



IAN WALLACE: "Heroism, Hidden"

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There's a subtle but crucial difference between showing photographs as art and showing photographs in art. No one has ever been able to elicit quite as much feeling from that difference as the Canadian artist Ian Wallace, whose work is surprisingly little known in the United States. Vancouver (where Wallace has lived most of his life) became, in the 1970s, one of the world's most generative art scenes, and in the following decade, as a result, a number of artists from there became prominent figures internationally—above all Jeff Wall, now one of the world's most successful and influential artists; his work is generally considered a major reason (to borrow the title of the book Michael Fried published four years ago) "why photography matters as art as never before." But for Wall, writing in 1992, it was Wallace who was the key transformative figure on the scene: "I think it can be said that the streams of tradition and counter-tradition in Vancouver divide with the appearance of his work." Now the Vancouver Art Gallery has mounted a retrospective encompassing some 200 works, "Ian Wallace: At the Intersection of Painting and Photography," on view through February 24.

For Wall, Wallace was important not Heroism, Hidden and substantial. This semblance of fullness probably results from his aesthetic sensitivity." Would it be unkind to make the same observation regarding Kracauer? His work is essentially journalistic—best appreciated as a succession of often brilliant insights rather than a somewhat plodding system, and no less impressive for that. For me, there is nothing that anyone has written on cinema that is more moving than Kracauer's recollection of the first motion picture he saw, as a young boy in the early twentieth century: "What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it." Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me. only as an example of how to bypass the heritage of romantic, lyrical evocation of the natural landscape that had been the dominant strain in the art of western Canada, but also because at the same time he showed a way out of what Wall calls "the impasse of conceptual and antiformal art" as it had established itself in the 1970s. What was that impasse? Wall doesn't explicitly define it, but reading between the lines, it is clear that he's thinking of the tendency of conceptual art to take up a position at the margins of the culture—a tendency that, as it happens, is on full display (through January 20) just upstairs from Wallace in a traveling exhibition, "Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada, 1965-1980." What Wall took from Wallace was an aspiration "to find a legitimate way... to occupy the kinds of spaces in architecture and culture reserved for painting"—that is, for the great art of the past. The point was not to dismantle the museum but to renew it, with a critical edge.

Wallace had fully assimilated the most important lesson of conceptual art—that art is not primarily a category of objects but rather a way of thinking (or as he put it at the time, "a principle of semiotic order")— as early as Magazine Piece (1969), which originated as a sequence of right-hand pages from an issue of Look taped to a wall in a straight line. Here, one of the typical "picture magazines" of the time—the perpetual number two to Life—becomes a fragmented panorama of "The Mood of America," as the first headline on the left would have it—a synoptic meta-picture, a no longer quite readable text but rather a visible image of a cultural moment. Subsequent iterations of the piece used, for instance, an issue of Life—this was in 1970, and the issue featured the killings at Kent State University— and one of Seventeen. The work now exists in the form of a drawn "schema" calling for "the cover and facing pages of a masscirculation magazine attached to the wall in a given arrangement until exhausted by the format"; the pages are to be shown arrayed in a grid rather than a straight line, the choice of the magazine being pointedly left unspecified. Whatever magazine is chosen, it will appear at once whole (shown from beginning to end) and fragmented (only every other page will be visible, breaking the continuity of texts,

pictures and ads). At the same time, the colored tape that runs across the top of each row of pages—the only truly continuous element in the piece—becomes an abstract pictorial element, a horizontal Newmanesque “zip.”

In Vancouver, the Wallace show’s curator, Daina Augaitis, has selected an issue of BOMB, the New York quarterly that showcases “the artist’s voice” through interviews with writers, musicians, painters and so on. This is not exactly the “mass-circulation” periodical Wallace’s schema calls for, and Augaitis’s realization of the piece turns it from a wide-screen snapshot of a moment’s cultural consensus to a cross section of a more restricted cultural setting, one in which Wallace himself might easily figure (although he hasn’t, to my knowledge, appeared in BOMB). Christine Poggi, writing in the exhibition catalog, sees Magazine Piece as an early embodiment of Wallace’s ambition “to think the world through an image of the world,” but here it becomes something smaller, though perhaps no less necessary: a way of thinking the art world through an image of the art world. That a “concept piece” like this is so permeable to the world that its fundamental character can change drastically from one instance to the next is its strength, but also its limitation. In its radical openness to contingency, the piece gives up on any notion of composing a determinate response to (and out of) the contemporaneity it reflects so clearly. That Wallace was not prepared to make this sort of effacement of his own authorship a central tenet of his aesthetic is something that was probably already clear from the work he’d been doing just before the first version of Magazine Piece. Among the earliest works in the exhibition are a number of vertical paintings in which an opaque, uninflected field of a single color is bordered by a band of a second color; the paintings are self-explanatorily “titled” Untitled (White Monochrome With Red), Untitled (Black Monochrome With Yellow) and so on.

