

Jeff Wall, Museum Photography and Museum Prose

Julian Stallabrass

[‘Museum Photography and Museum Prose’, *New Left Review*, no. 65, September-October 2010, pp. 93-125.]

The status of photography in the museum has changed utterly over the last twenty years.¹ What had been a marginalised, minor and irregularly seen medium has become one of the major staples of museum display, and has taken its place alongside painting in terms of scale, sophistication and expense. The defence of photographic work in criticism and art history has acquired much of the weight, portentousness and high seriousness that were once reserved for painting. This extraordinary development raises various questions: what has the museum done to photography in this accommodation (as well as vice versa)?² how has it been framed, literally and conceptually?; what are its viewers encouraged to think about it, and how?; has there emerged a form of photography, distinct from the mass of photographic production, that it is worth calling ‘museum photography’? One way to get a hold on these questions is to examine the remarkable career of Jeff Wall.

Wall is one of the most prominent photographic artists on the contemporary art scene, and indeed one of the most successful artists working in any medium. His sixtieth birthday was marked by his largest retrospective yet in the vast spaces of the Schaulager, Basel, and was followed by a sequence of exhibitions in premier art spaces around the world (including the New York MoMA, Tate Modern, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Guggenheim Berlin), and the publication of a catalogue raisonné of his photographic work to date, along with a collection of his writings.³ But what is striking is not merely the production of the standard literature that would surround the reputation of any successful artist, but the degree to which his work attracts academic attention. A special issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* was devoted solely to its examination.⁴ In a special issue of *Art History* about ‘Photography After Conceptual Art’, no fewer than three of the ten articles carried substantial discussions of Wall.⁵ He holds a particular attraction for prominent white, male art historians of an age similar to his own, receiving sympathetic treatment from such figures as Hans Belting, Jean-François Chevrier and Michael Newman.⁶ More recently, Wall has been taken as the major, and paradigmatic, figure of Michael Fried’s attempt to refashion the discussion of museum photography in the light of the themes that have sustained his writings since the 1960s:

¹ I would like to thank Malcolm Bull, Sara Knelman and William Wood who offered comments on a draft of this essay from which I have benefitted greatly, along with the NLR editorial team. I also gave some of this material in lecture and seminar form to the Department of Art and Art History, and the Humanities Center at Stanford University, and have benefitted from the conversations in both places.

² The latter question was the subject of Douglas Crimp’s well-known analysis, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1993.

³ Theodora Vischer/ Heidi Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, Schaulager, Basel/ Steidl, Göttingen 2005; Jeff Wall, *Selected Essays and Interviews*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 2007.

⁴ Steve Edwards, ed., *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007: Jeff Wall Special Issue [henceforth *OAJ*].

⁵ Diarmuid Costello/ Margaret Iversen, eds., ‘Photography After Conceptual Art’, *Art History*, vol. 32, no. 5, December 2009.

⁶ Hans Belting, *Looking Through Duchamp’s Door: Art and Perspective in the Work of Duchamp. Sugimoto. Jeff Wall.*, Walter König, Cologne 2009; Jean-François Chevrier, *Jeff Wall*, Hazan, Paris 2006; Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona 2007.

theatricality and absorption.⁷ Wall is the ideal figure to examine here, not merely because he was one of the first prominent museum photographers but because his work has been most successful in generating a museum prose of the photograph.

Wall is unusual, among major artists, both in having academic training at doctoral level in art history, and in not migrating to one of the great international art centres, remaining in his native Vancouver, which has its own distinct and fertile art scene (which counts Stan Douglas and Rodney Graham among its other stars). Through teaching and example, Wall has had a great influence over younger generations of the city's artist-photographers. Vancouver is the stage for most of Wall's photographs, though the attraction is less its beauty and distinctiveness than the way in which it is typical of smaller post-industrial cities that lie beyond the major financial and cultural centres that compete with each other globally.⁸ Wall depicts Vancouver, devoid of charismatic sights, as a place of unexceptional urban and suburban vistas in which human figures are carefully disposed. He makes scenes which are often seen as updates of Baudelaire's vision of an art that would capture everyday life, and while the concept of the 'everyday' has certainly shifted in Wall's work over the decades, he remains devoted to producing meticulous and elaborate reconstructions of mundane scenes and incidents.⁹

Wall is best known for his large lightbox transparencies, which are photographic positives or slides encased in shallow metal cabinets, backlit with fluorescent tubes. The technique of backlighting is common in advertising, particularly at bus stops, but is also a magnification of the light-tables found in any professional photographic processor or art history department. The contrast and chromatic vibrancy of the slide greatly exceeds that of any print, and Wall's big pictures have long been among the most immediately impressive weapons in the museum's photographic arsenal: these huge, illusionistic photographs of apparently everyday contemporary scenes are highly readable in the sense that their every element is clearly identifiable, and their combination suggests a narrative. Wall rejects the idea that the lightboxes are in and of themselves critical objects pitched against advertising. Rather, he says, they are 'a supreme way of making a dramatic photographic image'.¹⁰ He was among the first artists in the new wave of museum photographers to realise the spectacular potential of the massive enlargement. Unlike the photojournalists from whose work he draws, Wall uses large format cameras to make big pictures that will withstand close examination. As with academic history or mythological painting, viewers shuttle between standing back to take in the whole scene and moving forward to inspect detail. Even now, when such large-scale photography has become a museum standard, Wall's works offers a distinct combination of world-view, style, technical prowess and manufactured object.

⁷ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2008.

⁸ Dirk Snauwaert: Written Interview with Jeff Wall' (1996), in *Selected Essays and Interviews*, p. 263.

⁹ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon, London 1964.

¹⁰ 'Representations, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: An Interview with Jeff Wall by T.J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner' (1989), in *Selected Essays*, p. 222.



In Wall's most ambitious and complex works, such as *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* of 1993, the image is assembled from very numerous photographic elements, digitally montaged, much as a nineteenth-century history painting would have been brought together from many individual figure studies. (Indeed, Wall's work appears to bear the traces of that technique, showing a slightly awkward interrelation of figures reminiscent of large-scale figure pieces by Ingres, for example.) While art history is invoked in the title, composition, scale and the posing of the figures, pieces such as *Sudden Gust* also have the look of movie stills, or rather of the publicity shots taken on the sets of movies by professional photographers. The area of Vancouver in which Wall has his studio became a major location for film and television shooting from the 1980s, and he drew on the available local resources in making these 'cinematographic photographs'.¹¹ The lightboxes subtly illuminate their viewers, and this, along with their size and the metal framing of their boxes, elicits comparisons with Minimalism, which also sought to give the viewer a bodily experience of proximity to its carefully scaled objects. (This was the basis of Fried's famous critique of the movement, which he thought played too directly and theatrically to the viewer, mugging for the camera as it were, and allowing no room for the absorbed, timeless condition he thought necessary for true aesthetic appreciation.)¹²

'Everyday' Scenes

Most commentators assume that Wall's depictions of everyday life successfully convey some social significance. Yet the exact meaning of his combination of formal, technical and iconographic elements is highly elusive, and has arguably become more so as Wall has

¹¹ I am indebted to William Wood for the point about the film and television industry. The catalogue raisonné divides the work into 'cinematographic' and 'documentary' photographs, and the distinction is about whether the photograph is staged like a movie scene, and not so much about whether elements in the frame are manipulated. See Cliff Lauson, 'Photography as Model', in *OAJ*, p. 173.

¹² Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 10, June 1967, pp. 12-23.

developed the variety of his work through a series of highly considered contrasts. In one sense, Wall's subject matter is of a piece with the standard territory of museum photography: in reaction against the kitschy and suspect power of the snapshot that seizes some dramatic (or worse, decisive) moment, everyday scenes, in which incident is downplayed or absent, are elevated through enlargement to apparently epic significance. Photographs by Andreas Gursky or Thomas Struth, to take two of the most prominent examples, visually dramatise the quotidian, finding (in a considered and conservative paradox) a charismatic visual expression for Weberian disenchantment. The size and expense of these works is far from incidental to their social use. What the museum demanded of photography has been comparable to what it demanded of video—inflation in size and insertion into installation, both pitched against the television screen and the experience of mass media generally, seeking to assure viewers that what art works offer is unlike anything merely reproduced. This is often accompanied by a pompous tendency to insist on its own profundity (a key example here being the work of and the literature about Bill Viola).

