EVOCATIONS OF THE EVERYDAY: THE STREET PICTURES OF JEFF WALL

by

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A THESIS

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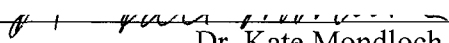
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This thesis will position the work of contemporary photographer Jeff Wall among

his peers from the 1980s until the present with an emphasis on the transition from

theoretical modes of references to the art historical canon to an inquiry into everyday

scenes through photographic constructions. Starting with the so-called "street photo,"

Mimic (1982), Wall's oeuvre has expanded in pursuit of representations of common, urban

scenes that are secretly works of fiction. Building on ideas from Roland Barthes, Douglas

Crimp, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss and Thierry de Duve, the argument is made that the

"street photos" have shaped Wall's larger production of photographs that question the

construction of vision in life and the media. Furthermore, his street photos have influenced

other artists working through postmodern poststructuralist ideas to reestablish the nature of

photography.

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In memory of W.S.P.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Canadian artist Jeff Wall seems to have a problem with being labeled strictly as a photographer. He uses a camera and film, much as one would expect of a photographer, but his work is not simply a collection of photographs. Wall has created a new approach to photographic representation and its mode of delivery. In contrast to dominant critical accounts of Wall's work, the images he constructs are not strictly pictorialist manipulations of staged photography. They also are not documentary films or journalistic snapshots. Not content with large glossy prints hanging on gallery walls in two-dimensional splendor or with the glow of flickering projectors usually reserved for slides and new media, Wall calls upon the tropes of mass media and cinema as well as the frankness and tension inherent in the works of Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Stephen Shore and other descendants of the straight photography tradition embodied by Alfred Steiglitz.

Although best known for his reimaginings of pieces from the history of art (i.e. *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* of 1993) and elaborate fictional compositions (i.e. *Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* of 1992), this thesis will argue that Wall's idea of the "street picture" is the most expansive and intriguing throughout his career. Loosely, this group of works spans his oeuvre from their inception in 1982 with *Mimic* to the present and deal

most obviously with the melding of snapshots and cinematography. They are cinematic in that they blend fact with fiction.[1] The photographs are not always street scenes, but have a commonality between them that references both the artist's cinematic leanings as well as his pseudo-journalistic tendencies.

The argument must be made, and so far it has not been, that Wall's early street pictures are those that have been the most influential (both subject- and theory-wise) to the course of his later works and his career in general. The street scenes and their descendants are also the works that most accurately encapsulate and express the way Wall approaches photography with an eye for moments present in everyday life and common experience that also speak on a more personal level. Having grounded himself

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[1] Wall makes photographs, so what distinguishes them as "cinematic" instead of just merely "photographic"? Régis Durand says that images such as film stills are "image fictions, something that looks like images to do with cinema but has none of their substance." (David Campany, ed., *The Cinematic* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007]: 154) David Campany, in the introduction to *The Cinematic*, skirts a direct definition of the term, but offers possibilities. Of the most promising, and directly about Wall, is first Campany's positing that "photography has evolved a new articulation of time very different from the decisive snap and the photo-sequence. Taking its cue from cinema's frames and film stills, a narrative staged photography emerged in art at the end of the 1970s." (Ibid., 14) He blurs the line between photographic and cinematic in regard to Wall, however, writing:" Wall's photographs rarely have the look of cinema or film stills. Nevertheless he grasped early on that all cinematic images are basically photographic and that the collaborative and preparatory image construction typical of narrative cinema could be put at the service of photography." (Ibid., 14) Secondly, Campany expands on Wall's usage of the production methods of cinema in service of his photographs when he mentions Victor Burgin's essay *Possessive, Pensive and Possessed* (included in *The Cinematic*; Ibid., 198) which puts forth the idea of the cinema as a specific viewing place and necessary environment for films, whereas photographs were traditionally more widespread. However, in recent years films have also left their dim lighted sanctuaries to be presented in a variety of different manners. They then, like photographs, "intersect with the complexities of our lived experience through unconscious processes governed by the *psychical* rather than the *physical* laws of time and space. Belonging neither to the chronology of film narrative nor the arrest of the photographic still, Burgin's concept points us beyond one of the great myths of our time, that photography is somehow intrinsically closer to the processes of memory than film." (Ibid., 14)

Wall's photographs are then cinematic rather than photographic for multiple reasons that remain somewhat nebulous. They blend fact and fiction. They employ the modes of production of traditional cinema and film. They work with a narrative and movement within the piece, imbuing them with some aspects of a film still while at the same time being full of supplementary information usually disregarded in a still but emphasized in a posed photograph. However, Wall's street pictures also interact with daily life in a way that is a bit too involved for a film still but not quick enough for a snapshot.

in art history in his school years,[2] the theoretical and art historically referential works are

telling of the impact that poststructuralist, feminist and postmodernist theory had on him.

It is in the street pictures that Wall most strongly develops these ideas into tableaus that

combine real life, his imagination, and the poststructuralist questioning of representation.

This thesis will position the work of contemporary photographer Wall among his

peers from the 1980s until the present with an emphasis on the artist's transition from

more critically postmodern modes of reference to the art historical canon to inquiries into

everyday scenes through photographic constructions. The primary questions will be: How

does Wall's beginning in poststructural postmodernist theory help to make his works

critical of the medium of photography as it relates to the cinematic while at the same time

embracing the format of the ubiquitous snapshot of everyday life?, How do his later

images stand out among the younger artists who have more recently embraced

photography?, and How have Wall's photographs grown into an ever more biting view on

everyday life as his oeuvre continues to expand, and what role have the early street

pictures played in this growth?

Once these questions are considered, I discuss Wall's more recent works that have

begun to diverge from his traditional format. I will consider the influence of the earlier

pieces on the non-illuminated works as well as the black and white photographs that have

become more prevalent in his oeuvre since the 1990s. This cadre of images is the next

logical step in Wall's career. It is not a step back: a reminiscence of the artist's own

photographic past influenced by a deep saturation in art historical inquiry and method.

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[2] Wall attended the University of British Columbia for his MA (graduating in 1970), and did postgraduate work at the Courtauld Institute from 1970-73.

Wall continues to push the boundaries of photography and its ubiquitous capture of the everyday scene while further honing his skill at constructing images that can lull the unwary viewer into a false truth.

The pieces under investigation are photographs. But, until recently, there have been several aspects of the works that immediately set them apart from other photographs. First, most of the works are quite large. *The Destroyed Room* (1978) was installed as a front window display upon its initial exhibition, and filled a street-side gallery's front at 134.7 cm x 198.1 cm. Second, the majority of his major works until the early 2000s were made as color transparencies set into housings with backlighting capabilities (as seen in *The Destroyed Room*). Installed, the images were illuminated from the back and cast their glow out onto the audience. One may be reminded of the glow of Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes, and the interaction between the piece and its viewer is similar in both cases. Rosalind Krauss, a Columbia University professor and prominent critic, takes Wall's lightboxes, not his photography, as his medium. And, commenting on the idea of medium, she posits that the boxes "connect objects [Wall's pieces] to subjects [the audience]."[3] This may be so, but she goes on to hypothesize that the lightboxes are the most engaging part of Wall's work, and that the scenes within are secondary.[4] Krauss argues: "in order to sustain artistic practice, a medium must be a supporting structure, generative of a set of conventions, some of which, in assuming the medium itself as their

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[3] Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1999): 26.

[4] Rosalind Krauss, "'…And Then Turn Away?' An Essay on James Coleman" *October* 81 (Summer, 1997): 10.

subject, will be wholly "specific" to it, thus producing an experience of their own

necessity."[5] In explaining that Wall's pieces are stronger as flagships of the lightbox

photo medium than of photography, Krauss has seemingly discounted further worthwhile

involvement in this genre of photography, presenting it as a finished phase with no more

growth possible. While the lightbox structure has remained relatively unchanged over the

years, Wall has recently done away with this support enabling a new focus on his images

and production.

Many of Wall's works show not only one event, but multiple past moments. By at

first using splicing of prints and negatives to achieve the desired effect (as in *Double Self-Portrait* of 1979) and then later using digital means to collage any number of shots

together into a cohesive whole (i.e. *View from an Apartment* of 2004-05). The

photographs belie their claim of actuality by presenting Wall's fictitious imaginings in

plausible settings. Because it is so close to the truth, but not the truth, the images blur the

lines of reality. They are made up of various "real" moments but the objects and settings

in the constructed image (as the viewer perceives it) never existed in reality. This blatant

fabrication of vision is central to Wall's work. Not leaving anything to chance, his

images, unlike many photographs, persuade the audience to see how the artist wants them

to see. There are no accidents that Wall has not planned; no blemishes in the composition

that are not known. Perhaps because of his integration into the new art history during his

college years, Wall is self-aware of the theories of representation that are driving it and

endeavors to both hide this construction of vision rooted in postmodernism as well as use

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[5] Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea"*, 26.

it to its full potential by making it more relevant to the viewer's everyday life. By breaking down the elements that make up visualizations of the everyday and recreating them, Wall brings the critical inquiry into the audience's space.

Coming out of the 1970s with a penchant for postmodern poststructuralist thought and an in-depth knowledge of art history and Marcel Duchamp, Wall initially posted himself as one of the obvious descendants of conceptualism. *Picture for Women* explores ideas of the gaze while also being a record of the artist's practice. This idea of using the photograph as a record of past events, common to conceptual artists as well as those experimenting with performance, was influenced by with the trend toward postmodern thought and the revival of painting and figuration (after Modernism) to make photographs with the air of paintings. Wall is sometimes given the moniker of "photographer of modern life,"[6] a reference to how Manet has been called *la peintre de la vie moderne*, and his own interest in Manet. At the Courtauld, Wall could view *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* again and again, eventually leading to *Picture for Women*'s compositional choices. However, it seems that making photographs with the air of paintings was not a ripe prospect for Wall, and he endeavored to make photographs with the air of life. The street pictures stray as far from fantastical artifice as possible and instead work with something much more difficult. Pieces like *Mimic*, *Men Waiting, View from an Apartment* and *Intersection* are documentations of real life that has been observed, reimagined, falsified,

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[6] Kerry Brougher, *Jeff Wall* (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1997): 39.

reconstructed and, finally, recorded on film in a manner that belies the immense amount of preparation and work that goes into each image.[7]

Canadian art critic Walter Klepac writes in "Some Postmodernist Paradigms"(1991) that: "[the postmodernist paradigms] persuade us that, above everything else, the subject and the object are imbricated within a common matrix of social relations and codes. In the most compelling work, limitations are compellingly evident."[8] The idea that imagery and the viewing of imagery is constructed is central to Wall's oeuvre. In early pieces like *Picture for Women* (1979), the artist took on directly the ideas of the gaze and the audience's implication in the experience of the piece. The camera in the piece looks out at the viewer. The figures do not. Like in Manet's *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882),[9] the path of the subjects' view is hard to trace. The figures in Wall's photograph and Manet's painting are looking outward, but it is difficult for the viewer to understand his/her place in the composition. Later works by Wall (like the street pictures and pieces like *Men Waiting* of 2006) are not as direct, and do not confront the viewer as openly. Instead of using direct sightlines out of the image, the audience is implicated by the very fact that they see similar scenes in their daily lives. Through the virtue of recognition provided by the generalized scenes, the viewer finds themselves suddenly more familiar with the photograph than they might have been with a strictly art

[7] Wall's idea (although about a specific work) applies to many pieces in his oeuvre: "...but the moment depicted in the picture is in fact not that moment, but a reenactment of it. Yet it is probably indistinguishable from the actual moment." Jeff Wall, "Jeff Wall," information leaflet, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, no. 17 (September, 1996); quoted in: Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 41.

