

Plural Pictures

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Edgar Degas painted a picture in 1875 which has two very distinct titles, namely *Place de la Concorde, Paris* and *Count Lepic and his Daughters*. Quite apart from the fact that a street picture can also manifestly be a family portrait at the same time and vice versa, the painting reflects a composition clearly borrowed from decisive-moment photography invented during that period, and whose motifs tended to be scenes taken directly from street life. It is possible to make out figures moving through the background of the Place de la Concorde with the Tuileries, while the eponymous Count Lepic with both his daughters are clearly depicted in the foreground. Just as decisive-moment photography elevates chance to the object of the composition by capturing fragments of a particular reality, which in turn reveals itself as transitory by means of the contingent sectional focus, so too Degas draws upon a staged chance occurrence that radically cuts into the figures on the left-hand and bottom edges of the painting and forces the group of people away from the center of the action, leaving the actual middle of the composition completely empty. However, where Degas is concerned, and by contrast to decisive-moment photography, the implied gesture of isolation is deliberate, because it is unfolding in the very place where it is the most irritating, namely in the bosom of the family. Whereas Count Lepic is turning to the right and is virtually striding out of the picture, his daughters stare indifferently in the direction opposite to which they are seemingly heading. The partial figure of a man can be discerned on the left-hand edge looking towards the group of three, but they are not paying him any attention. The refined quality of this composition contradicts the posited notion of chance to such an extent that it is possible to say that "separation is the mode of community for the individuals here."¹ Thus alienation and isolation form the actual motif, which for its part is curiously at odds with the very vibrancy of the street scene celebrated by contemporary photography of the era.

¹ Max Imdahl, "Edouard Manets 'Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère' – Das Falsche und das Richtige" (ed.), *Wie eindeutig ist ein Kunstwerk?* (Cologne: Dumont, 1986): 82.

Degas' painting illustrates a contrast between the city and people, architecture and portrait, which would itself become an essential motif of contemporary photography and introduce the theme of alienation as a metaphor for a structurally as well as economically determined environment. Degas' painting also shows that even at the height of capitalism – localized by Walter Benjamin in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century – certain traditional genres no longer functioned: the family portrait duly evoked in one of the painting's titles bears witness to a dislocated unity, whereas the topographically recognizable street scene (posited on the anonymity of the figures within) is contradicted by the group of figures, who are unequivocally recognizable as the protagonists. The dissociated subject of capitalism becomes lost in the shattered perception of a space, which itself disintegrates into separate entities. This "neither/nor" between unity and fragmentation reflected in the alternate titles of the painting does not mark a break with particular conventions in painting or even an abolition of historical typologies, and yet all the same it does cast a doubt upon the unconditional validity of the picture. The latent melancholy emanating from the painting is therefore not simply due to the motif, but is inherent in the painting as a mode of representation itself.

I mention this painting in connection with the discussion of a number of works by Ian Wallace not merely because the title of one of his early works, *La Mélancolie de la Rue* (1972–73), already signals the double code of street picture and meditation upon the representative structure of photography. Wallace's series *My Heroes in the Street* (1986) also evinces a certain affinity to Degas, inasmuch as it combines the genre of street photography with the portrait genre, and also because here the individuality of named persons encounters the anonymous structure of the city, which, in contrast to Degas' work, is no longer identifiable, but rather is more a heteronomic arena imbued with invisible political and economic structures. The subjects of Wallace's portraits adopt an almost defiant stance towards the experience of dissociation from the city, perhaps the most trenchant condition of the late-capitalist era, even if it is not clear whether the urban conglomeration is just meant to be background or indeed an all-embracing texture. Yet, such pictorial motifs are not the only recurring elements deserving of comparison. In principle Ian Wallace's artistic practice is that of deferred contrast, subtly wrought in its unresolved contradictions and divergent systems of reference. Where by rights there should be a historical separation, Wallace juxtaposes compositional elements almost dissonantly: the documentary nature of photography and the monochrome palette of painting, the facticity of photography and the fiction of staging. He distills a pictorially formulated conceptual component out of large-format photography, which refers back to art historical models in painting.