To make such monumental photographs without the image becoming noticeably grainy, artists use plate cameras, large boxes which must be supported with a tripod. Large negatives require long focal-length lenses which in turn require small apertures to deliver much depth of focus. Only rarely can such cameras be used to freeze movement, and only when the photographer steps well back from a subject is the whole scene likely to be in focus. As Wall put it in one of his first texts, 'by their unwieldiness and fixity, [these cameras] impose rigid terms on what can be successfully posed in front of them.'¹³ They are well suited to giving a compelling, apparently comprehensive view of the mundane, taken from a distance that is both physical and emotional. Yet Wall's distinctive move was to overcome those restrictions: his first solution to the problem was to pose figures before plate cameras, as in an advertising or fashion studio, simulating action. A second, in more recent digital pictures, has been to take a number of photographs of the same scene at different focus points, and then combine them to produce (say, in a technically challenging forest scene) a depth of focus that would be impossible with analogue means.

These techniques allowed Wall to focus on incident, albeit of a staged kind, and that incident was admitted to the museum because, unlike the uncomfortable interplay of contingency and deliberation in photojournalism and documentary photography, it was entirely in the control of the artist. In Wall's works of the 1980s, the posed figures interacted with one another in ways that suggested social tension and even conflict, and of class, racial and gender concerns: a male foreman shouts at a female garment worker (*Outburst*, 1989); two impoverished-looking women, one carrying a child, walk across a piece of neglected land, the one apparently complaining to or berating the other (*Diatrobe*, 1985); a white man pulls at his eyelid as he passes an Asian man on a Vancouver sidewalk (*Mimic*, 1982); two white cops hold and search a Latino youth who stares out of the picture with a melancholy gaze (*The Arrest*, 1989). In more recent work, of the kind most favoured by Fried, incident is played down, the figures are more often solitary, absorbed in some mundane task, and while their place in the social hierarchy is sometimes made clear (maid, cleaner, migrant worker, draughtsman), the pictures are less about social tension than about the character of their labour.

¹³ Wall, 'To the Spectator, 1979, reprinted in Vischer/ Naef, *Wall*, p. 438.



This combination of epic scale and staged incident is only the most obvious of the distinctive features of Wall's work. Another is its relation to painting in his exploration of pictorial genre, and to making manifestly artificial, often strained, reworkings of traditional pictures in photography. While the works that made Wall's reputation are apparently mundane scenes of everyday life, they are posed in such a way as to evoke early modernist painting, the usual reference points being Courbet and Manet. The awkward posing of the figures and their strange gestures, along with the odd articulation of space could be thought to refer to the crisis in pictorial representation brought about by modernism, and to be a recreation of it for another time and in another medium. There was a point at which Wall was prepared to say that Baudelaire and Manet still had resonance for contemporary society because of the persistence of capitalism itself.¹⁴ As in Manet, the viewer is set up to think that the picture will offer a narrative meaning, when it is in fact indecipherable, and the visible aspects of social alienation are rendered through the way figures occupy a space in relation to one another, and through their play of glances, expressions and gestures, and the details of their clothing and deportment.

¹⁴ 'Representations, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: An Interview with Jeff Wall by T.J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner' (1989), in Wall, *Selected Essays*, p. 208.

Another oddity is the character of Wall's photographic manipulations. It is not that other museum photographers who made large prints in the 1980s onwards did not engage in considerable alteration of their images—in fact it was the usual practice. Richard Avedon, another of the pioneers of massive enlargement, engaged in highly elaborate tonal variation of his prints to make a heightened, stagey version of documentary style. Other art photographers who made early experiments with digital technology did so to highlight the viewer's awareness of the strangeness of these techniques, making morphed combinations of images (Nancy Burson), manifestly collaged hybrid beings (Margi Geerlinks), and using exaggerating pixellation (Michael Ensdorf).¹⁵ Wall, in contrast, used it to stitch photographs together to produce unified, naturalistic scenes that disavowed the technologies that had made them. While photographers have made illusionistic analogue montages from the earliest days of the medium (in the landscape work of Gustave Le Grey, for example, or the complex figure scenes of Oscar Gustav Rejlander), it was highly unusual for an artist to use digital techniques for that purpose in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also odd in the light of Wall's earlier commitment to an art that should reveal its own means. In 1984 he had written of the threat photography had once posed to painting:

Photography reveals its own technical presence within the concept of the picture, and so it reveals the historically new meaning of the mechanised interior of the great spiritual art of painting itself.¹⁶

This was seen as a salutary demystification, so it is all the more strange that when Wall adopted the new techniques in 1991, they were bent to the service of a more effective and invisible emulation of the 'spiritual' art.

Then there is Wall's insistent warfare against photography's mechanical reproduction, a common, indeed standard, artistic technique here carried to an extreme.¹⁷ Many of the major lightbox pieces are made as unique pieces, and the others are made in very small editions.¹⁸ While other major museum photographers make small editions of their largest works, Wall's are smaller still.¹⁹ This restriction of supply may be to insist on the object (as opposed to the image) status of the works. It has an effect on the way the work is viewed, particularly for those art-world types who travel extensively, since their relation to it will be similar to that of a painting: it can only be seen at once place at one time. Wall has also produced relatively little work (the catalogue raisonné lists 120 works over 26 years). Once more, this is not untypical of some museum photographers who produce a small number of meticulously

¹⁵ For an account of early artistic work in digitised photography, see Hubertus v. Amelunxen / Stefan Inlhaut/ Florain Rötzer, eds., *Photography After Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, OPA/ Siemens Kulturprogramm, Amsterdam/ Munich 1996.

¹⁶ Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet' (1984), in *Selected Essays*, p. 78.

¹⁷ For a remarkable account of the consequences of this restriction of mechanical reproduction, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Gardes*, Thames and Hudson, London 1998.

¹⁸ Smaller lightbox pieces have often been made in editions of 2 and 3, and a few in larger editions. There are occasions where very large pieces, such as *Restoration* (1993) which is nearly five metres long, have been made in editions of 2. Most of Wall's later transparencies have also been editions of 2. The pieces described as unique in the catalogue raisonné are not strictly so, since Wall also usually makes an artist's copy. The edition details are listed in Vischer/ Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné*.

¹⁹ Andreas Gursky for example makes even the largest versions of his works in editions of between four and six; Thomas Struth typically ten; Cindy Sherman in her more recent, larger scale work between six and ten.

worked-on images, though again Wall is an outlier. It is, however, far from being the only commercially viable model, as the highly prolix careers of figures such as Nobuyoshi Araki and Wolfgang Tillmans show. A result of the combination of Wall's prominence, low output and low edition sizes is that his work has become very expensive: the dealer price for a large piece being about \$1m.²⁰

Most extraordinarily, Wall was once identified with the Left, and remained so through many of the years of his commercial success. Even in the 1980s, at a time when the tacitly McCarthyite turn of that decade was purging 'political' art from the museums and galleries, he remained both marketable and apparently radical. Indeed, he can be seen as part of a distinguished generation of leftist photographer-theorists, which included Victor Burgin, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and Jo Spence, who also worked as educators, and whose writings transformed the theory and history of photography. While Wall's writing never achieved the prominence of those peers, he did teach in Vancouver universities for many years, and some of his highly intelligent essays on photography circulated among cognoscenti. Yet, now that Sekula and Rosler's radical art has gained renewed currency on the Biennial circuit, in the wake of the rise of the anti-capitalist movements and the war on terror, Wall has adopted a more conservative political position. While it may once have been possible to read his earlier work, with its fragmentary construction of a naturalistic scene, as a model of Lukácsian aesthetics, Wall and most of his recent interpreters are now anxious to forget the taint of radicalism.²¹ As the artist put it in 2005:

I don't like the idea of having extra-aesthetic interest in my subjects, as if I am interested in them socially. When I began, I was under the illusion that I did have those interests. I grew up in the 60s and 70s, amid the counter-culture and the New Left, and I still believe a lot of those things, but they don't really apply to my work. I once thought they applied to my work, but learned that they don't.²²

Questions have been raised about the extent of Wall's radicalism even in the early years. William Wood, who has published much work analysing the Vancouver art scene, argues that the relation that Wall and his associates (including Rodney Graham and Ken Lum) had to avant-garde negativity was a historical and elegiac one, lacking an attacking or activist outlook. There were, at that time in the 1980s, more radical alternatives on offer in Vancouver—including the establishment of artist-run spaces, feminist practices, work on the history of the First Nations, activist video and experimental film.²³ Wall and his associates' preferred a mordant and melancholic pessimism, derived from Critical Theory, particularly the writings of Adorno, that dwelled on political defeat.²⁴ Wall's brilliant and insightful analysis of Conceptual Art (written as neoliberal reaction began to take hold), which laid out the necessary incompleteness of its critique of the business and the institutions of art, and

²⁰ See Arthur Lubow, 'The Luminist', *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 February 2007.