[8] Walter Klepac, "Some Postmodern Paradigms" *C Magazine* 30 (Summer, 1991): 22.

[9] This piece is often cited as a reference for *Picture for Women* as in: Thierry de Duve, et al., eds., *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1996): 30.

historical piece. This expansion out of a direct quotation of art historical, as well as postmodern, sources led Wall to produce more complex photographs starting in the early 1980s.

CHAPTER II

THE STREET PICTURES

In 1982, Wall took his photography to the street. Combining the aesthetic of his earlier, studio-based works with a reference to the 1960s snapshots of the American urban landscape, the photographer began to reconstruct scenes he had witnessed on the street and to capture them behind the lens of a large-format camera. The first of his "street pictures" was *Mimic* (1982), a lightbox that seems to depict three people in motion as they pass each other on the sidewalk. It was originally conceived to "[concentrate] a lot on a typical gesture, perhaps a micro-gesture, but certainly a small gesture of race hatred."[10]

This gesture of racial tension is really only a superficial element of the entire image when it is observed alongside the pictures that came afterward and before. Looking at the style of documentary photographers and filmmakers along with journalistic picture makers, Wall saw *Mimic* as a way to "try to bring street photography and 'cinematography' together."[11] This idea has been central to his work ever since.

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[10] Jeff Wall, "My photographic production," in *Symposium: Die Photographie in der zeitgenössischen Kunst. Eine Veranstaltung der Akademie Schloss Solitude 6./ 7. Dezember 1989* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Cantz, 1990): 66-67.

[11] Jeff Wall, "At Home and Elsewhere: A Dialogue in Brussels between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier," in *Jeff Wall. Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007): 280-81.

To combine cinematography with photography, Wall took his camera out of the studio along with lights and actors with the intention of making pictures with the look of films from the 1970s that would lend a sharp, documentary style to his pieces. He often cites Neo-Realist cinema as an influence in his work. Particularly, his interest in filmmakers like Buñuel are notable, partially because of both artists' use of non-actors in their fictional portrayals of real life.[12] But, unlike other quick, grainy street images (both moving and still, like those by Winogrand and other street photographers of the 1960s), Wall set out to make very clear, vivid pictures that "resembled street photography, or at least had an interesting relationship with what street photography was attempting."[13]

Early on, the artist realized that he needed to make pictures which confronted the audience not with the lush niceties of popular culture and advertising (as referenced in his use of the lightbox[14]), but with the reality of everyday life in the city and on the fringes of society. In his 1983 article "The Site of Culture: Contradictions, Totality and the Avant-garde," Wall showed that he was "perfectly aware of the problem" and that he "[knew] that if art makes do with positing some idealized beauty as imaginary substitute and compensation for the ugliness and violence of the world, it is giving place to an idea of happiness that is fraudulent and ultimately totalitarian."[15] However, if he is so interested

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[12] Jennifer Blessing and Katrin Blum *Jeff Wall: Exposure* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008): 24.

[13] Wall, "At Home and Elsewhere," 280-81.

[14] The majority of Wall's pieces make use of a support system that includes the photographic print as a transparent cibachrome on a large scale. The frame on which the prints are mounted contains a light source that makes the image glow, much like a backlit projection, but with more clarity and detail.

[15] De Duve, *Jeff Wall*, 26. The article mentioned is: Jeff Wall, "The Site of Culture: Contradictions, Totality and the Avant-garde" *Vanguard* (May 1983).

in showing the "truth," why do some of Wall's pieces reference the idealized compositions of paintings by artists like Manet and Hokusai? This seeming contradiction does not come out of a need by the artist to create idealization, but instead by Wall's interest in constructing images from what he sees.

Here it is necessary to mention Wall's interest in the history of art. An art historian by degree and practice, Wall had a long involvement in the scholarly aspects of the art world before working primarily as a photographer.[16] Along with broader references to the history of photography, there are also strong ties to the history of painting in the way that he approaches photography.[17] Pieces like *Mimic* are meant to be

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[16] Wall wrote his doctoral dissertation on Marcel Duchamp at the Courtauld Institute. In this article, Newman juxtaposes Wall's practice with the works of Duchamp. Specifically, the posthumous work *Étant Donnes* is considered in its relation to vision and the construction of it. Examples of the blatant sexuality and reference to *Étant Donnes* in *The Destroyed Room* lend themselves to a somewhat convincing argument that Wall's viewing of Duchamp's work led him to make *The Destroyed Room* while referencing *Death of Sardanapalus*. But, what Wall gets from Duchamp is not so much subject matter and imagery (that is Delacroix' contribution), but a way to present the scene that at once shows the fervor and sexuality of the tableau, and also the construction and conceptualism of the image. Duchamp's work is interactive: you are aware that this is a strange construction because you must look through the peephole to behold the scene. The scene within is odd and unnatural, it is not a photograph of a natural scene. The luminescence of the imagery helps to enhance the image, making it more lustrous and inviting while at the same time creating a feeling of unease from the unnatural given life via light. Similarly, Wall's room looks real, but on further inspection is an obvious construction. The room has been destroyed on purpose, just as the mannequin in Duchamp's has been disfigured. The fleeting audience is allowed to see an image that carries some shock; the inquisitive audience loses the shock and comes away with an understanding of the process and perhaps a better view of the construction of vision. Michael Newman, "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp" *Oxford Art Journal* 30 (1: 2007): 81-100.

[17] In Jean-François Chevrier's "Metamorphosis of Place" (in Wall's 2006 catalogue raisonné), the author talks about Wall's interaction with art history and writes: "On the one hand, the transformation of the Cubist picture-object and the move beyond easel painting into so-called Expressionist abstraction (in the wake of Monet and Mondrian), and, on the other, the legacy of Duchamp, and the desire to go beyond art taken from Dada by the neo-avant-gardes, together formed the context of [Wall's] first period of artistic activity in the wake of post-pop conceptualism." (Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef, eds., *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné 1978-2004* [Basel: Schaulager, 2005]: 20) Besides merely quoting art history in a mode of pastiche that would weaken such works as *The Destroyed Room*, Wall is really the epitome of the "art historian photographer". His oeuvre has been made using an approach that forefronts the pieces' intertextuality. There is a noted emphasis on art historical theory in his work as well, as he includes visual responses to the writings of Hegel, Benjamin and others. (Ibid., 278) Along with his influence from the history of painting and art theory, Wall makes reference to the history of photography. Similar to his use of

hung on the wall like a painting, and not stored in an album or looked at solely as plates in a book. The sheer size and luminosity of the lightboxes makes sure that one cannot ever get the full effect of Wall's art from a reproduction.

By making large format images, Wall not only engages and subverts the ideas of the traditional street snapshot (images by artists like Garry Winogrand and Robert Frank are typically smaller, having been taken originally on 35mm film), but comments on painting as well. Borrowing the scale and prestige of room-filling history paintings and enormous Abstract Expressionist pieces, Wall's works confront the audience physically in a way that small photographs cannot. Anywhere from 60 to 90 inches high and sometimes over 100 inches wide, they are not easily pushed aside. The figures are often life size or larger, and the minimal framing presents the image as an active object, protruding from the wall just enough to have three-dimensional presence. Furthermore, Wall's use of large lightboxes visually affects the gallery as well as the audience by virtue of their luminosity. The piece does not stop at the frame. It surrounds the viewer on a three-dimensional plane unlike a usual photograph, immersing them further into the image.

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the Manet's composition in *Picture for Women*, he cites the images made by Winogrand and Walker Evans in pieces like *Volunteer* (1996) and Edward Weston in *Torso* (1997) which is comparable to Weston's *Torso of Neil* (1925) although there is no mention of the similarities in Wall's catalogue raisonné. (Ibid., 363) Wall's essay "Frames of Reference" (2003) talks about his initial interest in photographers during the 1960s and 1970s. He writes: "At the time, I was indirectly reacting to that classic photography and liked the same photographers I like now – Evans, Atget, Frank and Weegee. But I was more immediately interested in the work of Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, and Dan Graham, because I saw their photography as emerging from a confrontation with the canons of the documentary tradition, a confrontation that suggested some new direction. I also noticed and like Stephen Shore's and Garry Winogrand's work [...]" (Ibid., 443. First published in *Artforum International*, September 2003: 188-193.) This interaction continues to be seen in many of Wall's compositions, even when they are not direct visual quotations.

It is also necessary to note the prominent roles that specific works from art history play in early examples of Wall's constructed photographs. *The Destroyed Room* and *Picture for Women* directly refer to Delacroix' *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) and Manet's *The Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1882), respectively. Taking keys from these "masterworks," Wall's initial approaches to the photographic genre borrow heavily from the pictorialist tradition of photography (and further forays see a continuing interest in the history of the art form). Artists such as Gertrude Kasebier employed many tropes of the painting world to make effective photographs that would be perceived as artistic works. Kasebier's *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (1899) could be compared to similar works by painters of the time. But, instead of using a brush, Kasebier used film. Obvious compositional choices were imposed on the actors and setting, and darkroom effects were often applied later by Kasebier and her contemporaries to more similarly mimic the painted canvas. Likewise, Wall takes the compositional elements of the Manet and the Delacroix to position his work within an art historical context as well as to draw reference to the way the picture is constructed. He does not, however, try to imitate brushstrokes or the feel of oil paint, but rather uses the lightbox and transparencies to invoke a cinematic reading of pieces that border between being appropriate for the Louvre or a bus stop advert. Most importantly, and unlike his pictorialist predecessors, Wall makes works that should be read as photographs. The muddling of mediums which Kasebier and others working in her style of photography used was an effort to gain the artistic prestige afforded paintings for photography.[18]

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[18] Miles Orvell, *American Photography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 82.

With the street pictures, however, Wall moves in a different direction. By developing a way of capturing everyday scenes in a way that is both cinematic and ordinary (that is, mimicking the snapshot aesthetic while still engaging specifically cinematic production), the artist brings into question modes of representation in daily life and human perception instead of trying to be paintings. *Mimic* and Wall's other street pictures use the look of street photography, especially Winogrand (for example, *L.A. Sidewalk* of 1969), even though they present fictional tableaus. Michael Fried elaborates on this point when he writes: "[...] Wall's exploitation of the look of street photography in *Mimic* amounted to a new conception of the genre, according to which the traditional strategy of capturing subjects who appear unaware of the camera is reasserted at the same time as the picture itself more or less openly proclaims its identity both as a deliberate artistic construction (on the level of depiction) and as an image intended to be hung on the wall and viewed by beholders in a face-to-face relationship."[19] This melding of the snapshot aesthetic with the constructed image is what makes Wall's street pictures so engaging as a photograph that was similar to its predecessors, yet entirely new.

