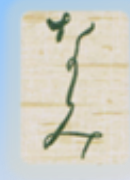


LAUGHING  
MOUNTAIN  
COMMUNICATIONS INC.



# ***Picture Start***

**How a small group of artists  
launched an unlikely city into the fine  
art stratosphere...**

**A One-Hour Television Documentary**

**Written by Ric Beirsto and Harry Killas**

**Directed by Harry Killas and Produced by Ric Beirsto**

**Press Kit**

**[www.laughingmountain.ca](http://www.laughingmountain.ca)**

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## **PICTURE START**

### **Synopses**

#### **Short**

The members of the so-called 'Vancouver School' are the biggest art stars to ever come out of Canada, yet they remain little known to many Canadians. **Picture Start** tells the remarkable—and unlikely—story of the emergence and rise of the original generation of this esteemed group—Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Ian Wallace, offering insight into how and why their ascent occurred in a city until recently known more for its surrounding forests than its artists.

#### **Medium**

The members of the so-called 'Vancouver School' are the biggest art stars to ever come out of Canada, yet they remain little known to many Canadians. **Picture Start** tells the remarkable—and unlikely—story of the emergence and rise of the original generation of this esteemed group—Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham and Ian Wallace. They met in the '60s, formed the most uniquely talented rock band in Canadian history (*the UJ3RK5*), then went on to individually achieve unprecedented international success in contemporary art. **Picture Start** draws back the curtain on this extraordinary set of artists, offering insight into how and why their ascent occurred in a city until recently known more for its surrounding forests than its artists.

#### **Long**

Berlin-based curator and critic Dieter Roelstraete says this about the Vancouver art scene today:

*“People who matter from all over the world continue to go to Vancouver to see what’s going on there. It has the highest concentration of artists for a city of its size anywhere in the world. If you went to Cologne or Glasgow or Mexico City in the 1990s, it’s like that right now in Vancouver. When people think of artists in America, they think of Vancouver right off the top. Without question, it’s the finest place in North America for art.”*

A small group of student-artists—chief among them **Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Rodney Graham**—met in Vancouver in the late '60s, and from there went on to vault Vancouver from a small town to a city at the leading edge of the contemporary art world. **Picture Start**, an hour-long documentary for Bravo! and Knowledge Network, explores how and why this remarkable emergence

occurred, presenting the key artists, their work and the supporting players, as well as the events which make up the history of what has been called the 'Vancouver School.'

These original members of the 'Vancouver School' are the biggest international 'art stars,' to ever come out of Canada—bigger than the Group of Seven, more international than the Quebec Abstract Expressionists Riopelle and Borduas. And yet their story is a mystery to many people in Canada, with the main players unknown, and the forces that conspired to produce such a phenomenon both hotly contested and not well understood.

**Picture Start** addresses this lack of knowledge or appreciation, offering answers to the critical questions as to how these artists grew together as friends, formed a New Wave band that received a recording offer from a major record label, turned it down, then continued on to change the Vancouver art scene forever, and the medium of photography in the process. They launched an unlikely city into the fine art stratosphere.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Picture Start** is produced by **Ric Beirsto** (*Mixed Blessings, Code Green Canada*) of **Laughing Mountain Communications**, and directed by **Harry Killas** (*Superkids, Stand-Up Samurais*). Beirsto and Killas are the writers, **Danny Nowak** shot most of the documentary, **Rafi Spivak** edited, and **Dennis Burke** composed the original music for the program. In addition to Vancouver, shooting took place in New York, Ontario, Paris, Barcelona and Dresden.

## **BACKGROUND INFO on the Artists and Their Work**

### **Ian Wallace “*The Mentor*”**

Wallace was born in England in 1943, but grew up in West Vancouver. He was interested early in music as well as art, and knew of and was connected to the older generation of West Vancouver painters, such as Jack Shadbolt and Gordon Smith. He first exhibited in 1965.

