

MOUSSE - MAGAZINE

"Ian Wallace: The Pictorial"

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Ian Wallace, *Magazine Piece (1970)*, 2008
Installation views of *A Literature of Images*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, 2008. Courtesy: the artist. Photos: Bob Goedewaagen

Over the last century, photography undermined and in many cases supplanted painting in artistic representation. Ian Wallace's conceptual work has always analyzed, developed, and ultimately portrayed the sense of this intersecting relationship. Gigiotto Del Vecchio talks with the Canadian artist about his practice, in which the work of art consummately embodies an image born from a thought.

Gigiotto Del Vecchio: Your work could be thought of as primarily exploring the boundaries between photography and painting. How does this need develop? In your opinion, what are the possible relationships, in terms of dialogue, between the two media?

Ian Wallace: Let me give you a rather lengthy response. My work primarily concerns the transmission of concepts by means of the "pictorial". Painting, for centuries, was the dominant if not the sole means of pictorial

representation. This is a given. I would even go so far to propose that the fundament of knowledge in general in the historical development of Western culture, how we have come to know the world as such, has been formed primarily by the framing of perception by means of the "picture". This framing is in the effect of the architecture of limits, whereby a view of the fullness of the world is set off or "abstracted" from the whole as a discrete pictorial image and represented as a "sign", or "meaning" that is other than the field from which it has been taken, and thus where it joins with other meanings to form what we commonly understand as the language of images. This is the basis of Western rationalism or the logos of modern culture. All this is to say that I understand painting to be not just an artful expression, although it can be that, but that its pictorial nature has formed the deep structure of our ability to think and thus act in the world. From this I also understand that the appearance of photography in the 19th century introduced the "industrialization" of pictorial practice, and by the early 20th century superceded painting and illustration by hand for the mass distribution of pictorial imagery, and eventually by the late 20th century has effectively superceded painting even in the pictorial practices of high art, which had been dominated by the fetish value of painting that was established over the past five hundred years or more. Even more recently, we can observe a further step in this process whereby the new technologies of image projection and digitalization of image distribution are perhaps about to supercede the privileged status of the static pictorial image. Please pardon the history lesson here, but it is a necessary preamble to the essence of your question. That being that I want to draw deeper the links between painting as the

historical fundament or "ground" of pictorial knowledge, and the photographic image as the contemporary technique for the representation of knowledge as an "abstracted" framing of the world in the form of a "picture".

gdv: It was in the 20th century that the concept of abstraction developed, definitively presenting its own dogmas...

iw: As I see it, the development of abstract painting at the beginning of the 20th century was a response to the crisis of representation precipitated by the social, technological and economic shifts of modernity in the general sense, and the challenges of industrially-produced pictorial imagery of photography, in which I also include cinema, in the specific sense. This "abstraction", or what I call the "evacuation of the image" from painting, contains within it a critical form of historical memory, which is why I speak of it as the "fundament", and which is why I recuperate it in most of my works since the early 1980s as the "field" across which the photographic sign is inscribed. There are two levels of framing in my work, both operating on a material and technical, as well as conceptual level. One is the rectangular framing of the work as a whole by the "ground" of paint of canvas, which carries with it all of the historical resonances of the crisis of representation and thus prevents us from taking the image for granted; the second as the photographic framing of the phenomena of the world as a specific sign of referential meaning, which by virtue of all of its rich and fluid capability of intervening conceptually in the world of appearances, offers us the critical apparatus for progressing beyond the given phenomena to act on it in a deeper, more fulfilling way. This as I see it is the function of art. There are certainly many other perfectly legitimate technical practices for art today, but my personal vision of the necessity of art in our times, as I have outlined here, requires a perpetuation of the historical dialogue between photography and painting.

gdv: You work across several fields, bringing together different intellectual dimensions that exchange ideas on possible paths of development. The word "intersection" has often been linked to your work. What does that mean?

