



*Untitled (The Lions/  
Army & Navy)*  
1971/1996

## Ian Wallace: Framing a Practice

Daina Augaitis

Ian Wallace emerged as an artist in the 1960s during a time that demanded an expanded contextualization of art and artistic practices, not only within art history but encompassing the broader realms of society. Although Wallace's work has been informed by wide-ranging cultural and art historical influences—especially the numerous challenges levelled at modernist painting as the dominant mode of representation in the 1960s—it has also been shaped by the fact that he developed his unique artistic outlook within the regional influence of Vancouver and British Columbia, where he has lived and worked for the duration of his career. It is in this interplay between the international and the regional, between the personal and the social, and between the art historical and the immediate, that the unique trajectory of his work unfolds. Wallace has come to be highly regarded because of his ongoing assessment of the ideological and expressive possibilities of imagery, which he explores through the intersection of two primary means of contemporary art making—painting and photography. The intellectual dimensions of Wallace's work have been shaped by his acute awareness of history and his relentless attentiveness to the current conditions of art and society, activities that have in turn been essential to his further pursuits as a critic, pedagogue and art historian. In addition to the theoretical underpinnings and personal motivations that Wallace himself expresses throughout this book, it seems pertinent to uncover some of the dimensions of the world he was immersed in that were instrumental in determining his responses and subjectivities as well as in creating his enormous legacy. This essay takes as its principal purpose a broad contextualization of Wallace's practice, elaborating on the culture that informed his early years, then tracing his specific interests and developments in the areas of poetry, cinema and visual art.

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As Ian Wallace came of age in the 1950s, Vancouver was entering a transformative period of modernization. It was still perceived as a frontier city dominated by conservative colonial values; however, significant modern ideas were already present by the early decades of the twentieth century. Even in this early phase



left  
Emily Carr  
**Forest, British Columbia**  
1931–1932  
oil on canvas  
130.0 x 86.8 cm  
Collection of the  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
Emily Carr Trust,  
VAG 42.3.9



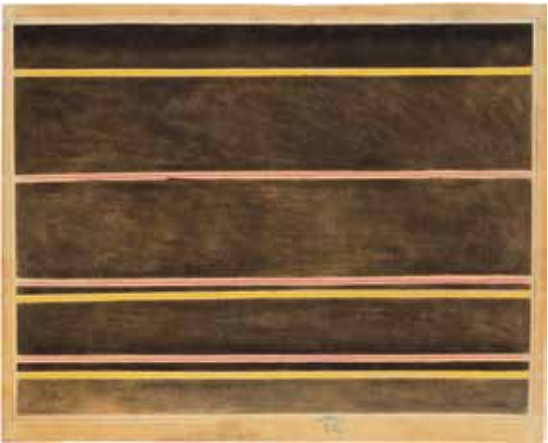
middle  
John Vanderpant  
**Untitled (Verticals)**  
1934  
silver gelatin print  
24.8 x 19.6 cm  
Collection of the  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
Vancouver Art Gallery  
Acquisition Fund,  
VAG 90.68.41



right  
Gordon Smith  
**Wet Night**  
1953  
oil on canvas  
74.0 x 84.0 cm  
Collection of the  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
T. Eaton Co. Picture  
Purchase Fund,  
VAG 53.7

of Vancouver’s emergence from its colonial past, an artist such as Emily Carr developed an important and lasting body of work in a completely modern idiom; she defied the staid British tradition of pastoral landscapes in favour of bold, spiritually charged depictions of the West Coast rainforest, and in her search for an art that was authentic to British Columbia, she was among the first to feature the Aboriginal cultures of the Northwest Coast. Carr’s endeavour to transform European Modernism into a unique style that implicated the conditions of life in western Canada cast a long shadow on the cultural world of Vancouver well beyond her death in 1945.

Even while Carr was still alive, with the pictorialist photographs of John Vanderpant, who was already exhibiting abroad by 1922, and the staunch defence of modern ideas by critic Harold Mortimer-Lamb, there was the beginning of a “highly literate, highly informed, internationally minded culture in Vancouver”, that paved the way for the following generation of artists to take their predecessors’ innovations even further.<sup>1</sup> To do so, the next wave of Modernists, who arose in the post-war period and included painters such as B.C. Binning, Bruno and Molly Lamb Bobak, Lawren Harris, Don Jarvis, Toni Onley, Jack Shadbolt, Gordon Smith and Takao Tanabe, introduced the international tendencies of modern art into the local scene. Their unbridled curiosity led to connections with the left-leaning ideas of the Mexican muralists; they took note of the latest developments in Britain; and they repeatedly crossed the continent by bus in order to participate first-hand in the cultural ferment of New York, where the legacy of European Surrealism was producing a new generation of avant gardes who eventually became the Abstract Expressionists. By the late 1940s and into the 1950s, this group of artists travelled widely to international exhibitions and world’s fairs in Europe and the US but—not surprisingly given Vancouver’s multiple streams of Asian immigration—also to Japan. These artists transformed international Modernism into their own uniquely local dialect, and taking a cue from Emily Carr, they softened the edges of abstraction into a more colourful and lyrical version that implicated the suppleness of Vancouver’s immediate and inescapable landscape. Even then, in their canvases was the growing presence of what Shadbolt referred to as the “urban edge”, where the city’s suburban perimeters rubbed against an undomesticated nature and notably, where many artists were building their modern, architect-designed houses.<sup>2</sup>



