simple chance as series, achieving instead a "structuration that leaks from inside.”

Second, one finds that the eye does not completely stall on any one image of this demystified and refabricated language, but moves between these landscapes. We left off describing this movement in terms of a mind at work, constantly increasing and expanding its sphere of knowledge. Presumably this is literalized as the subject matter in At Work (1983), but we will resist skipping ahead to this late work for fear of missing another far subtler order of expectation built into this one. In any case, this movement is already implicit to the cascading, spillover effect of the five-part montage in Pan Am Scan (1970). In addition, the emptiness of ascending and descending steps in this fine early work has little resonance other than the movement of a mind in the thick of thought, and additionally hinted to be a somewhat “unhappy” or dark enterprise, flagged by the shifty, substitutive nature of the letters “n” and “m.” What linguistic pessimism! What bullying by the letter! And how hollow this work—an important precedent for Mélancolie—already is!

Thus, the jowl-clamping glare of the woman in yellow who looks disapprovingly at an incident off-camera right—the play of the letter in the second panel titled “Barthes’ Third Meaning”: what one may or may not pick up on as the blurred, “ghostlike” face of a young boy sitting in the back of the Volkswagen who apparently sees Wallace taking his picture! Or, for that matter, the lonely boardwalk to “drop-out” heaven that carries one into depth, but also serves to move one back left, up a flight of stairs, to the centre and beyond! Shot in 1972, 1969, and 1971 respectively—in downtown Winnipeg; in the British Properties of West Vancouver; and at the Maplewood Mud Flats to boot; and further adding insult to injury in attendance at the official opening of the Winnipeg Art Gallery; while shooting for The Photo Show at the University of British Columbia; and during a period when the artist was living there (the mud flats, that is)

— the work can only be decoded by way of reading each photograph off the other two. But neither this meaning garnered syntactically, nor the original context or intentions of each panel gathered through word of mouth, acquaintance with the artist, or close dialogue with the images themselves, is secure.

One should begin to hear an echo of Mallarmé’s call to “Give the most pure sense to words,” to forget what we have come to know about words, to give a new “sense to the words of the tribe...” Related to this, one should also feel the finely tuned pressure Wallace is placing on what he has called “the idea of the picture.” The scale of La Mélancolie de la Rue is what is crucial here. Its size is prohibitive of finally deciding whether the thing should be viewed or read. (Surely Wallace believed his massive hybrid a renewal of what Mallarmé described the “vacant and superior surface” of Un coup de Dés.) And whether one is to view it, or read it, are just the kind of tasks one “takes on” without thinking. So one “tries on” both for size and discovers that by viewing the work, one has recourse to reading, and vice versa, that if one reads the work, one ends up with its complement: the truth of looking. Phenomenological content or not these are baby steps, for one should not jump to any hasty conclusions as to the relative status of either, or if the artist intended the reader/viewer to gain entrance to the work through either or both in turn. Such didacticism is alien to the “improbability” of the thing. And “improbability,” Maurice Blanchot’s description of Un coup de Dés, seems to fit the way in which this either/or predicament telescopes in upon its other, lines up in front of a far higher law and is made to look preliminary or simple-minded in face of this entirely other super constellation. Blanchot writes: “the necessary and the fortuitous are both put in check by the force of disaster... thanks to an exceptional perhaps... [Un coup de Dés] is projected onto some vacant and superior surface” (Mallarmé’s words): birth of a still unknown space, the very space of the work.

Even if broaching Blanchot’s space of disaster unnecessarily shifts our focus off the “projected... yet” of Barthes’ film still, the notion is worth keeping in mind for our final thoughts on content, origins, and criticality. If nothing else it insures that Wallace’s interest in photography in 1973 falls upon the gap existing between the textural (or painterly) possibilities of content within singular photographs, and the potential status of discrete photographs as placeholders within a differential system of marks. Think of Wallace’s maneuver here in terms of a substitution of images for words, whereupon the coordinates of the so-called paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of literary language are placed under as much point-by-point strain as is

