

IAN WALLACE  
THE MONOCHROMES OF 1967 TO 1968 AND AFTER

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For the brief period between the spring of 1967 and autumn 1968 I did a series of monochrome paintings that were the springboard of all my work since. Over the past three decades when I have given illustrated lectures of my photographic work, I have had to describe the conflicted relationships of my later work to these early monochromes. In doing so, I have to constantly review my own history and clarify my recollections and intentions. I have discussed some of these issues in my essays “Photography and the Monochrome” (1992) and “Street Photos” (2003). This account will attempt a more precise analysis of the origins of the early monochrome works of 1967 to 1968, with observations about their relation to the sculptural, language-based media and conceptual and photographic work that immediately followed.

I had been exhibiting “quasi-abstract” still-life paintings since 1965, but I felt that they were too conservative. So by 1967, stimulated by the new energy and innovation that was stirring in the local art scene (particularly the work of Iain Baxter of N.E.Thing Co, Gary Lee-Nova and Michael Morris), and inspired by reproductions of New York School abstraction that I had seen in the art press, I was eager to move in more challenging directions. A part of the problem was subject matter. What was there to say? My strong intellectual interests often came into conflict not only with the prevailing emphasis on romantic expression but also with the technical options available at the time. Although my absorption in literature and philosophy (I was also looking closely at Concrete Poetry and Existentialism) led me to rationalize abstraction in referential and linguistic terms, I realized that I needed to grasp the idea of art as a category of experience rather than as an illustration of ideas. So I had to strip everything down to the basics. And that turned out to be nothing more than a rectangle of painted canvas: the so-called “monochrome.” My strategy for an exit from the endgame of late modernism was to

enter it wholeheartedly: to “radicalize” pictorial space and “foreclose” on referential imagery. The monochrome seemed to offer a blank slate, an emptying-out and distancing from pre-given representations from which I could start anew. One of the first monochromes I completed in the early spring of 1967 was a grey grid painting titled *Remote* which was selected by Yves Gaucher for the controversial open juried Vancouver Annual at the Vancouver Art Gallery in September of 1967. This work, one of the few surviving from this period, was purchased by the UBC Brock Hall Art Collection, and is now in the collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at UBC. In the summer of 1967 I exhibited a grey monochrome (tilted on a diamond axis) with a fluorescent red border titled *Neon Red* in the *Joy and Celebration* show curated by Alvin Balkind at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery. This painting, like many others of this period, has since been lost.

The example of the monochrome was recently topical in the art press, especially after the Ad Reinhardt retrospective at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966. Locally, such painters as Roy Kiyooka and Glen Toppings were making abstract paintings that came close to a monochrome aesthetic, but I turned to the avant-garde of the New York School as a way of finding my own original space within these influences. At this time there was also still a lot of energy in the more expressive and decorative abstractions of “Greenbergian” modernism and “Post-Painterly Abstraction” as well as the media theories of Marshall McLuhan and his mantra that “the medium is the message.” I had already seen, but not fully understood, work by Barnett Newman and Stella’s *Black Paintings* at the exhibition of post-war painting that was a part of the Seattle World’s Fair of 1962; and I was aware through reproductions (mostly in *Artforum* magazine) of recent “minimalist” work. Fresh from working on my MA thesis on Piet Mondrian in the Department of Fine Arts at UBC, I wanted

to experience these works first-hand. Encouraged by my recent appointment as an instructor in art history at UBC, in May and June of 1967 I toured the art museums on the eastern seaboard of the United States, beginning with Barbara Rose's landmark exhibition *The Anti-Aesthetic* at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art in Washington DC. It was there that I remember being profoundly moved by Dan Flavin's work, and affected but puzzled by Don Judd's installation. While in New York in 1967 I was impressed by an exhibition of Ad Reinhardt's black paintings at the tiny Noah Goldowsky Gallery. I didn't see any original works by Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, or Brice Marden until the following year.