left  
**High C for Y.G.**  
1967

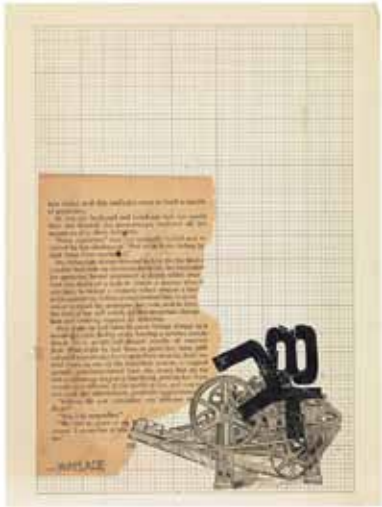


right  
**Remote**  
1967

By the late 1950s, Wallace stepped into an optimistic and progressive culture with an open liberal atmosphere that was equally present in the spheres of film, poetry, architecture, design, theatre and music as it was in the visual arts, where local artists were being lauded as the most innovative in the country.<sup>3</sup> As several Vancouver artists had been involved in the war effort, this cultural vanguard, which was anything but dry and dull and which also came to include some collectors, educators and forward-thinking businessmen, advocated for an improved society that would counter the catastrophic effects of World War II. They not only applied themselves to spirited discussions of the arts that ranged from theosophy to abstraction, explorations of new musical releases and debates over “what constitutes good design”, but also came together to build a cultural infrastructure that benefited subsequent generations of artists such as Wallace. This included the founding of an art department at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1955 by B.C. Binning, enlargement of the programme of the Vancouver School of Art (VSA) and organization of major gatherings such as the interdisciplinary Festival of Contemporary Arts that began in 1961—events that brought to Vancouver international luminaries such as Walter Gropius, Marshall McLuhan, Margaret Mead, Richard Neutra and Sir Herbert Read, and with them their groundbreaking ideas.<sup>4</sup> Above all, it was an intense period of experimentation and collaboration as painters ventured into projects with architects, writers and musicians, setting the stage for the following generation to reinvigorate local subject matter by looking more deeply at the expanding urban field and to emulate their precursors’ openness, determination and self-reliance in order to once again extend the limits of art.

During these heady times, Ian Wallace was finishing secondary school in West Vancouver and was already on track to becoming either an artist or a poet, encouraged by English teacher Helen Barr and writer/activist Maurice Gibbons, and buoyed by the publication of his poems in an early 1960s issue of *Talon*, a local poetry magazine. Wallace was immersed in the era’s beatnik culture, writing poetry and playing the tenor saxophone in a junky-jazz style. As an aspiring young artist he drew comics for the school newspaper, followed the work of the local Modernists, made photographs and took occasional evening classes at the VSA, all as means of getting involved and becoming informed.





left  
**Untitled**  
1968  
collage on paper  
27.9 x 21.6 cm  
Courtesy of the Artist  
and Catriona Jeffries  
Gallery

middle  
**John Locke Divided  
and Reconstituted**  
1969

right  
**Untitled (Breathless)**  
1997  
contact sheet paper,  
newsprint, tape  
43 x 34 cm  
Kadist Art Foundation



By the time Wallace completed secondary school and in 1962 moved to Robson Street in downtown Vancouver, he had joined artist friends King Anderson and Terry Reid and followed a circle of intellectual bohemians such as writers bill bissett, Lance Farrell, Curt Lang and Robbie Sutherland. They participated in cutting-edge initiatives, from the publication of underground poetry magazines such as *blewointment* and *TISH*, to the legendary 1963 Vancouver Poetry Festival, which introduced Vancouverites to beat writer Allen Ginsberg and Black Mountain poets Robert Duncan and Charles Olson,<sup>5</sup> an event that was described by some as the peak of experimental poetry in Vancouver and by others as a “life-altering” beginning.<sup>6</sup> These were among the prominent events that shaped a hot writing scene in Vancouver, one that by the mid-1960s challenged the literary foothold of central Canada.<sup>7</sup> Wallace’s exposure to this scene laid the foundation for his long-standing interest in literature, poetry and literary criticism. In particular, the idea of all-over, open-field composition promoted by Black Mountain poets was noteworthy for Wallace, who had already been introduced to the ideas of nineteenth century French critic and symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, a fundamental precursor of avant garde writing and visual poetry. Especially significant was Mallarmé’s late work *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*, 1897, in which the specific typographic structure of the poem is equally significant to the meaning of the words. Viewed as an early form of concrete poetry, it would have resonated in the 1960s with Vancouver writers and artists, especially with Wallace; the notion of the blank space of the page being equally important to the words can be read as a precursor to his eventual juxtaposition of the visual emptiness of the monochrome with the textual fullness of the photograph. In 1969, this field of interest culminated in the exhibition “Concrete Poetry” at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, with Wallace writing the essay in the accompanying catalogue; titled “Literature: Transparent and Opaque”, the essay accentuated the creative expression of the concrete poet who imparts meaning through the sheer act of writing as much as by the poem’s words and cadence, and characterized literary meaning as a kind of existential position established within time and space.<sup>8</sup> Well received, especially by writers, as Wallace recounts, the essay “highlights my particular symbolist (and performative) relationship to Modernism and the dialectics of communication—the expressible and the inexpressible—which still characterize my work.”<sup>9</sup> At this same time, Wallace was also incorporating these ideas into collages made from cut-up newspapers

