William Wood

Panoramas and ‘traces’, flâneur and arcades, modernism and the unchanging, without a theoretical basis—is this a ‘material’ which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura?

Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin, November 10, 1938

Ian Wallace’s 1986 work Studio/Museum/Street reads as a summation. It virtually says it all, retrospectively. The panels represent three areas of practical space that Wallace’s production has clustered around for 16 years and bears the elected weight of developed thematics and austere confidence. Conceived as a magazine piece, and subsequently formatted as a series of three diptych canvas photolamimates, the work divides up the page/canvas into image-sections opposed to ‘pure’, resistant fields of white—reserving the experience of plenitude by being blank rather than empty. The images depict upright male figures possessed in their demeanor, varying portrayal from the labour of the studio to the rhetorical poses of two classical statues and the determined gait of a pair of heroic, streetwalking moderns. Even cropping the images of the artist in the studio holds a touch of self-possession; it is an admission of privileged positioning outside the confines of panel and frame, a slightly fussly giving-over of the right of definition to the work proceeding from the studio rather than to the image of its maker.

Yet his image is there, related in the work’s formulation as a double-figure against the repeated singularities of patrician maleness and the stony young men in the streets. This doubling, formally necessary, is also registration of these images as both the progeny and the objectification of the artist. Adumbrating his position as a cultural subject and a cultural producer, the three groupings render intelligible a system of art production wherein the solitary, intellectual, and economic activity of the image-maker becomes the prized commodity of the museum which enforces the street’s anomie by regulating aesthetic display. The clarity of this theme is not the only effect. Melancholy exudes from each pair: the incommunicable reverie of the studio is followed by mildly modified nostalgia for the antique and, finally, by one version of recuperated individuality—the streetly freedom of flânerie with its potential model for accommodating imagination and commodity by domesticateing what was once the public sphere.

Before the hard death of romanticism and the triumph of the spectacular, Courbet used a similar tripartite scheme to order The Painter’s Studio, Real Allegory, Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life. The realist put his friends in the art world and the world of his rural home to either side of a self-portrait (with attendant muse) as he concocted a landscape. What Michael Fried sees here is a complex allusion to the somatic experience of painting as a made and beheld object that nearly weds the artist to his subject in phenomenological absorption while the servants and subjects of his art unknowingly support the activity of representation. Wallace’s version distances itself from the perfidies of representation in order to emphasize the museum as the central term mediating between—but also no doubt meting out—the apportioned value that art has as individual endeavour and social instrument. This reformulation cautions absorption, displacing its enthusiasms towards the rather sardonic but compelling figure of the artist/individual. He is viewed as immersed in culture’s vicissitudes; undercut by the dissolution of patriarchal systems, he withdraws from that process into a privileged, nearly redeeming state of enlightened autonomy.

Consciously echoing the 1973 triptych La melancholie de la rue, and contemporary to the My Heroes in the Streets project, Studio/Museum/Street attempts a well-placed closure on Wallace’s oeuvre to date. Abjuring the suburban and crowd scenes of La melancholie de la rue, the work is (like My Heroes in the Streets) a resolutely urbane portrayal of private realms and retains historical reference as a latent, ironic public authority. Yet, the composure attained within the social, the reticence about qualifying the art-system pictured, and the valorization of idyllic modes of subjectivity, each indicates certain tensions overcome or suppressed to guarantee thematic integration. Within such integration, however, lurks allegory’s spectre of polyvalence, so that the whole becomes insubstantial, the apparatus of individualist models and behaviours suspect, and the ensemble slips from the emblems of existing practice to-

warded standing as a memento mori for past cultural formations.

As the aura of tradition seeps through from the antique to the distinctly nineteenth-century modes of self-portraiture and urban life, it blocks interpretation in order to bring out the shuddering anxieties supposedly reined in by thematic assurance. In this view, the studio’s repetition of self-image leads to the uncanny anguish of finding oneself alone again, while the statuary’s opulence is now chiseled into the earnest, anesthetized gaze of the modern male pedestrian. The stiff visage and the claustrophobic isolation intimates a potential retilling that haunts the white passages; Coffin, Crypt, Cemetery; Wallace’s presence anchors the imagery to become the doubled corpse of the individual caught reforming the ruins by sealing himself in.

If this passage from confidence to mortification were not so inviting, we would not want to seek out how it came to pass. How can this droll, almost complacent series of still men suffice to picture both the redemption and the damnation of the system of art production in late-modernity? Does Wallace leave a residue which, as Adorno would have it, is not consumed by its own aura? The answer, as unsatisfactory as it may seem, will lie in investigating the clusters Wallace isolates: the artist as both reluctant hero and sacrificial, autonomous individual; the museum as site and theatre for aesthetic contemplation; the street as provocation for a sensibility fit to withstand the trauma dictated by the previous two terms.