In the lightbox works, and especially in the street pictures, Wall appropriates the illuminated transparency from advertising and places it into a gallery setting. This unfixes the media's association with mass culture and advertising and allows the viewer to rethink the lightbox. The work would not affect the audience, the space, and the image's perception in the same way if it were a large, glossy print. Second, Wall unfixes not only the meaning of a means of support, but also a genre of photography. As stated, the street

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[19] Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008): 240.

pictures are influenced heavily by the snapshot aesthetic of the 1960s and artists like Robert Frank who took the journalistic/documentary approach to pictures of everyday life. Unlike Frank's images, however, Wall takes specific measures to ensure that his composition is balanced in such a way to fit with his exacting ideas for the picture. The first street picture, *Mimic*, was, like many of the later photos, based on something Wall observed in real life: an actual event that unfolded in the course of a regular day. But, although this was the starting point for the work, Wall modified the event through a series of "filters" in the final product.

In a 2005 interview with Craig Burnett (author of *Jeff Wall*, part of the Tate Gallery's 'Modern Artists' series) Wall commented on how he uses the original, observed event as a jumping off point. "I needed a place to [make the picture], and when I'm looking for a location – and I still do this now – I go back to the original place that I've seen, and think, 'Well, maybe I can do the photograph here.' But usually it doesn't have the formal character that I want, so I free myself – I free myself from the place. I don't really know what I'm looking for until I find it."[20] This conflicts slightly with an earlier comment in the same interview. When asked about the gesture in works like *Mimic* and why it intrigued him enough to make a picture, especially after his more technical and art-historically referential works from the late 1970s, Wall says that it interested him because "[t]he gesture was so small. I was interested in the mimesis, the physical mimesis. The white man was copying the Asian's body. Mimesis is one of the original gestures of art. So there was a sense in which emphasizing the mimesis could

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[20] Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall (Modern Artists)* (London: Tate Gallery, 2005): 21.

take away from the simple evildoing, which was interesting but not necessarily the most interesting thing about the picture."[21] For the artist, *Mimic* is a picture about mimesis, that portrays the action of mimesis from life. It is this combining, layering and juxtaposing of many different copied elements (including place, subject, composition, light, movement and narrative) that make Wall's pieces so interesting. *Mimic* may seem relatively simple in terms of compositional elements, but as his career has progressed, Wall continually looks for new ways to bring more and more levels of complexity into the simple scenes he constructs.

The interest in mimesis is central to Wall's oeuvre. *Mimic* was Wall's first image that captured an image of culture that was not quite general, but also not quite specific. Because of the racial prejudice depicted, it is sometimes hard to look past our reaction to this cultural taboo and see what Wall is saying about photography and its encapsulation of certain ideas within society. This is not a picture about racism, per se, it is more a picture about pictures and how they are constructed out of life. Wall, after *Mimic*, has tried to tone down such socially charged subject matter so that his images can be more aesthetic experiences that do not lend themselves to an immediate, subject-matter induced reading.[22] Like *Mimic*, Wall's street pictures work to foreground his compositional choices in tandem with a more vague idea of representing society at the fringe of urban spaces. By showing common urban life falsified and by bringing up questions of what a "real" vision of urban life is, Wall plays upon ideas of representation that are at the very

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[21] Burnett, 21.

[22] Melissa Denes, "Interview: Picture perfect: Melissa Denes meets photographer Jeff Wall," *The Guardian,* October 15, 2005, Art and Design.

core of poststructuralist postmodern art practice (that is, he deconstructs the notions of vision as they pertain to everyday life as well as the media that permeates it). Artists like Sherrie Levine, who appropriates and rephotographs prints by Walker Evans and others, work with the same concepts that Wall is interested in: to unfix the way that photographs are often seen as accurate representations of life, of a moment, of a specific object that has been offered up as worthy of photographing. Douglas Crimp, in talking about Levine's work and its implications, posited that "no photograph could be traced back to or grounded by nature because photographers, conceiving their images and posing their models, would rely on or be influenced by an existing language of representation."[23] That is, by being fully immersed within a society with established modes of visual representation, a photographer's works are inevitably influenced by these modes no matter how "natural" a photograph claims to be.

Photojournalism and straight photography may not seem relevant to Crimp's argument at first, but they can retroactively fit into the framework of postmodern thought. A snapshot of people on the street is not typically associated with posed or controlled actors. Posing the participants would not constitute true street photography. Rather, the aesthetic construction lies within the artist's eye and their decision to click the shutter. These elements are dictated by societies' ideas of representation, of what will make a good photograph. People as far back as Alfred Stieglitz did just this when he stood in the street, camera ready, waiting for the precise moment that, he felt, would make a good picture.

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[23] Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 152-153.

CHAPTER III

FANTASY OR FACT?: WALL AND HIS PEERS

There seems to be a battle going on in Wall's oeuvre between pieces like *Picture for Women* (1979), *Mimic* (1982) and *Vampire's Picnic* (1991). Wavering back and forth throughout the years, he has consistently produced work that addresses the issues inherent in photographing constructed tableaus. Should the scene be over the top, hyperreal and obviously fabricated like much of the work by his contemporary Gregory Crewdson? Or should the picture be critically reflexive about its means of production, allowing the viewer to see the apparatus of the tableau: the camera, the lights, the set? Or should the photograph play at realistic likenesses, imitating the street photography of Garry Winogrand and the balanced images of the urban environment by Stephen Shore (for example: Shore's 1975 work *El Paso Street*)?[24] Looking back to the late 1970s, when Wall first started working with large-scale photographs in lightboxes, one recognizes the artist's fascination with postmodern critiques of representation. Using commercial media techniques (the backlit cibachromes) and revealing the artist and his tools to the audience, Wall hoped to bring to light the way a photograph was made and how that process was largely taken for granted, and how it affected the viewer to see a photograph about photographs.

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[24] "[In 1977 I] also noticed and liked Stephen Shore's and Garry Winogrand's work, partly because of the cool and knowing view of the American street and suburbs and partly because of the acceptance of the actual, vulgar colors of things." Jeff Wall, "Frames of Reference"(2003) in Vischer, 443.

As has been mentioned, mimesis is at the core of much of Wall's work. *Mimic*'s title stands in as an explanatory statement of both the subject matter as well as the overall aim of the piece: to create a photograph that "mimics" the reality of street photography, Neo-Realist film and even daily life itself. Before the lightboxes, Wall had ambitions to make films. *Landscape Manual* (1969-70) is an early example of his interest in journalism, but after a failed attempt at converting these inclinations into cinema, the backlit stills were a logical next step.[25]

Wall's interest in film aesthetics is related to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* of 1977-80. However, Wall's pieces from around the same time as the *Film Stills* are more based in the art historical canon and are less theoretically rigorous than Sherman's investigation of the gaze and related critique of representation using photography. It is helpful to tease out the ways that Wall was doing similar things with his work in the late 1970s, becoming inspired by the poststructuralist texts that other photographers were also reading. For example, if one compares early works by Wall like *Picture for Women* (1979), *Movie Audience* (1979), and *Stereo* (1980), it becomes readily apparent that there are deeper theoretical underpinnings in these pieces than is usually assumed. They are not simply large photos of people.

Sherman's work shares this condition of semi-familiarity by way of an uncertain use of the photographic medium. By specifically referencing B-movies from the 1950s and 1960s (as in *Untitled Film Still #11* of 1978), she plays with the stereotypes of

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[25] "Influenced by Barthes's ideas, Ian Wallace produced several seminal works in the early 1970s using actors and staged sets. *Summer Script* began as a collaborative film project with Jeff Wall, but was finally produced by Wallace as a series of stills in two groupings." Lori Pauli, ed., *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre* (London: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2006): 140.

women in these films and re-envisions them using her own body. But by relying on

images of her own person in multiple guises, she does not add to the stereotypes, but

rather forces the audience to question their views on these types of images. By unfixing

the meaning of these images of women, she creates a palpable tension between the image

and the audience.[26]

By making essentially fake pictures of real events people can relate to, Wall

creates a similar sort of tension between his works and his audience. Wall's street scene

pictures are staged but look like they are not. This familiarity is key when assessing the

success of more recent images like *Siphoning Fuel* (2008) and *Men Move an Engine

Block* (2008). They are successful because they are not easily caught in a lie, but when

discovered, become all the more rich in context. Everyday instances are captured in a

manner that partially presents their falsity but at the same time makes the viewer want to

believe. Wall creates scenes that everyone has seen, but does it in a way that makes them

memorable (for example, the contrast of light sources in *View From an Apartment* of

2004-05 renders the composition all the more dynamic).

Creating a tension between disparate elements in his compositions became an

increasingly important factor in Wall's working method as his career progressed. This

tension has gradually become enveloped in the images in such a way that it is a more

subliminal aspect that governs the whole picture. This is what sets the street pictures

apart from the works of artists like Gregory Crewdson, Sam Taylor-Wood and others.

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[26] For a discussion of this in regard to the *Untitled Film Stills*, see: Cindy Sherman, *Cindy Sherman* (Paris: Flammarion/Jeu de Palme, 2006): 240.; And for a similar discussion involving the *Rear Screen Projections*: Ibid., 246.

Most of Wall's pieces do not forefront an aesthetic scene where the subject matter is obviously absurd. This does not mean, however, that artists working in a manner contrary to Wall's are not looking at his work for inspiration. Andrew Lubow notes, "the influence of his huge images and studied compositions on the Düsseldorf group led by [Andreas] Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer. (Gursky has cited Wall as "a great model for me.") You can see it as well in the man-in-the-street pictures of Philip-Lorca diCorcia — done with a large-format camera, strobes and unwitting passers-by — which continue Wall's reworking of the documentary tradition."[27]

Even parts of Wall's oeuvre like *Dead Troops Talk* and his other obviously constructed works stand apart from pieces like *View from an Apartment* and *Trân Dúc Ván* (1988). These latter images are noteworthy for their progression into the documentary and journalisitic modes.[28] They also are not contingent upon constructed spaces (although *View from an Apartment* muddles this border by being set in a a space where Wall instructed people to go about their lives and thus create a more organic location for the image). About *Dead Troops Talk*, Thierry de Duve writes: "But remember that the set-up of this scene was totally manufactured in the studio. Wall did not go '*sur le motif,*' he imagined the set, conceived it and constructed it freely, with no constraint other than having to think, simultaneously, like a stage director arranging his actors in a real depth of space; like a painter composing a space from a plane; and like a

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[27] Arthur Lubow, "The Luminist," *The New York Times Magazine* (February 25, 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/magazine/25Wall.t.html?pagewanted=10&_r=1&sq=the%20luminist&st=cse&scp=1 (accessed April 27, 2009).