left  
**Document**  
**(La Tentative**  
**with Scribble)**  
2012

right  
**An Attack on**  
**Literature II**  
1975 (detail)



and magazines; he treated the collages essentially as concrete poetry, and they were published in a 1968 issue of bill bissett’s *blewointment*. The following year, Wallace’s further engagement with collage led him to literally ‘interfere’ with the pages of existing books. In *Geometric Pessimism*, 1969, for example, he cut a large triangle out of the centre of a removed page and inverted this cut-out, making the reconfigured page appear seamless yet impossible to decipher—a gesture he repeated in subsequent series and that established the importance of collage as a fundamental principle underlying all of his work.<sup>10</sup>

Wallace’s deeper re-engagement with Mallarmé some years later was triggered by his discovery in 1972 of a copy of *Un Coup de dés* in the stacks of the UBC Library, found right next to Marcel Broodthaers’ graphic version. This is when Wallace was struck by the significance of Mallarmé’s ideas not only to innovations in poetry but also to modernist literature in general and to its relevance for visual art. In 1974, with intensified interest, Wallace delivered a lecture at the Art Gallery of Victoria on the relationship of the blank pages and empty spaces of *Un Coup de dés* to the compositions of Mallarmé’s colleagues, the painters Edgar Degas and Édouard Manet. At this time Wallace also shared a mutual interest in Mallarmé with his then-roommate and fellow artist, Rodney Graham.<sup>11</sup> By that fall of 1974, Wallace began to work on a major piece, *Attack on Literature*, 1975, which featured a strong performative presence related to writing that Wallace describes as “Mallarméan in spirit”.<sup>12</sup> The Mallarméan influence was even more apparent in the large-scale work *Image/Text*, 1979, in which Wallace’s own poetry—simultaneously lyrical and conceptual and configured in a highly visual typographic manner—appears alongside photographic images of Wallace ‘performing’ his work, a combination that created an ambiguous space for reflection between the open structure of language and the symbolic nature of adjacent images. As part of this project (as with another work, *Poverty*, 1980), Wallace pursued his interest in the book form by also producing a small edition of inexpensive artist’s books that presented his ideas through a parallel system of engagement and distribution. The significance of the textual in Wallace’s work is evident to this day: it is visible in his interest in literary theory, especially during the 1970s, which Wallace refers to as his semiotic period; it is present in his images of books, written notes and the university as symbols of knowledge, discourse and, ultimately, the world itself; and it is remarkable in the unending inspiration that *Un Coup de dés* has offered for several of his major projects that combine photography and writing, all of which ultimately produce what Wallace has called “a literature of images”.



Wallace's preoccupation with text was matched by an enthusiasm for film. His initiation into cinema also occurred in the early 1960s, through Tom Pappajohn, who introduced Wallace to Cinema 16, an active 16mm film club at UBC.<sup>13</sup> Besides showing local experimentation, Cinema 16 was an important venue for screening Dada, surrealist and other progressive European films, including Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, which Wallace viewed there only a few years after its 1960 release. Screenings of French new wave, Italian neo-realist and American avant garde cinema were featured at the Studio Theatre on Granville Street and the Odeon Theatre on 10th Avenue.<sup>14</sup> By 1963, when Wallace began his studies at UBC, he was further exposed to the independent productions of Bruce Conner, the Kuchar brothers, Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol through the university's cutting-edge Festival of the Contemporary Arts. In 1965 he wrote an essay entitled "Alain Robbe-Grillet and the Cinematic Influence on the Nouvel Roman", which became his first university lecture. Later that year he accompanied his friend, artist and filmmaker Gary Lee-Nova, as the latter made his legendary film *Steel/Mushrooms*, with Wallace learning some basic techniques of 16mm film production.

