

# CANADIANART

## IAN WALLACE: "Choreographing Meaning"

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Having spent the last three years organizing an exhibition of the work of John Baldessari, I find it difficult to approach the work of Ian Wallace without this fellow West Coast artist in mind. The similarities, on one level, are striking. Most significant among them is the fairly unique dialogue between painting and photography in both artists' work. Baldessari and Wallace both started out as painters. Baldessari's early work, though famously largely destroyed in the *Cremation Project* of 1970, reflects his interest in the partial image (using strips of billboard advertising to dictate the painted surface) and his humorous critique of the standard methods for the teaching of art (which resulted in paintings of pages from "how to" books for budding artists). This work soon gave way to the text-and-photo works of the late 1960s that Baldessari is arguably best known for. Wallace's early monochromes, which he has described as "quasi-sculptural objects," were narrow, plank-like canvases sometimes installed in interstitial spaces outside the gallery proper, furthering their ambiguous nature. Later, Wallace suggestively deconstructed painting into its constituent parts, laying the stretcher and canvas out on the floor in an anti-illusionist gesture. As with Baldessari, most of these early works were edited out of Wallace's oeuvre, though here the destruction appears to have had more to do with lack of storage space than a conscious erasing of the past. In the 1960s, both artists abandoned painting, taking up photography in part for its potential "artlessness" as well as for its possible use in narrative and filmic sequencing, its relative portability and its potential to document the street and studio. Uncannily, painting reappears in both artists' work in the 1980s. Baldessari covered film stills with small overpainted areas and obscured the faces of drone-like businessmen, among other figures, with hand-painted coloured dots. Paint reappeared in Wallace's work in his photographic series *Poverty 1982* (1982); it became the ongoing ground for his photographic practice with *In the Street*, a range of works begun in 1986, and the series *At the Crosswalk* (1988-), for which he combined large-scale street photography with sections of monochromatic colour. Both artists have continued with this dual photo-painting practice ever since.

Among the other correspondences in their careers and work (though Baldessari is the senior artist by more than a decade) is the important role that teaching has played for each since the early 1970s. Baldessari and Wallace were arguably responsible for the formative experiences of generations of students at CalArts and the University of British Columbia respectively, and both artists have incorporated this professional role into their work, not only by collaboratively working with students and colleagues, but by developing a personal teaching style that departed from the norm. Baldessari questioned the fundamentals of what it is to "make good art" while Wallace has occupied the role of intellectual as much as that of artist, implicitly arguing for the importance of literature and scholarship within a craft-based education. Additionally, both artists share a deep interest in semiotic theory and New Wave cinema, both of which modes influenced their approach to the use of image and film and the potential use of image as text from the late 1960s on. Both Baldessari's and Wallace's photographic work are characterized by a filmic sequencing of images, suggestive of the allusive jump cuts of the auteur Jean-Luc Godard as well as a visual correspondence to theoretical thought.

I would have to admit, however, that for every apparent similarity between Baldessari and Wallace there is also a difference. The dissimilarities, I find, shed further light on both artists' work as well as their varying readings of dominant concerns in recent art discourse. It is perhaps helpful to examine Wallace's practice outside of the context of the Vancouver School of post-conceptual photography; this critical framework (often self-produced) has dominated the reception of his work and that of the movement's other leading exponents (Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham, for example). If one had to summarize the difference between Wallace and Baldessari, we might say that while Wallace's work has been characterized by a tightly controlled cerebral approach, with each undertaking's every detail theoretically and referentially

qualified, Baldessari's work emerges from a process of experimentation whereby he follows an idea both logically and intuitively to the nth degree. Wallace has pursued a set of ideas featuring the studio, street and museum (or institution), all the while remaining acutely aware of the significance of his chosen media, while Baldessari has explored many different topics, also using a variety of media. If chance plays a role at all in the work of Wallace, it is perhaps in his use of photos taken on the spur of the moment (and only later identified for use in a rigorously controlled manner). In Baldessari's work, while a single concept may dictate the overall proceeding, much is left open to potentially unexpected readings.

This generalization of their differences might equally be applied to their similarities. Take teaching, for example. Baldessari began teaching high school and eventually led graduate-level art courses (a trajectory defined largely by his need to support himself and his family, but which brought with it collegial and intellectual support). He made use of his students at CalArts to realize various works while ridiculing standard teaching methods, essentially doing everything that it was suggested one should not. Wallace's teaching, in contrast, has from the outset been at the university level and positioned such that his concomitant activities as artist, critic and art historian have been presented as one totality. Rather than disassembling the studio program, he has treated the university respectfully, as a site of knowledge production, while simultaneously critically acknowledging its structural politics.