[28] Wall refers to it as his "near-documentary"style of photographing. Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 18.

photographer (or a 'filmmaker of the still image'), lighting the scene and knowing where to place his camera."[29]

This problem of "going '*sur le motif,*'" as de Duve puts it, is what makes the street pictures so befuddling as constructed images, so difficult to construct properly, and so successful as instances of the perfect melding of the cinematic and the journalistic. Instead of laboriously fabricating the setting, Wall allows the setting and prior action to inform his image. The original concept behind the street pictures is that they are reconstructions of things that the artist has witnessed in his everyday life. Then, employing his methods of studio production, Wall goes back with lights, actors and a large format camera to recreate a moment that was not entirely imagined but also not wholly realistic. He says, "I use the term neo-realism [...] It refers to using non-professional performers in roles very close to their own lives, photographing events as if you were doing reportage, and recognizing good subjects in the everyday."[30] By implementing these "neo-realist" techniques in his process, Wall is better able to supplement his fictions with pieces of fact, thus making them more familiar (and thus more readily believable) to the viewer.

Photographers need to give the viewing public credit. An audience can usually tell when something is "off" or slightly wrong in a way that elicits the assumption of a constructed image. The best photograph makers today realize this fact and go one of two ways. Some go the route of obvious fabrication. Artists like Crewdson and Julia

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[29] De Duve, *Jeff Wall*, 37.

[30] Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 63.

Fullerton-Batten use the camera to capture an image that is so constructed that there is no doubt that this is not a documentary snapshot. Intense lighting, improbable tableaus and a surreal setting allow photos like those in Crewdson's *Twilight* series (2002) to fall within the realm of the cinematic more readily. In some of her work, Fullerton-Batten uses miniaturized scenes (as in the 2005 series *Teenage Stories*), but employs full-sized people, making her pieces fit in the realm of straight photography while at the same time flirting with absurdity.

The other route that artists like Wall have chosen is to use all of the equipment of cinematic artists, but to hide this from the public by constructing a scene so convincing that it becomes ordinary or everyday. Works like *Search of Premises* (2008) employ all of the background work of hiring actual investigators to look through a constructed set for clues, and all of the production work of a film shoot, but still present the image as a scene based in reality. Each of Wall's street photos is strangely familiar to the audience, and this is one of the major successes of the group. Creating an image that the viewer relates with more readily on the level of their everyday life as opposed to on the level of a constructed artistic composition let the street pictures interact with multiple critical angles at once. The snapshot aesthetic, the constructed tableau and the fictive narrative are all bound up in one image.

There are faces and things that one recognizes because of their ubiquity and others because of their fame (which, more often than not, may lead to ubiquity; take for example the instance of media-friendly "famous" people who are suddenly on every magazine rack for simply constructing an image around being famous). Crewdson, too,

generates familiarity in unfamiliar surroundings. In his *Dream House* series (2002), the photographer cast Hollywood actors like William H. Macy and Julianne Moore in his stills. They are at once recognizable (because of their fame) and unsettling (because of their stillness and surroundings). There is no movement in these pictures. Like Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) (which Crewdson has consequently re-envisioned in another work), the bodies are contemplative but static; common but abnormal; familiar but unplaceable.

Wall takes an opposite (and in my mind, more rewarding) approach to portraying the familiar. Whereas Crewdson's actors were the connection to real life in *Dream House*, Wall extracts his interpretations of events recognizable to him and recreates them in a way that they are also recognizable, somehow, to the viewer. If one deletes the human figures from pieces like Wall's *In Front of a Nightclub* (2006), it becomes a documentary shot of a real locale where the scene described could (and perhaps has, in some form or another) take place. This is not to say that both Crewdson and Wall do not dabble into the realm of each other's subject matter (*Dead Troops Talk* by Wall and the scenes of people standing dumbstruck in the street next to their cars in the *Twilight* series by Crewdson come to mind), but for the most part they are artists working toward similarly cinematographic aims but coming at the problem from different angles. Crewdson shoots contrived fiction that knows it is fiction. Wall shoots falsity that can pass for truth.

In a 1994 essay, Wall commented: "Angels don't fly too well in photographs."[31] This statement is particularly relevant given the majority of Wall's oeuvre. Although his use of cinematographic methods and constructed tableaus is integral to his practice, Wall's subject matter remains more true to life than some of his followers and contemporaries. Working within the idea of the photograph as a (fictive) record of a past moment or instant, works like *Overpass* (2001) do not overstate their use of color schemes, and *Tenants* takes on the feeling of transition common to quick snapshots from a small camera or those taken from a moving vehicle.[32] *Tenants* in particular bears resemblance to Wall's nascent work, *Landscape Manual* (1969-70) which contains a series of images actually shot from a car window but at the same time (according to Karen Henry in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*) "is one of the early works in which cinema begins to be articulated in photographic practice, through the back door, contrary to spectacle but colluding with it."[33]

The works of Crewdson tell of a dreamland. The rich color and provocative lighting in concert with the bizarre subject matter give his images an obvious otherworldliness. By using recognizable actors from film, the pictures speak to a certain cinematicism prevalent in Hollywood productions. Pieces like those in *Dream House* or in *Twilight* could be seen as frozen stills from the movies. Likewise, Wall also plays with this idea of the cinematic, but instead of Hollywood he looks to filmmakers like Luis

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[31] See: Jeff Wall, "Angels Don't Fly Too Well in Photographs: Vik Muniz Interviews Jeff Wall," *Blind Spot* 4 (1994).

[32] Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 56.

[33] Pauli, 140.

Buñuel and his film *Los Olvidados* (1950). Buñuel (identified within the neorealist genre of filmmaking) and Wall's street pictures make use of non-actors and the near documentary style.[34] In *War Game* (2007) and *Siphoning Fuel*, Wall uses children among his subjects. Unlike canonized actors in some of Crewdson's works, and because of the idea of capturing a moment, the children are reminders of the passage of time.[35] They "will age into adults and eventually die themselves. At the same time the work's gelatin-silver process suggests a melancholic reverberation of the past in the present, as the medium is so clearly historically dated and, today, subject to extinction."[36] By capturing a fleeting moment in the ever changing life of a child with an antique process now replaced, Wall comments on both life and photography on similar terms.

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[34] Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 24.

[35] It should be made very clear, however, that not all of Crewdson's pictures contain Hollywood actors and actresses. Specifically, *Dream House* is notable in using these famous personas, but Crewdson also uses children and other hired actors in his works. Although, they are not usually caught up in the follies of urban youth, but instead in the fantastic world of the photographer's making.

[36] Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 24.

CHAPTER IV

FAKING LIFE

A large light-boxed triptych, *Faking Death* (1977), sets out exactly what Wall wanted to do with his art in a straightforward manner. The first panel shows the setup: the stage, the lights, the crew, the camera; and the second and third panels show the exact same image: the reproducible imagery that was the result of the first panel's setup. This seems very generous of the artist to tell us exactly what he is trying to portray in his work so that we may read his later pictures more thoroughly, so that we will not have to wonder if they are constructions or not and then will be able to go about deconstructing them in light of art historical references and aesthetic choices. But, there is a twist. Wall no longer considers *Faking Death* to be part of his oeuvre. It does not exist in his catalogue raisonné or in most publications devoted to Wall's pieces. In fact, the only image of it that is somewhat readily accessible is in the 1979 catalog for an exhibition in Victoria, in which Wall also showed *The Destroyed Room* (regarded now as his "first" lightbox piece).[37]

There is a noticeable lack of imagery that relates directly to the photographic process in Wall's oeuvre. This seems strange considering the artist's continual referencing to photographic form, the lightbox support and the way that his works position the audience within the works via their everyday subject matter. However, a

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[37] Jeff Wall, *Jeff Wall: Installation of Faking Death (1977); The Destroyed Room (1978); Young Workers (1978); Picture for Women (1979)* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979).

small number of works by Wall directly feature photographic equipment or the tropes of the theatrical production. These pictures: *Faking Death, Picture for Women* and *The Vampire's Picnic* (1991) are direct representations of Wall's process colliding with his subject matter (something that can often lead to a weakening of illusion and compositional strength in photographs that rely completely on fictional or journalistic subject matter). *Faking Death*, having a somewhat forthright presentation of Wall's artistic practice, deals with the relationship of photography to theatre as it relates to the audience. The first panel shows the studio (or so we are given to believe) where the production of the second and third panels is taking place. Showing the artist in a state of undress lying on a bed, these subsequent images are identical. The reproductions of the fictive scene are juxtaposed with the techniques used to make them in the initial frame.[38]

As one of Wall's earliest large-format images that deals directly with the notion of theatricality and the cinematic, it is interesting that the artist has tried to remove traces of *Faking Death* from circulation. If this was the only example of "breaking the fourth wall," it might be a more understandable career move. But, as it stands, both *Picture for Women* and *Vampire's Picnic* (a much later work than the other two, and also much more fantastical) show the camera, studio and artist (in the first instance) and a stage light on a cart (in the later piece). These implements of the artform invoke very concrete allusions to Wall's process that are only hinted at in his other works. Instead of questioning the viewers' notions of representation by proxy of their subject matter and delivery, the

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[38] *Faking Death* "illustrates the production of the photograph as theatre and clearly positions the viewer as spectator. The first panel presents the machinery of cinematic spectacle: lights, camera, makeup, *mise en scène*, and crew are all part of the picture. The other two images, both of the artist lying "dead" on a bed, partially covered by a striped sheet, bare-chested and with his head propped on a pillow, are essentially identical. The construction and reproducibility of the photograph are part of the work." Pauli, 140.

photographs that obviously contain technical apparatuses being used to make the picture do something else. They bring to light the way that Wall uses narrative and theatricality in his work and also how the workings of these structures are unseen until visualized or made obvious.

It is worthwhile to consider *Faking Death* in relation to Roland Barthes' comments on the links between photography, theatre and death. He posits that "however "lifelike" we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography [sic] is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."[39] In the context of Wall's works, the idea of a striving for "lifelike" qualities is central. It would seem, however, that Barthes' supposition about denying an apprehension of death has been met head on with the theatrical production and staging of the artist's own mock demise.

These connections play upon notions of the photograph as a record, as scientific visual evidence that something has existed. It is, as Barthes would agree and has been touched upon already, not showing things as they are, but how they have been. By freezing an instant in time, the camera can capture a split second that only existed then and there. The comparison to a tableau vivant is telling. In such a theatrical construction the actors are still, yet full of life. Their stillness could just as easily be used to portray the

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[39] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981): 32.

dead on stage.[40] In a photograph the energy of the moment when the shutter was released is captured. There is, however, no definite assertion of the longevity of the scene portrayed. Photographs always show the past (or as Barthes says, "that thing has been there"[41]) and this fact is perhaps where they are most susceptible to trickery and forging. Wall fakes the look of journalism to illicit a different reaction from the audience than the kind that pictorialist photographs receive (which is similar to that reaction afforded a painted work) and to comment on how the audience perceives photography as this record of life (or death) whose truth is often taken for granted. Rooting his practice in the street photography aesthetic of the 1960s helps to make images like *Men Waiting* (2006) especially perplexing as constructed records of life.

