

IAN WALLACE: "A New Wallace Retrospective at the VAG"

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Ian Wallace *Lookout* 1979 Installation view / photo Tomas Svab, Vancouver Art Gallery

Earlier this year, while participating on a panel at Presentation House Gallery, Ian Wallace related in soft, unaffected tones aspects of his work in the gallery's "1983" exhibition and, somewhat more excitedly, the transition of Vancouver's postwar aesthetic superstructure, from the abstracted landscape paintings of Jack Shadbolt et al., to the post-conceptual picture-making experiments that, by 1983, had set the stage for what was to come.

As is often the case when listening to Wallace, we are flattered when we understand what it is he is talking about; impressed by his ability to synthesize it; and, invariably, uneasy with his reduction of it. For some, this is not an artist speaking but an art historian. Which is fine, because Wallace, like his former student Jeff Wall (who also holds a graduate degree in art history, and who also taught art and art history), can be both. Indeed, the artist-scholar interface is key to understanding the large-scale photo-based work and attendant pedagogical apparatus that took hold in Vancouver in the mid-1970s (first with Wallace's *Melancholia de la Rue* [1973]; later with Wall's *Destroyed Room* [1978]) and continues through Wallace and Wall's students, a group that includes Roy Arden, Rodney Graham and Ken Lum. Any doubt as to the importance of the artist-scholar presence in Vancouver was put to rest when, on the occasion of a PHG reception for Wallace (upon receiving the 2009 Molson Prize), University of British Columbia art historian John O'Brian declared, "Not only are Ian and his kind this city's most influential artists, they are its most influential art historians as well."

The current Ian Wallace retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery identifies the artist's exploration of the intersection of painting and photography as his most significant achievement. However, it is not the intersection where Wallace's painted monochromes share canvas space with a range of photographic processes; rather, it is the intersection itself, where the artist is not only active in critical writing, curation and scholarly activity (like the Intermedia artists who slightly preceded him were in poetry, performance, video and correspondence), but how and where these fields cross, form a practice. As Wallace noted during his PHG

panel talk: "Once we figured out the work we wanted to make, we had to figure out how to write about it, curate it and build the galleries and museums to house it."

How strange, then, that Wallace's name should not appear in a recent letter signed by "visual art professionals" calling for a new "stand alone" VAG building, an "iconic" work of architecture whose "benefits...are beyond question and will be shared by everyone." Yet while true that the former neo-classical courthouse that reopened in 1983 was never an adequate venue for the proliferation of video- and installation-based works that emerged in that decade, Wallace's 45-year oeuvre feels oddly at home there, the cool Mondrianian geometries and rich expanses of colour in his canvases pushing back against the VAG's antechambers and relatively narrow hallways, the work (both on the walls and in process-oriented vitrines) only occasionally collapsing under the weight of what at times feels like too much volume. Perhaps this is why VAG chief curator Daina Auguitis, in an effort to manage this volume, structured the exhibition into chapters, beginning with "The Cinematic," followed by "The Text," "The Street," "The Museum" and, finally, "The Studio," a system paralleled in the exhibition's impressive catalogue, co-produced by London's Black Dog Publishing.

Rather than read the exhibition categorically and run the risk of reducing Wallace's works to evidence of its chapter headings, I attempted instead a quick first pass, with an eye to stylistic changes in the mediums' intersections and, ultimately, their recurrences. The first works on display—*The Constructor* (1976) and *Lookout* (1979)—are multi-panel photo-montage works whose relationship to painting (apart from their historical thematic referent) lies not in the photo-images' adjacent monochromatic fields but, as in *Melancholie de la Rue*, hand-coloured "tinting," where colour does not abut the photo-image, as an imaginative *dérive* space, but is applied over it, true to the colours of its figures and settings. This is a gesture I am uncertain of (as "The Cinematic"), until I turn the corner and find *Colours of the Afternoon* (1978/79). Here, "painted" monochromatic colour is applied evenly over discrete pictorial photo-panels, in the same way Jean-Luc Godard applied monochromatic colour to film sequences in *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), *Weekend* (1967) and *Passion* (1982). In his writings on Godard, Gilles Deleuze identifies the filmmaker's use of monochromatic colour as "great, individuated genres in which the image is reflected," while Deleuzian scholar Colin Raymond Gardner notes that the effect of Godard's colour filtering creates "new conjunctions between and across genres, forming new categories in the interstices between series."

With these "new conjunctions" and "new categories" in mind, the work I most wanted to see in relation to *Colours* was not Wallace's *Poverty* series (1980–87) but *Image/Text* (1979). For what better way to transcend this painting-photography intersection and present the artist beyond that which he has been reduced to than through a curatorial juxtaposition that involves this large-scale Mallarmé-influenced cine-poem? But alas, like the retail shelves of the Chapters bookstore across the street, we remain locked within the categorical, with *Image/Text* at the opposite end of the VAG's ground floor, in "The Text" department. So, from *Colours* the viewer is moved through the *Poverty* series, where in addition to discrete monochromatic panel-sequencing we are introduced to the literal intersection of monochrome painting and photo-image, the Mondrian influence that runs through much of Wallace's work (the artist wrote his Masters dissertation on Mondrian). Although Vancouver audiences are familiar with this series (parts of it were included in PHG's "1983" show), experiencing it in full brings with it a sadness, particularly in light of the city's increasing disparity between haves and have-nots, a sadness that temporarily dissolves with its final large canvas (from 1987) painted in Mondrian's least favourite colour—green.

