

Written by Yuen Pik Kwan, Jenny

The artist chosen in this essay, who is active after 1980s, is the Canadian artist Jeffrey “Jeff” Wall. I found Wall’s work very interesting and profound as he uses a full range of modern photographic techniques with reference to fine art traditions and expectations. Wall’s staged photographs are particularly chosen among his wide range of work, that he attempted to reintroduce the belief of a creative narrative mode and subject matter into the territory of art which went missing with the emergence of Modernism.

Jeff Wall, born in 1946, is best known for his large-scale back-lit cibachrome¹ photographs and art-historical writing. Wall has been a key figure in Vancouver's art scene since the early-1970s. Wall studied art history and visual art at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and practiced as an artist before studying History of Art at London’s Courtauld Institute of Art.

To a large extent, his work has been a response to an era dominated by abstract art, the reflexivity², as Wall terms it. Wall became keen on an alternative conceptual expression whose work demonstrates its relationship with both past

¹Cibachrome is a dye destruction positive-to-positive photographic process used for the reproduction of slides on photographic paper. The prints are made on a dimensionally stable polyester base, essentially a plastic base opposed to traditional paper base. Since it uses azo dyes on a polyester base, the print will not fade, discolor, or deteriorate for a long time. Characteristics of cibachrome prints are image clarity, color purity, as well as being an archival process able to produce critical accuracy to the original slide.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cibachrome>

² Michael Fried, “Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday”, The University of Chicago Press, *Critical Inquiry*, vol.33, no.3 (Spring 2007), pp. 495-526

and contemporary art. "Because I grew up at the time I did, and experienced the art I did," Wall tells Jan Tumlir in 2001, referring to his early formation in the wake of minimalism and early conceptualism, "I've always felt that good art has to reflect somehow on its own process of coming to be. I have never been really convinced that this reflexivity had to be explicit, though.... I've always thought that if the work is good it will automatically contain that reflection, but you won't be able to see it immediately. It will flicker into view in some subtle way". Fried³ stated, "Reflexivity in Wall's sense of the term is by no mean solely a feature of modernist art."

The Destroyed Room (fig.1) was Wall's first publicly exhibited large, back-lit transparency in a fluorescent light box. It originally presented in the window of the Nova Gallery in Vancouver, and it is a work that usually regarded as the beginning of the artist's mature career. The exhibition consisted of another cibachrome transparency work *Picture for Women* (fig.3) which will be discussed as well. Wall wrote the exhibition's catalogue essay titled "To the Spectator" in which he set out his ambitions and described his ambitious art. It is not surprising that Adames⁴ stated "since certain of Wall's early work invoked the compositions of nineteenth-century French paintings, criticism often has described it in terms of painting and painting genres without much concern with its actual physical support."

³ Michael Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday", The University of Chicago Press, *Critical Inquiry*, vol.33, no.3 (Spring 2007), p.512

⁴ Virginia Adames, "Illusion and disillusionment in the works of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter: Picturing (post)modern Life", Thesis (Ph.D.)--University of Maryland, College Park, 2007



(fig.1) *The Destroyed Room*, 1978
Cibachrome transparency, Plexiglas, fluorescent lights
lightbox: 169 x 258.4 x 7 cm; image: 152.4 x 203.2 cm
National Gallery of Canada



(fig.2) Eugène Delacroix *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827
Oil on canvas
392 x 498 cm
Musée National du Louvre, Paris

When Wall made *The Destroyed Room*, he turned to Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* 1827 (fig.2) for a kind of a blueprint. *The Death of Sardanapalus* is derived from Byron's arch-Romantic play, depicts a moment of turbulent and erotic violence. The Assyrian King Sardanapalus, aware that he is about to be defeated and robbed. There are the strong diagonals in *The Destroyed Room* reference Delacroix's painting *The Death of Sardanapalus*. Wall's work shows a set, similar to one that would be built for movies or theatre that has been ruined for no obvious reason other than for the photograph itself. Holes in the wall, overturned furniture, and objects scattered about the floor look like a scene of random destruction. The undisturbed porcelain figurine on top of the drawer hints at the careful placement of every element within the photograph by the photographer. Standing above all the destruction, the porcelain figurine, in the same position of Delacroix's bearded king, rises like a bird in an elegant way. Wall leaves us to imagine the events leading up to the scene, but the deliberate and thoughtful position of the figurine suggests a point of view of the artist inside the picture.

Brougher⁵ commented on *The Destroyed Room* that it "represents a new direction for photography away from this 'absence' of the artist; for in this work the artist has interceded to an extent quite unusual for photography at the time". Unlike the works by Paul Strand or Henri Cartier-Bresson in the twenties and thirties and

⁵ Kerry Brougher, *Jeff Wall*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and Scalo Verlag, Zurich, 1997.

Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander in the fifties and sixties emphasize the instantaneous, capturing a “decisive” moment in Cartier-Bresson’s term.

Wall has described *Picture for Women* (fig.3) as a remake of Edouard Manet’s late masterpiece, *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82 (fig.4), in the same way as a movie might be a remake of an older one – an update that uses new technology and a slightly inflected take on a theme. Burnett⁶ described and analyzed the work, “A Man (the artist) and a woman (his model) are reflected in a mirror (as they are in Manet’s painting), the camera is like a third figure, a mechanical Cyclops with an unappeasable eye, ... The woman is both the subject of and the audience for the picture, since she looks back at herself, and the triangular structure between the artist, audience and work exists within the camera. If one looks closely at the release cable that travels from the artist’s left hand to the camera, one sees that its movement is blurred, like a brushstroke. The snap of the shutter creates a kind of irretrievable moment, partly beyond the artist’s control, and in this blur of cable is an uncontrollable element that distinguishes photography from painting. The artist experiences a lose of control when he releases the shutter, and at that moment he enacts an imaginary, shared desire for objectivity.”

As Burnett⁷ further remarked that “Wall found a way to bring together things that interested him as an artist, the experimental legacy of avant-garde, the tradition

⁶ Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005., p13.

⁷ Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005.

of Western figurative painting and the everyday debris of contemporary life”, unlike other photographers in the late seventies and in the eighties, such as Ed Ruscha who was playing with conceptual possibilities of photography, and Bernd and Hilla Becher who were taking rigid approach to document the heritage of the industrial past. For both technical and aesthetic reasons, photographs printed and exhibited were on a relatively small scale and remained mainly documentary.

Wall considers these two large-scale works to be his first successful attempts to challenge the norms of photography through the use of transparencies mounted in lightboxes. In doing so, he references both popular culture (the illuminated signs of cinema and advertising hoardings) and the sense of scale he admires in classical painting. As three-dimensional objects, the lightboxes take on a sculptural presence, impacting on the viewer's physical sense of orientation in relationship to the work.



(fig.3) *Picture for Women*, 1979
Transparency in light box
163 x 229 cm
Collection of the artist



(fig.4) Edouard Manet *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82
Oil on Canvas
96 x 130 cm
Courtauld Institute of Galleries, London

Lauter⁸ used the term “paraphrase” as an additional element that Wall uses as an artistic tool in his involvement with art theory and as a socio-critical component. Paraphrasing, i.e. freely re-stating, means transforming and updating a source picture. The photograph *A Sudden Gust of Wind* 1993 (fig.5) is a good example to show how Wall makes use of visual ideas handed down by art history to capture the unique character of human nature in modern times more accurately.

It is very interesting to see how Wall has been continuing his staged photography in relationship with other art pieces. In the early 1990s, Wall began to use computers in the construction of his photographs. *A Sudden Gust of Wind* is one of Wall's earliest digital montages. It refers directly to a woodblock print *Ejiri in Suruga Province* (Sunshû Ejiri) 1830-33 (fig.6) by Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai. He switches the nineteenth-century Japanese scene to a contemporary cranberry farm near Vancouver. Amateur actors play the odd assortment of rural and city characters, surprised by the forces of nature (see fig.5.5). Newman⁹ has given a rather remarkable evaluation on the work, “The way in which 19th century Western artists saw Japanese woodblock prints in relation to photography, and vice versa, draws attention to how Wall’s *A Sudden Gust of Wind* is also about photography and its relation to time. ‘Cinematographic’ as Wall’s approach may be, this photograph can only work as a still image, since it is about a trace of movement and not movement itself.” I found the way Wall works and the work

⁸ Rolf Lauter(ed.), *Jeff Wall: figures and places: selected works from 1978-2000*, Prestel, 2001

⁹ Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings*, Ediciones Poligrafe, Barcelona, 2007

itself very inspiring as I try discovering the trace of time on my own work sometimes.



(fig.5) A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai), 1993
Photographic transparency and illuminated display case
Object: 250 x 397 x 34cm
Relief
Tate Modern, London



(fig.5.5) Detail from A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai), 1993



(fig.6) Katsushika Hokusai *Ejiri in Suruga Province*
(Sunshû Ejiri) 1830-33
Colour woodblock print, Japan
From the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*
© The British Museum

Wall is a storyteller that he tells stories about people, their natural or urban environment, and the everyday or magic way they interact. I become aware of his work somewhat similar to my belief of making art as ...

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