

*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<sup>1</sup>*

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,<sup>2</sup> and subsequently formatted as a series of three diptychal canvas photolaminates, 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 fussy 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 domesticating 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 emblematics of existing practice to



# Ian



Ian Wallace, *Studio/Museum/Street* (1986) and-white photomurals, acrylic on canvas, x 117 cm, collection Vancouver Art Gallery

# Wait



wards 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 retitling 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".<sup>5</sup> 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 pro-

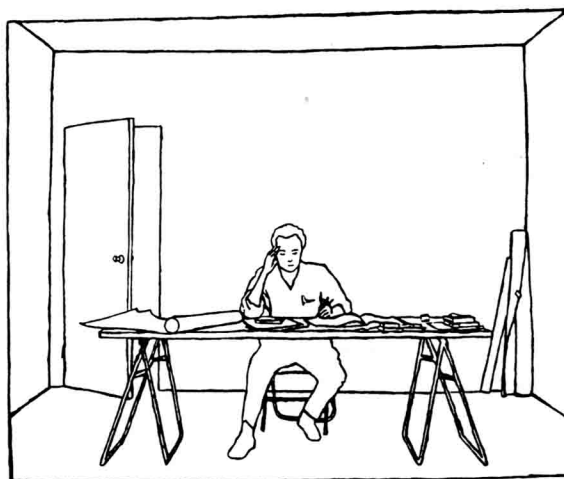
duction, the mind seems to unravel upon its grasp of possibilities, as portrayed in *Image/Text* and its latter companions, *In the Studio* and *At Work*. In *Image/Text*, we visit the studio as a site for deep investigation — a place of weighty book shelves and fetish-images of women replacing the muse; 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*

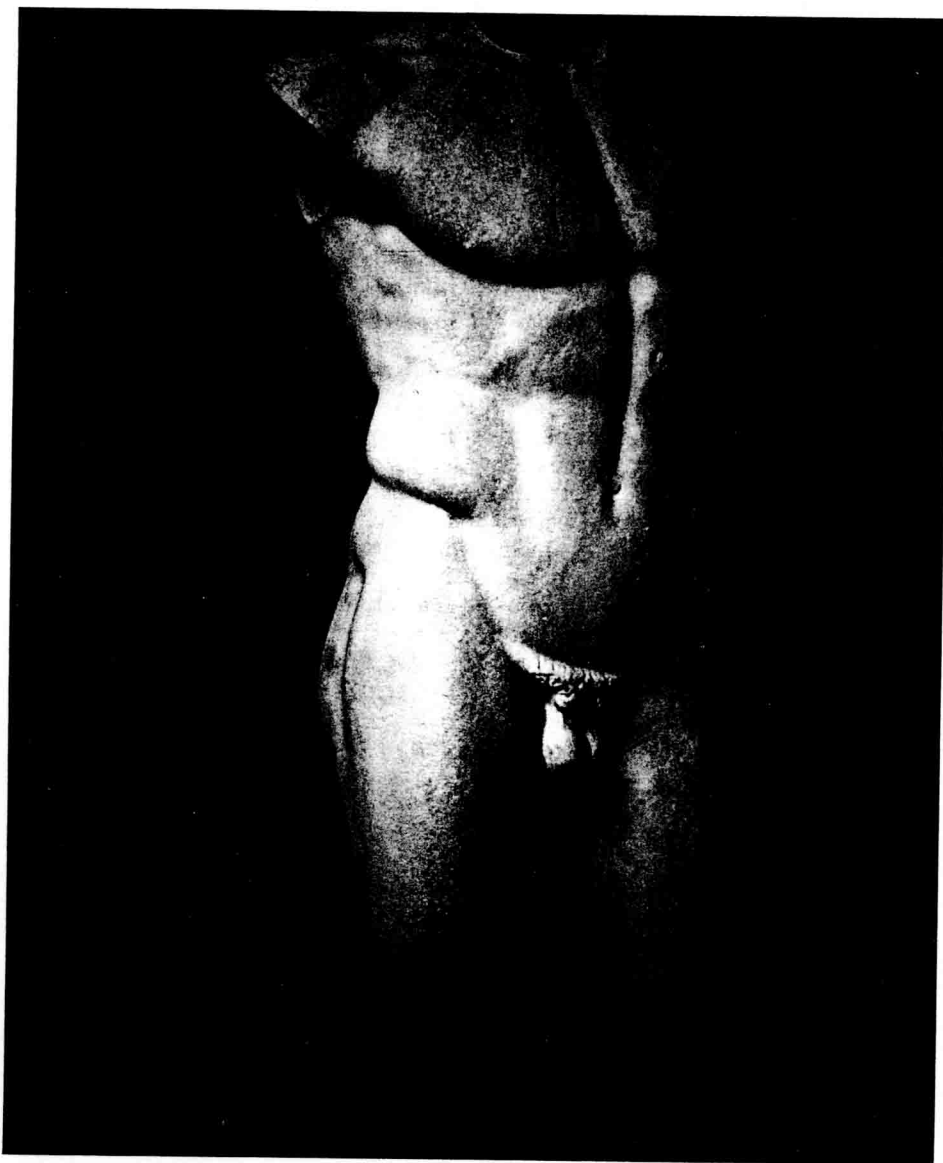
The return of thought, its recalled excitement and present articulation, appears in the plastic work done within the elaborate sanctuary of the studio. Where intuition and media collude to satisfy each others needs, the artist's body becomes the animator of imagery, illusion, strategy. That Pygmalion-like 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-