²¹ The point is made in Steve Edwards, 'Poor Ass! (*A Donkey in Blackpool*, 1999)', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, p. 39.

²² Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, Tate Publishing, London 2005, p. 30.

²³ William Wood, 'The Insufficiency of the World', in Dieter Roelstraete / Scott Watson, eds., *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp 2005, p. 71.

²⁴ Wood, 'The Insufficiency of the World', pp. 64-5.

saw it as a movement forged by the defeat of the Left and the narrowing means remaining to radicalism, may also be read as a description of his own position.²⁵

Entrance Requirements

So, as a first sketch of the interaction of these particularities, it may be that Wall's leftism was excused because of other conservative and spectacular elements of his practice, and that its elegiac and historical character was in any case unthreatening. Museums wishing to broaden the social composition of their audiences were attracted to easily legible, large-scale photography that dealt with familiar contemporary social issues. While many left-leaning photographer-artists made relatively cheap, easily reproducible and distributable work, and disregarded traditional artistic skills in favour of educative and dialogic virtues, Wall's work always aspired to the museum, rather than the classroom. While the lightboxes were made using advanced technology, they were also comfortably traditional in their insistent references to art history, picked up in the relation of the figures, their gestures, the lighting, and quite often specific reference to renowned painting of the past. This is Wall writing of the 'Western Picture' before modernism—of Raphael, Dürer, Bellini and other masters:

It is known as a product of a gift, high skill, deep emotion, and crafty planning. It plays with the notion of the spontaneous, the unanticipated. The master picture-maker prepares everything in advance, yet trusts that all the planning in the world will lead only to something fresh, mobile, light, and fascinating.²⁶

This is put with Wall's habitual intelligence and eloquence. It clearly strikes a chord as a description of his own ambition, as well as of the virtues of the old masters too hastily jettisoned in modernism and conceptualism. It was these qualities of familiarity, and above all the apparent assurance in Wall of high seriousness, intense and lengthy labour and the firm belief in quality, that helped position the artist at the head of the wave of museum photography.

It was ironic, if unsurprising, that the charge to bring photography to the museum (via the contemporary art gallery and the Kunsthalle) was led by imitating painting, which had been the failed tactic of the Pictorialists at the end of the nineteenth century. As Walter Benjamin put it, the theoreticians of photography '...undertook nothing less than to legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning.'²⁷ The Pictorialist photographers appealed to the tribunal through the imitation of paint and print surfaces, and the meticulous manipulation of each photograph to individualise it as a unique object, and as an emanation of an artistic sensibility. Wall's lightbox surfaces are unexceptional, except for the high resolution that was to become a cliché, indeed a marker, of museum photography, but the tribunal was satisfied with the denigration of reproducibility in favour of the singular object, and the presence of so many manifestly

²⁵ Jeff Wall, 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel' (1982), in Newman, *Wall*, pp. 265-98, especially pp. 271-2.

²⁶ Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995), in *Selected Essays*, p. 144.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Small History of Photography' (1931), in *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Michael W. Jennings/ Howard Eiland/ Gary Smith, eds., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1999, p. 508.

traditional elements. It is now the standard practice for museum photographers to make frequent and insistent reference to painting and art history, as a way to place their mechanical products firmly within the ambit of high art.



This assurance was furthered by Wall's use of digital montage. It allowed detailed control over every element of the photographic scene, and broke the ironclad association of photography with the recording of contingency. As Wall put it, writing of his first digital picture, *Stumbling Block*, digitisation furthered a 'visual poetry or prose poetry' which conflicts with the indexical aspect of photography.²⁸ While very close readings of paintings in terms of the artist's intentions, and the interplay of a depicted subject and the form of that depiction—the stock-in-trade of art history, the in-house literature of the museum—would be nonsensical if used to describe a snapshot, they can with some plausibility be applied to a photography over which the artist has such great control. From the point of view of the museum, this use of digital technology was an entirely welcome development. The museum's historic suspicion of the photograph had rested on its reproducibility and mechanical character: reproducibility had been dealt with by the traditional method of limiting supply; now mechanism was banished in favour of the hand- (or at least mouse- or digital pen-) worked picture, of which the viewer could never be sure that any fragment was free of the exercise of artistic sensibility. Better still, unlike the kitsch montages of the Victorian era, which too closely emulated painting, the results still looked entirely photographic: a new and hybrid medium had been born.

²⁸ Untitled text in *Binaera*, Musée communal d'Ixelles, Brussels, 1992, reprinted in Theodora Vischer/ Heidi Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, Schaulager, Basel/ Steidl, Göttingen 2005, p. 333.

Medium and Autonomy

It is over the question of medium that one of the controversies about Wall's reputation has been fought. To take the most prominent of his critics, Rosalind Krauss argues that Wall, in his use of the lightbox, invented an artistic medium but never took it seriously, and that to do so would have been difficult since it is so singular and lacks an aesthetic history. In fact, it is so distinct a medium that it can only be practised by one artist.²⁹ Wall's failure here consigns his reworkings of old masters to the level of pastiche.³⁰ Two assumptions underlie this argument, and each may be held up to question: first, that an interrogation of medium is necessary to artistic seriousness. This view has led Krauss, and others of the *October* group, to adopt a hostile attitude to large swathes of contemporary art (for instance, installation) because the concept of medium-specificity, and a critical reflection on it, cannot be easily applied to such work.³¹ Second, that the lightbox counts as a medium, rather than merely being one way of displaying photographic positives, which do have a history, going back to the invention of the Autochrome at the beginning of the last century. In any case, the question of the medium-specific qualities of photography is a complex one: while autonomous modernist painting tended towards abstraction, the attempts to produce an autonomous, medium-centred modernist photography (through the efforts of the f64 group, for example) led through an emphasis on sharp focus, great depth of focus and full tonal range to a fuller description of subjects in the world and an undermining of autonomy. It is unclear which photographic qualities are its essential ones. Wall himself remarks that 'photography's unique properties are contradictory',³² and there are certainly features intrinsic to photography, such as selective focus, converging verticals, lens flare and movement blur, that are largely banished from contemporary fine art photography through adherence to its remarkably strict, if unwritten, conventions.

Yet Krauss' charge has some purchase because for much of his career, Wall made photographs that emulated paintings, and this enslavement of one medium to another may work to the detriment of both. For example, Wall claims to be the inheritor the crisis of the tableau, as exemplified in the work of Manet, in which unity and fragmentation are held in productive tension, the former being an ideal which founders on the expression of social alienation in the latter.³³ However, as Stewart Martin argues, the 'claim to Manet's painting of modern life is precarious, even sophistical', since Manet's unconventional brushwork, disjointed compositions and strange perspectives find no photographic equivalents in Wall, whose works resemble instead the smooth pictorial surfaces of neo-classicism.³⁴ In the transposition from one medium to another, the critical charge of modernist painting, inhering in painterly techniques, is mislaid.

²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, "'...And Then Turn Away?'" An Essay on James Coleman', *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer 1997), p. 8. In fact, other artists have used it, though it is true that none are as identified with it as Wall.

³⁰ Krauss, 'And Then Turn Away?', p. 29.

³¹ See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, London 1999.

³² 'Interview: Arielle Pelenc in correspondence with Jeff Wall', in Thierry de Duve/ Arielle Pelenc/ Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon Press, London 1996, p. 9.

³³ Jeff Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet' (1984), in *Selected Essays and Interviews*, pp. 77-83.

³⁴ Stewart Martin, 'Wall's Tableau Mort', *OAJ*, pp. 126-7.

As if to respond to that charge, in his work since around 1990, Wall has been concerned with exploring the history of photography alongside that of painting (Michael Newman characterises this as a shift in Wall's 'presiding genius' from Manet to Atget),³⁵ making more works that have a documentary (or near-documentary) status, alongside large black-and-white prints some of which play with the limits of perceptibility in sepulchral tones (in a programmatic manner, these dark prints serve as a contrast to the lightbox works in which all is illumined in full detail). The use of black and white has also allowed a reflection on the conventions of the documentary tradition in photography. Nevertheless, the effects should not be over-stated, and Wall's recent work, including the monochrome pictures, is still discussed very largely in terms of painting, as is typical with museum photography, in which the history of photography is regularly downplayed.³⁶

The Digital Medium



Yet it is remarkable that in the lengthy disquisitions about medium in the Wall literature, there is very little discussion of the effects of digitisation. Newman's extended, detailed and sophisticated discussion of medium in Wall barely mentions it.³⁷ Hans Belting also bats away the issue, stating that Wall:

³⁵ Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona 2007, p. 224.

