

IAN WALLACE  
COMMENTARY ON WORKS OF THE 1970S

**IAN WALLACE**  
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The decade from 1970 to 1980 brackets a distinctive period in the development of my practice. During this period, my work took a decisive turn away from late modernist abstract art to experiment primarily with conceptually-derived photographic imagery enlarged to a scale that would allow it to compete with painting in the contemporary museum environment. I wanted to position photographic imagery as a central medium for the return of pictorial representation to avant-garde high art. This technical shift necessarily involved the formulation of a “post-conceptual” or “post-modern” spectacularization of earlier, smaller-scale, text-oriented conceptual art strategies translated into photographic enlargements. Therefore, this was not simply a shift in mediums, from painting to photography, but from medium to concept, from *métier* to process.

The motivating force of this shift drew from intellectual influences and pictorial models originating from outside the existing aesthetic and institutional discourses of “classical” photography in the 1970s, which themselves were also experiencing a revival. Important intellectual influences of the 1970s, particularly the recent translations of continental theory in North America, eventually described in general as a “post-modern” critical discourse, which included discussion of such varied related fields as semiotics, psychoanalysis, critical theory of the Frankfurt School, linguistics, media theory, and gender politics, as well as new trends in contemporary art, also had a significant effect on the subjects that could be embedded in such spectacular photographic representations. This theoretical tendency was part of a larger inquiry and rationalization of conditions of modernity as filtered through a politicized academia. But in order to distinguish that my position emerged from within the logical contradictions of late modernist avant-garde art that culminated in conceptual art, rather than from within photographic discourses per

se, I used the term “photoconceptualism.” In an abbreviated manner, I often described my “late modernist” abstract paintings of the latter half of the 1960s as my “structural” period and my “photoconceptual” work of the 1970s as my “semiotic” period. Broadly speaking, beginning in the early 1970s, I turned decisively away from the “literalist,” “minimalist,” non-signifying tendency of my abstract work, such as my monochrome paintings of the late 1960s, to embrace a deeply image-oriented or pictorial strategy that introduced a variety of subject matter informed by theoretical and literary themes.

While certain parallel practices in photo-based conceptual art took on a pop-influenced iconography (such as that of Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, or N.E. Thing Company), my literary and intellectual sensibilities took me in a direction that was simultaneously political and poetic. The various formats and compositional structures offered by this new photographic and media-based practice had the effect of both tempering and exaggerating my content. The documentary aspect of photography allowed for a self-evident presentation of political content, while its pictorial aspect opened up models of symbolism and cinematic dramaturgy that invoked a poetics. Both aspects led to a deep engagement with an interpretation of subject matter that took my work into directions quite critical of the abstract modernist tendencies of the late 1960s. This meant that despite the fact that there are many overlaps of approach, the decisive changes in my work of the 1970s introduced new attitudes that later came to be described as “post-modernist.”

In doing so, I had to address three issues related to the theoretical, technical, and expressive. I first had to formulate a theoretical position that would rationalize these artistic developments within a larger art historical, philosophical, and critical framework so that they

would be necessary and not arbitrary. This led to intense research into the history of the pictorial image in general in order to demonstrate my thesis that photography (and, by extension, cinema and video) was the logical heir to the historical tradition of pictorial high art that had, until recently, been the primary domain of painting. I nevertheless took a position that attempted to read the introduction of new artistic practices within terms of the historical logic of mainstream modernism and proposed that they were even the necessary outcome of modernism. Instead of presenting the development of modernism as strictly rising from Cubism to abstract art, as the interpretations of such critical historians as Clement Greenberg emphasized, for instance, I included with this mainstream development the important introduction of the “ready-made” that was implicit in the newspaper components of the collages of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso of 1912 and its outcome in the work of Marcel Duchamp and his following. From this I interpreted the introduction of photography in late modernist conceptual art as an aspect of the “readymade” by virtue of its ability to appropriate the phenomenon of the world in the form of an allegorical and referential pictoriality that would parallel and counterpoise the trajectory of radical abstraction in modernist painting practice.