# Wallace



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Ian Wallace, *At Work* (1983), grease pencil  
paper, 132 x 178 cm



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 be its strength, for it remains as the sublimated 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

sleight-of-hand. Tracing over his image, he narcissistically caresses and repossesses the site of potent presence, indicating less his place in tradition and more his desire to distance himself from the originality-denying repetition of paternal influence which accords him the canon. As Norman Bryson has written of neo-classicism:

[T]he restorationist project places the painter in a double bind: to begin by turning his back on the past, yet in the end back he has yielded to the expropriation that takes away all beginnings.<sup>6</sup>

There are two studios, then: that of withdrawal into fantasized nostalgia and the one where that mastery is known but left ready to go the distance. In the former the privilege of retrospection is stated in the language of the past in order to attempt an occupation of the present. In the latter, such language has grown moribund, if necessary the position essayed is that of embracing the ruin hoping it will return to glory again.

Such sentiments are conveyed through performance and documentation in *At Work*, wherein Wallace occupied his studio for several hours a day replicating his studio practice under the gaze of gallery patrons. Again, there is an ambivalence in the notion of 'taking over gallery space', but the rhetorical sanctification of turning 'doing one's work' into the spectacle of the artist at work in the gallery should be seen as an apotheosis of the other studio. For here Wallace attempts to engage the figure left out before, other than the viewer — the looker. In meeting the specter he encounters both the guarantor

of aesthetic practice and its potential dissolution. The spectator is free to regard art history and intuition without feeling beholden; the work has its duration and its effect, but, commodity-like, it is always substitutable for another period, another practitioner, another stimulant. Particularly for those who resist the sway of tradition, the position of the spectator is problematic for it is coded as passive, 'feminine', penetrating both the superstructure and the sentimental spectacle of popular media (these forces deny the compulsion of the work). By so forthrightly courting the attention of the spectator in *At Work*, the artist is subordinate to the desires of that attention. Aware of inhabiting an under-appreciated tradition, he solicits a link to calm the unwary artist's gaze by presenting his body as the vehicle for its principles of discernment, analysis, and fascination. In this project *At Work*, the toil and the tedium face the future of its acts. Alternately being ignored and engaged, the artist is divided between showing and being seen.

In the works on the museum, Wallace becomes, in line with 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 pressure of restoration. In the large photo-murals, particularly *Lookout*, the orchestration of gesture and architecture is

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.

