

A critic's or anyone else's reaction to an artist's work can take many forms, sometimes changing from one day to the next. Reading through some of the major critical discourse around Ian Wallace's work, I found it striking—and deeply informative—that so much of the writing revolves around Vancouver as a social and art-historical context for the work. For an outsider like me—someone who has spent most of his life living in the New York metropolitan area, who now lives in London, and who has been able to spend only a few days in British Columbia—this discourse has been both profoundly revealing, through its unusual double focus on both regional specificity on the one hand and broader historical developments played out on an international level. But it's also been off-putting, making it harder for me to see how to enter into the work and its discursive atmosphere. The artist himself has remarked (in his essay, quite typically titled in this context, "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver," 1991) that the "ethos of information culture...came into conflict with the ethos of *genius loci* based on a romantic valorization of 'place' that still maintains itself in the cultural sphere even though it has largely been dissolved in the actual social world." Although Wallace and others contested the nature mysticism that much earlier modernist art in British Columbia had shared with, for instance, that of the Pacific Northwest of the United States (think of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, among others), a vigorous sense of the *genius loci* seems to have survived the notion's translation into that of a social construct formed around local microhistories—a perfect response, perhaps, to the Lyotardian collapse of "grand narratives."

Now that the discourse of postmodernism seems to have become a historical relic, however, those grand narratives may not seem much more convincing but they do seem far more necessary than they did not long ago. They are the new "unfinished project," perhaps. In any case, I can't help noticing how words that had been notably absent from the dominant intellectual vocabularies for some time—words like "utopia" and even "revolution"—are now re-emerging in the writings of Antonio Negri and Slavoj Žižek, among others. The art of Ian Wallace, with its emphasis on concrete particularity and its avoidance of any grandiose rhetoric, is hardly a polemical intervention within the debate on the credibility or otherwise of totalizing theories, but I can't help but think that in recent years it may have

been less invested in its own local specificity and more concerned with displaying what within it might be seen as referring to what might once have been called, by a writer of the Romantic era like Baudelaire, a universal viewpoint. The city in Wallace's work is always a particular city at a particular time, but it is also (as he put it in his 1992 essay "Photography and the Monochrome: An Apologia, an Exegesis, an Interrogation"), it is also "an emblem of 'reality' or the common exterior world which we know is actually in existence and which is constructed historically." The city and the photograph both function as simultaneously particularity and abstraction. Not surprisingly, I first started to become aware of this crossing of the local and the general for reasons having to do with my own local identifications—when I saw Wallace's exhibition "New York City" in my former home town in October 2001. I had left New York that summer; what happened a few months later seemed to separate me from this once-familiar place in a way that previously I would have imagined possible only after years of absence. In this foreigner's view of a place that had once been so familiar to me, I found a kind of reconciliation, at least for the moment. As I wrote in a review of the show in *Artforum*, the figures in the earlier works I'd seen of Wallace's had been presented in isolation, or at least sparsely, while in the "New York City" works they were packed in; and the visual rhythms of the work, I went on to note, emphasized verticality, not horizontality. So far, so much to be expected of the difference between pictures of Vancouver and ones of Manhattan. More important, for me, was what this verticality had allowed Wallace to perceive and in turn hand on about the city I knew so well. Street photography in New York, examining life at ground level, had always more or less ignored its relation to the buildings towering over it—often enough such work had been made, in any case, in older, lower-built residential areas rather than the midtown business district. Architectural photography, by contrast, might capture sweeping views without telling much about the zones of encounter between architecture and people, structure and life. The photographs that were the primary component of the "New York City" series had the rare virtue of being sufficiently horizontal to convey the weight of the built environment looming over its inhabitants—though perhaps "inhabitants" is not the right word, since the pictures were taken in midtown and one had a strong sense, in them, of the transient nature

of the people's presence there—while also having been taken at sufficiently close range to give a sense of the crowd as anything but an anonymous, characterless mass. Strangely, they seemed to be completely indifferent to their surroundings, and their surroundings (emblematic of economic and political forces that for the most part work themselves out “above our heads”) seemed equally indifferent to them, and the magnetic pull of work, of consumption, of the commerce embodied by those surroundings was the only reason for them to be there. The people whom one saw, typically, waiting to cross the street, suspended in the city's *bardo*, what I called “the dead zone of urban life when we are simply marking time between one place and another, moments that aren't productive but don't count as leisure either”—these figures are as real and vivid presences in “New York City,” with enough idiosyncrasy of stance and gesture there to communicate something of their human particularity. This human particularity was what I found so moving about this body of work—all the more so, as you can imagine, since I was seeing it on my first visit to New York after the attacks on the World Trade Center. The odor of destruction still hung in the air downtown and the sides of buildings were still covered with photocopied pleas for information about possible sightings of missing loved ones. These appeals that had been put up in the immediate aftermath of the attacks when the fate of many was still unclear; a month later, there could be few mysteries left as to who had survived or not. The notices were still there because no one had had the heart to remove them. In any case, the strange combination of overt indifference and subterranean accord that characterized the relation between people and their social space was captured in an extraordinary way in these works.