The monochromes that I did over the winter of 1967 through the spring of 1968 took these tendencies further, reducing the canvas to a blank slab that acted as an architectural accessory to the exhibition space. The strongest works of this period were a series of tall narrow canvases (200×40 cm) painted mostly a matte black with borders of primary colour. By making the canvas a narrow "plank," almost all the residual pictorial space offered by the conventional proportions of painting were squeezed out, leaving the canvas as a quasi-sculptural object. These were exhibited in four shows in 1968. I used some of the same works in these various shows but arranged them in different formations, further reducing their role to that of an architectural accessory. The most complete exhibition of this body of work was a two-person show in May 1968 (with Duane Lunden, who showed some beautiful coloured Plexiglas panels cut across the diagonal) at the Simon Fraser University Gallery which at that time was run by Marguerite Pinney. For this show I installed the work in the hallways and back exit stairwells rather than in the main gallery space. I wanted to devalue their position as hieratic art objects and extend their presence into the more ambient social landscape. I also exhibited

a monochrome diptych in a staggered arrangement in the *System and Structure* exhibition at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery; and in a group show at the Douglas Gallery (Doug Christmas's gallery before it was called Ace Gallery); and at the original Bau-Xi Gallery run by Paul Wong. Since all of these original "slab" paintings were destroyed except for one blue canvas with a white border that is in a local collection, I recently reconstructed and exhibited them in a solo show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver in October 2007.

I should also qualify that, except for a very few, these early works were not "pure" monochromes in the literal sense. They actually are hybrid works that addressed the issues that have come out of the discourse of the monochrome within the general category of abstract painting. Most importantly, they are about the boundaries of the rectangle that defines pictorial space, and as such they are visual proposals of what I like to call a "theory of limits," the categorical distance that they maintain in relation to anything else that may be in their proximity, including the supporting wall upon which they hang. They were both an acknowledgement and a denial of pictorial space and as such were an expression of my skepticism about the dominance of the "idea of the picture." They were more an art of "being" than an art of representation. I put "being" in quotes because I was and still am dubious about this aspect of my ideas about representation. It continues to be entangled with the unresolved problematic of existentialist philosophy and notions of pure presence. Nevertheless it does describe an aspect of my outlook then and even now. The later series titled *My Heroes in the Streets* of the mid-1980s and the images of the individual in the urban crowd in the more recent *Intersections* series, also evoke the concept of presence, identity, and autonomy in this existentialist sense.

In retrospect, although these early monochromes were a necessary and important experimental stage in my development, they were only partially successful, especially insofar as I did not carry their implications fully to the end, and necessarily so, since my concepts were as yet unclear and continued to evolve. I felt that that since monochrome painting did not convey any overt subject, it tended to evoke a vaguely mysterious sublimity and was susceptible to being interpreted in either exaggeratedly mystical or superficially decorative terms, both of which I want to avoid. Since this was a conundrum that I put upon myself, I had to find my own solution, preferably from within the “theory of limits” that I had already established for my work. That limit was in the very “objectness” of the work, and this stood in contradiction to the problematic of meaning and authenticity that I attached to it. To the degree that I insisted on a “literalist” reduction of interpretation to the material fact of the work as an inert, “meaningless”, redundant, or obdurate occupier of pictorial space, my approach to monochrome intentionally occluded any referential power. In this sense they are examples of what I sometimes refer to as “melancholic modernism.” Later, by the early 1980s, I had also come to recognize the art historical conundrum whereby painting, having had its representational function replaced by reproduction media, primarily photography, was left as an “empty shell” that still occupied the space of idealist culture. This of course brings into question issues about authenticity. In any case, by the summer of 1968 I was ready to force a shift away from painting and open up new options.

In the fall of 1968 I started experimenting with a “deconstruction” of both the technical and theoretical implications of my monochrome paintings as they evolved over the previous year. I had shifted from stretching and painting the canvas surface to just working with the wooden stretcher bars placed flat on the floor in various configurations, often