Having graduated with a master's degree in art history at UBC, Wallace was hired to teach the subject in the university's Fine Arts department in 1967. Students in his modern art history lecture courses included Rodney Graham and Jeff Wall, and his classes were audited by Dennis Wheeler (who, together with filmmakers Kirk Tougas and Tony Reif, was instrumental in initiating ideas about structuralist film in Vancouver). While this was a formative period for developing his ideas, Wallace left his teaching position at UBC after two years, and in 1970, keen to develop further as an artist, he spent a year in London, where, among other pursuits, he frequented cinemas and became immersed in screen culture and film theory published in magazines such as the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound*. While in London, Wallace made *Pan Am Scan*, 1970, a sequel to *Street Reflections*, 1970, both important photographic works that consider photography's representation of the phenomenological, structured space of the city as well as the actions captured in window reflections that Wallace described as "phantasms". While these works are fundamental to Wallace's shifting preoccupation toward the individual within the alienating modern urban environment as a primary subject for his work (which would eventually take root in his *My Heroes in the Street* series), they also maintain strong ties to film through their sequential structure. Together, the stacked photographs in *Street Reflections*, which resemble a film strip, and *Pan Am Scan*'s cascading images produce rather jarring disjunctions of space and time, collapsing the seamless continuity of cinematic narrative, something that new wave film directors of the era were also undoing.



*La Mélancolie de la rue*  
1973 (detail)

opposite top  
Fred Herzog  
*Granville/Smythe*  
1959  
ink jet print  
71.3 x 96.9 cm  
Collection of the  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
Gift of the Artist,  
VAG 2008.41.39

opposite bottom  
*Study for Street Reflections*  
1970  
silver gelatin print  
41 x 16 cm  
Collection of the  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
Vancouver Art Gallery  
Acquisition Fund  
VAG 88.5.1

By 1971 Wallace was so keen on cinema that he borrowed a 16mm Bolex camera from the newly formed Vancouver artists' collective, Intermedia, and filmed his hitchhiking adventures down the coast to Los Angeles for an interview at the American Film Institute, making a spontaneous 'on the road' film that was never edited.<sup>15</sup> Upon his return to Vancouver, the experimental film scene was burgeoning, and in 1972 Wallace began teaching at the VSA, where film animator Marv Newland and filmmaker Al Razutis were also faculty. Wallace's interest in film persisted, and he recounts that "in 1973, after Jeff [Wall] returned to Vancouver from London, I hired him at VSA to organize a series of noon-hour film screenings and from that point on I had a course in film history with weekly showings of classic 16mm films".<sup>16</sup> In terms of his own work, Wallace had a major breakthrough with the making of *La Mélancolie de la rue*, 1973, comprising three adjoining hand-coloured photographic enlargements that, through their sheer size, expanded the existing limits of scale associated with traditional photography and put it on par with large-scale modernist painting that implicated both the size and palpability of history painting and the spectacle of cinema. Taking available technologies to their limit, Wallace was among the very first artists anywhere to create such large works, using scale as part of a more ambitious strategy to reposition photography as the principal medium for the exhibition of pictorial art within the museum. In terms of its cinematic associations, the full title of Wallace's *La Mélancolie de la rue* references Roland Barthes' seminal text "The Third Meaning", in which Barthes elaborates on the unexpected or "obtuse" meanings that lie between the flow of cinematic images. Significantly, Wallace produced a work that illuminated these ideas in visual art with his juxtaposition of three unrelated images, positing something greater than the inherent meaning of each individual photograph. As critics such as Shepherd Steiner point out, this work cemented the dialogue of Vancouver's conceptually based artists in relation to internationally significant theoretical ideas of the early 1970s, specifically Barthes' structuralist theory of film.<sup>17</sup> In his elaboration of Wallace's work, Steiner further suggests that,

in its gentle turn away from painting toward the prospects of photography, it stands as a breakthrough piece of major ambition. In terms of scale, transparency of theoretical and political engagement, as well as its balanced conjuring of an inward formalism and the concerns of the everyday, the work far outdistances anything produced in the city of Vancouver up to that time. No doubt the title's explicit reference to Barthes was in part intended as a register of Wallace's ambition, but its succession of hard to consume ideas-come-images points to something far richer than its approach, something like the figure of a restless spirit.<sup>18</sup>





Poverty Image with Red (Cinematic Cut)  
1987 (detail)

The conceptual advancements of *La Mélancolie de la rue* opened the floodgates for further panoramic-type works. As Wallace recalls,

Also in 1973, Rodney [Graham], Jeff [Wall] and I worked on an ambitious but unrealized film project for which we received some funding from Canada Council and the Vancouver Art Gallery. At my urging, we first made a video sketch of the script with equipment I borrowed from the art school. From this material, again at my urging, we made photo blowups from the video stills that became *Stills from a Film in Progress* for an exhibition, “Pacific Vibrations”, 1973, at the Vancouver Art Gallery. I developed this video material further into a large panorama that became *The Summer Script*, 1974, for a show at UBC Fine Arts Gallery. In 1974, Jeff, Rodney and I tried to finish the film project with a new script using 16mm format with Tom Braidwood as cameraman. Although technically finished, this project remains unseen, we just didn’t have the resources to do a commercially viable film. I felt that we should focus on a conceptual-film framework that was possible on a limited budget as I was neither capable of nor interested in conventional cinematic culture or business. I was much more directed towards film in an art context while Jeff was more interested in classic narrative film. Nevertheless, we had many intense and productive discussions. In the 1970s and beyond, I continued to use film to produce my artworks, developing a way to take stills from 16mm film frames that could be blown up into montaged photo enlargements (such as *L’après midi*, 1977–1979, *Colours of the Afternoon*, 1978–1979, *Poverty*, 1980). I also used video [as part of *Lookout*, *Poverty* and *Image/Text*] and slide dissolve technology starting in 1970, to experiment with projected narrative imagery.<sup>19</sup>