In contrast to works such as *The Summer Script* (1974) or *An Attack on Literature* (1975) that have been pieced together from series of individual pictures, *Lookout* (1979), for example, does not depict a specific scene, but instead is composed cinematographically from different temporally consecutive moments which unfold in a succession of time and space. *Lookout* thus constitutes a pictorial world made up of figures captured in contexts different from their apparent ground and opts for a panoramic view of a landscape in which diverse individuals are gathered. Here, the *dénouement* occurs without there being a climactic central scene as such. Moreover, the use of the panorama references an historical forerunner of the cinema, which places painting in a dynamic relationship with the ways of seeing peculiar to other optical media. Walter Benjamin calls it an "aquarium of the far away and of the past," which is not only geared towards "seeing everything," but also that one can see "in every way."² It transcends painting and points forward to photography.³ In a similar way to the panoramas from the nineteenth century, redolent of historical scenes in condensed form, *Lookout* is both authentic and fictional at the same time. The landscape was composed of eight images photographed via a 180° pan of a cliff-top clearing on the forested coast of Hornby Island near Vancouver. Since the concept of the complete panorama required a composition of twelve images to construct the full length of its fifteen meters, four more photographs were taken from another location, and sutured artificially into the fractured unity of the scene, one of the images even being laterally reversed in order to facilitate this effect. Furthermore, the people montaged across the field of the composition, none of whom had ever visited this landscape, were photographed separately by Wallace in his studio in front of a white background, and printed in different sizes onto photographic paper. The landscape provided them with a back-ground so to speak. Finally, the figures were cut out and pasted onto the photographs of the landscape, re-photographed and the enlargements hand-colored. Unframed and behind Plexiglass (the historical panorama is regarded as an "unframed" picture, too), *Lookout* unfolds temporally before the observer's eyes, which are able to assimilate the image as a whole and yet which only become aware of it by successively looking at all the details. In a similar way to Degas' painting, it depicts isolated groups of people looking in different directions who, despite sharing physical proximity to one another, are drifting apart in human terms. In this way, Wallace's panorama seems like a street scene that has been transported into the beauty of nature, similarly transferring city dwellers into a real-life arcadia, which none have physically entered. It is the subjective synthesis of different motifs that generate a coherent effect, but that defy linear interpretation. It is precisely for this reason that dialectic expression is given to the dynamic tension derived from the experience of alienation, which is signaled by the absent metropolis and which finds its symbolic transcendence in the countryside.

² Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983): 660.

³ Benjamin, 844.

This dialectic is experienced directly and results from the fact that Wallace, rather than taking up motifs from art history, chooses instead to paraphrase pictorial typographies. In contrast to Jeff Wall for example, it is not a case of appropriating the iconographic context of historically charged pictorial elements for his own works and duly using them to create both a palpably real present and visual constructions with allusive, art-historical vision. Ian Wallace's works are located more clearly in their respective present moments and are characterized less by their compositional and more by their conceptual relation to painting.

Alongside the fictionally accentuated guise of street photography, which even informs works such as *Lookout* in all its staged contingency, other central photographic *dispositives*, such as sectional focus and immediacy, encounter an aesthetic strand inherent in painting, which repudiates these categories. The later series *My Heroes in the Street* (1986) actually does enact street scenes, although notably devoid of the characteristic decisive moment. The urban setting connects more with the portrait of a single person identified as an individual trying to prevail against the monumental structure of the city with its overall leveling tendency. In this series, as in almost all of Wallace's later works, a decisive difference emerges with the concept of a "painting of modern life," as articulated by Baudelaire and exemplified by Degas, and in which photography is associated to a form of painting connected with a later stage of modernist art: namely monochrome painting. In this series, and in most of his subsequent major works, photographs are laminated onto painted canvases. The often complete disengagement from figuration and denial of expression, as practiced by abstract painting from the Constructivists, through Neoplasticism, to the post-war American modernists, presents itself here rather like a counter-model to photography's reproductive and discursive potential. Monochrome painting is nothing other than a series of different marks and traces because by definition a monochrome painting depicts nothing other than paint. It negates the presence of events as constitutive reality, and indeed this negation is its very goal. If therefore, the aspect of monochrome painting in Ian Wallace's pictures doesn't quite silence photography by virtue of its denial of a mimetic relationship to reality, it nevertheless invites a degree of speculation about photography's position in relation to what it actually does depict. By countering the technological structures of metropolitan topography with planes of monochromatic painting, Wallace reveals this conflict both on an aesthetic as well as semantic level. The "rescue" of the individual – to put it in existential terms – resides then in the realm of the autonomous, i.e. monochromatic work that for its part repudiates the reality principle. In the *My Heroes in the Street* series, it is more a case of presence, identity and autonomy rather than representation.⁴ Later works rescind this focus upon the individual and postulate a contemporary interpretation of "street psychology," which in turn captures chance, both in its aleatory essence and indeed its significance. Tellingly, these later pictures are simply entitled *In the Street*, because they feature anonymous passersby as opposed to named persons. By contrast, the cities can clearly be identified in their fragmentary appearance as though they had in fact become the true protagonists. A further shift between the earlier *My Heroes...* series to the later *In the Street* compositions concerns the monochrome color field upon which the photograph is grounded (and literally laminated) and which is revealed on either side of the image. Whereas these fields were white in the early series, the later versions introduce color on one side or the other, and eventually only