From there, in its own cramped room, we find the *Clayoquot Protest* series (1993–95), with its photos of protesters hoping to block a company that produces from its mills that which Wallace has used to print the canvas's (ply)wood-cut monochromes. While this instance of the print provides a formal segue to "The Text" chapter, that chapter nevertheless remains marked as such; so rather than allow for a lyrical or associative flow of the monochromatic print to the printed text, the photo-montage to the textual-concretist collages Wallace made in the late 1960s, we are instead offered these concretist gestures less as works of art, in the largest sense, than as works of print literature ("concrete poems"), a bridge that Intermedia artists Bill Bissett, Judith Copithorne, Maxine Gadd, Roy Kiyooka and Michael Morris attempted to build (but failed to entrench in the academy) earlier in that decade.

Also within "The Text" chapter is another series-specific room, *Tropismes* (1995), based on Nathalie Sarraute's 1939/1957 book of the same name. Yet while *Image/Text* (hung opposite) allows its discursive poem ("theory of an idea") to behave similarly to Mallarmé's own 1897 poem "Un coup de des" (flowing freely over the surface, albeit in boxed-off vertical rectangles), Wallace has taken blown-up handwritten fragments from Sarraute's book and neatly overlaid them with monochromed photos. Although there is a relationship between the excerpted fragments of Sarraute's texts and her desire to have them read not as prose but as poetry (à la Baudelaire's intent with *Le Spleen de Paris*, 1869), the *Tropismes* series feels decorative, uncompetitive in the face of Wallace's earlier, more resonant photo-painting experiments. An instance of the artist repeating himself (working off a source text) in an effort to branch out? The same could be said of Wallace's more recent canvases *Table with Un Coup de des I, II* (2011), with their tertiary pastel colours.

The penultimate room of the VAG's ground floor features a selection of Wallace's photo-painted 1990s still-lives, most of them executed in some of the artist's favourite European hotels. These are pleasing, well-spaced images, a respite from the volume and density that precedes them. Indeed, one might be tempted to describe these works as that of a Symbolist, if they were not undertaken on the road but in a well-fortified villa, like Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884). But this is art, not life, and Wallace—as both an artist and an art historian—would be the first to point that out.

Just as this review might feel as if it reached its conclusion with the preceding paragraph, so too did Wallace's exhibition feel like that to this reviewer—and still no sign of *Melancholie de la Rue*. But after climbing the stairs to the second floor, there it hung, announcing "The Street" chapter, where the intersection between painting and photography is literally just that—an intersection of downtown roads. Although Wallace began photo-documenting intersections in 1970 (along with storefront glass reflections), it was only in the mid-1980s, with works like *At the Crosswalk* (1988), that he began integrating these images into his photo-paintings, a project that continues to this day. However, whereas Wallace had almost exclusively used artists in these works, his most recent large-scale canvases feature local collectors, a gesture made more apparent given the placement of these works in one of the VAG's two largest rooms (the other large room is devoted to "The Studio" chapter, another recurrent staging site in the artist's oeuvre). Would a more resonant work such as the *Clayoquot* series have been better served in one of these rooms, where the protest it documented occupied roughly the same square footage? Only if the *Crosswalk* series remained in contrast.

Linking "The Street" and "The Studio" is "The Museum," the third and most elegant chapter in the second-floor display. Although this area also includes a couple of sculptural works ("The Text" chapter features five McCrackenesque white boards leaning up against the wall, while "The Studio" has a similar set assembled end to end on the floor), it is composed largely of canvases whose photo-pictorial content includes architectural structures, ancient statuary, artworks (Mondrian) and audiences. That Wallace chose black and grey as his monochromatic complement (paint and photo do not overlap in these works) raises questions as to how, in this instance, we might relate to their potential, whether their painted sections retain their function as imaginative *dérive* space, or whether the autonomous museum and its contents—as pictured—neutralizes that, rendering the viewer uncertain (grey) or adamant (black). Does Wallace subscribe to socially conditioned notions of colour and tone, the oppressive yet real-by-its-consequences binary that has black versus white? As an artist and an art historian, the museum, more than anywhere else, is Wallace's domain. But what is he telling us about them? Are they really so neutral?

As exhaustive as this exhibition is, as dense and unremitting as it sometimes feels, there are parts missing. Most notable is *The Idea of the University I-XVI* (1990), a 16-panel series and an ostensible documentary on campus life. For those unfamiliar with Wallace's oeuvre, the absence of *The Idea of the University* will of course go unnoticed, its compositional strategies available in other works. But for those who know it, and know why it is not in the show, something else is added, a further layer that returns us to the room that houses the *Crosswalk* series, where collectors share intersections with artists. It is indeed a pity when collectors withhold an important work from an exhibition of an artist they think enough of to collect, though not enough of the gallery to lend it. But artists too have played this game. Back in 1983, when the relocated VAG prepared to re-open with its "Vancouver Art and Artists: 1931-1983" exhibition, Wallace, Wall, Graham and Lum refused to

take part, citing the lack of a curatorial imperative. Does Wallace's work benefit from the curatorial strategies employed in this retrospective? The artist is in, but is the art historian.