While Wallace sustained an interest in cinema, he stood largely outside the enclosed circle of Vancouver’s experimental filmmakers, and by the 1980s his more integrated theoretical approach was visible not only in the courses he taught that combined a number of histories within “a study of the interrelationships of all the pictorial media arts”, but also in his own work, which at that time referenced a number of pictorial traditions (photography, video, slides, artist’s books, painting, sculpture) and offered a sustained reflection on the nature of representation.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond Wallace’s significant early sequential and panoramic works made from blown-up film stills typically from his own source images, his further engagement with film focused on a study of gender relations in a body of work titled *Masculin/Féminin*. In this series, which Wallace initiated in 1997 and returns to periodically, he appropriated film stills that capture poignant encounters between couples from existing films, including Jean-Luc Godard’s *Masculin-Féminin*, 1966, and *Le Mépris*, 1963, Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia*, 1954, and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*, 1960. Wallace’s recontextualization of images depicting emotional encounters such as



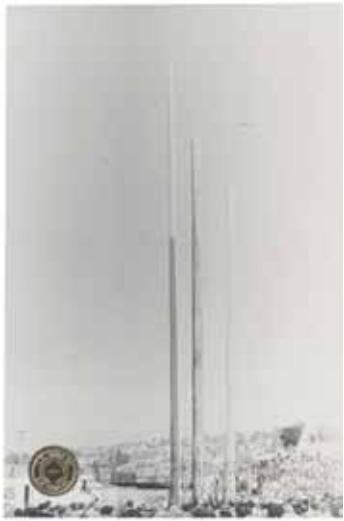
Untitled  
(Heavenly Embrace)  
1987  
chromogenic prints  
4 panels: 2, 244 x 101 cm  
(each); 2, 244 x 60 cm (each)  
University of Lethbridge  
Art Collection, Gift of the Artist  
Installation view, Centre  
international d’art contemporain  
de Montréal, 1987

the dissolution of a marriage or a stormy affair renders these segments as signs of stereotypically gendered actions; in Wallace’s work, the isolation of these images within a field of pure abstraction creates an emotional detachment, and with it, the possibility of a deeper examination of the fragmented facial expressions, gestures and dialogue that epitomize the romantic yet impossible relationships that proliferated in the existential themes and narrative ambiguities of European post-war cinema—ambiguities that linger throughout Wallace’s portrayals of couples even beyond his *Masculin/Féminin* and into his street works and *At the Crosswalk* series.

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In terms of Ian Wallace’s visual art trajectory, one of his earliest memories of responding to modern abstract art occurred in the mid-1950s when he saw a Gordon Smith abstraction in the window of the New Design Gallery, which American transplants Alvin Balkind and Abraham Rogatnick had just opened in Dundarave down the hill from Wallace’s West Vancouver family home.<sup>21</sup> Still in secondary school, Wallace took the initiative to regularly visit exhibitions, including a trip to the Seattle World’s Fair of 1962, where he saw major works by the New York School, and to the Vancouver Art Gallery, where he recalls seeing Emily Carr, British works from the Founders Collection and paintings by Canadian Modernists Guido Molinari and Kenneth Lochhead, and where he took in workshops such as Artists in Action, in which, for example, local painter Reg Holmes created action painting directly on the gallery floor.<sup>22</sup> The presence of an engaged public art gallery in Vancouver led by open-minded directors such as Richard Simmins and Tony Emery contributed significantly to the development of progressive ideas in Vancouver, providing artists experimenting with the eclectic practices of the 1960s and 1970s with institutional resources to make new work, as well as with a forum to present and assess it. Wallace first exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1965 in the annual juried exhibition, followed in 1967 as part of the controversial 34th BC Annual juried by Yves Gaucher, a modernist painter from Montréal who advocated for painting’s reform and selected only ten progressive works for what turned out to be the last of an otherwise yearly, broad-based, regional survey. Wallace’s painting was a grey, abstract grid composition titled *Remote*, prefiguring his series of monochromes that followed later that year.