overlaid with a skin of transparent plastic sheeting which mimicked a canvas field. I then photographed these arrangements. This is the first work in which I used photographic documentation as an integral part of my work process. My approach to the materials of painting was both sculptural, insofar as technique intended previously for “illusionistic” ends was converted to “objective” presence, and linguistic, insofar as the deconstruction of the technical elements into their discrete parts in variable arrangements was “syntactical.” I showed a group of these floor pieces in a two-person exhibition (with Darcy Henderson) at the UBC SUB Gallery in the late fall of 1968. I was interested in letting the materials speak for themselves and followed closely the discourse on “literalism” that accompanied the so-called “minimalist” art of the time. The N.E. Thing Co. (Iain and Ingrid Baxter) *Piles* exhibition in Vancouver in the summer of 1968, and recent articles such as Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” published in the summer 1967 issue of *Artforum* magazine, were a major inspiration for this new direction of my work. I had seen the *9 in a Warehouse* show at the Leo Castelli Gallery warehouse on 103rd Street in New York in the winter of 1968, and the *Anti-Illusion: Materials and Procedure* exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York in the summer of 1969. These shows, which included early work by Bruce Nauman, Michael Asher, Eva Hesse, Keith Sonnier, Richard Serra and many others, complimented my own move away from pictorial towards installation concepts. Much of the work represented in Germano Celant’s book on new conceptual and installation art titled *Arte Povera* (1968) expanded on these ideas, as well as Harald Szeeman’s exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (I didn’t see the show but had the catalogue). Lucy Lippard’s important show at the Vancouver Art Gallery that followed in January 1970 titled *955,000* was a recap of these tendencies but integrated them with the text-based conceptual art that had made its first strong appearance

by 1969. During the exhibition, I was assigned to caretake the installation of the work by Carl Andre which was installed in a park near the university.

In the spring of 1969, I was invited to participate in a group show at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. I took this opportunity to expand on my recent sculpture-installation concepts and since this work was composed of standardized materials easily available from any hardware supplier and requiring no alteration of the original materials, I took advantage of this strategy to avoid the cost of shipping heavy materials by simply mailing a drawing for an arrangement of 12-foot long 10×2 inch planks covered in clear plastic sheeting, which would then be assembled and installed by the museum. When I arrived for the opening I found the work installed perfectly by the museum crew (the material I think was returned to the lumberyard after the exhibition, or at least that was my intention). This work was recently reconstructed and exhibited as *Plank Piece* in my solo show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in October 2007. I drove to Montreal for the opening and then toured around the whole periphery of the USA on the return to Vancouver. This month-long highway trip gave me “white-line fever” and so the first major work I did on my return was a 60-foot white line consisting of five lengths of 12-foot shiplap arranged end-on-end and painted white. I intended it as a formal abstract “inscription” inserted into the landscape. This work had a strong rapport with the arrangements of materials in a linear format by Carl Andre which I was aware of. I first photographed it as an outdoor installation on the Maplewood Mudflats in North Vancouver, then scorched the line by burning it with gasoline, and then exhibited the scorched planks in a two-person show with Tom Burrows at the Bau-Xi gallery in fall 1969. The importance of this work for me was that it presented the formal abstract aspect of my work in relation to the social landscape. I also began at this time to understand that a

work like this functioned as a kind of prototype or generic model for an artistic procedure that could be repeated through a variety of works. I began to refer to these works as “concept pieces” to accommodate the flexible materialization and dematerialization of the object as such. The most recent installation of the *White Line* as a “concept piece” was in the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in October 2007, where it traversed the gallery space and acted as a conceptual “binding agent” for the other work. This motif of the white line reappeared as the crosswalk in the urban street intersections photographs I did in the spring and summer of 1970, and also in almost all of the *Street Series* works to the present. Another important example of the “concept pieces” that I initiated at the time was *Magazine Piece*, which consisted of taking any mass-circulation magazine and arranging the pages on the wall in a grid-like format. Like the *Plank Piece*, this work utilized readily available standardized materials (in this case saturated with social subject matter) arranged to mimic the heroic scale of history painting.

While in Montreal in May 1969 I met Bill Vazan, who showed a “black line” in the exhibition, and who showed me some very interesting examples of his sequential street photographs that referred to analogies in real space of his concepts of abstract lines that run to the vanishing point. I am sure that this also confirmed for me how to relate my earlier monochromes and sculpture-installations to references in real social space through the medium of photography. Photographic discourse at the time was still not able to reconcile the traditional pictorial aesthetic of photography with its purely documentary function or its “objecthood” as a medium. But a new “conceptual” approach to the photographic medium, which circumnavigated all the previous taboos about photography as “art,” changed all of this. The photographs that Duane Lunden, Fred Herzog and Iain Baxter had taken for the *Piles*

catalogue of N.E. Thing Co. in the summer of 1968, and of course the photographic parodies of minimal sculpture in Dan Graham's oft-cited *Homes for America* (1966–67) as well as the photo-essays of Robert Smithson and the photo books of Ed Ruscha were also an inspiration. In this context I would also include the reproductions of works in the *Arte Povera* catalogue published by Germano Celant in 1968, many of which were Earthworks art that could only be known through photographic documentation.

