Interview with Nicholas Cheveldave and Ian Wallace
Photography by Seth Fluker (additional portraits available upon request)

Walking into Ian Wallace’s studio this summer the sun was shining through the windows, it was warm but with a breeze, in the corner was a lush collection of plants, a full band set with drums, amps, guitars, a keyboard, and where we sat a picture of Alan Ginsberg stared down at us. I grew up in Vancouver and have known about Ian Wallace’s work since I was a teenager, and attended many of his lectures from then on, but it’s a different experience being in the studio where the work is realized, and I understood then the biographic intensity of what Wallace has been developing over his 40 year career. In the 60’s Wallace started painting monochromes, that he referred to as the “zero-degree of painting,” but his interest in the ways to expand the language of painting quickly cued his exploration into the extensions of the painting medium after the monochrome. The new technologies of the 60’s led Wallace towards the use of photography and lamination to build his images forward using the zero degree as a base to expand upon, and structuring the image language of his work for the next four decades. He is a founding member of the “Vancouver School” also known as Photoconceptualists, alongside Jeff Wall, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham. Wallace has shown internationally for over 30 years, and in 2013 held a retrospective in his home city at the Vancouver Art Gallery, titled “At The Inter-section of Painting and Photography,” that brought together his four-decade career, presenting his significant contributions to the global identity of Conceptual Art.

NC: Over the years of experiencing your artwork I’ve come to find that what you make often addresses the mechanics of a medium, like painting. Your images create for the viewer a formal breakdown of one medium through another, for instance Painting being looked at through the photographic image. Am I reading your work correctly?

IW: Yes. I often like to jokingly describe myself as an old-time modernist, insofar as I am very attentive to the role that the medium plays in the work of art. And this emphasis on the function of the medium of expression is a fundamentally critical one. By the term “critical”, I mean that it draws attention to the contradictions and problematics of contemporary art; and also to the notion of “crisis” that is inherent in the cultural shifts, the innovations, anachronisms and exhaustion that are registered in these mediums of expression. But as an “old-time” modernist I want to ground this critique in terms that are fundamentally and foremost aesthetic, rather than “educational” or even “intellectual”. But modernity is always reinventing itself by questioning, through the medium of expression, the relevance of contemporary art to contemporary life.

NC: You often turn the camera on yourself and are in many of your works, and I’m interested to know when this became important to you, to be physically present in the critiques that your work involves itself within?

IW: For thirty years I worked as an instructor in art history so intellectual labour was an essential part of my artistic identity. Naturally I was inspired by the theoretical tendencies of conceptual art, and also performance art. In the 70s I created some photographic works in which myself and other artist friends act out tableaus of historical paintings. In the early 80s I created works in which I present an image of myself as a conceptual artist, just reading and writing alone in the studio. I wanted to present “thinking” as a form of “work”, something grounded in the actuality of my physical presence. But these were ironic because in fact my conceptual practice was also simultaneously deeply embedded in the material practice of painting.

NC: The 70’s works are great, and were shown at the Kunsthalle Zurich in 2008. This period of semiotic works seemed like a way for you to break down constructs of contemporary image making, and also in popular culture. But they also seem quite personal, as in the images your friends are models, the North Vancouver Mudflat squat you live in is pictured and so forth, were the images that you were making also trying to be autobiographical?

IW: The great thing about photography is its ability to pictorially record those transitory moments of our lives. It is a witness to the world, and by representing the world as an image I can reference the subjects of the world expressively. It is also intensely personal insofar as my eye is a direct extension of the lens of the camera. I stand literally behind each image, except of course in those images in which I appear, such as in the “At Work” series. Like the direct mark of a painterly gesture, I like to show that the photograph can also register our “persona” as a direct image, an image of the self, and thus our “subjectivity”. I think of the making of a work of art as a kind of “performance”, and as an artist I play the role both of the producer and actor. The viewing of a work of art in public is also a form of performance, the performance of appreciation and judgment.
NC: If you believe that making of a work of art is a kind of “performance” and knowing that many of the images you capture have a staging involved with them, also in the series Masculin/Féminin you use appropriated images of actors from Jean-Luc Godard’s film, how influential is film and cinema to your work?

IW: When I speak of “performance” I intend it to be understood metaphorically, as the way we act out our lives, then reflect upon it artistically. Nevertheless cinema is the paramount medium for picturing the world and it has had a tremendous influence on the evolution of modern art over the past century. As you note, I have made specific references to cinematic models in my work. In the 70s and early 80s, I made short 16mm films and then constructed photographic assemblages with still images taken from these films.

But frankly, my work is more inspired by the film still, as a fragment of time taken from a narrative continuum, than from the dramatic flow of cinematic language. So therefore I have to say that my relation to cinema is relatively indirect. I look at cinema from the outside, unlike that of artists like Stan Douglas, for instance, who has developed an amazing body of work that pushes the boundaries of cinematic narrative from inside the medium.