³⁶ See, for example, Craig Burnett, 'Jeff Wall: Black and White Photographs 1996-2007', in *White Cube, Jeff Wall: Black and White Photographs 1996-2007*, London 2007, n.p., in which the works are related to Poussin and Cézanne.

³⁷ Newman, *Jeff Wall*, pp. 161-224.

... does not employ a new photographic technique, but instead “edits” the motif that seems to depict our everyday world in front of the camera, just as we would edit images in Photoshop. That is why his principle did not change when he began to use digital technology.³⁸

The ‘seems’ here could bear more weight than it is given. Both writers follow Wall’s lead in making light of digitisation:

I think the process of deconstructing photography as a rhetoric has reached a point of exhaustion. This line of inquiry did not succeed in providing an alternative to our acceptance of a physical basis for the photographic image. We haven’t progressed beyond where we were when the medium was new, and we won’t.³⁹

On this view, photographs are made by recording light reflecting from surfaces, and that is all there is to it. Yet the labour that goes into the construction of Wall’s major pieces should give us pause. Fried gives a detailed account of the two-year process of making *A View from an Apartment* (2004-5), a visually lush but apparently mundane scene of two young women in a flat, one reading a magazine, the other walking by an ironing board.⁴⁰ This involved renting the place, hiring a model to live there and furnish it, long shooting sessions and the digital combination of various elements, particularly the views through the windows to the city of Vancouver at dusk. With *The Flooded Grave* (1998-2000, the dates themselves are telling) a very complex and lengthy process produced an image both naturalistic and hallucinatory, in which the bottom of a grave is seen as an undersea environment. Wall first combined the background and foreground of the image from two graveyards, then built a tank made from moulds of the dug-out grave to fill with sea creatures, and then went through the very difficult task of digitally stitching together the various elements so that the joins would not show.⁴¹ Wall thinks that even so complex a picture remains indexical since each element is an act of photography, of light reflected onto film.⁴² Surely, here he underestimates his own inventiveness, and the extent to which the ontological character of the medium has changed. In photojournalism, which Wall has often emulated, there is a large measure of chance, and photographers have little control over the image; they can make choices about where to place the camera, when to press the shutter, how to use selective focus, and the focal length of the lens, but most other factors remain beyond their powers of manipulation. This has been the basis for some critics denying that photography can have full status as an aesthetic medium since it is very hard for the viewer to know what was intended and what was incidental.⁴³ Wall’s manipulations are so far-reaching that the viewer is placed in the position of assuming that every element of the scene has been worked on by the artist, either through the selection and manipulation of the object to be photographed, or through digital means.

³⁸ Belting, *Looking Through Duchamp’s Door*, p. 176.

³⁹ ‘The Hole Truth: Jan Tumlir talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*’, in Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2001, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, pp. 56-7.

⁴¹ For a full account of this process, see ‘The Hole Truth: Jan Tumlir talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*’, in Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2001, pp. 150-7.

⁴² ‘The Hole Truth’, p. 154.

⁴³ One notorious statement of this position is Roger Scruton’s essay, ‘Photography and Representation’, in *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, Methuen, London 1983.

Contingency is not entirely abolished but intention saturates every point of the image, just as it does in the photography of advertising, commerce and the public-relations industries. While some Photoshop tools merely simulate traditional darkroom techniques, others perform a wide variety of highly configurable and finely graded alterations over the images, which include features such as sharpening and precise colour control that were unknown in analogue technology. The digital photograph must count, surely, as a new medium—and, if the manipulations are made openly, it may be used to reflect on the relation of straight photography to contingency. Here, though, through their concealment, we are faced with a state of half-photography, in which each surface has been digitally brushed over and bent to the will of the artist. And here, Krauss' charge has real force, both for Wall's practice and for the writings of his supporters, since in both the new medium is denied and concealed.⁴⁴

Museum Prose



In the new wave of Wall literature, and particularly in the grandeur and deportment of the catalogue raisonné, a massive volume that meticulously documents each work that has been admitted into the oeuvre, various suspicions are raised: there is first the implied assumption in the monumental character of the publications and in their heavily garlanded prose that Wall is a great artist, and even on some accounts the saviour of the Western pictorial tradition. Authors strain to deliver an analogue in prose of the aesthetic experience delivered by the photographs, with results both vague and glutinous: pieces are variously described as 'mysterious and lyrical', or offering 'a kind of pictorial amplitude' and producing 'a kind of ravishing luminosity'; or as manifesting Bergsonian duration in which 'cyclical, linear, polar

⁴⁴ In a recent lecture, Wall took the logical next step of denying the importance of the photographic medium, seeing it as merely one of a range of depictive techniques, alongside sculpture, painting and print-making, which stand opposed to conceptual art and its progeny. Jeff Wall, *Depiction, Object, Event: Hermes Lecture 2006*, Stichting Hermeslezing, Hertogenbosch 2006.

or abstract notions of time converge in synchrony'.⁴⁵ In Fried's book, analysis regularly makes way for the mysticism of the timeless engagement with the autonomous picture. Of Wall's photograph of a cleaner washing windows at the reconstruction of Mies van der Rohe's famous Barcelona Pavilion (*Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999*), and the way in which Wall had staged and constructed the scene, Fried writes that it is:

a composition of great pictorial and intellectual sophistication, one that exploits the "magic" of absorption to induce the viewer to accept as verisimilar something that he or she "knows" to be improbable at best...⁴⁶

In an earlier published version of this essay, Fried omitted the quotation marks around the word 'magic' but it is unclear what is salvaged by their addition.⁴⁷ The book is concluded with a long analysis of Wall's reconstruction of a scene from Mishima's tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*, and with a conspicuous piece of Mishima-inspired God-bothering, again centred on timelessness.⁴⁸

A striking feature of this literature is the extraordinary domination of the artist's own writings and interviews. Wall is certainly a highly intelligent commentator on his own work and that of others, but the status of the writings between artist's statement and academic analysis, and the shifts between the two, can be difficult to tie down. Some very sharp analysis of art-historical developments sits alongside passages of a poetic and even mystical character:

... I also like dirty sinks, the soggy abandoned clothes I see in the alley behind my studio all the time, crusted pools of dried liquid and all the other picturesque things so akin to the spirit of photography.⁴⁹

In his earlier writings, Wall cultivates an ingenious, playful bringing together of opposites, in a dialectical or paradoxical conjunction which yield sharply and beautifully expressed phrases, part analysis, part artistic performance: so, for example, the glass office towers of Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson express 'with cold irony and detachment what the city has in fact become: a bad view.' Or: 'the architectural project of the glass house reveals in pure form its historical fate: to live by virtue of its own death.'⁵⁰

Wall's writing is also haunted by a variety of ghosts, once Adornian spectres that summoned and lamented lost political ideals, now art-historical shades that flit in and out of consciousness seeking beauty:

⁴⁵ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, p. 62; Briony Fer, 'Night', in *OAJ*, pp. 80, 77; Rolf Lauter, 'Jeff Wall: Figures and Places', in Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2001, pp. 23-4.

⁴⁶ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Fried, 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday', *Critical Inquiry*, no. 33, Spring 2007, p. 517.

⁴⁸ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, p. 352.

⁴⁹ Wall, 'A Note about Cleaning', (2000), in Theodora Vischer/ Heidi Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, Schaulager, Basel/ Steidl, Göttingen 2005, p. 393.

⁵⁰ Wall, 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel', (1982), in *Selected Writings*, pp. 55, 65.

...there is always something spectral—ghostly—in the generic, since any new version or variant has in it all the past variants, somehow. This quality is a sort of resonance, or shimmering feeling, which to me is an essential aspect of beauty and aesthetic pleasure.⁵¹

The catalogue raisonné reprints many of Wall's texts, both lengthy essays and many shorter texts on individual works which complement the catalogue entries. In a number of elaborate and intelligent framings of the history of avant gardism, modernism, conceptualism and the history of photography, Wall provides a thorough contextualisation of his own work, which is naturally referred to insistently by critics and historians, and rarely escaped from.⁵² He has also given many interviews about his own works. The dominance of that literature is seen in the extent to which it is reprinted in monographs, and the regularity with which it is cited by other writers.⁵³ The manner of those citations is also remarkable for, despite the very marked shifts in Wall's positions over the years, his statements are rarely held up to critical examination but are rather taken as incontrovertible evidence for the interpretation of his pictures. Fried, to take one example, cites Wall frequently and reverently, and since Wall has long had an interest in Fried's writing, even gets to cite Wall citing Fried.⁵⁴

Adrian Rifkin, in a critical essay on Wall, writes of the effect, referring to the Phaidon monograph on the artist, which also reproduces much of Wall's writing:

Wall's own speaking appropriates and fully processes everything that touches it with the effect that the relation of the practices of making and theorising, in the work and around it, make for a monumental closure of which openness, question or uncontrolled readings are nothing more than one of the characteristics of its monumentality. In none too subtle a loop the critical itself emerges as the highest and shared form of value, the commodity offered by the book, and figured in a mutual hollowing out of art and critical discourse.⁵⁵

In the catalogue raisonné, texts by Wall are described as 'primary', while those by other authors are secondary. While the question of what counts as a primary text in the study of contemporary art is a delicate one, the designation here has a sense: it allows us to clearly see Wall's oeuvre as being a unit of text and picture, each dependent on the other.