⁴ Cf. Ian Wallace, "Photography and the Monochrome: An Apologia, An Exegesis, An Interrogation," *Cammeres Indiscretas*. (Barcelona: Center d'Art Santa Monica, 1992): 120.

on the left side. Rather than forming imaginary voids or fictional projection surfaces, they thus begin to figure as a compositional, painterly supplement that refers perhaps to the very lack at the center of the picture that they purport to frame. As in the case of Degas' painterly paraphrase of a street scene – to turn once more to the example cited at the outset – the center of the composition is empty. Crammed with people, buildings and intersecting streets, Ian Wallace's pictures are by contrast overcrowded with significant moments that seem, nonetheless, to be leading parallel existences synchronized solely by what one might almost nostalgically call the dynamics of the big city. And yet the conception behind this – and here we approach the root of Ian Wallace's art – is neither depictional nor is based upon motif. Its refinement resides much more in letting the picture become the existential description of the state of modern society that in turn manifests the idea of depiction *ex negativo*. This idea of a descriptive approach to the present *qua* depiction exists only as a deformed, negative cipher, and yet it is present before our eyes as something we recognize as familiar. This art enables and indeed verbalizes experiences of the "external world" without recourse to literal delineation.

In this sense Wallace's work is indeed committed to a strain of modernism that first took palpable shape in its avowal of the figurative and its eschewing of an immediate allocation of function for art. Indeed, the categories posited by Adorno, such as autonomy, aesthetic illusion, the mysterious character of the artwork and not least the dialectical connection of the contemplative intellect with radical, socio-political critique, have been inherent qualities of Ian Wallace's artwork for decades. After 1984, when Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* was available in English translation, it was featured in seminars he presented to art history students. And yet, his is not a pure application of the aesthetic theory, for it is not merely art – at once radically withdrawing from this reality or critically outstripping real conditions – that creates a consciousness of the world's real negativity, but rather the connection with a type of photography that both depicts and meditates upon reality. The essence of painting and anti-painting as such – photography – enter into a dialectical relationship in which the photographic referent provides the experience of reality as the essence and antipode to the abstract concept of painting.

Indeed, one might well take into account that such a conceptually charged form of photography – which for its part captures our present in incisive, yet unspectacular moments – provides a fresh perspective first and foremost upon its relationship to monochrome painting. When the two combine, as in almost all of Ian Wallace's later works, painting is presented with a diminishing set of options due to the fact that photography has sequestered its traditional functions. As Jeff Wall has pointed out elsewhere,⁵ painting would then face the challenge of pondering what the premises for its continued existence as a self-critical entity might be. Monochromatic painting ultimately represents the obverse of traditional genres in painting, which it set out to abolish in its most radical formulation from the previous century.⁶

⁵ Jeff Wall, "Monochromie und Photojournalismus, On Kawaras Today Paintings," Gregor Stemmerich (ed.), *Szenarien im Bildraum der Wirklichkeit. Essays und Interviews* (Amsterdam / Dresden: Fundus Verlag, 1997): 341.

⁶ Ibid. Wall writes that monochrome painting, "restates [...] the approach of the radical artists from the 1920s, this time without the prospect of social intervention. What was merely 'positive negative' in Rodchenko's case takes on a different form in this instance."



Kunstverein Düsseldorf installation: *Hommage à Mondrian III (New Lighthouse ...)*, 1990

Ian Wallace speaks of the “melancholic modernism” of his monochrome paintings, which presents itself as a meaningless surface and neutralizes the alleged antagonism between photography and painting once more – a dichotomy that perhaps enabled the latter to withdraw from figuration in the first place and to re-chart the relationship between illusion and illusionism. On a contextual level, this “meaningless surface” nonetheless behaves as a supplement to the element of photographic depiction, for which it provides the frame. Wallace’s *Mondrian Series*, of 1990, for example, juxtaposes incisive landscape photographs from the North Sea beaches of Holland – where Piet Mondrian derived his early motifs of abstraction – side by side with bands painted in the primary colors favored by the Neoplasticists. These works not only function here as the symbolic negation of meaning and as reference to critical absence, but in connection with the pictures of this specific countryside, they also refer to a decisive moment in the path to modernist abstraction, the one that Mondrian passed through in his turn from figuration to pure color via abstraction. In so doing they are eloquent in a way that only art can be when it resists the lure of the obvious.

Translated from the German by Tim Connell



Kunstverein Düsseldorf installation: Sea and Dunes Domburg, 1993

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Kunstverein Düsseldorf installation: maquette for Lookout, 1979

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