Wall's oeuvre, for the most part, is rooted in the everyday, drawing from his ideas embodied in the first street pictures. His pieces, though constructed, lit, acted, enlarged, cropped, digitized and collaged, exude something akin to the street photographs of Winogrand or Frank. Wall's lightboxes are grand, illuminated spectacles that foreground simple events in a cinematic frame. Yet their subjects purport to be ordinary: things that have happened, things that have been seen, things that might be seen. The artist bases much of his work on events he witnesses in his home of Vancouver, British Columbia, but the photographs are not exact recreations. Pieces like *The Storyteller* (1986) are a

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[40] Barthes further expresses the connections between theatre and death when we relates: "We know the original relation of the theater and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead: the whitened bust of the totemic theater, the man with the painted face in the Chinese theater, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian Katha-Kali, the Japanese No mask … " Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 32.

[41] Ibid., 76.

good example of the mixture of painting history and photojournalism.[42] They are tableaus

that attempt to reimagine the past and at the same time document a moment that then fills

in for the real event; it is very much a retelling – the art historic references and dynamic

compositions are the work of an artist, not happenchance. Wall has said before that:

"The spontaneous […] is the most beautiful thing that can appear in a picture, but nothing

in art appears less spontaneously than that."[43]

Barthes writes: "Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse

combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most

often 'chimeras.' Contrary to these imitations, in Photography [sic] I can never deny that

the thing has been there."[44]

What has been there? Certainly the actors and the sets Wall uses have been there.

Or have they? Oftentimes the artist will pose different aspects of the scene and

photograph them separately, only collaging them digitally later to make the final product.

This is seen in numerous examples: most noticeably in *A Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*

and less clearly in *Dead Troops Talk. Intersection* (2008), furthers this by including both

chance elements (the men walking in the foreground were photographed without their

knowledge) and highly selective shots (collage seams are present on some of the

buildings because of slight light differences, although one wonders if this was not

intentional, knowing Wall's highly critical eye). Digital manipulation has made it

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[42] References to Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) are often cited along with the small group on the left side of the composition. For example: "[…] it takes only one iconographic detail for *The Storyteller* to bring *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* to life." De Duve, *Jeff Wall*, 49.

[43] Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 12.

[44] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 76.

possible to present convincing photographic tableaus that never actually existed in the physical world. Although based on an actual moment that Wall witnessed, the photographs are more fragments of a general view on what is common and ordinary. Since they are compiled from many specific shots, the digital street pictures can show every part of the scene that Wall wants to show in one image and are not limited by the contents of a single instant like a traditional photograph.

A prime example of Wall's compilation process, and one that fits well with his inquiry into the category of "images of everyday life," is *View From an Apartment*. In it, the artist ferreted out the exact dwelling in which he would make his picture. He then rented the apartment and hired a young woman to live in it as she normally would for a period of months. After such a time, Wall returned and began to photograph. From looking at the image, one might not be able to guess that the shooting took weeks. Through digital collaging, Wall was able to shoot the scene outside the window in the best light and shoot the scene in the apartment in the best light and then digitally combine the two to make the final image. All told, the entire process that went into making this picture took over two years.[45] Yet, when viewed, *View From an Apartment* belies the time it took to create the image and instead shows a sense of instantaneous movement (the woman walking) and a lucky case of the light working in the photographer's favor (the window's light juxtaposed with the interior lamps).

Michael Fried says about *View From an Apartment*: "Then there are what for want of a better term may be called the self-referential aspects of Wall's photograph, in

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[45] Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 57.

the first place because the view through the window inescapably presents itself as analogous to the lightbox image itself."[46] The cold light outside contrasts with the warm glow inside much as Wall's lightboxes stand out in a neutrally lit gallery space. As in *Faking Death*, and more subtly in *Mimic*, Wall has again made reference to his work within his work. This self-referentiality shows that the artist is not so much trying to trick the audience into believing (in fact, he gives them hints as to the image's construction), so much as the audience may at some point be tricking themselves. The viewer wants to pretend that what they see is real, even for just a moment, and the fact that this happens taps into the very core idea of how vision is constructed in society and how Wall is so in tune with the tropes of this overarching structure that he can, essentially, fake life.

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[46] Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 59.

CHAPTER V

POSTMODERN BEGINNINGS: CINDY SHERMAN AND JEFF WALL

In Roland Barthes' essay "The Third Meaning," he talks about film stills and

how, "unlike a regular photograph, [they are] a narrative fragment, a quotation. [They

provide] an opportunity for associations that open out beyond the trajectory of the

primary narrative."[47] In this respect, Wall's photos, like Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*,

are not film stills. Wall's pieces do not always readily lend themselves to the construction

of an ongoing narrative. They contain a certain immediate tension, but this is often

brought about by the composition and does not necessarily lead onto separate, disparate

events in the viewer's mind. Lori Pauli writes: "Unlike the documentary photograph,

which Wall sees as relying on an aesthetic of the "fragmentary," the staged photograph is

a completed visual statement. Gesture, pose, set design, and lighting are all highly

controlled, as would happen in preparing a scene for a motion picture. Wall, in fact,

frequently refers to his work as "cinematographic," but in his constructed photographs

the narrative resides entirely within a single image."[48] His works that draw heavily from

paintings by specific artists lend themselves less to an ongoing narrative with the viewer

and more toward a place in the timeline of art history. In this respect, the art historical

pieces are not as successful as the street pictures because they rely on and contribute to

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[47] Pauli, 140.

[48] Ibid., 62.

the construction of vision already in place instead of facilitating an active engagement between the viewer and their perception of the world.

The possible suggestion of narrative in the street pictures may be the cause for their relative unpopularity among Wall's other works that have either fantastic or historical subtexts. However, simply because the street pictures' narrative is not readily discernible does not mean they are fragmentary. These images of everyday life are a way to look at something ordinary or familiar in a new way. The subject matter is of interest to the audience, but more importantly, the photograph itself is the subject under scrutiny. By making the focal points of his pieces appear mundane and familiar, Wall elicits a critical response from the audience when he presents them with familiar subjects in an unusual way. Rather than have the viewer consider extra-aesthetic issues regarding his street scenes such as political movements or the art market, the artist does his best to take away these matters and return to a more purely formal and aesthetic vision. Wall investigates the mediums of the support, the mode of representation, and the photograph of everyday life. This does not mean, however, that Wall is a modernist. By using photography as a fictitious record instead of only as an investigatory tool, he aligns himself with postmodernism and the photographic practices coming out of conceptualism.

Upon further inspection Wall's works can be seen as informed by feminism. The critique of media technologies (not taking for granted the way in which photography or cinema work within society and within art practice) and representation are core tenets of feminist art and criticism. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist art theory

dominated advanced art. With it came an emphasis on questioning of the relationship between representation, the body, the media and art practice. Artists (women and men alike) started working with feminism's tenets both directly and indirectly in their pieces and in dialogue with the history of art.[49] Many artists used photography, the basis of many later conceptual works, to provoke the viewer into taking a second look at the world around them. Cindy Sherman has continued on this track throughout her career, making photos that actively engage the audience in a critique of representation. Jeff Wall began making pieces that closely rivaled those of Sherman, but focused on implementing these theories into his subject matter, rather than on the way he could make the audience aware of them.

By creating images of herself in stereotypical roles imposed on women in film and the media, Sherman brings into play notions of pleasure and scopophilia as infamously commented on by Laura Mulvey.[50] That is, by looking at images of women in these ways, people, even women, embody and perpetuate the phallocentric society in which the stereotypes have been constructed. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* of the late 1970s deal with ideas of representation and the gaze as it relates to mass media and the cinema. Douglas Crimp, writing about her work and that of similar artists like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince in 1979, posited that their drawing out and reframing of images from and inspired by media and mass media was a way for these artists to

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[49] Refer to pivotal writings such as: Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" in Foster, Hal, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle, WA: Bay P, 1983).

[50] See: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," (1975) in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Cambridge and New York: MIT Press and New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

question the structure of representation.[51] The "Pictures" exhibition of 1977 was integral in introducing the works of the poststructuralist postmodernist artists of the late 1970s to the art world. These artists' thoughts have become central (and perhaps almost taken for granted) now as theorists constantly talk about Sherman and her compatriots when referencing the critique of the fixity of meaning in images and art.[52]

It is sometimes asked whether or not what Sherman is doing is a critical discourse or if it is simply perpetuating the stereotypes that she is deconstructing.[53] If we take this into consideration, by simply drawing attention to the construction of representation in the films she is mimicking, Sherman has effectively started to undermine the system upon which they are built. Critics like Craig Owens, in his 1983 article "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," contend that Sherman's work presents femininity as a type of masquerade, that the popular vision of women is that of "an empty signifier."[54] He also posits that Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* unfix the idea of the male gaze by challenging (not contributing to) the stereotypes she depicts and by deconstructing the idea of a stable identity through her use of self-portraiture.[55] If indeed these are "portraits" of Sherman, then Owens' idea of the empty signifier seems contradictory since an image of a person that directly relates to its subject cannot be

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[51] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88.

[52] For Crimp's original discussion of Cindy Sherman in the context of the *Pictures* exhibition, see: Ibid., 80-81.

[53] Eleanor Heartney, et al., *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (New York, NY: Prestel Publishing, 2007): 173.

[54] Ibid., 173.

[55] Ibid., 173.

entirely empty. However, it is plausible that Sherman's images do not contribute to the stereotypes of women because of their depth. By not being just images as empty signifiers, they challenge the gaze and invoke a rethinking of the depiction.

Wall also started working with photography during the 1970s. Although working in Canada instead of New York, he developed his own response to poststructuralist theories that he had encountered after writing his dissertation on Marcel Duchamp at The Courtauld Institute. Keeping in mind Duchamp's ideas of the readymade, Wall was influenced by Minimalism and Conceptualism and then a subsequent return to painting by some artists in the 1980s. Krauss argues that Wall and artists like him were set in trying to create a medium by combining aspects of previous media in a way specific to their practice.[56] Because of the expansion on the basis of readymades (that is, the vast expansion of materials usable in art practices), artists tried to single out a way to work that would be the most effective. Michael Fried in the 1960s used the term "theatricality" when talking about the amalgamation of mediums, a term that coincides well with the cinematic nature and allusions to the *tableau vivant* of pieces like *View from an Apartment*.[57] Perhaps then it is only fitting that almost fifty years later Fried has written a text on photography that foregrounds Wall's oeuvre (*Why Photography Matters as Art As Never Before* [2008]). Using photographs, Wall has endeavors to unfix the meanings in

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[56] Krauss, "…And Then Turn Away?", 5-6.

[57] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (Summer 1967). Krauss has this to say about Fried's idea of "theater": "[He] saw the individual mediums imploding into a single continuum which he chose to call "theater," his name not only for a technical mixing of mediums but also for what he saw as an activation of the work's audience by means of the forms of pandering we commonly call entertainment, but which he called "presence" (as in stage-presence)." Krauss, "…And Then Turn Away?", 6.

his images by referencing the art historical canon and dealing with questions of medium, the photographic support and the notion of constructed photographic tableaus as opposed to journalistic snapshots. This blending of genres is often problematic as some critics find that the images are better approached like paintings and some, like de Duve, talk about them as photographs but with painting-like qualities.