⁵¹ Interview: Arielle Pelenc in correspondence with Jeff Wall', in Thierry de Duve/ Arielle Pelenc/ Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon Press, London 1996, p. 14.

⁵² These essays include 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel', 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', 'Roy Arden: An Artist and his Models' and "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', all of which may be found in *Selected Writings*.

⁵³ Aside from the catalogue raisonné, many Wall monographs feature the artist's voice prominently: the Phaidon monograph contains a number of Wall's writings; the Lauter volume contains no less than three interviews with Wall, while Newman's recent books also contains Wall's major essays. Thierry de Duve/ Arielle Pelenc/ Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon Press, London 1996; Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2001; Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona 2007.

⁵⁴ Fried, *Why Photography*, p. 38.

⁵⁵ Adrian Rifkin, 'What is a Minor Artist? A first and last note on Jeff Wall at Tate Modern', <http://www.gai-savoir.net/jeffwall.htm>

The Artist Writes



We can briefly map the interrelation of work and prose through various moments in Wall's career to point up the changes. The earliest writings, two lengthy essays on the work of Dan Graham written in 1981 and 1982, were heavily influenced by Adorno, especially as applied to the visual arts through the writings of Benjamin Buchloh.⁵⁶ Here, a profound sense of cultural pessimism, defeatism, irony and detachment is lightly leavened by holding out the possibility that artistic models that juxtapose elements normally forbidden may still hold a critical charge. Similarly in his 1984 essay on Manet, the idea that absolute fragmentation had become the standard aesthetic in contemporary photography offered up the possibility of a productive, anti-orthodox bringing of fragmentation and unity into contention.⁵⁷ These writings correspond with the evolution of Wall's distinctive style and subject matter, in a series of works made between 1982 and 1985, mostly street scenes such as *No* (1983), in which a wealthy looking man walks past a prostitute at night, or *Milk* (1984), in which a young man—possibly indigent—squats on a pavement before a new brick building while milk from a carton he holds spurts into the air. While Baudelaire's hymn of praise to Constantin Guys for his meticulous, immersive, selfless and innocent depictions of modern life emphasised the 'splendour and majesty' of 'the river of life', Wall's version is a good deal

⁵⁶ Jeff Wall, 'A Draft for "Dan Graham's Kammerspiel"' (1981); 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel' (1982), in *Selected Writings*, pp. 11-75.

⁵⁷ Jeff Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet' (1984), in *Selected Writings*, pp. 77-83.

gloomier.⁵⁸ Working class decline and defeat may be read into these images, which were made as neoliberal economics began its terrible unfolding. *Mimic*, for example, as Walter Benn Michaels points out, is not merely a reconstruction of a casual racist gesture, but should be set within the context of the wave of immigration to Canada from the 1960s onwards of well-educated Asians, who drove the existing working class to further economic disadvantage.⁵⁹ *Abundance* (1985) sees two elderly women gathering cast-off clothes from a box marked 'Free', one of whom regards the camera in a self-aware fashion, displaying the many layers of clothes she has donned as an absurd sign of her need. To render such subjects in this cool, epic form speaks of an ironic detachment. *The Thinker* (1986), Wall's first work to contain elements of fantasy, is an explicit reworking of Dürer's proposed monument to the defeat of the Peasants' Revolt.⁶⁰ The figure, a man in a suit and work boots, sits on a stump and pieces of concrete, overlooking a rail yard, the wheat silo of a long-established co-operative, and in the distance the towers of Vancouver. The man is of an age that, had he lost his job, he would be unlikely to find work except of the most unskilled, casualised and low-paid kind. As in Dürer's print, a sword protrudes from his back. Close above his head, the picture is divided by the heavy black of telephone lines, the data-carriers which spelt the end of effective, nationally based working-class power. Wall was certainly concerned to describe this situation, but nothing in these pictures points to resistance. The spilling of milk may indicate the pointlessness of shedding tears.

In two essays of 1988, on Rodney Graham and Stephan Balkenhol, Wall steps back from Adornian pessimism, saying first that some aspects of postwar fragmentation in art, such as Arte Povera, offered 'vistas of possibility and hope', and further that there were opportunities in the renunciation of an experimental form that had 'congealed into orthodoxy', and the utopian embrace of representation, particularly of the human figure.⁶¹ Ernst Bloch is the model here, and while Wall still writes about capitalism, there is less focus on class—indeed, with relation to ecological depredation, he uses the terms 'us' and 'we'. This shift is accompanied in 1988-89 by works in which there are more overt depictions of oppression and conflict—sexual, racial and class-based. There are images about eviction, a couple's estrangement, the berating of a worker by a foreman in a garment factory, teasing and perhaps bullying children, and arrest. Yet while this period marks the high point of Wall's depiction of social conflict, the oppressed (when they can be identified) remain passive and powerless, and the utopian a merely formal possibility. In his brief 1989 essay, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence', first published in a major group exhibition, in which Wall's work was shown alongside that of Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth, among others, the artist laid out a contrast between the wet and dry aspects of photography. The dry was associated with optics, geometry, ballistics, certainty and precision; the wet with archaic, pre-industrial work, the chaotic and the unpredictable; the combination of the two in photography achieving 'a historical self-reflection, a memory of

⁵⁸ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Walter Benn Michaels, 'The Politics of a Good Picture: Race, Class, and Form in Jeff Wall's *Mimic*', *PMLA*, 125: 1, 2010, pp. 178-9.

⁶⁰ Vischer/ Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 302.

⁶¹ 'Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham's Work' (1988); An Outline of a Context for Stephan Balkenhol's Work (1988), in Wall, *Selected Essays*, pp. 87-101, 103-7. Quotations from pp. 103, 105.

the path it has traversed to its present...⁶² Tarkovsky's film, *Solaris*, is also invoked to suggest that liquid chaos (or intelligence) has its own purposes and agency, that may be far from ours. The enthusiasm for chaos theory and science fiction fits, perhaps, with the trend at the time for some on the Left to comfort themselves with remote utopian possibilities and the thought that those in power could not foretell or control the consequences of their actions. Once again, it suggests a distant, even Olympian, view.



In 1992 and 1993, Wall made massive, heavily manipulated and montaged pieces. Some were overtly fantastic, such as *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* (1992), an elaborate scene of a 'conversation' among recently slaughtered Soviet troops. Others were plausible though plainly only realisable through montage, such as *A Sudden Gust of Wind*; and others use extensive manipulation to render quiet and naturalistic scenes, as in *Restoration* (1993). In 1993 Wall also wrote an essay about the work of Vancouver artist-photographer Roy Arden. Here, the main claim is that photojournalism contains a dialectical structure comprising the prosaic and the poetic, which is also a tension between the instant and the implied narrative of the event depicted.⁶³ Art photographers, however, do not merely practice photojournalism or any other standard photographic genre, but rather emulate it and reflect on it.⁶⁴ Arden's strictly composed works of the 1980s:

⁶² Wall, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence', in Jean-François Chevrier and James Lingwood, *Une Autre Objectivité/ Another Objectivity*, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris, 1989, pp. 231-2; also in *Selected Essays*, pp. 109-110.

⁶³ Wall, 'Roy Arden: An Artist and his Models' (1993), in *Selected Essays*, pp. 115-17.

⁶⁴ This claim also is made in a later Wall essay, in which he argues that Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Brassai were making art by imitating photojournalism; this is a key claim for Wall, who cannot accept that reportage can be art, but would have come as news to all of them. "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995), in *Selected Essays*, p. 145.