Wallace earned an MA in Art History from UBC in 1968, teaching at UBC and then the Vancouver School of Art (now the Emily Carr University of Art + Design) until 1998. His course on contemporary art, called *Art Now*, was one of the earliest to introduce the art of the recent past into the art history curriculum, effectively demonstrating to his students that a contemporary artist should be engaged in both art history and in an active contemporary debate.

Rodney Graham describes Wallace’s course this way: “It was a real scene, unlike anything I got in the English departments. The art world seemed romantic, exciting.” Says Robert Linsley, Professor at the University of Waterloo and currently completing a book on the history of art in British Columbia: “The effect of Wallace’s courses and his visitors program cannot be overestimated for the effect they had on the art scene in Vancouver throughout the seventies and eighties.”

In the eighties Wallace also introduced a History of Media course that brought printmaking, photography and film together with painting as a single domain of images. Linsley again: “While this seems unremarkable now, at the time it was a very progressive step.”

It is Wallace who coined the term, “photoconceptualism,” meaning “photography that came out of conceptual art. It was a branch of photography that didn’t derive from previous fine art photography. Wallace is quick to add that, “It’s important to note that Jeff Wall [who rejects the label] comes out of reacting against conceptual art with a more intellectual approach.” Wallace is also comfortable with the tag “Vancouver School,” while his cohorts by and large are not.

Wallace was one of the first to see the possibilities for large-format photography and has developed a picture idiom that combines monochrome painting with documentary photos. Unlike the others of the Vancouver School, until very recently Wallace’s practice has remained underexposed in Europe.

*The Summerscript* (1974), *The Idea of the University* (1990) and *Clayoquot Protest* (1993) are three seminal works that lay bare formal relations between

avant-garde painting and photography, and test the communicative and ideological limits of art production.

Wallace's latest work combines casual street photography and solid blocks of paint on large-format canvases. Now age 66, he says, "I've been able to evolve a language, a signature style. People can see my work and know who did it. Of course, the challenge remains to produce interesting and relevant work, to be constantly moving forward, opening yourself up to new possibilities. So a signature style, but some edgier work... with fissures...possibilities."



Ian Wallace

Detail, *Clayoquot Protest (August 9, 1993)*, 1993-1995

### **Jeff Wall "The Master"**

Jeff Wall is one of the most acclaimed and influential artists of his generation; the consensus in the art world being that he is among the top ten most important artists working today. "Only once a century does an artist of Wall's significance appear," says curator Patrik Andersson.

Growing up on Vancouver's west side, Wall was a bright kid who showed a keen interest in art, specifically painting. During a trip with his family to the Seattle World's Fair in 1962 when he was 14, he saw important abstract paintings for the first time and found the experience "overwhelming." Back in Vancouver he immediately began painting 18-foot canvasses.

Wall has a quiet manner, lucid intelligence and quick curiosity about surfaces, images, and ideas. The reticent style can be deceiving though. His abilities as

commentator on art rival his as creator, and he has been known to mercilessly dissect artists and critics whom he disdains.

While on vacation in Spain, what Wall would later describe as “a pretty darn good idea” came to him—he could import the grandeur of Western painting into the contemporary practice of photography. He could do so by essentially employing the techniques of modern moviemaking to create the work, then by employing a technique of modern advertising—the light box—to present it. It was an idea absolutely key to his success, soon placing him firmly within the tradition of great western art. And so a work like *Picture for Women* directly references *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by Édouard Manet (see below).



Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979



Edouard Manet, *Bar in the Folies-Bergere*, 1881-82

Wall's early works were informed by working class politics and art history, but lately his work seems to be more conditioned by the traditions of art photography.

In some of his giant color transparencies, mounted on light boxes, the scene has been created through the conventional manipulation of objects or individuals in real time and real space. In this sense, Wall works as a film director might, using sets, lighting, and camera angles to stage a narrative or effect an illusion. These days Wall is making photographic art works that are very small, in limited editions, and also very large. He is rumoured to have made his last light box.