NC: The film still then freezes the narrative to create a suspended state for reflection. You use this kind of method in your series Magazine Piece where you mount one full magazine on the wall so all pages are viewed like a film strip. You’re using the magazine like a ready-made, but changing the common formula of how a magazine is usually read, is this to create a leaner assemblage for the viewer to make the image sequence into a narrative reading?

IW: Yes in the 70s I did some very large works with photographic stills assembled in a linear sequence over 20 meters long that used a cinema-like montage. These linear structures were at the time a way that I was able to build scale out of smaller photographic elements. This opened up possibilities of a sequential readings of images that also resonated with issues in film theory and semiotics that were discussed in the 70s.

NC: You mentioned you were an educator for many years, and I recall you once telling me that you had the opportunity to invite guest lectures to speak in Vancouver including Dan Graham, Jack Goldstein and Barbara Kruger to name a few, how did you first come upon conceptual art and when did your practice begin to turn in this direction?

IW: Conceptual Art was very much discussed in Vancouver in the 60s and remains so today. I was a student of Iain Baxter of N.E. Thing Co. and he was very much an influence on the beginnings of conceptual art in the Vancouver scene. Lucy Lippard did one of her “numbers” shows at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1970 and Doug Christmas did exhibitions with Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner. And Christos Dikeakos curated a conceptual photography show in 1969 that featured photographic work by the major conceptual artists as well as Vancouver artists. I was teaching contemporary art history at the University of BC at the time and so participated both as an artist and as an academic. And of course Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham and others were there at the time and made some terrific work. I think that it was my intellectual interests that drew me to conceptual art. But I wanted to ground these conceptual aspects in a representation of social and political issues and thus exploited the referential potential of photography to do so. So I developed a blend of semiotic and formal abstract strategies in such works as Intersection 1970 and Pan-Am Scan also of 1970. I think that I coined the term “photoconceptual” soon after to describe this specific practice that was actually global and not just regional. In fact I think that I might have borrowed the term from Peter Wollen, the British critic.

NC: Over your career you have had many great essays written about your work, you have also given significant written contributions to your discourse, how important do you think it is for artists to write about their work and ideas?

IW: It certainly is important to me but I do not assume that it would be for others. I have always had an interest in writing, speaking, thinking - and intellectual and academic activities in general. And art history and theory are fascinating subjects. And the fact that I taught art history for thirty years made this an essential part of my life. Even though I retired from teaching...
twenty years ago I still constantly research these subjects for the pure pleasure of it as much as anything else. Art is constantly changing and I like to keep informed. And as an artist I contribute to the ongoing dialogue through my work, which is in effect a demonstration of my concepts, and through selfreflective commentaries I am able to clarify my intentions to myself as well as others.

IW: I travel mostly to attend and install exhibitions of my work and to maintain contact with the galleries that represent me. I work constantly so I inevitably also draw inspiration from wherever I am. And when I travel I like to take a corner of my hotel room, usually a table near a window, and turn it into my studio, my personal space to work on my art. I download photographs of my environment then create studies or maquettes for possible future works from these smaller works on paper. I then also photograph this work in progress in the hotel room and from this I create what I call my “hotel series”, which are smaller paintings that offer an intimate peek into my work process, to turn a personal space into a public image. These images of studies of future works that appear in the hotel series also create a complex cross-referencing of works within works. I like a finished work to be reflected in its origins, the beginning of an idea.

NC: Your studio is in Vancouver, and this is where I assume most of the work is physically made, but you also travel a significant part of the year, setting up places to work in Europe and just bring a camera and drawing instruments. Your work seems to have a keen interest in the geographies of space, like the studio, political demonstrations, urban environments, and so forth. How important to your practice is working away from your Vancouver studio?

IW: I have had a long connection to Paris as a city, first for the inspiration that I have derived from its artistic and literary history, but also for the fact that it has my favorite hotel, the Hotel de Nice. And since it is relatively inexpensive I can afford to stay there for extended periods and use it as a studio away from home. I first exhibited work in Paris there in 1973. I have had representation by galleries there since the late 1980s and for a few years had a studio there. I have work in many public and private collections in France. Paris is my second city. It feeds my work in a different way than Vancouver. But mostly I feel at home there. I like the people, the language, the streets, the landscape. It is an amazing place.

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IW: The fact that the history of visual art is preserved and presented in the museums of the world makes them essential to cultural memory. These institutions help to define our identity. I see part of my task as an artist is to contribute works of art that shape this identity and keep it in tune with the changing times. My works are a personal and expressive witnessing of the present that can then communicate to people in the future. Many of my works are specifically scaled for the space of the museum. I see the space of the museum as a public theater for the contemplation of visual art.

NC: You have mentioned galleries a few times, and in your work there is an interest in the space where art is to be viewed by a public, for instance your series In The Museum features many well-known museums internationally, what is your interest in these kinds of institutions?

IW: The Hotel series is often taken from a window of a Hotel you frequent in Paris every year, I understand that you take inspiration from the deconstructionist philosophies of Roland Barthes and the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé, what is your attraction to France and the desire to visit so frequently?