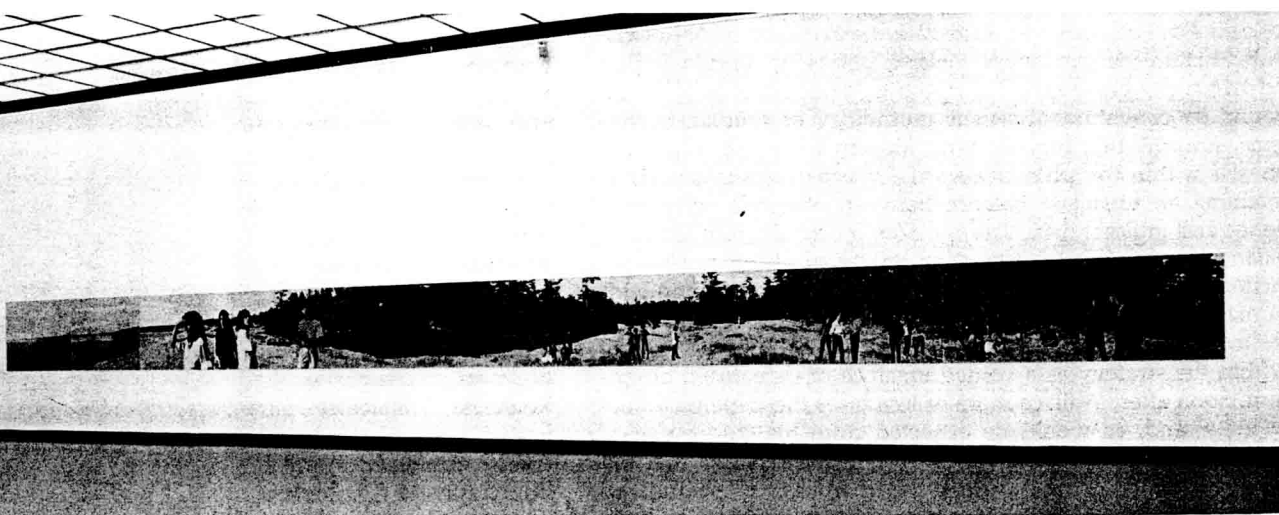
The work's rarity, ideality, and pleasure is thus double-edged, for it is at once the outcome of the productive matrix of the studio and a materialized come-on to erase that matrix and celebrate possession of its remains alone. Entering the catacomb of the aesthetic impulse, the spectator finds both the producer's body disavowed and the signs of its absorption draped in gravely 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.

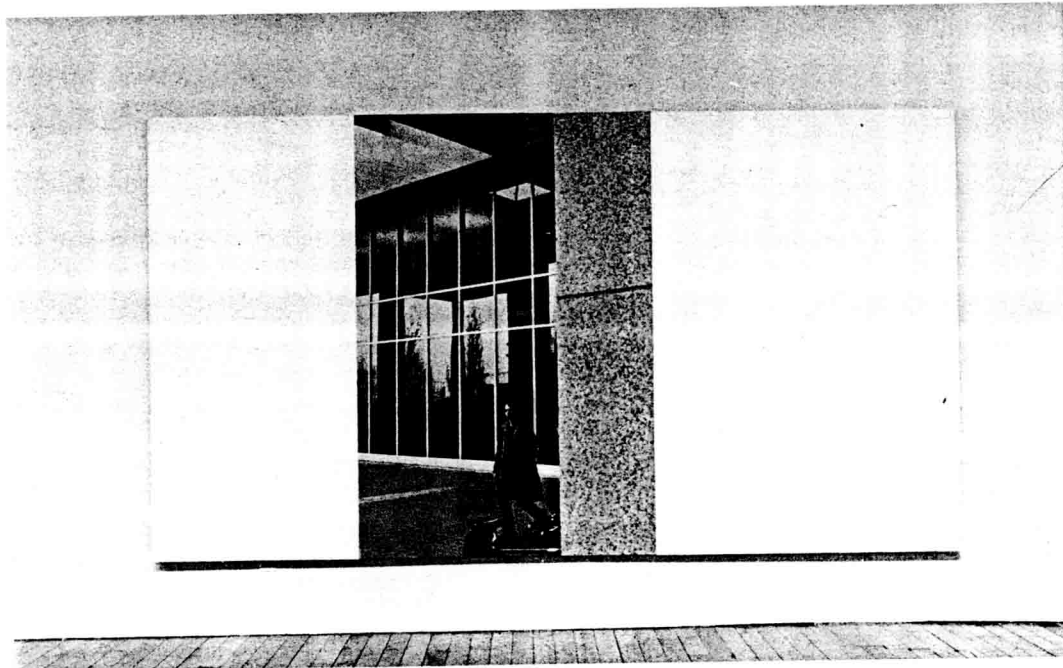
Three small-format photographic series simulate this quandary of spectacular, institutional display. *1900*, *From the Glyptothek*, and *From the Pinakothek* are furtive glances at museum works under the sign of decrepitude. Wallace concentrates his camera and lighting on the under-realized aspects of 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 overtakes 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. The parallax be-