He also recently completed building a large studio on the outer edges of the downtown east side, fitted out with the latest digital and photochemical processing machines, a studio warehouse production space with 30-foot ceilings, and a group of assistants, many of whom are either established or up and coming artist-photographers in their own right. Says Christos Dikeakos: "The Wall Studio is an incubator of talent. Scott MacFarland, Owen Kidd, Evan Lee, Mike Grill, Adam Harrison, Steve Waddell have all worked there."

Currently, Wall says that he is just "drifting" from piece to piece, without a grand plan in mind. He continues to explore what he terms "near documentary" photography, which results in "pictures whose subjects were suggested by something I saw, and that I tried to reconstruct and represent as precisely as I could...."

In the fall of 2008 Jeff Wall had his first show in Vancouver in 18 years. This after a year of triumphant one-man shows in the world's most prestigious galleries—the Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco.

### **Rodney Graham "*The Mad Genius*"**

In sharp contrast to Wall and Wallace, Graham was born in the village of Abbotsford, 90 km east of Vancouver, where his father was manager at a logging mill. Among Rodney's most vivid early memories are the feature films his father projected on a pull-up screen in a lumber camp cookhouse.

His family moved to Vancouver in 1964, where Rodney attended high school, finding it "completely repressive." He enrolled at UBC in 1971, intending to study literature, but fell under the spell of Ian Wallace. Jeff Wall soon too became a mentor and supporter of Graham's art.

Graham is a natural musician. He began playing in garage bands while in high school, continued with music until 1982, when broke, he sold his guitar. He didn't resume playing on a regular basis until 1995 when he formed the group *Volumizer*.

His art involves photography, film and video, text, music and sculpture. He explores modes of perception, in particular altered states of perception, and

themes of location. Large-scale photographs of upside-down trees show the world from inside a camera, where things naturally appear topsy-turvy.

Art historian Patrik Andersson summarizes Graham's work neatly when he says, "Rodney's work is all about trips, about getting lost. He is trying to wake you up. He is a true anarchist and refuses to become fixed to anything." This may explain Graham's current status as a 'shape shifter,' a true conceptual artist who masterminds the many projects he creates supported by an army of technicians.

Graham often appears in his own work, and adopts the guise of various personas. In *The Talented Amateur* (itself a send-up of Jeff Wall's staged lightbox images), Graham presents himself in the work as a second-rate modernist artist of the 1950s, "extending his persona of a macho but limp intellectual," says Andersson.

Currently Graham is at work on various works, including paintings. "And he's never really painted before," adds Andersson. "He continues to adopt the classic strategies of the avant-garde: he finds things that no one is paying attention to, well-known clichés, and then he subverts them." "The art world has become more like Rodney," says David MacWilliam, Dean at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. "He's a madman, an eccentric, a chameleon, a genius. Who knows where his art will take him? He's totally unpredictable. I have every confidence that his best work is yet to come."



Rodney Graham

*Dance!!!!*, 2008

Two painted aluminum lightboxes with transmounted chromogenic transparencies  
Overall dimensions: 107" x 138"

## Also Appearing in *Picture Start...*

**Iain Baxter** has been pursuing constant artistic themes ever since his arrival in Vancouver in 1964: a concern for ideas (how to think about art); for commercial systems and everyday objects; for the way we inhabit, treat and think about the environment; and for an art free of polish, taste or any arcane reference. He has been said to have been influential in both positive and negative ways. Wallace recently cited him as an influence on his late '60s monochromes, whereas Roy Arden and others have reacted against "...the 'ha ha,' the west coast style, the art as lifestyle movement promoted by the Western Front, the anti-intellectual and the anti-serious. We believed that art was a legitimate form of knowledge, a serious pursuit like poetry and philosophy."

**Christos Dikeakos** is a photographer and curator who has been at the centre of the Vancouver School since its very beginning. It was Christos who photographed the legendary *Glue Pour* staged by Robert Smithson near UBC in 1970, and he has remained good friends with all members until today. His photographs depict the urban landscape in Vancouver over almost four decades, examining the city's transformation, and the separation of the individual from the past as the past is displaced by successive waves of development. Dikeakos speaks passionately about the early days of photoconceptual art, starting in the '60s with Wall and Wallace as they tried to "de-centre the romance of the artist" by exploring collage, the ready-made, and photographs developed at the drugstore, then blown up to four-feet-by-six feet. "The snapshot was the original, the everyday, the everyman. The anti-aesthetic that had an aesthetic."