While Wallace’s interests in film, poetry and even politics were significant, his primary education at UBC was in art history, for which he took courses from Professors Bill Hart, Ian McNairn and George Rosenberg and auxiliary studio



top  
***At Work 2008***  
2008 (detail)

bottom  
N.E. Thing Co.  
***ACT #24 Three Tree Climbing Logs at (P.N.E.) Loggers Annual Competition***  
1967  
silver gelatin print, collage, felt pen  
49 x 32 cm  
Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of J. Ron Longstaffe, VAG 87.52

courses from Iain Baxter and B.C. Binning. It was mostly through projects that Baxter was working on that students such as Wallace came into contact with the conceptual nature of Baxter's thinking. Aware of the critically based ideas circulating internationally that questioned normative perspectives on the art object, Baxter and his collaborator, Ingrid Baxter, equated the world of art with consumer culture and used photography as a means toward a documentary, non-aesthetic and highly ironic purpose. Wallace's own photographs of the 1960s and 1970s, mostly of the street, maintained a similarly casual and unencumbered approach to photography as a practical means for capturing visual information, a methodology used by other conceptual artists internationally such as Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham as well as locals Jeff Wall, Duane Lunden, Christos Dikeakos and others who shared a depersonalized approach to taking pictures. Another intersection of the Baxters' ideas with Wallace's was in their mutual interest in the essential nature of an artist's work. The Baxters used metaphors of business to tie the work of an artist to that of a producer; instead, Wallace focused on the intellectual and performative aspects of an artist's practice, which he primarily expressed through his teaching but which was also first suggested in his 1969 studio photograph documenting his own process of making art, and was later immortalized in his epic series *At Work*, 1983 and 2008, which iconicized the acts of reading, writing and looking alongside making. For Wallace, this subject of the studio has persisted with depictions of personalized environments and studio messes that speak to the material aspects, ritualized processes and physical residues of making art in a classic studio environment that is never divorced from its conceptual foundations. Furthermore, Wallace's *Hotel* series, started decades later in 1986 at a time when his international exhibitions and related travel had accelerated, documents a contemporary and therefore more portable approach to art making. The studies he made on the go using tools at hand at a table in any hotel room around the world, and the paintings that subsequently immortalized them, complicate the understanding of what a studio practice is and where it can occur, highlighting the role of the studio—regardless of where it is—as the place to consider and generate ideas as much as to produce the work.



***Untitled***  
***(Blue Monochrome with White)***  
1967/2009

Other critical influences for Wallace, who was always attuned to international developments, were American painters Barnett Newman, whose “zips” defined the structure of his colour field canvases and whose monochromes can be viewed as a representation of unlimited potential space (or infinity), and Jackson Pollock, who revealed the performative possibilities of painting. Additionally, the work of Andy Warhol, which Wallace was aware of by the early 1960s, was a significant influence. As Jeff Wall recounts in his defining essay on Wallace's early work, Wallace was especially struck by Warhol's two-panel car-crash disaster paintings from 1963: “In these works, both panels are painted the same colour, but only one has been silkscreened with Warhol's characteristically repeated images. The other is blank. A more precise formulation of the polarity between polemical imagery and the ambiguity of the monochrome could hardly be imagined.”<sup>23</sup> Warhol's use of the monochrome fuelled Wallace's own rethinking of the potential of painting in the late 1970s, simultaneous with the art world's push toward the return of painting. Wallace was especially keen to integrate the representational possibilities inherent in photography (with which he had been working throughout the 1970s) into the frame of the canvas, thereby implicating the discourse of painting.<sup>24</sup> The *Poverty* series, 1980, represents Wallace's first experiment in combining photographic images with painting when he screened his black and white *Poverty* film stills onto monochrome canvases in an attempt to recover the radicality of the monochrome that he had experimented with earlier. “In this process of recovery, Wallace moves to adjust the generic nature of the imagery. His problem is to construct an image, or an image-type, which does not incriminate or polemicize. Such an image permits the rescue of the ‘mute ideal’ of inwardness and the recovery of the radical ambiguity of the monochrome.”<sup>25</sup>

Concurrent with the invigorations of Vancouver's art scene of the 1960s and 1970s came expanded possibilities for exhibiting. The curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Doris Shadbolt, and her counterpart at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Alvin Balkind, each presented seminal exhibitions such as “LA 6”, “Piles”, and Lucy Lippard's “955,000”, which brought avant garde work from elsewhere while also featuring the latest from the local scene, which in some cases was developing and being critically assessed in art magazines simultaneously with



*The Drawing Cabinet  
of Gustave Moreau*  
1989  
photolaminate,  
acrylic on canvas  
121 x 121 cm  
Private Collection

artists in more established centres of the art world. These curators also encouraged artists to take a curatorial stance; one of these projects was organized by Christos Dikeakos, who put his finger firmly on the local pulse with the 1970 group exhibition “Four Artists: Tom Burrows, Duane Lunden, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace”, which included an urban film work by Wallace and identified a shared sensibility around the idea of the “de-featured landscape” that would later be identified with Vancouver’s distinct variety of photo-conceptual practices.