In a catalogue essay which also reads as a near-definitive artist’s statement, Wallace wrote of contemporary artists as possessing “an essentially ‘symbolist’ sensibility in which resonate the conflicting experiences of the real and the imaginary; of the demands of art history and the originality of popular media; of personal intuitions and that of the superstructure”.

These dichotomies provide a set of concepts which shore up much of Wallace’s speculative work, but it is the imaginary, art history, and intuition which appear to rule the studio. In the confines of production, the mind seems to unravel upon its grasp of possibilities, as portrayed in Image/Text and its latter companions, In the Studio and At Work. In Image/Text, we visit the studio as a site for deep investigation—a place of weighty book shelves and fetish-images of women replacing the muse; an arena of plans, airy spaciousness, and inspiring, lovingly arranged flowers. The measured pace is complemented by monochromatically tinting the images, as if they were bathed by unadulterated memory and desire. This heady tone is more than amplified in the pseudo-Mallarméan disposition of the text:

words in poverty
subjectless in the face of demand
in economy and only what they look like in appearance
framing those places
in which thought occurred
window door other structures
library
boudoir

The return of thought, its recalled excitement and present articulation, appears in the plastic work done within the elaborate sanctuary of the studio. Where intuition and media collude to satisfy each others needs, the artist’s body becomes the animator of imagery, illusion, strategy. That Pygmalion-like role secure, he dreamily wanders in the shadows, locating himself within the reassuring territory of tradition as if following the proper paths to achieve his laurels.

The anachronistic note of this artist’s parable is part rhetorical figure and part personal mythology. The trope can always turn back as a fantasy of self-fulfillment under the stress of modern-
sleight-of-hand. Tracing over the image, he narcissistically caresses repossesses the site of potential, indicating less his place tradition and more his desire to off the originality-denying repetitious paternal influence which accorns the canon. As Norman Bryson has stated neo-classicism:

"The restorationist project plays in a double bind: to begin to turn his back on the past, yet in back he has yielded to the expropriation that takes away all beginnings." 

There are two studios, then, of withdrawal into fantasized and the one where that mastery is not just ready to go the distance the former the privilege of real stated in the language of the order to attempt an occupation claims. With the latter, such a has grown moribund, if necessary the position essayed is that of ing the ruin hoping it will ret glory again.

Such sentiments are conveyed performance and documentation Work, wherein Wallace occupied lery for several hours a day replying to his studio practice under the gallery patrons. Again, there is an in the notion of 'taking on gallery space', but the rhetorical isication of turning 'doing one's into the spectacle of the artist as the gallery should be seen a apotheosis of the other studio. For here Wallace attempts to engage figure left out before, other to the — the looker. In meeting the spe he encounters both the guar

ist anonymity; the mythos is protected by its skillful use of artistic license. Tolerating such ambivalence has its price, and, in an almost tautological move, this work realizes its duplicity by being the product of its own subject. That work and that subject are proposed as having achieved the distance to be ambivalent within competing desires for totality, and, as such, they stand in for the quest of tradition and uphold the torn shield of enlightened criticality. The vulnerability of this position is taken to its strength, for it remains as the sublime hidden away from production's demands. It is as if the dreaminess were a demiurge sacrificing the artist in the capture of luxurious knowledge.

Troubles within are perhaps more acute in the group of works titled In the Studio where Wallace uses printmaking techniques to go over the same theme. The artist is shown approaching blank canvases, poring over images to be used, but this time in scenes of no splendour whatsoever. The muses are absent, the studio barely featured, and Wallace draws over the photographically derived imagery as if the traces — now coming from the body — will update his model of practice without jeopardizing its proto-epic theme. He is thus involved in a melancholic game of presence, played out in the reproductive media of lithography and diazotype, but the game ends up resolving its inescapable defeat through literal aesthetic practice and its potential dissolution. The spectator free to regard art history and intuition without feeling mands; the work has its duration and its effect, but, city-like, it is always substitutable for another period, a practitioner, another stimulant. Particularly for those who are devoted to tradition, the position of the spectator problematics for it is coded as passive, 'feminine', penetrates both the superstructure and the sentimental spectra popular media (these forces deny the compulsion of works). By so forthrightly courting the attention of the ton spectator in At Work, the artist is subordinate to the ris of that attention. Aware of inhabiting an under-peated tradition, he solicits a link to calm the unwary act the gaze by presenting his body as the vehicle for its images of discernment, analysis, and fascination. In this at Work, the toil and the tedium face the future of its ucts. Alternately being ignored and engaged, the artist is divided between showing and being seen.