iw: The theme of the "intersection" has underlined my work at least since the late '60s. It describes the process of collage, or montage, in the specific sense of artistic technique, or in the more general sense, as the mixing of meanings caused by the intersections of heterogeneous materials, whether it be words, images or perceptual experiences; that is, seeing one sign in relation to its spatial or material intersection with another, so that in this encounter, a third meaning would arise. The idea of collage, for this very reason, has been the technical and conceptual basis of my work from the beginning. But when I started applying my photographic work to the subject of the city in the late 1960s, I literally took the actual social location of the urban intersection or the crosswalk as an indexical metaphor for the collage technique as well as the specific location in the public space of the city where our everyday experience of modernity is brought into play, where we literally intersect with signage of all types, monumental architecture, traffic and other people, in a particularly complex way. I seized on the image of the "intersection" as the locus for a critical reflection on the human condition of urban modernity. But the intersection is not just a conceptual framework for approaching my work. It also provided a formal or structural shape for unifying the photographic image, for framing a complex set of movements within the visual vector of the white painted lines that outline the crosswalk and which direct the movements of pedestrians and traffic. The image of the pedestrian poised at the threshold of the street, in my mind, is that of an "existential moment" of common experience, and which defines the core of our experience of modernity.

gdv: Ever since the late '60s, you have been considered a pioneer of "photoconceptualism", and have always admitted that you try to get your own vision across, especially in the academic and educational field. You have always been a teacher, and I think that's important in understanding your work. Your students have included Rodney Graham and Stan Douglas. Could you tell me something about Vancouver, which even today seems to me like one of the most interesting art scenes out there...

iw: I think of Vancouver as the quintessentially modern city. It is a new city, only a century old. So the pioneering spirit still remains. I have spoken of it as a frontier city still very much in transition. Artists in

Vancouver have to create their own art history, but the truth is we also borrow from all other cultures. The traditional concept of the avant-garde in contemporary culture originated in the established art centers where there was also tremendous change on the social, political and technological level. In Vancouver, there was not so much a cultural tradition to react against as a vacuum to fill, a tabula rasa upon which one could write the future.

At least this is the way it seemed to young artists in the 1960s. In fact, however, since the turn of the century there had been an avant-garde art culture of modernist painters that existed within the frontier culture. These earlier pioneers created the conditions for the emergence of subsequent generations of avant-garde artists in the Vancouver region. However, in the late 1960s, the appearance of photographic work as an integral part of the strategies of conceptual art, with all of its political and intellectual aspects, brought about a completely different set of possibilities for a new generation of artists whose ambitions to make serious art were informed by more cosmopolitan and internationalist trends. Blended with a specifically regional situation, this use of the photograph, along with cinematic, video, performance and literary media, allowed a new generation of artists in the Vancouver region to create a distinctive alternative to the dominant tradition of painting for avant-garde tendencies in contemporary art. Following the earlier work of N.E. Thing Co, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Christos Dikeakos, Arni Haraldsson, and many others, including myself, were instrumental in initiating significant new work of what I call "photoconceptualism" during the 1970s and 1980s.

gdv: And your position?

iw: I was just one of the players. We achieved this not just through our artistic and exhibition practice, but also by a conscious theoretical approach, discussing the issues and implications of this work through writing, teaching, lecturing, and curating exhibitions. This was very much a collective activity. Moreover, we did not feel limited by the relative isolation of Vancouver and its regional character. Instead, we traveled widely and made contact with artists in other centers who were making similar moves. Although I am referring here to Vancouver, similar developments took place in many other regional art scenes around the world. The appearance of "photoconceptualism", as a strategy for contemporary art practice, was just one of the phenomena of the "postmodern condition" in the global village. But the original work by this specific constellation of artists in the Vancouver situation, artists who were inspired and informed, allowed for a particularly unique and influential variant on what is a truly international phenomenon.

gdv: A few years ago, Jens Hoffmann curated an exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin that was inspired by *The Function of the Studio* (1970), an essay by Daniel Buren about how the latter is central to the development of ideas. You contributed *At Work*, a piece from 1983 that is a sort of statement about the significance of the physical space where the creative process gets underway. The space in which thoughts, reflections, and intellectual breakthroughs are turned into works of art. For many artists, though, the studio no longer exists, as it has been replaced by the laptop; the computer has become their realm of creative action. But how important to you is the space where you work?