The new work that Wallace is now presenting is based on images of another North American city, Los Angeles, and they are as distinct again from the New York pictures as the latter were from those based on images of Vancouver. For obvious reasons my immediate emotional connection is less intense than it was with the New York work, just as, I presume, neither body of work has the same spontaneous kick that the Vancouver pieces have for someone whose biography is entwined with that city. But Vancouver is anonymous to anyone who's never actually been there—the reason its cityscape stands in for so many others in the movies—whereas everyone thinks they know

New York and Los Angeles, which are worldwide cultural projections as much as they are real places. When I go to Los Angeles I somehow seem to have a profound Pop-Proustian connection with every street, because its name is known to me from a movie, a TV show, a detective novel.

To some extent its visual formats gave the city in the New York series something of the featurelessness of any vertically-oriented downtown business district while restoring a certain human individuation to the people who traverse it. Wallace's new work on Los Angeles likewise both confirms and denies what one thinks one knows about that city. Pictured in many of the works is a downtown business district few of us visitors ever see—skyscrapers and all, though these sometimes stand erect in isolation with lots of open sky around them rather than overshadowing the street with their density. Even more surprising, perhaps, is that there are pedestrians on these streets. In “City of Miracles” and “Century City,” admittedly, the figures crossing from the far sides of what seem like impossibly vast boulevards all seem to have a lonely odyssey ahead of them before they reach our side, but in “Avenue of the Stars” those on foot, still hardly numerous, nonetheless seem to have taken the street back from cars that have become endangered species. Only in “6<sup>th</sup> Street LA” does the automobile predominate, as our expectations of Los Angeles would call for. But one's awareness of the relation between pedestrian and vehicular movement in all these works suggests a fact that normally goes without remark: Photography, at least when it leaves the studio, is essentially a walker's activity—the art of a stroller or *flâneur*. The car is essentially alien to the photographer; it may get him part of the way to what he's looking for but what counts is what he finds when he leaves it behind. It's the moving picture—identified above all with Los Angeles, of course—that's so enamored of the car, that loves speed, the chase, and then of course the crash. As a result of the way they imply a viewer who's infiltrated the city from an unexpected vantage point, these Los Angeles street scenes make for some of the most subtly disconcerting works I've seen by Wallace. I always feel like I'm in the wrong place as I look at them.

The four works called “Construction Site LA” function a little differently. They show the new Walt Disney Concert Hall, designed by Frank Gehry, being built on South Grand Avenue across

the street from LA MoCA. In these images there is no overt human presence—no cars either, for that matter, with the exception of a parked construction vehicle in the third of the series. Stillness and emptiness preside. One feels that this might be a kind of ruin as easily as it could be a construction, and the temptation is to quote Walter Benjamin on allegory in the German *trauerspiel*. Possibly more apropos, however, would be an observation made by Adrian Stokes in 1961:

A collapsed room displays many more facets than a room intact: after a bombing in the last war, we were able to look at elongated, piled-up displays of what had been interior, materializations of the serene Analytic Cubism that Picasso and Braque invented before the first war; and usually, as in some of these paintings, we saw the poignant key provided by some untouched, undamaged object that had miraculously escaped.

I cite Stokes not only as a reminder of an underused resource in redeeming the powerful social and psychological experiences secreted within modernist formalism but because in many ways his viewpoint represents a hidden connection between the art that came after him and the art that came before. Gehry's architecture of shards and fragments clearly reflects its roots in the Cubist art of destruction and Frankenstein-like reconstruction into a new homogeneity; the "blank" structures of minimal and conceptual art are a renewed and radicalized version of the same breakdown of form. The contemporary city is its projection on a grand scale. But the "finished" heap of scraps is sure to glow with a glamour that glosses over the way that the building is an expression of a culture as damaged as it is exuberant. As an unfinished project surrounded by construction hoardings, however, the building remains a "piled-up display" not, to be sure, of anything interior, but of exteriors, of surfaces.

It will not have escaped the attentive reader that I have discussed these works of Wallace's as essentially photography. In fact the Los Angeles pictures, as is typical of his production for many years now, engage in a dialogue between photography and the painted monochrome. In this case, each work uses a narrow vertical bar of one color on the left and a somewhat wider white area on the right to enclose the central photograph that dominates the rectangle. Wallace himself has written (in "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver"):

*Without valorizing photography as a technique in itself, photoconceptualism, through the mimicry of a variety of forms of photographic genres and production, self-consciously concretizes the value, the ideological inflection of its imaging function in the social world.*

But while Wallace figuratively *frames* photography through reference to painting—as history, convention, and discourse—photography remains the central technique. It is through photography and its indexical adhesion to the real that we enter these works, even if they retain a place at the margin for a "purer" and more abstract discourse. Each serves to render the other more visible, even if they never find their promised unity. Wallace's art, too, is a concatenation of fragments.

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2003

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ISBN 0-9688269-9-7

Ian Wallace February 28 – April 5, 2003  
Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

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