My approach was highly “functionalist.” I argued that changes in the current “zeitgeist” required technical innovation and that no medium be privileged by its historical status alone. This meant, for example, that painting was not necessarily an aesthetic “end,” but rather a “means,” and thus the pictorial tradition of painting could be adequately continued through photography, even as the mainstream of modernist painting itself repudiated its own pictorial tradition. Although I was often identified as having a “painting is dead” attitude, nothing could have been further from the truth. In fact, despite my critique of

painting, I still privileged it as embodying what I call the “horizon of ideality” of the concept of art. Furthermore, I saw in the possibilities of photography and new media, including video and film, the potential for maintaining and reinvigorating the pictorial tradition of modernity, of which painting was the original, but not necessarily the only, technical form of expression.

My critique of painting also required a critique of photography, especially in its aesthetic context. The recognized practices of “art” photography in the 1970s, whatever the aesthetic merit of any particular work, were generally limited in scale and almost always devoid of colour. Canons of photographic quality were prescribed within what seemed to me to be a very limited framework, restricted to habitual practices rather than innovation and typically of an academic modernist approach, limited to comparison within the existing aesthetic canon of that medium alone. In contrast, my approach originated not from within the medium of photographic practice in itself, but from a broader approach to signifying practice in general. It was inspired primarily by text-based as well as photographic forms of conceptual art, in addition to formal strategies borrowed from late modernist sculpture, painting, literature (specifically concrete poetry), and cinema. I was aware of similar approaches by other artists elsewhere and followed current international trends closely.

I had to push the technical limits of photography within the scope of my resources and what was technically available at the time in order to create works of sufficient scale that would engage the spectatorship that was long taken for granted as the traditional display of painting and sculpture in the public museum. In essence, I wanted the photographic image not only to be “architecturally grounded” in relation to the support structure and the space of the spectator but also to be included in the discourses of modernity and contemporary art that were being promoted

by the contemporary museum. This meant that not only did I need to use mural-sized enlargements, but that I also had to go beyond the discrete and singular image that was typical of classical photography, and to gather images into dramatic sequences, directly influenced by cinema, and serial arrangements directly influenced by abstract minimal sculpture, in order to present a compositional logic that emphasized syntax and rhetorical or dramaturgic devices. This was an expanded notion of what I called in 1969 “a literature of images.”

This dramaturgic or narrative drive to secure an enhanced scale led to the third challenge of the period: what subject matter would be adequate and convincing within the monumental scale of this new photographic work? This was the most problematic aspect of my whole project. Although larger political and social subjects came first to mind, my political positions were too uncommitted and immature to be able to claim authority in the expression of them. Where they do appear, they are intentionally vague and reflect my insecurity and distance from any form of programmatic politics. My interests in classical art history and literature led me early on to the conclusion that subject matter had to be centred on the human subject that had been the mainstay of all pictorial art until the period of radical modernist abstraction of the twentieth century. Moreover, such a subject matter also required a dramaturgic or narrative structure to propel such figuration into meaningful action. However, my thinking was still very influenced by self-reflexive and anti-dramaturgic attitudes of 1960s modernism. I also had trouble originating these narratives. As a result, I worked with self-reflexive strategies that would construct the narrative flow out of the search for subject itself. I instinctively resisted arbitrarily “importing” subject matter into the artistic process and consequently bended the medium to illustrate the content, even though that was the natural tendency of photography.

In the process of reifying this self-reflexive aspect (inherited from my modernist approach of the late 1960s), the subject matter became very personalized, revealing my own lapses into conceptual ambiguity and mystification, thus often causing the imagery to take on an emblematic or iconic as much as a narrative logic.

Although my approach was grounded in a self-conscious critical theory, when I came to originating any specific work, I left myself open to an experimental, provisional, and most often improvisational playing out of the expressive possibilities and demands of the particular concept in the moment of its making—what could be almost a “Fluxus” approach. Such a dramatized or “performative” (keeping in mind the importance of performance art at the time) approach to modernist imagery led me to an early formulation of “post-modernism.” This brought my concepts into conflict with what I would call the “avant-garde imperative”: that authentically new art must reject the pictorial conventions of past art, particularly the dramaturgic or anecdotal conventions of Salon painting. Although I instinctively subscribed to an “avant-garde” attitude and was hesitant to embark on pictorial strategies that could regress into outmoded academic conventions, the photographic paradigm was so innately pictorial, so literally mimetic as pure technique, that a reflection on its genres and conventions was inevitable. The expressive and narrative potential of photoconceptualism also caused a latent expressive and Symbolist literary tone to emerge in my work, which stood in contrast to the more systematic and structural distancing of my more avant-garde conceptual art of the period up to *La Mélancolie de la rue* (1972–1973). It was this conflict between tradition and innovation that led to the “experimental” character of this period, as well as to the often “mannerist” dramatic and conceptual exaggerations that seemed to compromise some of the work.