34. Wallace defines the “idea of the picture” as “the overarching concept of reality for the Western logos, formed by dominantly pictorial modes of information dramatization carried through technical pictorial saturations... an irresistibly movement that modernist art in the collapse of painting technique and its poetic equivalents (for example, Mallarmé’s Coup de Dés) did attempt to resist.” Ian Wallace, e-mail correspondence with the author, June 2005.
35. Ibid. This undecidability loosely corresponds to the general way in which Wallace describes his practice as “teetering on the coup of the shift between pictorial logos and its afterimage in the monochrome textural field of the material support.”
37. It is interesting to note that de Man outlines a similar problem in an early
text on one of Mallarmé’s hermetic
sonnets when he writes: “In the same way
that the object-symbols exist to permit
the drama, the drama serves to reveal the
identity of the concepts. We must see the
scene in order to grasp the meaning of the
process, but it is often necessary to know
this meaning already in order to isolate
the elements constituting the drama. It is
as if we saw a play in which the unfolding
plot served to establish the initially vague
characters taking part in it. This paradox
inheres, for Mallarmé, in the very move-
ment of truth, and he attempts to object-
itize this movement by deliberately
recreating it in his reader’s mind.” Paul de
Man, “Poetic Nothingness: On a Hermetic
Sonnet by Mallarmé,” Critical Writings,
1957-1978, ed. and intro. Lindsay Waters
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
38. Ian Wallace, e-mail correspondence
with the author, August 2005.
Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric
of Contemporary Criticism (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 5.
40. Ibid., 7-8.
41. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,”
Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1998), 166, 167.

necessary to make understanding a bit itchy, or not quite at
home in its own skin. In other words, Wallace’s interest was
in using the medium of photography as the building block for a
new language, without actually having the traditional resources
of the medium completely break down, in order to flesh out dif-
fERENCE. For remember, if the nexus of relations between “class
and property relations symbolized through architecture” are
derivable through a process of judgement, it is not without a
degree of confusion or inflammation welling up within the
emptiness of individual photographs.

A lot hinges on how one speaks of this uneasy movement.
Allow me to propose a way that hinges on the poetics of
Mallarmé, and which will allow us to pinpoint the calamity of
interpretation: call it Wallace’s own “rhetoric of crisis.”
Given the origins of each panel the work is literally all over the map;
and yet these spatial and temporal disjunctions are only the tip
of the iceberg. But then, if these slightly jarring moves open up
to the disconcerting knowledge that these photographs were
taken in 1971, 1969, and 1972, the first (heaven forbid) not even
in Vancouver, one also needs to acknowledge the hermeneutic
horizon shared by all three: a veil or surface reading laid over-
top of such accessible rupture that barely disturbs “reader” con-
ventions. Here, in Wallace’s work “as in Mallarmé’s later prose
and poetic works,” to quote Paul de Man on the maîtrise d’crise:

…the act of writing reflects indeed upon its own origin and opens up
a cycle of questions that none of his real successors have been allowed
to forget. We can speak of crisis when a “separation” takes place, by
self-reflection, between what, in literature, is in conformity with the
original intent and what has irrevocably fallen away from this source…
such scrutiny defines, in effect, the act of criticism itself. Even in its
most naive form, that of evaluation, the critical act is concerned with
conformity to origin or specificity: when we say of art that it is good or
bad, we are in fact judging a certain degree of conformity to an original
intent called artistic. We imply that bad art is barely art at all; good art,
on the contrary, comes close to our preconceived and implicit notion
of what art ought to be. For that reason, the notion of crisis and that of
criticism are very closely linked, so much so that one could state that
all true criticism occurs in the mode of crisis.