iw: In my opinion, art can be made anywhere, under any conditions, studio or no studio. I have always envied poets who only need a pen and a piece of paper, or even just their voice. Conceptual art opened up visual art practice to purely mental processes without even an object in mind, such as the work of Robert Barry's piece *All the things that I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking; 1:36 PM, June 15, 1969*. The structure of this work is embodied in our mental understanding of it. The point is, even when there is nothing to see, nothing strictly material about the work, it is still a work that is bounded by the limits of what it is not. I occasionally do what I call "concept pieces", or works that need not be actually made by me, but which are authored by me as an idea. These include my continuous series of "Magazine Pieces" and the *Declaration Piece*, which is simply the internet address of the United Nations declaration of human rights in whatever language one chooses. And of course, as you say, the laptop makes an excellent "virtual" studio, since it is an imaginary space which holds an immense amount of information, visual and otherwise, not only as a production center but also as a broadcasting center. The screensaver image on my laptop is of my studio, an image which is actually a work of art titled *Work in*

Progress and which was produced as an inkjet print for Hauser & Wirth Gallery in London last year. But I am interested in the "work" aspect of the work of art as well as the purely conceptual "art" aspect. I have a series titled "At Work", showing me at work in the studio. Ironically, in these images I am actually doing more "thinking" than "working". But thinking is also "work", is it not? Joking aside, I also still feel that the work of art in its most complete formation needs what I call the "material practice" of objectifying the concept in real materials through real technical processes. I am interested in the kinds of meanings that surface when concepts come into conflict with technique and the limits of the materials. I think that the concept of "production" in the material sense is as important as "representation" in the intellectual sense. It is through the resonance and the resistance of materials that the concept becomes open to the responses of the spectator, it gives an opening to interpretations of the art concept from other eyes than the artist alone. And it is in the space of the studio that the drama between materials and concept takes place. When I travel, my hotel room becomes a kind of peripatetic studio where I read and do small monochrome drawings, which are meaningless in themselves, but which ground my most abstract thoughts in the materiality of the paper. I photograph this space, usually just a small table by a window, as a material document of the abstractness of this practice, then make a canvas work from it.

gdv: I'd like to end this interview by asking you to tell us something about your three almost simultaneous shows at the Witte de With in Rotterdam, the Kunsthalle in Zürich, and the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf. To me, they were important in that they helped me get a clearer vision of many elements related to your artistic evolution over the years. A lot of work on your part, but also a significant curatorial statement...

iw: The concept for the exhibition was initiated by Nicolas Schaffhausen, the director of the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam. The research and logistical organization was done by his curator, Renske Janssen. Together with Vanessa Müller, director of the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf, and Beatrix Ruf, director of the Kunsthalle in Zürich, they decided to expand the concept to become a three-part exhibition that would be installed simultaneously in all three locations, thus allowing for the exhibition of a larger body of works instead of traveling a smaller show. Over the years, I have shown a lot of work in Europe that is not known in North America and viceversa, so this was a great opportunity to show a wide range of my work in Europe, and the idea of installing "chapters" of such a large body of work appealed to me. The catalogue of these three exhibitions was very necessary to the project as a whole. Markus Weisbech of Surface Design and Sternberg Press in Berlin did an excellent job of pulling together such a variety of work, done over forty years and shown at three different locations, into a single, impressive, visually rich catalogue. Each of the "chapters" featured a major large-scale mural work from the 1970s, and this provided a centrifugal center for the variety of related works that accompanied it. I was very pleased to be able to see my work, much of which I hadn't seen for years, installed in such perfect hangings and introduced to new audiences. It is always great to have work done forty years ago look new again in a contemporary context. I often joke that I am a "white wall" artist. But it is true that my canvas works in particular have a rapport with the support of the wall. Whatever else my work might be about, I always like it to "hold the wall" in a solid, specific way. When Nicolaus Schafhausen first proposed an exhibition at the Witte de With, I immediately said "yes!"; I have always loved the space and the light and the walls of the Witte de With, a former industrial building, as is the Kunsthalle in Zürich, and I knew that it would be perfect for my work.