... hover just at the point of resembling autonomous works of pictorial art. They reflect both the moment at which photojournalism becomes art, and the last one in which it remains lyric, miniature, and utilitarian—that is, in which it remains reportage.⁶⁵

Again, this plainly reflects back on to Wall's own aims: *Dead Troops Talk* is a highly self-conscious infusion of a photojournalistic subject with fantasy and of course academic figure composition. In *A Sudden Gust of Wind*, a mundane if photojournalistic subject—a meeting between businessmen and labourers on a farm—is apparently transformed momentarily into a scene that evokes the past and art history by the weather (a chaotic system) scattering the instrumental—business documents—high into the sky.



In *Restoration*, women engage in the slow and painstaking work of restoring Edouard Castres' *Bourbaki Panorama* in Lucerne, showing the crossing into Switzerland of a portion of the fleeing French army in 1871. Wall's massive panoramic photograph is a celebration of their labour, and is the first of many elaborate works in which the artist takes as his subject such often overlooked tasks. Indeed, Wall sees the women acting as a conceptual model of how society should be:

I think one of the historical roles of pictorial art was to make images which in a way are models of behaviour, too. First, they are conceptual models of what a picture should be, because every picture can be thought of as a proposal of a model of what a valid picture is. But, also, the behaviour of the figures in the picture may be models, or at least proposals of models, of social behaviour, of whatever kind.⁶⁶

There is plainly a parallel between Wall's own meticulous labour in staging, photographing and digitally montaging, and that of the restorers. Further, Wall is happy to say that *Restoration* has a post-revolutionary and even counterrevolutionary implication, in which the old regime is preserved and even brought back to life.⁶⁷ This revival is certainly one of an old pictorial tradition, but, as we shall see later, it is increasingly accompanied by other conservative attachments.

Wall's production of sustained writing about art, both his own and other people's, has slackened, and the rate at which he produces pictures has increased, as he branched out into making black-and-white prints and smaller lightboxes. While he still gives many interviews,

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

⁶⁶ 'Jeff Wall in Conversation with Martin Schwander' (1993), in *Selected Essays*, p. 234.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

there are many subjects on which he prefers to hold his silence. It is telling that the last interview in the volume of his selected writings ends with Wall saying: 'I am not so concerned to comment on interpretations of my work, or anyone's, these days.'⁶⁸ He hardly needs to, since he has found such effective mouthpieces in those art historians who have written at length about his work, and whose writing remains dominated by Wall's own views.

Hunting Sources

For those who take the side of Wall, he is one of the most important artists of his generation, or even of his epoch. Michael Newman, among the most effusive of the artist's supporters, writes:

We can think of the Duchamp of both *The Large Glass* and *Etant donnés* as not so much breaking with the pictorial tradition as, in a rather perverse and fetishistic way, preserving it so that the Western tableau could be reanimated for its uncanny afterlife in Wall's backlit Cibachrome transparencies, and carried over into the large-scale directorial photographs of a generation of artists inspired by Wall's example.⁶⁹

This view of Duchamp, which echoes Wall's own, is a very eccentric one, for it sees him as a saviour rather than a destroyer of artistic tradition.⁷⁰ While such a view would have seemed incredible at the time when Duchamp gained renewed importance for the contemporary art world in the late 1950s as traditional art forms came under sustained assault, it does acquire a 'perverse' plausibility, when conceptualism and spectacle have become fused in the grand conversation piece that is now taken as art—after all, some of its elements may happen to be pictorial or traditional. While there is no unanimity among Wall's admirers about the legacy of Duchamp (and indeed for Fried he is the figure who led art to dwell between rather than within media, and as a consequence, abolished quality and value), there is agreement about Wall's status.⁷¹ Fried explicitly argues that it is museum photography that has renewed the Western pictorial tradition that was once borne in painting, and that Wall was among the most important figures to have grasped that this was photography's proper task.⁷² To place Wall in that position is to more than imply that, like Duchamp, he is not merely a great artist but one who has brought about major and lasting artistic change.

A marked feature of this literature is the pains it takes in the identification of sources and influences behind Wall's pictures (in an attempt, perhaps, to identify the components of that 'shimmering feeling'). Wall has certainly referred to paintings in his works with explicit reworkings of Delacroix, Hokusai and Manet. In some art-historical writing, the analysis of sources and close visual reading is given a particular point through its bearing on ideological, political or other issues. Steve Edwards, for example, in his account of *A Donkey in Blackpool* (1999), which Wall had made to be paired with one of Stubbs' most celebrated horse

⁶⁸ 'Post-'60s' Photography and its Modernist Context: A Conversation between Jeff Wall and John Roberts' (2006), in Wall, *Selected Essays*, p. 345.

⁶⁹ Michael Newman, 'Towards the Reinvigoration of the "Western Tableau": Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp', *OAJ*, p. 100.

⁷⁰ For Wall's later view of Duchamp which sees him as a part of 'great pictorial culture', see 'Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier', in *Selected Essays and Interviews*, p. 320.

⁷¹ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, pp. 44-5.

⁷² Fried, *Why Photography*, p. 37.

paintings, *Whistlejacket*, makes clear the class associations of each, their situation in very different worlds of leisure, the Christian allusions in the subject of the donkey, and uses this analysis to suggest that the picture may be read (once again) as a monument to the defeated working class.⁷³



More often, however, the identification of sources seems to be an exercise in assuring that the works receive the right kind of attention as art, imbuing them with historical depth, while demonstrating the author's perspicacity, knowledge and sensibility. So Newman, in discussing *The Destroyed Room*, which is (as Wall tells us) a reflection on Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, also finds references to Duchamp (though illumination and the staged mise-en-scene), Pompeian villas (in the wall colour), Matisse, Courbet, Fontana and Barnett Newman.⁷⁴ Thierry de Duve, among others, picks out a figure in *The Storyteller* (1986), which seems to resemble one in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and makes great if vague play with its significance.⁷⁵ It may be noted that Wall himself has made a few statements expressing scepticism at such source-chasing. He writes that the model in *The Storyteller* who appeared to echo the figures in Manet's work did so by accident, though 'everyone picked up on that'.⁷⁶ Moreover, on his work, *Odradek* (1994), which is based on a story by Kafka, when asked if the girl coming down the stairs alludes to Duchamp or Richter, Wall says that he does not 'make those kind of jokes' and she is just a girl descending a staircase:

⁷³ Steve Edwards, "'Poor Ass'" (*A Donkey in Blackpool*, 1999), in OAJ, pp. 39-54.

⁷⁴ Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*, Ediciones Polígrafa, Barcelona 2007, pp. 17, 21.

⁷⁵ Thierry de Duve, 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path' in Phaidon, pp. 46-7.

⁷⁶ Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, Tate Publishing, London 2005, p. 39.

If people want to think in those terms, then that's their affair. Depiction just causes things to resemble each other.⁷⁷

This is not to say that an artist's statements should be held up against those of a critic or historian, and that the latter be found wanting. It is rather that the game of finding images that resemble other images is likely to be both endless and useless (except as artistic validation) without the discipline of a point that sits outside an art history that, at its worst, emulates the supposed autonomy of the pictures. Artists, least of all Wall, are hardly innocents in this, since, as we have seen, making art-historical references is one of the most reliable tactics to get a work discussed as if it is art. Within the context of the art world and the competitive positions taken by artists, critics and historians, it is hard not to see such references to sources as a form of social display, and as being indelibly marked with the inequalities of class, education and the opportunity for cultured leisure.

The Taint of Mass Culture

The interest in art-historical comparison has come to be matched by a neglect and even denigration of mass culture, which plays down the importance of what non-specialist viewers may experience when looking at works by Wall, which are, after all, about 'everyday life'. In part, this hostility is to do with the widespread idea that art can offer an antidote to a technological mass culture that provides quick, disposable fixes of clichéd stories, off-the-peg emotions and standard forms. So video art, in its flight from the fast cutting and mobile camera work of film and television, is supposed to encourage a slower, more considered and critical way of viewing moving images. Similar claims are made for large-scale museum photography as against the photography that is rapidly consumed in newspapers, magazines and advertisements. For some critics, one of Wall's achievements is to hold the viewer before a medium that is normally so quickly glanced over and gutted for a recognisable narrative or emotive charge.⁷⁸ Others posit an utter separation of mass culture and the work of art, and place Wall entirely on the side of the latter.⁷⁹

The shard of truth that these views contain is held in the structural necessity of art photography to oppose the mass industry of image production, just as high art in general must distinguish itself from mass culture. Nevertheless, Wall's own views on this issue have changed dramatically, and he used to be happier to point to sources for his work in film, television and even advertising and commercial display.⁸⁰ The first lightbox, *The Destroyed Room*, took Delacroix as a source, as we have seen, but also indicated its commercial origins by reflecting on the artificiality of the room ensembles made for shop-windows. This piece of 'built disorder' was shown in a gallery window, facing the street, just like a shop display.⁸¹ These days, however, the artist does not want viewers to think about anything other than high art. In a tetchy reply to a question about whether *Dead Troops Talk* may be related to television or newspaper imagery, Wall said:

⁷⁷ Burnett, *Wall*, p. 77.