**William Gibson**, the famed sci-fi author was briefly a part of the *UJ3RK5*, has been a constant firsthand witness to the emergence of these artists, and remains a trenchant observer of Vancouver society and culture.

**Robert Linsley** is an artist currently teaching at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. He's an old friend of Rodney Graham's and is working on a book on the history of art in BC.

**David Wisdom** was a long-time CBC broadcaster and a charter member of the *UJ3RK5*. He lived with Wall and Wallace during their incubative sojourn in London.

Art historian **Jean-François Chevrier**, from L'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, included Vancouver artists in his 1989 show of photography in Cologne, and is generally credited with putting Vancouver on the map internationally as a centre of avant-garde art-making.

**Peter Galassi**, Director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography, and the author/editor of books on Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, Lee Friedlander, Henri Cartier-Bresson and others, curated the one-man Jeff Wall show for MOMA New York and San Francisco.

**Scott Watson** is the Director/Curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, and Professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at UBC. He is the author and curator of many books and exhibitions, including *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists*.

**Claudia Beck and Andrew Gruft** are a lively married couple, Vancouver-based, and long-time, highly successful collectors of contemporary art. Their Nova Gallery, though a commercial failure, was pivotal to the introduction and development of the work of the Vancouver School of artists.

## **A CHRONOLOGY of Events Which Provides the Context for Our Story...**

**1966** Founding of the N.E. Thing Company Co. by Iain and Ingrid Baxter. They enjoy a stellar rise to national fame with wild, innovative, sometimes subversive work that includes *Bagged Place*, a plastic-wrapped environment installed at the UBC Gallery, *A Portfolio of Piles*, a photo project taking in 59 different sites across the Lower Mainland, and most notably, an installation at the National Gallery in Ottawa which transforms the Gallery's ground floor into a fully detailed corporate office. Baxter is the first to use the 'light box' technique later made famous by Jeff Wall, and undoubtedly influences both Wall and Ian Wallace, but Wall eventually rejects Baxter's work as insufficiently "serious."

**1967** Ian Wallace, 24, begins teaching at UBC, and Jeff Wall, 21, arrives as an M.A. student. They become part of an "exciting constellation of artist-intellectuals, both students and faculty, who gathered at the University in those years." Wallace has been keenly attuned to the emergence of conceptual art in the late '60s, especially in America, and especially to the appearance of photography in that art. He commutes to New York to bring in artists like Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, who exert a profound influence on both men.

**1969** *Photoshow* is curated by Christos Dikeakos, while still a student at UBC. Wall and Wallace are pursuing minimalism, Wallace by painting featureless monochromes, and Wall by creating a clear varathane rectangle on the floor of Vancouver's Bau-Xi Gallery. Wall soon discovers that, "There was no place to go beyond that."

**1970** Wall creates *Landscape Manual*, a work combining text and snapshots taken from inside a car. It's included in *Information*, a groundbreaking conceptual art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Wall has his 'calling card' for the art world, but completes no more work for the next seven years. Wall and Wallace move to London. Wallace produces *La Melancolie de la rue*, an important transitional work in what he will come to call "photoconceptualism."

**1973** Wall and Wallace return to Vancouver, begin work with Rodney Graham on a film project that is to have full-blown theatrical feature production values. The project is ultimately abandoned, but Wallace later uses stills from the film to create a panorama of sequential images seventy feet in length titled *The Summer Script*. Wall leaves to take up a teaching post at NSCAD in Halifax, a milieu at the time rich in artistic impulse, and where he makes a number of important professional connections.

**1974** Wall returns to Vancouver to teach at SFU. Graham produces *75 Polaroids*, his first photographic work, consisting of 75 Polaroid images made with a flash at night in a forested area on the suburban fringes of Vancouver.