If the exhibition programmes of local art galleries were significant catalysts for the art community, equally influential was the visiting artists programme initiated by Wallace at the VSA in 1977, when he convinced the art school to use the equivalent of a teacher’s salary to bring in visiting artists primarily from eastern Canada, New York and Los Angeles. Wallace managed the programme as part of his Art Now classes (which always remained current with international trends), but additionally and generously he opened these presentations to anyone in the school or community. Wallace further involved Jeff Wall, who was then teaching at Simon Fraser University, and Serge Guilbaut at UBC to jointly share the visitor’s five-day stay. The programme was tremendously engaging, especially during its early years (until 1984, when Wallace took a sabbatical leave), and it brought to Vancouver artists such as Laurie Anderson, Vikky Alexander, Michael Asher, Alan Belcher, Chris Burden, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham (who came repeatedly), Jack Goldstein, Noel Harding, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Thomas Lawson, Sherrie Levine, Jana Sterbak, Lawrence Weiner, Jim Welling and many others. The week-long duration of these visits allowed for ideas to be fully debated, and it was enough time for visiting artists to become acquainted with Vancouver’s nascent scene and strategically, on their return, pass on first-hand knowledge about the interesting work emerging from this peripheral node on the West Coast. As a result of these associations, when Wallace and others began to exhibit internationally, they capitalized on their contacts to pave the way for further projects; one such example is Wallace’s exhibition at 49th Parallel, New York, in 1985, which he curated with the inclusion of Rodney Graham, Ken Lum and Jeff Wall, who, together with Wallace, were the core artists of what became known as the “Vancouver School”. Benefiting from a synergy in their photoconceptual approaches, these artists articulated the ideas behind their practices in catalogue essays and magazine articles that also served to have their work recognized further afield. Wallace’s subsequent and ever-growing participation in museum exhibitions throughout Europe and North America prompted him to add the museum to his existing explorations of the street and the studio. Capturing the functional aspects of these institutions in his photographs, Wallace attached the metaphorical ‘ground’ for art—the museum—to the physical ‘ground’ of his canvas. As a body of work, it traces the multiple purposes of the museum as a repository for history, as



*The Idea of the  
University XI:  
Discussion in  
the Gallery*  
1990  
photolaminate,  
acrylic on canvas  
152 x 152 cm  
Rennie Collection,  
Wing Sang Museum,  
Vancouver, BC

an architectural form, as an information-producing machine and as a public space that frames the resonance between art and its audience.

After more than four decades of making art that has been consistently rigorous in its theoretical underpinnings and visual acuity, Wallace has a remarkable following that has expanded internationally. In the work of former students who have gone on to exceptional careers, such as Roy Arden, Stan Douglas or Arni Runar Haraldsson, we can see Wallace echoed in their formal approaches, their symbolic references to the monochrome or their fuller interrogation of Modernism. Even subsequent generations of sculptors and installation artists such as Brian Jungen and Geoffrey Farmer deploy a conceptual approach indebted to Wallace’s persistent and sophisticated investigations of the everyday. His profound effect reinforces his position as a central bridge between generations, constituting the link between the contemporary artists whose practices similarly question the ideological limits of imagery, and, by virtue of Wallace’s insistence of working on canvas as a painter, to the post-war Modernists of the 1950s and 1960s who paved the way for the profound advancements made by Wallace and his colleagues. His accomplishments remain distinct in his life-long project to reinvigorate Modernism, to shape it according to his particular interests in art history, literature and philosophy, through a critique that was possible through the terms of conceptual art. In Wallace’s work, through his use of the monochrome, he acknowledges Modernism’s arrival in the 1960s to a theoretical end, when, due largely to the proliferation of mass media, painting no longer served a primary pictorial function, and he reactivates this tradition, finding his own unique way out of the “crisis of representation” with the presence of the now-dominant vehicle for visual content—photography. While Wallace’s monochromes refer to the institution of art and the history of painting, his photographic images register the sensorial and political fullness of the world in its unspectacular everydayness. In Wallace’s works, this juxtaposition of contradictions, between abstraction and representation, between conceptual and pictorial, even between art and life, are left open in a perpetual state of reconciliation.

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Like the exhibition it parallels, this book guides us through the principal investigations undertaken by Wallace over the last 45 years. The first section of the book focuses on Wallace’s formative interest in monochrome painting and minimalist sculpture, a tradition he ultimately reinvested with the pairing of photographic imagery; in the exhibition, these early minimalist works are interspersed throughout the galleries as periodic interventions into the norms of museum installation, appearing awkwardly in rarely used niches or up against doorways as constant reminders of the uneasy history and aspirations of the avant garde. Next, revealing his deep-seated interest in the cinematic image, we encounter Wallace’s use of sequential film stills that are blown up, animated with gestures and used as a means of evoking narratives



Work in Progress  
(January 10, 2010)  
2010



that range from the poetic to the political. The following section features Wallace's engagement with concrete poetry that begins with early collage and magazine pieces followed by full-scale works that embrace the use of text and utilize the image of the book as a signifier of ideas. The exhibition then progresses sequentially through Wallace's three primary subjects—the worlds of the street, the museum and the studio—starting with works that record everyday urban life as the subject for art, moving to works that feature the public encounter with art in the museum, and ending with the intimate but highly intellectualized space for conceiving and making art—the studio. In this book, the same sequence is brought to life with essays on each thematic section by Wallace himself and by writers who either illuminate a singular work or draw out new perspectives through interviews with the artist.