It’s worth noting that, whereas the gesture that is Magazine Piece preceded its schematization, in the case of these monochromes (or, more accurately, I guess, monochromes-with), the schema came first: the color choices for these paintings were not based on subjective judgments of taste, but rather on the idea of exhausting the thirty possible combinations of the three canonical primary colors—red, yellow, blue—plus white, black and gray. These paintings may not be terribly unusual for their period, but as a group they embody more vividly than most similar works the feeling, which must have been widespread at the time, that (as Wallace later put it) “anything was possible in a painting, but not much was possible as a painting.” They testify to their own simple presence, but also to their refusal to represent anything else but this presence—as opposed to Magazine Piece, with its readiness to represent anything. If abstract painting represented, for Wallace, the aspiration to an artistic absolute, and the use of ready-made pages from a mass-circulation magazine represented an opening to radical contingency and the unaesthetic, the synthesis he arrived at in the 1970s was to put the photograph in the place of painting. This was the idea that lit a fire under Wall, who had stopped making art around the beginning of the decade but began again in 1977, clearly cognizant of what Wallace had been doing in the meantime: sequences of very large-scale hand-colored black-and-white photographs, which the Vancouver Art Gallery has exhibited under the rubric of “The Cinematic” (one of the thematic categories into which the exhibition has been organized, along with “The Text,” “The Street,” “The Museum” and “The Studio”).

The label makes sense insofar as these sequences conjure explicit or implicit narratives and because, departing from the traditions of “straight” or documentary photography, they are engaged in what, around this time, the critic A.D. Coleman (who probably did not yet know Wallace’s work) dubbed the “directorial mode”—that is, the photographer stages the scene before his or her camera in order to photograph it, ironically turning the camera’s capacity to record the appearance of things and events accurately away from realism and toward fiction. When Coleman named the directorial mode in 1976, he seemed to be pointing to an underground current in the history of photography—one that was traceable straight through from its beginnings to what was then the present, in which practitioners calling themselves “photographers” and others calling themselves “conceptual artists” more or less unknowingly shared a common ancestry. What distinguishes Wallace’s work of the 1970s from that of contemporaneous practitioners of directorial photography is that Wallace, along with Richard Avedon (who’d made several grand-scale group portraits around 1969–71), was one of the only thinking in terms of mural scale. By translating a succession of shots that would make up a cinematic

sequence into a string of stills covering a wall, Wallace had set himself the problem of composing a visual rhythm out of repetition and variation—and this is where he excelled. As a quasi-cinematic sequence, *An Attack on Literature* (1975)—in which a man and two women in a featureless black space are seen (across a dozen panels spanning nearly seventy feet across) apparently trying to elicit some text from a blank sheet of paper in a typewriter, but producing instead a sort of storm of blank pages—may seem a bit hokey. But as a rhythmic pattern of black-and-white shapes with a kind of visual crescendo, it is impressive.

More properly cinematic is a work from 1978–79, *Colours of the Afternoon*, whose six panels show a woman roaming alone amid a rocky seaside landscape. The six images are actually stills from a 16-millimeter film; their enlargement lends a grainy texture that contributes to the work's pensive mood. One thinks of the harsh, empty landscapes in which the characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's films wander; Stan Douglas, in likens *Colours of the Afternoon* to "a missing part of *L'Avventura*," though Wallace himself points out a connection to an earlier Italian film, Rossellini's *Stromboli*. The black-and-white images are each tinted a different pale monochrome shade; these create a sense of metrical sequencing (along with the recurrent figure, who is always seen from a different viewpoint and therefore provides only a weak visual connection) that ties together the six otherwise very distinct images and gives the piece its somnolent, melancholy atmosphere. Here, something of the lyrical approach to landscape that Wallace had rejected in the 1960s returns in a new form, now based not on communion with nature but on alienation from it.

However, the pinnacle of Wallace's work of the 1970s is another piece from 1979, *Lookout*. Again, what's at stake is a specifically urban way of being in or with the countryside, in this case Hornby Island, British Columbia. You might think of this as an update of the *fêtes galantes* painted by French rococo artists such as Watteau and Lancret, but at Cinemascope scale—its twelve panels are together about forty-eight feet long. Unlike *An Attack on Literature*, in which a single scene is repeatedly shown from slightly varying viewpoints representing successive moments, or *Colours of the Afternoon*, in which each frame shows a different location, in *Lookout* one vast panorama is composed of contiguous slices. As with *Colours*, the black-and-white imagery has been hand-colored, but not this time in monochrome rectangles encompassing each frame; instead, as in an old postcard, the sky has been tinted blue, the trees green, some items of clothing red, and so on. This is nature with the color drained and then reconstituted artificially. The casually dressed young people who populate this scene seem to stand around aimlessly, alone or in small groups, sometimes looking off into the distance but never making eye contact with each other. One has the feeling that they are something like staffage, those anonymous secondary figures dressed perhaps as plowmen or shepherds, who populate old paintings for reasons more decorative than narrative—though here the central scene that these accessory figures might have noticed in passing is missing altogether.