⁷⁸ See Burnett, *Wall*, p. 74.

⁷⁹ See Hans Dickel, 'Image Technology and the Pictorial Image: Media Images versus Art Images', in Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Prestel Verlag, Munich 2001.

⁸⁰ See Wall, 'To the Spectator', p. 438.

⁸¹ The phrase is Belting's, *Looking Through Duchamp's Door*, p. 150.

Just because I made a war picture doesn't mean that people automatically or necessarily have to associate it with media imagery. That presumes that media imagery is a total horizon of everyone's experience. Those presumptions have now reached the stage of orthodoxy. That is an unfree way of conceiving how individuals experience works of art, unfree and unrealistic. Conformist, institutionalised, academic, textbook and suffocating.

Wall goes on to say that art is an independent experience of the world, and that cultural studies and immersion in mass media threaten the Western canon.⁸² It may be that the sources and references that are useful to a young and unknown artist are quite different than for those who stand at the apex of the museum world, but it may also be that in the exclusive focus on fine art, some of photography's most interesting associations and affiliation—particularly those to photojournalism, commerce and film which Wall himself explored with acuity in his early writings—become lost.

The prose written by Wall's champions is destined for the museum, just as the photographs are. It appears directly in museum catalogues, or books from museum publishing houses, while the rest of the literature bolsters curators' various texts with ideas and authoritative quotes, and influences the way works are hung and juxtaposed. In this way, theme, object, display, interpretation in exhibition boards and leaflets, catalogue and monograph texts, and the encouragement of appropriate reactions in an audience are integral parts of the 'work', which is no mere collection of objects but rather the construction of a social network that includes collectors, curators, critics, art historians and (lastly) viewers.

The paradigm of such writing is the volume by Fried, which in its resolute focus on the pictorial tradition and on what the author takes to be its fundamental characteristics, its grandiose self-importance, and even in its design is geared towards an aesthetic validation of its subject. While there is a degree of ontological musing about photography, and the claim is even made that photography is 'compelled' to do ontological work, the character and extent of its contribution remains unspecified.⁸³ The fundamental purpose of this prose is to assure the status of its object of study for the museum and the canon. While Fried's views do not remain entirely unchanged from those of his youth, and he is obliged to acknowledge the 'theatrical' aspects of Wall's work, these are bent only to a further heightening of absorption, of a parallel between subject and viewer, both sunk in the timeless form of close attention, shut off from the clamour of the world, and participating in an engagement with labour and aesthetic appreciation that remains comfortingly unchanged across the centuries.

The reader of this now complicated and very extensive literature will come across a broiling stew of theoretical, political, art-historical and cultural references of which Wall is the master. It may be that he learned from his postgraduate study of Duchamp the value of creating art works and discourse which together work as interpretative traps, which through the elaboration of considered contrasts (monochrome versus colour, light versus dark, fantasy versus the everyday, landscape versus still life, single versus multiple figure

⁸² Gordon McDonald, 'Interview: Jeff Wall', *Photoworks*, Autumn/ Winter 2005/6, pp. 20, 23.

⁸³ Fried, *Why Photography*, p. 3.

compositions, large versus small, posing versus documentary, to take but a few) are capable of generating endless circles of reference and self-reference.⁸⁴

Wall's own writing, in places a model of close reading, gives a clue as to the results. In exploring the elements that make up a work by Dan Graham, the *Alteration* project, Wall enters into long and brilliant analyses of the use of glass in architecture, the modernist glass house, the office block, the tract house, suburbia, and urbanism generally—just under 30 pages devoted to a scrupulous unpacking of cultural meaning.⁸⁵ This, to get at only three elements brought into novel juxtaposition in Graham's project: glass, mirror and tract house. Since what is examined here is not merely each element taken singly but their relations with each other, the complexities of such analysis must increase exponentially as further elements are added. It is easy to see that Wall's work admits of no terminable analysis in this form.

Art history and art criticism are the willing victims of the interpretative trap, not least because of the institutional requirement for the continual generation of texts to act as buttresses for work in the contemporary art industry and for state-enforced bean-counting assessments of research 'outputs'. Multiple readings, indeterminacy, and a revulsion at 'essentialism' are the touchstones of this discourse, which exudes the heady perfume of postmodern mysticism. They are also supposed to have a close affinity to what art offers as a consoling supplement to mass culture and working life. Wall's work now comfortably inhabits the centre of this orthodoxy. It is no surprise to read in the introduction to the catalogue raisonné, in a text surely endorsed by the artist, that all his pictures 'have no moral pretensions and do not communicate a fixed meaning, but rather emphasize the instability and contingency of their meaning'.⁸⁶

Is it possible, then, to cut through this Gordian knot of sources, theories and references? In much of the recent Wall literature, taken as a whole, there can be found the symptomatic characteristics of much contemporary art writing: 'poetry', publicity and indeterminacy; the antidotes may be materialism, neutrality and politics.

'Objecthood'

To begin with the material, among the first and most obvious points to make about the lightboxes is that they are large, expensively manufactured objects, necessary to the development of Wall's evolution of a signature style as an exceptional, individualistic artist, and that they are used to control and restrict the display of Wall's images. In the early years, Wall was clear that the very expense of making these transparencies (along with that of the cinematically staged shoot itself) was an advantage: they represented his commitment to art, attracted serious attention, and the money to ensure his future artistic career.⁸⁷ The rarity of

⁸⁴ See Duchamp's writings on his 'Large Glass': *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even: A Typographic Version by Richard Hamilton of Marcel Duchamp's Green Box*, trans. George Heard Hamilton, Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., London 1960.

⁸⁵ Jeff Wall, 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel' (1982), in *Selected Writings*, pp. 31-75.

⁸⁶ Theodora Visser, 'Introduction', in Theodora Vischer/ Heidi Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004*, Schaulager, Basel/ Steidl, Göttingen 2005, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Wall, 'To the Spectator' in Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *Jeff Wall*, Victoria, BC 1979, n.p. Cited in William Wood, 'The Insufficiency of the World', in Dieter Roelstraete / Scott Watson, eds., *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and*

such objects increases the frequency and distance that they need to be shipped. The art world has barely begun to confront its extraordinary environmental profligacy, which has been exacerbated as it has become increasingly globalised and event-based, as the flocks of private jets track the global tour of biennials and art fairs, while rare and heavy art objects are transported by air, and accompanied by couriers. It is a particularly perverse situation when there is a good argument for saying that the ‘work’ is not any particular lightbox (which could be replaced if damaged or destroyed, and indeed have been as some have undergone irreparable degradation due to the materials used in their construction) but rather the digital file from which the picture is made—and this could be sent anywhere that has an Internet connection with very little expense or environmental impact. Instead, the control of the image, to preserve its market value and to keep its display in the hands of the experts, trumps all other considerations.

As for neutrality, the point is not necessarily to be for or against such pictures, certainly not in terms of their place in an aesthetic canon. Rather, we may, neutrally, examine their effects. Wall’s lightbox works are big, detailed, brightly coloured things, entertaining to look at, as convincing a simulacrum as any fashion or advertising shot; they may get us to think about other art; they may get us to think about politics (though gazing down any street can do that). Their utility for the museum as providing a form of spectacle that has to be seen as a physical object in a physical space to get the full effect, and as a generator of art-historical discourse, is obvious. Wall’s legacy is clear in the proliferation of large, complex figures pieces staged for museum walls, tableaux vivants for the contemporary age. Some of his most successful followers point up the dubious elements of Wall’s work, hidden by his relative tact. The very expensively staged, manipulated and mannered suburban scenes of Gregory Crewsdon hint at dark goings on in the suburbs. Their cheesy and schlocky air is reminiscent of David Lynch but also develops the contrast between the mundane and the fantastic found in Wall. David LaChapelle, a highly successful magazine portraitist who has moved into art photography, uses digital procedures to make complex and highly polished allegorical figure scenes in which highly recognisable art-historical references are blended with celebrity images and pop culture in gaudy abandon. Wall’s warnings about the pollution of the pictorial tradition with mass culture have their nightmare incarnation here, while the inhuman sheen of LaChapelle’s flesh and the too-perfect cleanliness of his objects make apparent what is hidden in Wall: the hybrid medium that is the digitally painted photograph.