In the central rotunda of the museum around which Wallace's survey exhibition unfolds, and therefore at the symbolic core of his multiple propositions, is his *Declaration VII* (Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver), 2012. It is one of an ongoing series of concept works that Wallace creates in situ for select exhibitions. The *Declaration* series, initiated in 1998, presents in large vinyl letters a URL for the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights that is in the local language or dialect. At the Vancouver Art Gallery, as elsewhere, the work is situated outside the galleries in a welcoming location within the museum's architecture. Wallace's deceptively simple gesture immediately directs the web-savvy viewer to the political implications of the exhibition's locale. In the Vancouver Art Gallery installation, the internet site at [http://www.musqueam.bc.ca/sites/default/files/musqueam\\_declaration.pdf](http://www.musqueam.bc.ca/sites/default/files/musqueam_declaration.pdf) leads to the Musqueam First Nation's particularized version of the UN's declaration. Through a single line of text, this artwork acknowledges the traditional territories on which the neo-colonial building of the Vancouver Art Gallery stands and points to a prominent political conflict in the region where European notions of universal progress and expansion collided with the world view of the indigenous peoples, and where vestiges of colonialism are still abundantly evident. In a sense, this piece funnels Wallace's entire practice through a lens that focuses the reading of all of his works in a specific time and place, and possibly answers his own philosophical query, "What is possible to think through art?" In the here and now, the work is framed not only in the history of art but also within the history of a place, calling for an attentiveness to the current situations of life out of which art emerges and through which art is ultimately understood.

overleaf  
*Declaration VII*  
2012  
Installation view,  
Vancouver Art Gallery,  
2012

- Wallace, Ian, conversation with the author, 23 January 2012.
- "Urban edge" is a term used by Jack Shadbolt in an interview with Dorothy Metcalfe in 1974 located in the Vancouver Art Gallery Archives, but the grid of the city as it merges into the forest began to appear in the paintings of Bruno Bobak, John Koerner, J.A.S. McDonald and Gordon Smith in the early 1950s. See *A Modern Life: Art and Design in British Columbia, 1945–1960*, exh. cat., curated by Ian Thom and Alan Elder, Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery/Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004.
- As stated by National Gallery of Canada director Alan Jarvis in Scott Watson, "The Lost City", in *A Modern Life*, p. 93.
- Smith, Gordon, conversation with the author, 4 February 2012.
- "People/David Bromige", in *Ruins in Process, Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, accessed 4 February 2012, <http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/people/173>.
- Warren Tallman's unpublished recollection of the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Festival in his text "Poets in Vancouver", posted 10 August 2009, to <http://vidaver.wordpress.com/2009/08/10/warren-tallman-vancouver-1963/> (blog), accessed 4 February 2012.
- Bunting, Pauline, "TISH: The Problem of Margins", in *Writing in Our Time: Canada's Radical Poetries in English (1957–2003)*, Pauline Bunting and Susan Rudy eds., Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005, p. 53.
- This idea is expanded in Wallace's essay, republished in this volume, "Literature: Transparent and Opaque".
- Bunting, "TISH", p. 53.
- Titled after the books Wallace used to make this series of collages (which added another layer of meaning to the work), the collages include *Literary Interference*, *John Locke Divided and Reconstituted*, *Geometric Pessimism*, all made in 1969 and *For an Ethic of Ambiguity*, made in 2007.
- Wallace, Ian, email to the author, 30 January 2012.
- Wallace, 30 January 2012.
- According to Wallace, Larry Kent, a South African émigré, not only ran the film club but also was a film director who made *The Bitter Ash*, 1962, a canonical

- post-beat film that helped launch Vancouver's new wave cinema. Ian Wallace, conversation with the author, 23 January 2012.
14. Wallace, 23 January 2012.
15. Ian Wallace, email to the author, 12 February 2012.
16. Wallace, 12 February 2012.
17. Steiner, Shepherd, "v.s. a beginning of sorts", in *Intertidal, Vancouver Art and Artists*, Dieter Roelstraete and Scott Watson eds., Antwerp: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, 2005, p. 115.
18. Steiner, "v.s. a beginning of sorts", p. 116.
19. Wallace, 12 February 2012.
20. Wallace, 12 February 2012.
21. The New Design Gallery was where, almost a decade later, Wallace also encountered Claude Breeze and Gary Lee-Nova's surreal experiments influenced by their stays in England. Wallace, 23 January 2012.
22. Wallace, 23 January 2012.
23. Wall, Jeff, "La Mélancolie de la rue: Idyll and Monochrome in the Work of Ian Wallace 1967–82", in *Ian Wallace Images*, exh. cat., curated by Yves Aupetitallot, Saint-Étienne: Maison de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint-Étienne, 1989, p. 16.
24. Ian Wallace, conversation with the author, 19 August 2008.
25. Wall, "La Mélancolie de la rue", p. 20.