**1977** While vacationing in Spain, Wall is awed by the Prado Museum's Velázquezes and Goyas, then has an epiphany while looking at the back-lit advertising boxes lining Madrid streets.

After Graham's camera is stolen on a trip to Rome, he makes *Rome Ruins* with a pinhole camera he constructs from 126 mm film cassettes, glue, a bottle cap, and the lining from his shaving kit.

**1978** Wall, now "in a hurry," creates *Destroyed Room*, his first light box, and displays it at 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue's Nova Gallery, the first gallery in Vancouver dedicated to the art of photography. The gallery later closes, but *Destroyed Room* almost immediately begins Wall's artistic ascendancy.

Wall, Wallace and Rodney Graham form the *UJ3RK5*, "the most uniquely talented lineup ever to form a Canadian band." They are part of a thriving local punk music scene, but play their first gig at the Helen Pitt Gallery. The band records some original tunes, and Polygram Records is intrigued enough to offer them a contract. The *UJ3RK5* do the unheard of and say no thanks, leading to a breakup of the band.

**1981** Wall debuts in Europe when he is included in *Westkunst*, a show curated by Kaspar Koenig, an important critic Wall met while teaching in Halifax.

**1983** The Vancouver Art Gallery moves to new premises and opens with a BC retrospective show. Wall declines to participate, citing incompetent curatorship.

**1984...** Wallace, Wall, Graham and Ken Lum form the centre of a series of evening 'salons' held at La Bodega in Vancouver, where ideas and art are hotly contested. Grad students like Roy Arden and Arni Haraldsson are a part of the scene.

**1986** Graham's *Two Generators* is presented at the 49<sup>th</sup> Gallery in New York, and comes to the attention of Ken Lum and the Rudiger Schottle Gallery in Berlin. Graham travels to Rome to attend an art show of friend Robert Linsley and is fired from his 14-year part-time job in the liquor distribution system when he returns.

**1988** Wallace has his first solo show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, curated by Christos Dikeakos.

**1989** Jean-François Chevrier coins the term 'Vancouver School' when he includes the work of Wall, Wallace and Arden in his massive and influential *PhotoKunst* show in Stuttgart.

**1990** Wall has his first solo show at the Vancouver Art Gallery. He is at work on *Dead Troops Talk*, a major tableau that some will consider his *Guernica*.

**1996** Wall is offered and accepts a teaching position in Berlin, where he is better known than in his hometown and country. Shortly after his arrival, a student rejected by the school pulls a gun in his presence. Wall immediately resigns and returns to Vancouver.

**1997** Rodney Graham's international reputation is suddenly made when *Vexation Island*, a 9-minute 35 mm/video loop, is selected to premiere at the Venice Biennale.

**2005** The *Intertidal* show opens in Antwerp, a major survey of the work done by the artists affiliated with the 'Vancouver School.' Once again Wall refuses to participate.

**2007** Wall has solo shows at the MOMA, New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the MOMA in San Francisco, and the Tate Modern in London. Roy Arden has a mid-career retrospective at the VAG. Two museums in Stuttgart present a comprehensive exhibition of the works of Stan Douglas within a space covering 4,000 square metres, and encompassing fourteen video and film installations, plus numerous photographs. Wall is made an Officer of the Order of Canada.

**2008** Wall has his VAG show.

## **BIOS:**

### **WRITER AND PRODUCER - RIC BEAIRSTO**

**RIC BEAIRSTO** is an award-winning writer/director/producer who was a founding partner in 1980 with The Hy Perspectives Media Group Inc. where he produced a string of successful television documentaries, including *Walking in Pain*, set within an Aboriginal drug and alcohol treatment centre, and *A Life of Independence*, about severely handicapped men leaving an institution to live independently. More recently, Ric produced *Stand-Up Samurais*, an hour-long documentary about stand-up comics touring the small towns of western Canada, and *Superkids*, about the rarefied world of gifted children, both for CBC Newsworld. He acted as Executive Producer on *My Mother, My Hero*, a 13-part series for Shaw TV about the relationships between survivors of the Holocaust and their children, and on *Code Green Canada*, a six-part 'green' home reno series for CBC.