By the summer of 1969, the combination of conceptual art, which synthesized all of the previous shifts in radical abstract art from monochrome painting to minimal sculptural installations; and documentary photography, which made possible a rich testimonial appropriation of actual social experiences, provided a necessary technical solution to the artistic problems of the time. For me the primary question was how to bridge the gap between the radical effect of the anti-image of the monochrome and the literalist materialism of the sculptural work with the need to address the subjects of modern life and those intellectual and political issues that were seminal to the discourses of the late 1960s. This approach was also introduced very early in the *Photo Show* curated by Christos Dikeakos and Ilyas Pagonis at the SUB Gallery at UBC in the fall of 1969, which featured all of the most advanced photoconceptual work of the time. In addition to the pioneering work of N.E. Thing Co., a younger generation of artists whom I was close to, such as Jeff Wall (in *Landscape Manual* of fall 1969–70) and Christos Dikeakos (in *Photo Information* of 1969–70) became influential in expanding the possibilities of this combination of conceptual art and documentary photography. It was all part of the open dialogue that made the new art of the time so stimulating.

In the case of my own development the process of applying a photographic “cipher” or reference to real social

content to the framework of an abstract formal concept became embedded in my work ever since. It is really about “materializing” the concept of art by collapsing pictorial space into a pure object of its potentiality as presence (the monochrome phase), then to dissolve it into its constituent material parts of support and frame (the floor sculptures), then to reconstitute the concept in pictorial form as the photographic referent which recalls the experiential reality as the essence and the antipode to the abstract concept. The three key photographic works that I did in 1970; *Intersection 1970*, *Street Reflections* and *Panam Scan*, embodied in a renewed pictorial (but anti-painting) technique the implications of the deconstructions of late modernist abstraction and led me directly to the development of a syntactical, language-oriented, rhetorical but unprecedented breakthrough of the photographic medium into the museum display of contemporary art that eventually came to be discussed under the terms of post-modernism.

This account summarizes my interpretation of the influence of the monochrome in the transitions from painting to sculpture to photography which ran from 1967 through to 1971. After this I started to turn my attention to a concept of image-montage (in *La Melancolie de la rue* 1972–73) and more cinematic-dramaturgic-spectacle models for the photographic paradigm (in *The Summer Script* 1973–74 and *An Attack on Literature* of 1975). Political and representational issues rose again under the sign of “semiotics” throughout the 1970s. By the 1980s (for example in *Poverty* 1982) I returned to the monochrome as a “ground” for the semiotic and referential and pictorial power of photography. This return to painting as a ground was made possible by innovations in display technology that allowed for the mounting of photographic enlargements on substrates of various materials, including canvas, which became available only in the early 1980s. In my

procedural approach to the making of art, I consistently have maintained that each technical aspect has to be acknowledged as a material basis for the work or the image as a mode of production. I reiterate in this context Marshall McLuhan's mantra: "the medium is the message." Since painting on canvas became the ground or support for the photographic image it also had to be recognized as the surface of the image. Thus the photographic component of my pictorial work necessarily has to share space with the purely abstract painting component, which is usually limited to a single (arbitrary) colour and white.

Although the dominant practice of my work since the mid-1980s has been this combination of painting and photography, it is not restricted to it. In the late 1980s I also did some acrylic paintings and ink monoprints on canvas using a standard sheet of 8×4 foot plywood over a coloured acrylic ground. These later monochromes were an attempt to reclaim my earlier trajectory of reductive

monochrome painting but are distinguished by the fact that they are strictly surface-oriented and are not "bordered" (and thus implying a residual "illusionism") as are the earlier works. Nevertheless, since the main thrust of my work from 1980 on emphasized the combination of the material presence of abstract painting and the referential power of photography, I did not exhibit these later monochromes until my October 2007 solo show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver. On a much more modest level, but one which I nevertheless take seriously, are the small monochrome drawings that I have been making since about 1990, but which I also had not exhibited until the 2007 show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery. They often appear on my worktable in the photographic component of my *Hotel Series* works and recall the photographic documentation from the autumn of 1968 that recorded my "sculptural" deconstructions of the monochrome paintings, as a material practice converted into the image-phantasm of photography.