(facing) Ian Wallace, *From the Glyptothek* (1984), eight cibachrome prints, 28 x 36 cm; (above) detail from *Hyperotomachia (The Staircase)* (1977), black-and-white photographs, 36 x 144 cm; (below) *Lookout* (1979), hand-coloured black-and-white photomural, 91 cm x 14.64 m, collection Vancouver Art Gallery

refers to the act of regarding works of art, yet they do so by displacing regard. *Lookout's* art-historical referencing and panoramic scale presents the spectacle of nature being 'taken in' by a group of snappily dressed individuals. But, while they interact among themselves, they do so only through the medium of their references. A Watteau-like *fête champêtre* ambience reduces each individual to typology, the scene to an Arcadian mortality of fixed positions — an effect heightened by montaging the figures into the landscape. Standing before it we take the posture of the personalities within and mirror their references to codified, authorized gazing and artificial presence within the spectacle. The hand-tinting of the panels adds to this effect by providing another layer of mediation to the tableau, insinuating that the colours are applied to mask the ineffable and encourage fascination. Our presence is thus





(above) Ian Wallace, *My Heroes in the Streets* (1987), colour photomurals with acrylic on canvas, 183 x 360 cm; (below) *Pan-Am Scan* (1970), black-and-white photographs, 203 x 122 cm; (facing) *Poverty* (1982), acrylic and silkscreen on canvas, 183 x 122 cm

tween the classical ideal body in its fragmented form and the agonized, fetishized body of early modernism displays the history of the museum as one of restoration and melancholia, picturing and annulling the body by derealizing the bodily presence of the spectator and stressing the gaze alone. The tensions of representing this erasure are not didactic as much as doleful — emblems of cultural pessimism, each image is a deprecatory meditation on the after-life of bourgeois angst.

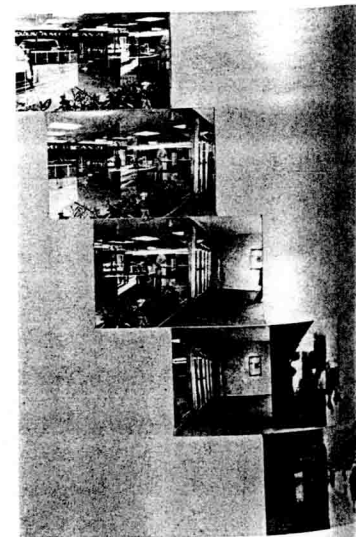
The museum series are elegiac cabinet paintings, homages to picture the crisis of belatedness which so frustrates communion with the past. This crisis has led Wallace along the two paths I have traced, but, where the museum and studio reveal internalized influence and determination within the conceptual 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 caption within urban psycho-geography.<sup>7</sup> 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 voided instance of defeated 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 oneiric, cinematically based images of sexualized street encounters. *Hyperotomachia* (*The Staircase*) is clumsy,

laden with filmic reference woman close by a wall pe back fearfully towards stairway on which two sons are conversing. body well-light, while they are in darkness, she responds haltingly (as in *noir*) to the potential conspiracy their unintelligible conversation contains. To plot this voyeuristic image under the rubric of *Hyperotomachia* ("the strife of love in dream"<sup>8</sup>) is to echo Walter Benjamin on Baudelaire. Writing of the experience of shock, Benjamin posits that *The delight of the urban is love — not at first sight but at last sight. It is a joy well forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the poem supplies the figure*

*shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet's emotions have been effected as well. What makes his body continue in a tremor — crispé comme un extravagant, 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.*<sup>9</sup>

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 invitation to enchantment and its inevitable denial. The poet comes to the street as a *flâneur*, seeking to aim his move within the domain of capital in ironic disregard of capital's demands of utility. Strolling its regime, he will saturate the public sphere with his subjectivity, taking hold of the 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 woman whether dreamt or beheld, whether hyperbolically invested simply psychically charged, will represent the space to be produced or else fetishized in order that the promenade can continue.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the potential eroticism of the anonymous counter becomes diverted into the *flâneur's* loneliness: woman, the rest of the crowd surrounding the pedestrian, represents a cipher for his (supposedly) self-possessed investigation of being private among the public.

*Poverty* takes this prospect to a near-repugnant extreme. From a self-produced black-and-white film of actors imitating the homeless, Wallace selected stills which have appeared as lithographs, a photo-book-work, a



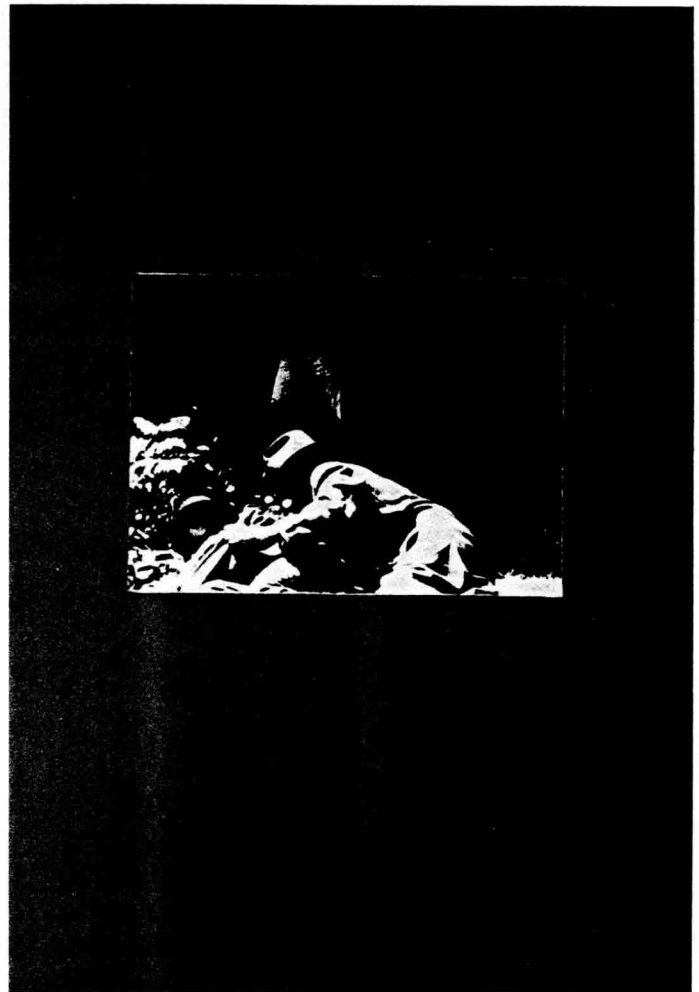
ographic series, offset posters, and a series of canvases. The implied narrative presents a man and a woman meeting, talking, and laying down amid the refuse of urban life. Like Baudelaire's rag-pickers, the underclass is pictured as reducing the bucolic and pastoral into the regulated city. Visually (and without subversion) the figures subtract from the public space for private peregrination and erotic potential but this is all implied while Wallace's plastic means refine the theme.