The Destroyed Room is one of Wall's very first photographs that the artist considers worthy of his catalogue raisonné. It has strong visual ties to art history and the tradition of painting. As mentioned, it directly references Death of Sardanapalus.[58] The ripped mattress stands in for the bed of the doomed king. The women of the harem being slaughtered have been transformed into various women's garments and accoutrements spread chaotically about the tableau. Vibrant red walls pulse with an anger and violence that recalls Delacroix' original scene. Yet, this is not the only parallel to be drawn. Also relevant perhaps is a reading of Matisse's Red Studio (1911). This juxtaposition brings the subject matter of a Romantic painting to bear with a Fauvist treatment of an artist's studio. Indeed, Wall's piece is self-aware. This is a contrived scene. Made on a set and carefully photographed, The Destroyed Room seeks to deconstruct the notions of representation not of a kind of film, like Sherman's imaginings, but of painting. Wall, like most photographers, is taking a picture of things he sees. However, what Wall sees in these early works prior to Mimic is the painted image and the tradition of pictorial photography, not reality.

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[58] "Typology, Luminescence, Freedom: Selections from a Conversation with Jeff Wall," in Jeff Wall. Selected Essays and Interviews (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007): 186-87.

Even more clear in its critique of the nature of photographs and their relation to art history is *Picture for Women*. From the outset, it is obvious that this is a studio construction. Whereas *The Destroyed Room* left some doubt at the very beginning, *Picture for Women* confronts the audience immediately with what is at stake. There is a self-portrait of the artist. There is a woman. And, there is a camera. All are facing outward. The reference to *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is an obvious one. However, though it is implied that the viewer is the man partially reflected in the mirror in the Manet, it is difficult to discern with whom we are supposed to identify in Wall's piece. The man on the right is a self-portrait of the artist, and he does not, on close inspection, look out at the viewer. The woman stares back at us, but not directly. She functions in somewhat the same way as the barmaid in *Folies Bergère* (although it is difficult to tell whether we are looking at her or she is looking at us). After a time, the viewer is given the uncanny feeling that they are the camera. Indeed, this is how the photo is constructed and therefore it is the most probable point of entry into the piece.[59] But identifying with the camera has its own set of problems. By doing so, the viewer has to figure out for themselves whether they are the one gazing, or the one being gazed at. The reflection of the mirror muddles this point.

Sherman employs mirrors and direct gazes to comparable effect. The *Untitled Film Stills* involve the artist in the stereotypical roles she has constructed for herself, but engage the viewer much more actively. We are caught in our gazing. This creates a tension between the viewer and the piece that forbids the observer to become complacent

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[59] De Duve, *Jeff Wall*, 30-31.

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with looking. This tension elicits a recognition of the composition as a reference to a stereotype. Régis Durand writes that the "[*Untitled Film Stills'*] success lies in the tension established by the artist between our immediate recognition of a reference or stereotype (with the inevitable danger that this becomes a somewhat superficial game), and the creation of a space onto which the viewer can project his or her fictional imaginings and desires."[60] The author goes on to suggest that Sherman's early images function much like real film stills because they "[invite] the viewer to implicate him- or herself in the image, both visually and sexually."[61] The scenes are fragmentary and they imply a narrative that viewers take it upon themselves to continue.

Consider Wall's works again. Like the *Unititled Film Stills*, they play with the idea of the cinematic view of life; the way that vision is mediated. They initially may seem strictly derivative of Sherman's and this could be true for the first few works in his oeuvre. However, after the initial foray into constructed images that are blatant provocations of the audience to think about systems of representation, Wall turned away from the non-narrative quality of film stills that is so present in Sherman's pieces. By depicting scenes of everyday life, Wall delivers a much more contained image. This containment releases the artist from having to tell a story through narration that draws on fragmentary scenes. Instead, the narrative is created in the viewer's mind, having been prompted with a scene that they can relate to their everyday sights.

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[60] Sherman, *Cindy Sherman*, 240.

[61] Ibid., 240.

In her essay "Cindy Sherman: The Polemics of Play," Eleanor Heartney places Wall with artists like Crewdson when she writes that Wall, Crewdson and others' "photographs tell stories, but do so in stop-action episodes that require the viewer to attempt to fill in the story, to imagine what happened before, what might happen next. By offering either too much or too few clues, these artists create a state of tension that keeps the viewer constantly aware of the fictitious nature of the illusion being created. This, in turn, encourages the viewer to complete the story, in effect joining in partnership with the artist in a way that undermines conventional ideas about the artist's absolute authority."[62]

The argument can be made that the tension does not come from the viewer trying to join with the artist in the construction of a narrative in Wall's early photos. The tension is in two parts. First, it is compositional. Since these are not snapshots, Wall has had the chance to carefully construct the scene according to his aesthetic leanings. The frame of the photograph is filled in with content in such a way that each element is in correspondence with the other elements. Figures in movement play off of each other and the setting and these in turn play off of the photographic construction and the frame of the picture. The second, less superficial source of tension, is that Wall's early photographs (such as *The Destroyed Room* and *Picture for Women*) are obvious constructions. They can be read as constructed scenes, something made to be photographed, much like Sherman's work. Indeed, some critics have argued that Wall's early work simply

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[62] Heartney, 183-184.

appropriated feminist and poststructuralist critiques of representation evacuated of political or critical urgency.[63]

Sherman does something similar, although in a more technical manner that still places the focus on singular figures in staged poses. Her *Rear Screen Projections* of 1980 were the first of her color images, and also the first of her images to use a larger format. These scenes are still very recognizably constructed. The fact that the background is a projected image in front of which the subject (Sherman) stands can assure the viewer of the falsity of the tableaus. This version of the cinematic is similar to Wall's, but focuses more on displaying the technical aspects of cinema projection (one is reminded of older movies where characters would drive in a car nonchalantly while a pre-recorded background played out, giving the illusion of movement). Unlike the *Untitled Film Stills*, these images show the subject "as a more everyday figure, less overtly linked to specific cultural and social references. Young, modern-looking women are captured against a projected background (interior or exterior), in close-up or in the middle distance, sometimes positioned off-center within the frame, and apparently caught unaware, although the exact nature of the narrative is not immediately apparent."[64] Instead of directly engaging the audience by invoking well-known stereotypes, Sherman's *Rear Screen Projections* attempt something which Wall has since been developing throughout his career, culminating in images like *Two Eat From Bag* (2008) which are so highly constructed that they could almost pass for reality. Sherman's projections serve as a kind

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[63] Wall's connection to feminist thought is mentioned in Lubow, "The Luminist" and Newman, "Western Tableau".

[64] Sherman, *Cindy Sherman*, 246.

of basic, nascent form from which Wall's lightboxes and subsequent large-format black and white images could be seen to evolve. Her pieces are the most false-looking in terms of the scene constructed (since the background is nothing more than a projected image). Like the pre-selected projection, Wall's scenery is also handpicked by the artist to fit his compositional needs. An element of chance is introduced in that they are real locations used in the street pictures. This idea that something in the scene could be a happy accident (even if this is only an illusion placed by Wall for the viewer) is one of the things that make the street pictures so complex.

Mimic (although not the most successful picture in comparison to later works that more thoroughly combine the documentary nature of the snapshot with a Lacanian psychoanalytic critique of representation) marks a point in the artist's career where the first inkling of what, with later pieces, will become central. Instead of being overt about questioning the nature of the quick snapshot and investigating cinema and the cinematic, Wall hides these things in constructed photographs of the everyday by mimicking the way that people actually view the world and the way in which they view the world through cinema. By tediously constructing imagined scenes that have reference in the real world, the artist is able to somewhat fool the audience into thinking that his works are truthful representations. In turn, when they are made aware of the fact, the audience is made to re-evaluate how their vision is structured and see how they can be fooled.

More recent works like *Men Waiting* (2006), *View from an Apartment*, and *War Game*, mask Wall's questioning of representation and photography with the ordinary. Upon first look, the images seem to be simple photos of everyday occurrences. Closer

examination and background information will tell the viewer that these tableaus took many days and precise planning to realize. Realizing that these seemingly common snapshots are instead laborious constructions (that are so well fabricated they at first pass for truth) brings up pertinent questions such as: How does the cinema/media shape our perception of reality? How is reality shaped by our perception of it through the lens of the cinematic? And what does it mean that artists like Wall have the technology to construct seemingly uninteresting scenes that we take for granted in our day to day? Some of Sherman's later works, such as *Untitled #223* (1988) of her *History Portraits* series, are similar to Wall's pieces that explicitly reference the art historical canon. The image is an amalgamation of different paintings by different artists. By combining aspects of specific paintings, Sherman makes the audience aware that something is familiar, but is unable to tell exactly what they recognize in these restagings.[65] This notion of vague recollection is an underemphasized quality of Wall's pieces as well. While less subtle in Sherman's direct reconstructions (for example, her reworking of Caravaggio's *Sick Bacchus* from 1990) and Wall's more epic studio creations (i.e. *Vampire's Picnic* and *Dead Troops Talk*), the street pictures, like the works that refer to the art historical canon, are compelling because they are strangely recognizable. They are not something the audience can connect to by recollection of media imagery or, in most cases, because of art historical knowledge. Rather the street pictures elicit a recognition of the everyday. Based on something Wall has seen in real life, they are reconstructions of specific but generic events that force the viewer to reexamine how dominant visual regimes influence their

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[65] Pauli, 40.

seeing. Many of the street pictures are titled innocuously, such as *Two Eat From Bag* or *Passerby* (1996). These scenes are general and are named as such, yet they are specific to the fringe of society, and more importantly, to the fringe of urban society in Vancouver that the artist has personally witnessed.

The idea of the generic commonality along with a personal specificity for both the artist and the audience as seen in the street pictures was hinted at early on by Wall while he was still making pieces like *Picture for Women*. He was aware of the cinematic nature of his works and how the glowing light of the backlit transparencies could instantly link his photographs to a discourse about the film still or the cinema screen. In his essay for the catalog that presented *Faking Death, The Destroyed Room, Young Workers* (1978) and *Picture for Women* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1979, he wrote about their construction: "If some of my pictures are reminiscent of stills of movie sets, the structure of the delivery system makes them more like movies made for TV. This is especially so since, like TV, the pictures are on all day or night when exhibited."[66] This equating with the modes of production associated with television (a common, everyday media source) hints at Wall's goals that were realized later. In the late 1970s, he was still gaining his footing as an artist and it would seem he was highly influenced by artists like Sherman and others who actively engaged in feminist and postmodern critique in their works. It is only later, in the street pictures, that Wall creates something different, that is: he somewhat eliminates theoretical fantasy on the surface to embed a critique in his photographs that speaks to the way in which media shapes our views in real life, not just

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[66] Vischer, 438.

in other media. He is still using the core principles of poststructuralist/feminist theory, but has expanded upon the initial forays into artistic representations of these principles by distancing his works from the confrontational nature of he and his peers' early work.