A comparison of the photo-text and photo-painting works of Baldessari and Wallace reveals more about the relative opening up of meaning demonstrated in Baldessari's work versus Wallace's symbolically controlled approach. Baldessari's series *Blasted Allegories*, for example, consists of photographic montages that can be read in several different ways. This series, produced in 1978, takes as its starting point a phrase by the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter*: "Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories; but I remember that I always had a meaning or, at least, thought I had." With the *Blasted Allegories* pieces, which offer up symbolic representations of abstract ideas, Baldessari questioned the meaning of images and what they are expected to represent. Each work in this series consists of a set of random photographs taken directly from a television screen. Each image was printed using a colour filter; Baldessari then had an assistant write on each picture the first word that came to mind upon seeing the image. Later, they were mounted on a board upon which the complete title of the work was written. The result is a montage of disjunctive images, mostly fragments taken out of context and placed casually next to one another, converting each montage into an open piece of shifting meanings. In contrast to a text in which all terms are defined and the allegory can be decoded, this set of images functions as an unlimited text; each sign might occupy numerous different places within the syntax, leading to an unlimited number of stories.

In 1979, one year after Baldessari's *Blasted Allegories*, Wallace made the large-scale panel work *Image/Text*, in which photographs of his Vancouver studio are presented on monochrome backgrounds and juxtaposed with panels bearing typed text. Formally, the combination of monochrome photo and text, arranged in a grid formation, recalls Baldessari's series, but here each element has a specific origin and intention. Wallace's photographs, which he took himself, are constructed such that elements within them recur—the Irish woman featured on a calendar, for instance, appears on the wall behind Wallace in a self-portrait, and in a mirror above another photograph hung on the wall of the studio. These clues suggest that one could, with effort, begin to mentally trace out the architecture of the studio space. More importantly, though, this visual repetition can be understood, as Clint Burnham has written, as a "simulation of artistic production itself" as well as a theoretical conceit concerned with difference and context. As Burnham continues, "Such a theory, that value or meaning in the commodity, ethics, subject, and language is not substantive but based on difference from other terms, has informed the institutional critique of the museum or gallery." Wallace himself has referred to the piece as an "architectural self-portrait," featuring as it does a work table, drawings and notes as well as a sketch of the final composition of *Image/Text*. The text panels refer to the poetry of Mallarmé and resemble pages from a book (indeed, *Image/Text* appeared in book form simultaneously with the wall panels) and the

language itself self-referentially takes us further into the topology of the studio. Unlike with Baldessari, nothing is left to chance here; the only arbitrary element is perhaps the selection of colours for the photos' monochrome backgrounds. The work is an exercise in carefully circling and closing in on meaning. While Baldessari offers up limitless interpretive possibilities, Wallace carefully choreographs our understanding of his analysis of the structural significance of content and context.

The artists also differ in how they have introduced paint into the photographic field. While Wallace in fact returned to the canvas as a support in 1982, Baldessari retained the photograph as ground. Both artists work with the tension between surface and ground in their hybrid photo-painting works, but while Wallace uses monochrome painting to both separate and unite fragments of imagery, Baldessari overpaints photographs, using the underlying imagery as the basis for his elimination of information. Wallace juxtaposes modernist abstraction with realist photography to question this dichotomy, while Baldessari withdraws information to make the imagery more difficult to understand. One is an analysis of modernist dictum, the other an investigation of the structure of visual interpretation.

Fundamentally, what Wallace and Baldessari share is an interest in exploring the process of visual analysis in the context of a critical understanding of the structure of the world around us. But this raises one of the most salient differences between their practices: while Baldessari's work can be considered political insofar as it questions the fundamentals of what art can be, where it begins and ends and who judges if it is good or bad, Wallace has undertaken a more directly political project in his work, both taking on concrete social and economic concerns and demonstrating a conceptual approach aligned with the activities of institutional critique. This point in particular seems to call for a broader comparison between the contexts of Los Angeles and Vancouver in the 1960s and 1970s, a subject too vast to be addressed here. Still, developments within these related spheres during this critical period, their moments of correspondence and points of difference, may shed much new light on these significant artistic centres and the art that was, and continues to be, generated within them.