Ric has also written and directed extensively in the area of TV drama and docudrama, including *Close to Home*, a feature-length docudrama broadcast by the CBC, and *Eye Level*, a dramatic mini-series broadcast by a consortium of six different Canadian broadcasters, and the teen series *Madison*. He recently completed production on *Dark Pines* a docudrama for CHUM TV about the mysterious death of Tom Thomson, the famed Canadian landscape painter. As well, Ric was creator, head writer, director and producer on *Mixed Blessings*, a comedy/drama series which ran for four seasons on APTN.

### **WRITER AND DIRECTOR - HARRY KILLAS**

**HARRY KILLAS** is a Canadian director, writer and producer who has lived and worked in the United States, Canada and Europe. His dramatic films have been screened at several international festivals including Bilbao, Toronto, Palm Springs, Clermont-Ferrand, Oberhausen, Torino and Vancouver. His documentaries have been broadcast by or produced with the BBC, NHK, CBC, CHUM, Knowledge Network, and CTV. Recent credits include *Aristotle's Lagoon* and *Superkids*, both television documentaries. Currently, he is in post-production on *Greek to Me*, a comedic feature-length documentary-drama hybrid that delves into the history of his family and its Greek identity. Harry Killas is a graduate of Stanford University and New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Harry resides in Vancouver where he is Associate Professor of Media Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

## **CINEMATOGRAPHER - DANNY NOWAK**

**DANNY NOWAK** began his career as a young maverick filmmaker based in Vancouver, British Columbia. He made his first film in 8mm at age 13, then went on to excel professionally behind the camera, eventually shooting a multitude of projects around the world.

In recent years he has served as Director of Photography on many TV movies and over 20 feature films, including Tristar's *The Big Hit*, Neil Simon's *The Goodbye Girl* and Bruce McDonald's *Hard Core Logo*. A patriot of Canadian Cinema, Danny is devoted to the development of both indigenous and international film art.

His many awards include a 2006 Gemini Award for Best Cinematography in a TV Drama for *Love Crimes of Gillian Guess*; and a 2007 CSC award for Best Cinematography in a TV Drama for *Dragon Boys*.

## **EDITOR - RAFI SPIVAK**

**RAFI SPIVAK** was born in Lithuania in 1968 and immigrated with his parents to Israel in 1975. In Israel Rafi studied Philosophy and Psychology, and then completed a B.Sc. in Mathematics and Computer Science. After several years of unfulfilling work as a software engineer Rafi decided to follow his lifelong dream and began film studies in Tel-Aviv.

In 2000 Rafi immigrated to Canada and landed in Vancouver with his wife Noa. The same year he went to Vancouver Film School and completed the film program there. In the film school his passion for editing and documentary became apparent and upon completion of the program Rafi began working as an assistant editor on several documentary films.

He soon became an award-winning editor with over 10 years' experience editing documentaries, lifestyle and drama. His credits include over 20 hours of television programs, and experience as a story editor for lifestyle programs and documentary films. Rafi also has been teaching film for the past seven years at UBC, Langara College, Emily Carr University, and Simon Fraser University.

## **COMPOSER - DENNIS BURKE**

**DENNIS BURKE** is an internationally recognized, multi-award-winning composer and sound designer for film and television. With over 100 titles to his credit, his work can be seen regularly on television and at film festivals, commercial

theatres, and galleries throughout the world. Dennis has been a professional musician for the last 30 years, performing throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

Dennis' research interests centre on acoustic communication, psychoacoustics, and the dynamic relationships of sound with the moving image.

Since 1987 Dennis Burke has been an Associate Professor in Media Arts at Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver where he has also served as Associate Dean of Curriculum, Degree Programs. Among his many activities at ECU Dennis has developed a multifaceted sound program consisting of series of courses that investigate the creative possibilities of sound in Media Arts, Design, and Visual Art practice. Dennis is also a faculty member at the Dodge College of Film and Media Arts, Chapman University.

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