Wall's current practice comes out of his postmodern critique of the photograph and a melding of studio and street production.[67] His early interest in the imitation of the effects of painting goes back to the Pictorialist modes of the early 20th century, when photographers were "dazzled by the spectacle of Western painting and attempted, to some extent, to imitate it in acts of pure composition."[68] Walter Benjamin, when talking about the simulation of "the lost aura through the application of techniques imitative of those painting," gave the example of the gum bichromate process which pictorial photographers used on their prints to simulate the physical properties of the painted canvas.[69] Wall does not modify the surface of his pieces physically, but the compositional elements of the "Western Picture", the idea of the tableau drawn from Western art

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[67] About his pieces of the late 1970s, Wall writes: "[The pictures in the exhibition of 1979] were conceived for and executed with large-format plate cameras, cameras which, by their unwieldiness and fixity, impose rigid terms on what can be successfully posed in front of them. Only certain forms of performance can be recorded in this way. Generally, things must be still. This stillness is not that of snapshot photography or movie stills ('interrupted motion'), but that of painting or sculpture – or, I suppose, of forms of photography which imitate the effects of painting, like a lot of studio portraiture, or of forms which parody and manipulate those effects, such as advertising and fashion. This mode of photography finds itself always in a profound relationship with the history of painting and sculpture. All still production does so, but more inadvertently than this." Vischer, 438.

[68] Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art," in Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960-1982* (Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003): 33.

[69] Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter, 1980): 95.

history, are noticeably present in his early works and to a lesser extent in more recent photographs.[70]

The interest in the history of art is seen in his early works, and continues to be a driving factor in Wall's work. He is well aware of the art historical canon and uses this knowledge to his advantage when constructing photographs that rely on this reference to pieces by Manet, Hokusai and others to invoke a sense of recognition from the viewer who then pause to more closely examine the piece whose referent they know so well. For those less familiar with the works' referents, this connection to previous works of art would not have as much effect. However, with the street pictures Wall does something similar but that can be spread to a wider audience. Disregarding somewhat what he said in 1979, Wall began to work with movement (or at least the illusion of movement) in street pictures like *Mimic*. Of course, this is not the movement of true snapshot photography (as Wall notes in the preceding quote). He has created an uneasy melding of movement and stillness that leads to the tension of the composition. This is why the early street photos look almost like true street photography, yet still retain the essence of the cinematic through a blend of real life representation with what Douglas Crimp refers to as "presence" an idea inspired by Benjamin's thought of the artwork's aura, but with a more

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[70] In his essay "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" of 1995, Wall's description of the "Western Picture" is strikingly familiar to what can be seen in his own practice. He writes: "The Western Picture is, of course, that *tableau*, that independently beautiful depiction and composition that derives from the institutionalization of perspective and dramatic figuration at the origins of modern Western art, with Raphael, Dürer, Bellini and the other familiar *maestri*. It is known as a product of divine 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. The soft body of the brush, the way it constantly changes shape as it is used, was the primary means by which the genius of composition was placed at risk at each moment, and recovered, transcendent, in the shimmering surfaces of magical feats of figuration." Wall, "Marks of Indifference," 33.

personal side relating to the vision of the artist.[71] *No* (1983) and *Milk* (1984) are both scenes of simple actions happening on the street. They are not constructed in a studio. Yet, the simple way that they are photographed using lights and the large-format camera makes them seem strangely surreal and contrived. This is very similar to what Sherman was doing with her *Rear Screen Projections*, except that Wall tries to establish the same contrivance of setting with the real world, while Sherman forgoes attempting this difficult feat and uses an actual projector.

Works like *No* do not provoke the viewer in the same way that *Mimic* and Wall's more recent photographs do. Whereas *Mimic* and *Men Waiting* are strangely natural looking, almost as if they were capturing a single, fleeting moment, *No* is awkward. The way the man walks past the woman readily belies the actors' rehearsed poses. Is this good? Is it better not to be tricked into thinking a constructed image is a real snapshot? If Wall had wanted to do that, he would not have gone to the trouble of exiting the studio and setting up in the space of everyday life and action. He would have done something similar to and derivative of Sherman and other artists. The street pictures are at their best when it is nearly impossible to tell what is and is not a constructed action or setting. By allowing the audience to initially accept the image that they see as real, they are more likely to question their own everyday life when made aware of the work's staged qualities. Wall is almost Brechtian in the way he makes his pieces interact with the audience. However, only in a few pieces (*Faking Death* and *Picture for Women* come to

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[71] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 94-95.

mind) does he engage the viewer in a manner congruent with the ideas of "epic theatre".[72]

In the street pictures, it is this lack of obvious construction (an intentional obscuration, even) that lets them make a more significant impact on the viewer once their falsity is exposed.

Douglas Crimp writes: "[Sherrie Levine's appropriated images] suggest that Roland Barthes's description of the tense of photography as the "having been there" be interpreted in a new way. The presence that such photographs have for us is the presence of déjà vu, nature as already having been seen, nature as representation."[73] Jeff Wall's pieces have a comparable presence. Whether he is reconstructing art historical tableaus (as in *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*), or creating staged versions of ordinary actions, Wall caters to the audiences' ability to recognize something that they have seen before, yet cannot quite place in this artistic context. This is similar to some of Sherman's *History Portraits*, as has been remarked on previously. Unlike Wall, Sherman questions the role of women in society much more matter of factly. By using herself as a model in many of her works, she brings an almost undeniably personal element to the pieces that is irrevocably entwined with her practice. She works with the shifting identities of women in society whereas Wall only brings up direct feminist issues in his earlier works.

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[72] The unnatural lighting and other tropes that draw attention to the scene as constructed are better seen in the works of artists like Crewdson (or Wall's early work as has been noted). See: Bertolt Brecht and Edith Anderson, "Theatre for Learning," *The Tulane Drama Review* 6:1 (Sep., 1961): 18-20.

[73] Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," 99.

CHAPTER VI

NEW WORKS: PRODUCTION V. PROCESS

"The pictures I made between 1978 and 1982 showed me some paths I could

take… how I could work in real places on themes derived for the most part from my own

experiences, remembered and reconstructed. I guess that was the start of what I came to

call my 'near documentary' pictures. I also think of those pictures as having a Neorealist

quality, an affinity with both reportage in photography and the look of the films I like

from the 1950s on."[74]

This quote is from James Rondeau's 2007 interview with Jeff Wall. It was

included in a catalogue of Wall's work for the Museum of Modern Art and, more

recently, in the press release for a show of new works by Wall at Marian Goodman

Gallery in the Fall of 2009. In the interview, the artist goes on to talk about the ways in

which he was trying to veer off from the predominant modes of pseudo-journalistic

photography by artists like Robert Frank while still working with the ideas of straight

photography. About his pieces of the 1980s (like *Mimic*, *No* and *Milk*, as well as others in

the same vein), Wall says: "These pictures were important to me; they opened up another

way of working, less indebted to the dialectic of painting and cinema […] and more

connected to straight photography."[75]

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[74] Peter Galassi, *Jeff Wall* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007): 152.

[75] Ibid., 153.

Painting and cinema are two overarching themes that are often used to understand Wall's work. Yet, it may be quite useful to try to overlook them only for a moment in order to more clearly see the artist's underlying creative structure. Many of Wall's pieces, no matter their aesthetic or technical links to the history of painting or the apparatus of cinema, are simple scenes of people doing daily activities or interacting in a rather mundane way with the world around them. For years these ordinary tableaus have been presented extraordinarily by being backlit in large lightboxes and printed as transparent cibachromes. The resulting glow resembles a cinema screen, and sometimes overshadows how mundane and trivial the actions depicted are. In more dramatic constructions of fictional scenes (such as 1992's *The Giant*), Wall's flickering support system brought even stronger parallels to the silver screen. Regardless, the lighted cibachromes are one of the first things people mention when talking about the artist's oeuvre.[76]

At the 2009 show at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, the lightboxes that Wall is known for had been entirely replaced by unlumened prints,[77] perhaps marking a turn away from the emphasis on the cinema screen correlation noted in the lightboxes. These new pieces rely heavily on the artist's skill at portraying scenes in a cinematographic manner that puts an emphasis on the ordinariness, the normality, the everyday nature of what has been photographed.

Why might Wall change his choice of medium after so long to make regular large format prints? This is further complicated by the fact that the artist plans to convert many

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[76] For example, see: Lubow, "The Luminist"; and Pauli, *Acting the Part*.

[77] Instead of using his usual backlit cibachromes, Wall used large, unilluminated photographic prints; both black and white as well as color. These prints were digitally manipulated and collaged to make the final product.

of the lightboxes into regular photographs.[78] While Wall's pieces have always dealt vaguely with notions of people on the outskirts of society, all of the works in this exhibition fit loosely into the broader context of the "fringe of society." This stronger emphasis on theme may have been a result of the artist trying to tie together photographs that no longer had backlighting to tie them together. Of course, it could also have been a way for the gallery to market the pieces, or a completely chance grouping. Many of Wall's pieces have dealt with similar subjects, so a perceived, general theme might help to bring them together in a gallery context.

It may be that a turn toward unlighted photographs signals both a look back to the history of art as well as a step forward in the artist's career. Wall is well known for his appropriation of the works of Manet, Hokusai and other artists whose emphasis on scenes of the ordinary marked them as deviants from tradition and (in the case of Hokusai and other artists working in the *ukiyo-e* tradition of printmaking which subsequently inspired the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists like Paul Gauguin and Mary Cassatt) as the greats of popular, reproducible media. However, with pieces like *War Game* and *Men Waiting*, as well as other works more in line with the tradition of street photography like *Tenants* and *Passerby*, Wall has stopped relying on color and illumination to evoke the cinematic - "the black-and-white print, instead, is imbued with the pathos of the history of this silvery medium."[79]

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[78] This has already taken place with works like *Polishing* (1998), which appeared at Marian Goodman alongside a number of other unlit works. Other unpublished information from: Andrew Richards (Senior Director, Marian Goodman Gallery), conversation with the author, September, 2009.

[79] Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 30.

Krauss, as was mentioned at the outset, has done a lot of thinking about what exactly Wall's "medium" is and why it matters. She writes in 1997: "[a]lthough Wall is described as having a "signature format," this is not analyzed or even named as a distinct medium. Partially this is because Wall, though working self-evidently as a photographer, is depicted as rehabilitating the medium of painting."[80] She then goes on to ask why Wall's pieces are considered within both the painted and photographic mediums, which seems to her a flippant decision on the part of critics.[81] Her further discussion reveals that the use of a perceived narrative in pieces like *Dead Troops Talk* and *Diatribe* lends them a connection to dramatic history paintings and further muddies the medium with which they must be associated. By doing so, she continues: "although Wall may have "invented a medium" he has, by producing "talking pictures," failed to engage that medium's specificity. It is this failure, I think, that consigns his reworkings of old master art to nothing more ambitious than pastiche."[82]

Krauss' intense disdain for Wall's practice is evident (she goes so far as to note on page 32 of the article that there was some grief from the editor about her inclusion of this criticism of Wall in an article mainly about James Coleman). There is a validity in some of her critique, however, although perhaps not in the way that was originally intended. It is true and pertinent to note that many critics do talk about Wall's lightboxes

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[80] Krauss, "…And Then Turn Away?", 29.