In retrospect, there are distinct technical stages that defined the development of my work throughout the decade. In the beginning of the 1970s, my tentative efforts to use photographic enlargements involved repetitive or serial photographic scans structured similar to that of abstract Minimalist sculpture like that of Carl Andre or Robert Smithson, where identical elements would be arranged in sequential extensions that would amplify the scale of the whole work using smaller elements. Early examples of this strategy would be *Panam Scan* or *Street Reflections* of 1970, which mimic the tall narrow format of my monochromes of 1967. In 1971, I made diptych montages of discrete images using standard thirty by forty inch enlargements that were the largest commercially available at the time, then only in black and white (thus leading me to hand-colouring them with oil paint). By 1972, I purchased hundred-foot rolls of photographic paper and printed my own pictures in standard four-by six-foot sections that were then assembled into panoramic sequences of three to six to twelve images. These works from the early 1970s onward tended to involve juxtapositions of independent images that had the effect of what I called “allegorical montage” insofar as the concept of the work was usually built out of the symbolic or signifying differences between the images, such as in the diptychs of 1971 and the first panoramic hand-coloured montage, *La Mélancolie de la rue*. Later, I developed a panoramic format consisting of a continuous flow of sequential images, which conveyed a time-lapse effect of dramatic movement flowing across the composition. In these large works, such as *The Summer Script* (1973–1974) and *An Attack on Literature* (1975), each of which were twenty metres in length, rhetorical and compositional devices derived from cinematic and performance-oriented imagery were adopted to provide narrative unity. Since colour prints of this scale were not available until the end of the 1970s, I resorted to hand-colouring the early large

“photomontage” panoramas such as *La Mélancolie de la rue*, *The Summer Script*, and *An Attack on Literature*. Having used imagery derived from video for *The Summer Script*, I began creating video versions of the panoramic works and slide-dissolve works that accompanied each of the major works. Eventually, I made panoramic works with images derived from 16mm film, such as in the *L’Après-midi series* (1977–1978). The necessity of overcoming technical challenges stimulated inventive but not always successful solutions.

By the end of the decade, technical developments in the large-format commercial photographic display industry made possible new forms of presentation for this “photoconceptual” art. The appearance of large-format Cibachrome transparencies at this time led Jeff Wall to his innovations in large-format dramaturgic imagery. Having some success with these first experiments, I continued with constructing large-scale panoramic assemblies of hand-coloured photographic enlargements right up to the late 1970s when I did *Lookout* (1979) and *Image/Text* (1979) for a solo show at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the fall of 1979. But by the end of that year, I began experimenting with ways of grounding photographic imagery onto other surfaces and combining it to an abstract field. When I took advantage of the technical innovations in the lamination of large-format colour photographs onto various grounds, I inevitably saw the possibility of a critical reassessment of painting and canvas as a ground for my photographic imagery, which in turn led me directly back to the question of abstraction as a fundamental language of avant-garde art. This shift, which was technical as well as conceptual, led me to a completely new direction that characterized the following decade of the 1980s, when I began combining colour photographic enlargements laminated onto canvas with painted monochrome fields. The first work that initiated this development was *Poverty* (1980) followed by the large versions of *My*

*Heroes in the Street* (1986–1987). These works led me to a return to the discourse of modernist painting, but now in a dialectical relationship to the photographic representations laminated onto its surface. This turn also resolved for me the critical dilemma of the historical teleology of modernist art: how to resolve the apparent conflict between abstraction and representation, between the image and the anti-image? I formulated the concept

of “contradiction in suspension,” whereby the photographic “readymade” would be inscribed as a signifying antipode across the abstract canvas “ground” by which modernist painting had realized itself as avant-garde practice, not to annihilate it, but to preserve, through the force of representation and allegory, the memory of its original radicality and to anchor the legitimacy of new art in terms of historical continuity.