In the works on the museum, Wallace becomes, in line the principles of the gaze, an arranger of bodies, a spectator. His discernment, his inhabitation of tradition make his act of looking into the making of art under the ress of restoration. In the large photo-murals, partic Lookout, the orchestration of gesture and architecture o
entailed by what the spectator's role would seem to refuse: the canon of masterworks that we now come to mimic in taking positions before the display.

With Lookout we are to recognize vision and gesture as extensively conditioned by the museum's regulation of bodies in space. Also, within that regulation, we are to envision a detached delight in the power of the art work. So precisely fettered by its institutional administration/incarceration, the work is imbued with an imaginary, potent lure — the aura of the commodity. Placed within historical validation, the art work loses its problematic relation to the producer and emerges as evidence of the power that preserved it for our consumption.

The work's rarity, ideality, and pleasure is thus double-edged, for it is at once the outcome of the productive matrix of the studio and a materialized come-on to erase that matrix and celebrate possession of its remains alone. Entering the catacomb of the aesthetic impulse, the spectator finds both the producer's body disavowed and the signs of its absorption draped in gravelly illusion. Hence, much as the museum's conservatism holds the statues and canvases in place, so it also gives license to the viewer to act as a stroller seeking serendipity within the crypt.

Three small-format photographic series simulate this quandary of spectacular, institutional display. 1900, From the Glyptothek, and From the Pinakothek are furtive glances at museum works under the sign of decrepitude. Wallace concentrates his camera and lighting on the under-realized aspects of the ideology of display. In 1900, images from Italian galleries show details of paintings with accompanying table sculpture; an undistinguished work of militarist academic nationalism meets a solitary beggar/saint across a blank wall that cannot suture the misalliance; a small-scale mythological hero gracefully subdues a snake beneath the fin de siècle image of an idealized woman's portrait looking the other way. These 'accidental' pairings resonate with the themes of tradition, but their contingency reflects the museum as a clutter of signage — the shopping mall of aesthetic life. From the Glyptothek and From the Pinakothek continue in this vein and, by focusing in on the framing and surfaces of individual paintings and sculpture, Wallace more directly addresses the museum's overdetermination. Rich hues cover classical statuary lying in gloomy solitude, while the reflective gold frames and lacquering of symbolist pictures overtake their image-content of tortured minds and bodies. Isolating the work beefs up its material presence and allure only to render it more distant; its past profundity has degenerated into regimented nostalgia.
laden with filmic reference: woman close by a wall peeks back fearfully towards stairway on which two sons are conversing. Body well-light, while they are in darkness, responds haltingly (as in noir) to the potential conveyance their unintelligible conversation contains. To play this voyeuristic image in the rubric of Hypnerotomachia ("the strife of love in dream") is to echo W. Benjamin on Baudelaire: Writing of the experience of shock, Benjamin posits: "The delight of the urban is love — not at first sight but at last sight. It is a well forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the poem supplies the figurative shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet's emotions have been effected as well. What makes his body quiver in a tremor — crissé comme un extravgant, Baudelaire — is not the rapture of a man suffused with eros; it is, rather like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man."

Benjamin's sympathies aside, this passage indicates what stake in the street. It is no common alienation which afflicts the male voyeur so much as it is an unease with both the vitation to enchantment and its inevitable denial. The artist comes to the street as a flâneur, seeking to aimless move within the domain of capital in ironic disregard of capital's demands of utility. Strolling its regime, he will satiate the public sphere with his subjectivity, taking hold of mundane and contingent as the precious material which allow him the leisure to dream (or, as Benjamin puts it, "compensate" him for "many humiliations"). The wonder whether dreamt or beheld, whether hyperbolically invested simply psychically charged, will represent the space to be reduced or else fetishized in order that the promenade continue. Thus, the potential eroticism of the anonymous counter becomes diverted into the flâneur's loneliness:

The museum series are elegiac cabinet paintings, homages to picture the crisis of belatedness which so frustrates communion with the past. This crisis has led Wallace along the two paths I have traced: but, where the museum and studio reveal internalized influence and determination within the conceptual schemes of tradition and presence, the term 'street' opens out on the present and the social. However, Wallace's strategy to face the street is almost consistent with his approach to aesthetic realms and may well be seen as the foundation of his beleaguered process. In the early Street Photos and Pan Am Scan, the camera is parlayed as a tool of the individuated consciousness seeking points of capture within urban psycho-geography. A rigorous, situationist motive, unbound by conventional artistic mythology or canonical reference, informs this practice with an aim to record and place oneself within the phantasmagoria of urban capitalism while retaining an unsteady balance between objective correspondence and internal drift. Pan Am Scan most fully indicates this balance by carefully constructing an arc of vision outside an airline ticket office leaving but one point of perception for punctuation—the photographer, street-investigator, is not reflected in the panorama of building materials, but is caught within the strategy as a voiced instance of defecated alienation. Soon after, Wallace more or less loses the impetus to 'objectivity' and, as would be expected from his studio works, moves toward the idyll of drifting. The street works that follow are oneric, cinematically based images of sexualized street encounters. Hypnerotomachia (The Staircase) is clumsy,
graphic series, offset posters, and a series of canvases. The implied narrative presents a man and a woman meeting, kissing, and laying down amid the refuse of urban life. Like Baudelaire’s rag-pickers, the underclass is pictured as re-
locating the bucolic and pastoral into the regulated city. 

In this (and without subversion) the figures subtract from the "public" a space for private peregrination and erotic potential; this is all implied while Wallace’s plastic terms refine the scene.

The canvases attract special notice as they silk-screen the im-
opposed monochrome fields, thus foregrounding the aes-
tation of the indigent, suggesting the ‘poverty’ of modern
t painting, of theory, of representation as a comple-
mentary therapeutic technique. A poor excuse for materialists,
the problematic of Poverty is the nasty, amoral edge of the
material — the abject disrupts the representational field and
izes its sitting within the canonical pastoral mode. Above
(ex)tent disability, Wallace’s persistence in utilizing the
images completes the work’s obduracy: Poverty’s grating and
oral problematic of idyllic (dis)possessions lends flâneurie
the status of resistance.

That Wallace chooses the figure of the flâneur — and refers
to his "motifs" of Baudelaire’s modernity — empowers his
tory with the ambiguity of nineteenth-century avant-
garde. The restoration of tradition combines with the cool
stance on the social to raise the artist’s status. Tied to the
or, given his high estimation of the restorationist pro-
ject of urban modernism, double-tied by historicism — the
small for meaning is located in the zone of the heroic.

The series My Heroes in the Streets exemplifies this archaism,
wallace returns to the street scene of late-capital, subjecting
a group of individuals to becoming flâneurs under his de-
script surveillance.

These shots are casual, prosaic, but their large scale and
monumentation as photo-laminate surrounded by white passages
leave the subjects, as the artist wrote, “monumented
as my ‘heroes of modern life’”.

Memorials, monuments, the figures thus cover the grave for Wallace, acting as
ic figures of sepulture for the notion of individuality. With this
nolition of the heroic, this shielding against the present,
ecies are conflated: the crisis of the intelligentsia as it en-
anger in a newly administered European capital is
ed onto North American urban experience with only the
nest irony. The individual is restored on the grounds that
all to administration — the pavement of urban life where
pensions and spectacles inure the shocks to better police the
aces and spaces of the imaginary.

The studio, the museum, in the street, Wallace does
quire the scene that the flâneur begs: where amid
jective minding would the ‘other’ figure? This blank
or query is what Wallace asserts lies at the core of art
its being. Yet it is easier to view the formation and
ition of the void as blanketing over the confrontations
llenge the subject to differentiate. Without recog-
ing another, he is the other, patiently waiting. What
valuation underlines is Wallace’s inhabitation of the
orary as a zone of instability, repetition, melancholia. The
ary’s endless call back to past formations of desire and
way means that its products will always read as symp-
rather than as cures — modernity is skipped over to fa-
romanticism and the individual accountable is at once
ned and blissed-out by that remembrance. The aura, so
lly sustained, succumbs to the state of mourning its
works. As Malarmé wrote, both impersonating his dead
and suggesting his own aesthetic mortality:

2. Photocommuniqué 8:3 (Fall, 1986).
4. Ian Wallace, “The Megalopolis of Modern Art”, in Artropoeta: Exhibition of Contem-
6. An echo of the term used in Guy Debord’s “Theory of the Dérive”, in Situationist International Anthology, ed. and tr., Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Se-
crets, 1981), 50-54.
9. For a more thorough reading of the flâneur’s role in gendering public space, see
Grietje Pollock’s “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity”, in Vision and Differ-
10. "Hugo placed himself in the crowd as a citizen; Baudelaire sundered himself
from it as a hero,” Benjamin, 66.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, “A Tomb for Anatole”, in Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry
and Prose (New York: New Directions, 1982), 57.

William Wood is a critic and the Associate Editor of Vanguard.