What is just tangible in La Mélancolie de la Rue then, is the way
in which the “presentness” of language gently wrenches
itself away from the “presence” of language (for example, “per-
sist(ence) in time,” or “duration,” to give all of this a contextual
ring via Fried’s famous couplet from “Art and Objecthood”).
The insistent matte finish, the greyeness of black and white
photography, the hand-tinted colour, the imperfections of large format imaging, as well as the fact of montage itself, are all serving a clear summons. But this is not to flag intertextuality or theatricality or the Parnassian dream of a pure language strictly for their own sake. On the contrary, the dead weight of this language always has one pressing for another higher order of language. Thus, the inkling that what is before one has arrived incomplete, or a moment too soon, is slightly ill-founded, or bound up in what could be the chance effects of montage. Take the problems of misinformation surrounding titling alone: for instance, was the long title the original title? And, if not, was the second panel retitled to coincide with *Artforum*'s publication? Was it really too long? Did it reveal too much? Was the reference to Barthes too hastily ascribed? Perhaps an impulsive decision in thrall to ideology got the better of intention once again? In every such cycle of questions one is pointed in the direction of an original set of intentions, hermetically sealed off from the surface of things, but nevertheless temptingly offered up as the secret of a material history. This is especially true in the case of photography—for if photography's original assignment was to provide a record of historical memory—in Wallace's palimpsest-like construction it finally lends its indexical function to the role of thought in action. And the way in which it falls into place as the undervalued and thus privileged, performative moment of a constative, written economy, is where Blanchot's "force of disaster," de Man's "crisis" and "act of criticism" open up. Just when consciousness is identified with language, the constitutive nature of thought displaces performance to that of a second text that is irrevocably other.

Only a few specific examples need to be brought on stage, but I think it appropriate to especially mark the history of conflicting intentions, flagging interest, spent energy, lost and misinformation surrounding Wallace's collaborative film project with Wall and Graham. The collaborative project loses flair by the fall of 1974: only the stills for Wallace's *The Summer Script* (1974) can salvage it. The original 16 mm black and white film that would later serve as a source of stills in *Poverty* (1982) fares no better. Now lost to the world, the memory of Wallace's purpose-filmed-short falls away; the "original intent" nowhere evident to the viewer of silk-screens on monochromes, who might well believe the images to be rephotographed prints from the Depression. Or finally, there is the hermeticism and marmoreal matter of the green-hued photographs of *Portrait Gallery* (1984). Here deadness itself is the thing; they speak as if from beyond the grave; of belonging to a lost portfolio or of an as yet incomplete collection of fragments from a scholarly book to come.

Thus, too, the sad fate of Mélancolie’s second panel: a history blurred by time, theoretical reference, syntactical context, and because retrospection cannot look past the enlarged death’s head of the child. But no less on the edge of vanishing is the confusion and threat precipitated by boys drumming on a postbox that from all accounts alarmed secret service officers protecting Princess Margaret, and which presumably triggered Wallace’s own shot at the official opening. As nearly obscured is the main title that reaches back to Giorgio de Chirico: who will remember that his streets are empty? Or that Edward Hopper’s vision of Early Sunday Morning (1930), if a far sight happier, is not an idyll? And this is to say nothing of the now faraway memory of the day-to-day existence of squatting in the mud flats or visiting Tom Burrows. The point being that this collection of alarm-ridden, at one time urgent, but also deeply meaningful stands, responses, perspectives, or memories, are all on the verge of what Mallarmé somewhere called their “vibratory near disappearance.” And not least because these resonant moments have been overlaid with a substitutive and simulated crisis that works through the drama generated by syntactical proximity: this is merely the most palpable trace of what is really at stake. The near disappearance of things—of history, tradition, the moment just past, the constitutive fabric of a ground itself—in the wake of 1968 and in the aftermath of the radical experiments of the neo-avant-garde, seems to have precipitated an especially acute sense of art’s place in the world. Did it have a place? Not quite! Wallace’s question is far more pessimistic, more on the order of since it no longer has a place, from what gap will it now emerge?

Wallace’s answer is as improbable as the work itself. Like the “Calm block fallen from some distant disaster” that stands forever as a limit in Mallarmé’s Le Tombbeau d’Edgar Poe, the work originates in the muffled and deeply obscured critical act that separates signification from death. Of this strange space that is both constitutive of the work, and is the work itself, Blanchot writes “the work is the expectation of the work...it comes from beyond the future and does not stop coming when it is here.” This working crisis—Wallace’s hermetic crisis of intention, of origins, of what constitutes the critical at a time when poetic precursors, art historical reference, and material history were vanishing of their own accord—does much to establish the critical ground for the Vancouver School: not least by positing an origin and gesturing toward it as a moment of crisis from the beginning.