The panorama seems to present a view encompassing 180 degrees or more; the viewer feels like one of these characters in the picture, glancing from side to side in search of what to look at. The implication is that the main spectacle here is one's own estrangement from the landscape, which is reflected in that of the figures populating it—who, for that matter, were never really there; they were photographed in the studio and montaged onto landscape shots that were taken separately. As Wall remarked, this "experimental pastoral" expresses our detachment from our favorite places. In all of these works, Wallace is experimenting with ways to bring together what another of the catalog essayists, William Wood, calls "the sensuous (and sensual) qualities of painting and the mechanical, pictorial quality of photography," though it might be better to emphasize the tension between the determinate intentionality of painting and the openness to contingency characteristic of photography. "I would describe myself as a very passive photographer," Wallace says in his interview with Douglas. "I accept the subject as it presents itself to me." In the work he developed in the 1980s and continues to produce today, Wallace found a different way to bring these dichotomies to the fore. It was, in the end, a downright obvious way, though not so obvious that anyone else had tried it before in just the same fashion, literally "bonding... the discourses of painting and photography into a single programme," at first by silkscreening the photographs (à la Warhol) but, starting in the middle of the decade, by laminating large-scale

photographic prints onto the surface of a canvas in juxtaposition to areas of monochromatic painting (or, in recent works, areas of hard-edged geometrical abstractions using multiple colors). It's interesting that some commentators on these works refer to them as photographs and others call them paintings—while still others, perhaps more scrupulous, seek more precise but roundabout descriptions (Wallace himself sometimes calls them “works on canvas”). Although the photograph, with its richness of detail and “human interest,” is the part that the viewer will focus on first—and, of course, is what gives the piece its subject matter—the photograph may not be artistically self-sufficient if seen in isolation from the painted portions of the work.

However full of interest these images may be, there is also always, in them, the implication that something is missing, that they are somehow incomplete. Likewise, the simple uninflected fields of color, if seen on their own, would hardly function as autonomous art; if it's true that, as Donald Judd once put it, a work of art need only be interesting, these areas of color, without depth or suggestiveness, could be said to have successfully resisted any attempt to find interest in them if seen by themselves. And yet the simple juxtaposition of these two “inadequate systems” yields, thanks to the precise choices that Wallace makes in bringing them together, something much more than the sum of their parts.

Among the earliest and still most moving of Wallace's works of this kind is the series *My Heroes in the Street* (1986), in which images of individuals on the streets of Vancouver—friends of the artist, all of them apparently easily recognizable to denizens of the tight-knit local art world—are shown as if glimpsed from a distance, in passing, and very small in comparison with the structures surrounding them. They are on their way somewhere, purposefully, yet they seem isolated and somewhat lost amid the impersonal geometry of the city. Just as they are dwarfed by their environment, the images in which they are wandering seem small in relation to the large areas of white paint by which they are framed. And yet these areas somehow seem to give a kind of answer to the question of what is missing from the image and of where these people are heading.

When I first got to know these works, I used to wonder about the title. What did Wallace mean by that word “heroes,” since these people look so average, so unheroic? Was he being ironic? Or is it just that to exist at all in the modern city, to his mind, requires a heroic effort? Now I think it's neither of these. I think that, according to these works, the heroism of modern life (to borrow Baudelaire's phrase, which Wallace had in mind) is necessarily a hidden thing; that although the environment through which each of us proceeds from day to day is that of the contingent, the alien, the massed geometries and random minutiae of daily living, we are also surrounding ourselves—to the extent that we have some idea, some thought that abstracts us from the quotidian—with the absolute that is our goal: not the Heaven of the Scriptures, to be sure, but an entirely human transcendence of the present. This is why it can also be true that, as Baudelaire said, “We are enveloped and steeped as though in an atmosphere of the marvelous; but we do not notice it.” If there is a heroism specific to the modern artist, it lies, first, in the effort—usually less effectual than we think—to forge from the common materials of the culture a language that is adequate to the time, and then to convey through (and even about) that language something that resonates with the feeling of that time. I am conscious of the fact that, in this review, I have traced some of the steps by which Wallace forged his language but am about to stop short of delving into all he has said in that language since it came together. One reason for this is simply that the early part of his career is substantially new to me—and the same is probably true for most non-Canadian viewers (his first solo exhibition outside the country took place in 1987, at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle in Munich). In trying to briefly catch you up with the last twenty-five years of Wallace's art, which are conveyed beautifully and in detail at the Vancouver Art Gallery, I can say that through his hybrid of photographic imagery and painting, he has continued to think deeply about the place of art and the artist in our time. He has shown how art can witness both political conflicts, as in the *Clayoquot Protest* series (1993–95), and the solitary ruminations of the isolated individual whose only powers are those of thought and perception, for instance in the haunting hotel-room still lifes he has made periodically throughout his career. It's a rich oeuvre we will surely get to know better in years to come.