Democracy

To turn to politics, just over ten years ago, John Roberts thought that it was plausible to argue that realism for Wall was less a matter of narrow aesthetics than the recognition of a historical connection between representation and the possibility of a public culture for art, so that to defend a painting of modern life was to hold onto the ideal of a non-bourgeois audience for art.⁸⁸ More recently, Michael Newman has argued that there has been a shift in Wall from work in which beauty was seen as a promise, and the basis for a critique of the

Artists, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Antwerp 2005, pp. 66-7. The essay is reprinted in Vischer/ Naef, *Wall*, pp. 437-8.

⁸⁸ John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1998, p. 187.

present including unjust social relations, to his current rejection of the utopian. He goes on to cite Wall:

The Utopian aggression against the actual, against the slow and the imperfect—I see that as a rhetoric, as one of the last formations of the avant-garde. Democracy involves imperfection. The fundamental aesthetic trait of democratic culture is the taste for imperfection. It has to do with accepting its presence and of knowing that everything you do won't be realised exactly as you want it to be, and that other people will also have something to say about it.⁸⁹

This is but one of Wall's recent statements about the role art may play in an imperfect democracy:

And one of the great processes carried on in modern democratic society is that in which people learn to come to terms with imperfection in themselves and others. So I think the commonplace has an enormous charge on an artistic level because it ruins the old hierarchies of art and lets new feelings emerge. I think by working with that it is possible to create a new feeling of the beautiful—one that is refreshed.⁹⁰

Ugliness is associated with evil in the Western tradition, as Wall himself points out, and so by implication beauty with virtue, here with mundane daily activities, often those that imply care for a person or an object—in particular, cleaning. It is a concentration on the overlooked tasks of improvement and maintenance in a conservative art that tries to bring to expression the striving for modest improvement in imperfect democracy, and to give it beautiful form and coherence. This can be seen most clearly in the ambitious and complex montage, *Morning Cleaning* (1999). Fried and others have subjected this picture to some very abstruse readings,⁹¹ but it may be seen as a depiction on a grand and extraordinarily labour-intensive scale of a disregarded act which is nonetheless central to the ideal effect of Mies' luxurious modernism, which a little dirt would certainly ruin. The cleaner, as Wall produces him in the picture, is absorbed in his task as we viewers should be in Wall's spectacular image. He is, if not happily, entirely lost in the elimination of suds from glass, and may be compared to those depictions of farm workers in eighteenth-century England, defined by their fixed place in the natural hierarchical order.⁹² The frame of a modern monument takes the place of landscape here, but the message is similar—of virtuous labour, ordinary but necessary, that plays its part in the maintenance of the imperfect order of democracy. Art lovers, who like to think of themselves as complex creatures, may view it as a pastoral scene, in their sophisticated and elite appreciation of simple virtues.

⁸⁹ Philip Ursprung/ Jacques Herzog/ Jeff Wall/ Christina Bechtler, *Pictures of Architecture/ Architecture of Pictures: A Conversation Between Jacques Herzog and Jeff Wall*, Springer Verlag, New York 2004, p. 67; cited in Newman, *Jeff Wall*, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Wall cited in Burnett, p. 89.

⁹¹ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, pp. 66-82. For an equally complex counter-reading, see Christine Conley, *Morning Cleaning: Jeff Wall and The Large Glass*, *Art History*, vol. 32, no. 5, December 2009, pp. 996-1015.

⁹² For a view of Richard Wilson's landscape work that followed these lines of argument and produced at the time a furious controversy, see David Solkin, *Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction*, Tate Gallery, London 1982.

The point of reference for Wall in these remarks on democracy is no longer to Critical Theory but to Walt Whitman in his essay 'Democratic Vistas', and to Diderot's remarks on the imperfectible nature of humanity. The awkward, stilted figure poses and relations that still characterise Wall's work, and which used to be related to critical modernism, alienation and forced social relations, are now bent to register democratic imperfection. Wall remarks that 'This imperfection implies gentleness and forgiveness, and the artistic challenge is to express that without sentimentality.'⁹³ The change may be registered through Wall's extraordinary urge to remake some of his early works, in particular *Eviction Struggle* (1988) which has been digitally recast using the original working shots under the new title *An Eviction* in 2004. The lightboxes were already held in collections so the owners had to agree to the replacement of their old works for new. In the later version, Wall made extensive changes to the placing of figures and cars, and lessened the photograph's tonal contrast. Most significantly, and in line with the change of title, Wall removes two figures who do not merely glance at the scene but watch steadily from a distance, and who may be read as officials or landlords overseeing the eviction.⁹⁴ So we move from a piece that was a long landscape view of class conflict, to one that may more easily be read as a meditation on human imperfection, in which power relations are toned down and 'struggle' is lost.



⁹³ Interview: Arielle Pelenc in correspondence with Jeff Wall', in Thierry de Duve/ Arielle Pelenc/ Boris Groys, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon Press, London 1996, p. 21.

⁹⁴ I am indebted to William Wood for this point.

The tension between an apparently radical description of the social consequences of neoliberalism and the spectacularly commodified character of Wall's work has evaporated. In its place, we see a celebration of what the artist takes to be democratic life as it is lived. A clear example is *Dressing Poultry* (2007), which shows women workers preparing slaughtered chickens to be eaten. One turns to the camera, laughing as if enjoying a joke, and despite the mundane clutter of the shed and the bloodied labour, the scene is almost a cheery one. Whitman recommends variety and freedom as the founding principles of his vision of democracy, and 'the full play of human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions'. It is a fair description, too, of the old ideal of the artist, the ungrounded bourgeois hero, free of material and cultural constraints, and of the work that results.⁹⁵ When the life of this democracy appears on the lightboxes, it is not hard to read such pictures as an advertisement for what exists.

Wall's thoughts about democracy do, though, raise thoughts about the possibilities for a democratic culture. Are they to be found in the exclusive, specialised culture of the few, pitched against mass culture and the mass media, that Wall recommends, one which is made by a few great artists who sustain a great tradition?⁹⁶ Are they to be achieved through rare and vastly expensive objects made by individualistic artists in signature styles? Do we need such geniuses to interpret the world visually, curators to control the way their products are seen, and the weight of those art-historical volumes that tell us how to see? Or would a democratic culture rather be collective, participatory, dialogic, less fixed on the singular object and on institutions governed by the wealthy? Would it be faster moving, freely copiable and alterable, and also perhaps ephemeral? In 1989, in some very interesting remarks about the simplistic reduction of all representation to complicity with capitalism, Wall argued that such views are most likely to be held in capital cities where people are not only consumers of images but also tend to work in or close to huge image-production industries. In that realm, images seem to float free of context, referent and nature to become 'totally moveable properties' governed by the business cycle.⁹⁷ In the years since, the distinction between the producers and consumers of images has become eroded, above all for photography and video, as almost every mobile phone has a camera built in, and as digital technology has provided the means not merely to make images but to publish them. Many more people not only take photographs but manipulate and upload them to public sites (this is the 'us' referred to above, a broad group that cuts across class divides, though still a small minority of the world's population). The reality of a democratic image culture is hardly to be found in the broadcast model of the museum, with its policed and expert discourse, strictly guarded by copyright, but with all its imperfections in the postings of images and the dialogue they elicit on Facebook, YouTube and Flickr. If that discourse is thought shallow or even vacuous, conventional, commercial, epigrammatic to a fault, even perhaps idiotic, it offers a clearer look into the face of our 'actually existing democracy' than the photo-paintings of Wall and those who have followed in his path. In both realms, word and image making is constrained—in the museum by direct control, on the Web by the frame and structure of the interface—and in both, the ideal of democratic freedom seems distant, for

⁹⁵ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Democratic Vistas*, J.M Dent and Sons, London 1912, p. 301.

⁹⁶ See Gordon McDonald, 'Interview: Jeff Wall', *Photoworks*, Autumn/ Winter 2005/6, pp. 20, 23.

⁹⁷ 'Representations, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: An Interview with Jeff Wall by T.J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut, and Anne Wagner' (1989), in *Selected Writings*, p. 209.

that would require the bringing together of complexity and accessibility, singular expression and cooperation, and power and mass participation. Perhaps, after all, the two realms might best be seen, in terms borrowed from Adorno, as ‘torn halves of an integral freedom—to which, however, they do not add up.’⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Letter to Walter Benjamin of 18 March 1936, in Adorno, Benjamin et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London and New York 1977, p. 123.