The canvases attract special notice as they silkscreen the image atop monochromatic fields, thus foregrounding the aestheticization of the indigent, suggesting the 'poverty' of modern painting, of theory, of representation as a complementary therapeutic technique. A poor excuse for materialists, the problematic of *Poverty* is the nasty, amoral edge of the material — the object disrupts the representational field and resists its siting within the canonical pastoral mode. Above the (intended) disability, Wallace's persistence in utilizing the image completes the work's obduracy: *Poverty's* grating and formal problematic of idyllic (dis)possession lends *flâneurie* the force of resistance.

That Wallace chooses the figure of the *flâneur* — and refers to other "motifs" of Baudelaire's modernity — empowers his imagery with the ambiguity of nineteenth-century avant-gardism. The restoration of tradition combines with the cool distance on the social to raise the artist's status. Tied to the modern — or, given his high estimation of the restorationist program of urban modernism, double-tied by historicism — the struggle for meaning is located in the zone of the heroic.<sup>11</sup> The series *My Heroes in the Streets* exemplifies this archaism, as Wallace returns to the street scene of late-capital, subjecting a group of individuals to becoming *flâneurs* under his decentered surveillance.

The shots are casual, prosaic, but their large scale and composition as photo-laminates surrounded by white passages on canvas leave the subjects, as the artist wrote, "monumentalized as my 'heroes of modern life' ".<sup>12</sup> Memorials, monuments; the figures thus cover the grave for Wallace, acting as sites of sepulture for the notion of individuality. With this simulation of the heroic, this shielding against the present, the crises are conflated: the crisis of the intelligentsia as it enters the market in a newly administered European capital is projected onto North American urban experience with only the faintest irony. The individual is restored on the grounds that he will to administration — the pavement of urban life where collisions and spectacles inure the shocks to better police the streets and spaces of the imaginary.

In the studio, in the museum, in the street, Wallace does not entertain the question that the *flâneur* begs: where amid the subjective minding would the 'other' figure? This blank space for query is what Wallace asserts lies at the core of art and of his being. Yet it is easier to view the formation and definition of the void as blanketing over the confrontations and challenge the subject to differentiate himself. Without recognizing another, he is the other, patiently waiting. What the evaluation underlines is Wallace's inhabitation of the primary as a zone of instability, repetition, melancholia. The primary's endless call back to past formations of desire and ideology means that its products will always read as symptoms rather than as cures — modernity is skipped over to favor romanticism and the individual accountable is at once defined and blissed-out by that remembrance. The aura, so fully sustained, succumbs to the state of mourning its works. As Mallarmé wrote, both impersonating his dead and suggesting his own aesthetic mortality:



no — I will not  
give up  
nothingness

father — — — I  
feel nothingness  
invades me<sup>13</sup>

#### Notes

1. Theodor Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin", in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977), 127.
2. *Photocommunique* 8:3 (Fall, 1986).
3. Michael Fried, "Representing Representation: On the Central Group in Courbet's *Studio*", in *Allegory and Representation: Selected Papers of the English Institute N.S.* 5 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 94-127.
4. Ian Wallace, "The Megalopolis of Modern Art", in *Artropolis: Exhibition of Contemporary British Columbia Art* (Vancouver: Vancouver Artists' League, 1987), 10.
5. Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 29.
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 Secrets, 1981), 50-54.
7. Robert Harbison, *Eccentric Spaces* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 74.
8. Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973), 125.
9. For a more thorough reading of the *flâneur's* role in gendering public space, see Griselda Pollock's "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity", in *Vision and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1988), 50-90.
10. "Hugo placed himself in the crowd as a citizen; Baudelaire sundered himself from it as a hero," Benjamin, 66.
11. Ian Wallace, "Artist's Commentary", *Ian Wallace: Selected Works, 1970-1987* (New York: 49th Parallel, 1988), unpaginated pamphlet.
12. Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Tomb for Anatole", in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982), 57.

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