[81] Krauss writes: "De Duve, the only critic to take Wall's classification as photographer seriously, produces another deflection in the case by focusing on the subcategory of genre as a way of effortlessly moving back and forth between photography and painting, as though photography itself had not developed (over the same historical period as that of modernism) its own, specific genres, all of them inflected by the condition of documentary: news-photo, portrait, fashion or advertising shot." Ibid., 29.

[82] Ibid., 29.

in relation to the history of painting. As has been mentioned earlier, there is a definite

influence from art history in Wall's early works that is applied to the rest of his oeuvre.

However, it is most helpful to talk about his photographs as photographs. De Duve, for

one, gives the works attributes of both painting and photography.[83] Wall's work is best

understood not as having "invented a medium," as Krauss puts it, but as a new take on

photography and its process. Contrary to Krauss' emphasis on medium, the majority of

his photographs, the street pictures included, are in fact a mixture of mediums.[84] Wall

uses the lightbox, but (as can be seen with the recent deletion of this "signature format")

it is not the most important part of his presentation. Rather, it is the size, the clear focus,

the tableau and the idea of movement (or narrative) that makes each of Wall's street

pictures and some of his other works (especially those containing figures) so noteworthy.

All of this together manufactures a kind of production for the audience.[85] With pieces like

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[83] De Duve writes: "Wall is not aiming to simulate with photography effects which only painting can produce, but rather to emulate them with the only means available to the photographer: the choice of location, point of view and lighting. [...] [*The Storyteller*'s] medium is neither just painting nor just photography, but their historical relations." De Duve, *Jeff Wall*, 49.

[84] Fried, "Art and Objecthood".

[85] When referring to the "production" in this paper, it is not meant as a term to refer to the way in which a piece is made: that is, the physical manufacturing of a work. Instead, it is meant in much the same way that the word is used in theatre. The show, the play, the number: these are all other terms used to refer to a production on stage. The production also should not, moreover, be confused with the final product. That is only one part of the whole. Instead, it is the final object (in Wall's case, a photograph no matter how he has displayed it) bound up with the process of its making, the unseen elements that lend to the informed viewer a certain something, or *punctum*, that Barthes has elucidated to us in *Camera Lucida*. He notes: "the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance." In the case of Barthes and the photograph of his mother (the *Winter Garden Picture*, as he has termed it), the punctum is the feeling he gets from looking at a photograph of his recently deceased mother, something that, if we are to believe Wittgenstein, is something individual, unshareable, yet bothersomely foisted upon others in the constant barrage of vacation photos and baby pictures that have become so ubiquitous in this over-photographed society. See: Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 51.; Also consider: "At the same time, Wittgenstein is clear that nothing gives someone the "right" to display to another person insipid objects or fragments of nature - photographs of scenery are the example he cites - in the expectation that they could possibly mean to a second party what they do to the first." Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 78.

Vampire's Picnic and *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*, the falsity of the scene and the indebtedness to art history are almost blatant (*A Sudden Gust of Wind* is of course immediately recognizable as a reconstruction of its ukiyo-e referent), so the production becomes readily apparent and thus does not function as well as the street pictures in allowing the viewer to reconsider the way they look at these events in real life.

Wall's productions are an attempt to deliver a scene that he has witnessed in some form in a visual mode, as well as in a way that is less individualized but still retains a personal element. One gets the idea that there is something askew in the pieces. They have been carefully made to express just this. Barthes' ideas of *punctum* and *studium* are relevant here. The studium are the more obvious juxtapositions, the way that Wall's pieces refer to the street, Vancouver, and the artist's experience of these things.[86] The punctum is the detail that takes these things and makes them into inquiries on the nature of photography and of the way vision is constructed. The more obvious instances of this can be seen in the stage light in *Vampire's Picnic* (which changes this scene from one of the living dead to a commentary on Wall's outdoor studio practices) or the chatting soldiers in *Dead Troops Talk* (showing how it is a contrived set, not a journalistic war photo). The obscurity of the street pictures' unseen something perhaps comes from what Barthes says about a second kind of punctum: "I now know that there exists another punctum (another "stigmatum") than the "detail." This new punctum, which is no longer a form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ("that-has-been"),

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[86] In *Camera Lucida*, he talks about obvious juxtapositions being studium, not punctum, as punctum is not something readily available to the eye on a casual glance. Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 47.

its pure representation."[87] Within the street pictures there exists an idea of the laborious, time-intensive studio work masquerading as the quick snapshot. It is not something readily seen, but baffles the viewer upon their attempts to delve deeper into their understanding of the picture using their existing knowledge of studio or street works.

With some of the newer pieces (such as those in the September 2009 show of Wall's work at Marian Goodman Gallery), the artist has veered from his usual large-format images and has once again taken up an exploration into smaller, more intimate modes of picture-taking. In *Jeanette in Wirtz' Garden* (2009), *Florists' Shop Window, Vancouver* (2008), and another piece showing the artist's wife looking in a jeweler's window[88] there is a marked emphasis on Wall's experimentation with smaller format and lower quality cameras. Both *Garden* and *Florists' Shop Window* were taken with a lower resolution device than his traditional 8x10 view camera, and the quality of the picture after enlargement is lesser than the larger format works in the show. The shot is emphasized as quick, and both images look to be unposed compositions taken on the spur of the moment. Of course, knowing Wall's penchant for constructed tableaus imitating instantaneous snapshots, there is always an underlying chance that the piece the audience sees is not the result of happenstance. Let us suspend our disbelief for a moment, however, and take both of these images as relating to straight photography in a similar way to the street pictures, if only to help us approach the third photograph in question. The picture of Jeanette looking through a jeweler's window is grainy. It is low resolution.

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[87] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

[88] Note: This piece was not part of the show proper, but was hung in the office of the gallery.

The viewer peers from behind the artist's wife at a reflective surface behind which various items sparkle with white pixels. This image is the opposite of the crisp, clean, imposing images that one is used to in Wall's oeuvre. Whereas photographs like *Two Eat From Bag* and *Siphoning Fuel* show intimate moments in a presentational mode that opens the scene to the audience, the photograph of the jeweler's shop is still private and secluded both by nature of its subject (the woman's back is to us and the camera peers over her shoulder) and its small size. Compounding this is the process by which the picture was taken. Wall used a low-resolution phone camera to capture this image. This knowledge puts the piece at odds with many of Wall's other pieces. Whereas many of his works' production consist of the idea of the near-documentary photograph and the recollection of witnessed scenes through photographic manipulation combined with a crispness and size that one is not used to seeing in other pieces with similar journalistic aspects, the jeweler's window photograph mixes the quickness of a snapshot taken on the fly (camera phones are often more readily on hand than other cameras) with a personal, intimate idea of sharing a kind of specific moment. This specificity is expanded to a specific city in *Florists' Shop Window, Vancouver*, yet is still relevant enough to a generalized audience to prove intriguing. Even more enticing is the prospect of a constructed photograph using the view of the picture produced by a phone camera as even more likely recording of truth than the traditional camera.[89]

Wall's more recent works take Canada as their subject matter, where Wall has lived and worked for most of his life. In photographs like *Men Waiting* and *War Game*,

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[89] One might also note that in both *Jeanette in Wirtz' Garden* and the camera phone picture, the named party has her face away from us, allowing this piece to skirt the genre of portraiture.

Wall returns to the pictures of everyday life that he originally explored with the street pictures and those that came out of them, specifically pieces like *Mimic*, *Man with a Rifle* (2000), *A Hunting Scene* (1994) and *Fight on the Sidewalk* (1994). This willingness to capture urban and suburban life through construction of "real-looking" photographs has characterized Wall throughout his career. He has always been interested in what he perceives in his everyday life in Vancouver and other parts of Canada, and this fact is a major source of the subject matter that he employs. Perhaps his interest in portraying his country in a specific way stems from the manner in which Canadian photography is often lumped in with European and American works that portray similar subject matter. By intricately constructing scenes of Canada, he is producing a mediated image of Canada by a Canadian, one which will not so easily succumb to visual generalizations with pieces from other countries.[90]

Men Waiting depicts a number of dreary looking workers who Wall hired from the lineup day after day as they waited for work at a factory or construction site. The somber attitude of the men is their own, but the way they are placed, the location and their positions are Wall's creation. He invokes their mood and outlook on life more readily through his photographing of them in this new place that they would otherwise not inhabit. In *War Game*, "a group of young boys [plays] in a vacant lot with those water pistols and rifles popularized in the late 1980s (but now supplanted by computerized and virtual versions)."[91] These images of real life are not necessarily

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[90] Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003): 16-18.

[91] Simon Rees, "Jeff Wall," *ArtUS* 22 (Spring, 2008): 57.

reconstructing art historical tableaus (although some have pointed to *Men Waiting* as a reference to Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* [1849-50])[92], much like the earlier street pictures had their compositional basis in real life, yet they do something that the early pieces do not: they draw much more attention to a social commentary on the plight of people in these neighborhoods and in Canada. Wall's idea that he would leave such politics out of his work has been shaken a little, and this is the result.[93]

The artist's most recent works continue to explore the nature of photographic representation. By playing with ideas of mimesis and the interaction between image and audience, Wall creates productions that befuddle and enthrall. *View from an Apartment* uses composite editing and multiple takes in order to construct what looks like a very "normal" scene. The way the lights interact is not quite natural, and this slight, subtle tension is how Wall addresses the audience and makes them think about their ideas of photography. The newer pieces after *View from an Apartment* become more concerned with the specificity of their subject matter. Instead of making images that can be easily generalized along with American and European works, Wall's new works make a transition to talk not only about visual representation, but also about Canada and its social landscape.

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[92] David Cohen, "Jeff Wall's Unlovely World - March 6, 2008" The New York Sun. March 6, 2008 <http://www.nysun.com/arts/jeff-walls-unlovely-world/72426/>. Accessed June 4, 2009.

[93] In response to taking more politicizing subject matter out of his work. Denes, 2005.

CHAPTER VII

ON ABSORPTION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Roland Barthes wrote in *Camera Lucida* that: "[s]eeing a bottle, an iris stalk, a chicken, a palace photographed involves only reality. But a body, a face, and what is more, frequently, the body and face of a beloved person? Since Photography (this is its *noeme*) *authenticates* the existence of a certain being, I want to discover that being in the photograph completely, *i.e.*, in its essence, "as into itself..." beyond simple resemblance, whether legal or hereditary."[94] Using a human figure in a photograph creates a much stronger relationship between the viewer and the image. By virtue of the subject alone, the audience establishes a preliminary entrance into the narrative taking place, therefore increasing their interest and connection with the piece.

Wall's street photographs present the human subject in the urban landscape. Drawing from real life experiences and fleeting glances through the viewfinder of his camera, he creates for his viewers an "authentic falsity" that nonetheless resembles reality so keenly as to make one do a double take. But this surprise of shock does not equate to a notion of *punctum* in the work, that comes later when the full breadth and depth of the scene is learned from careful research and study of Wall's images. This

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[94] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 107.

inquiry cannot begin if the audience does not feel something "off," but when they do, the game is on.[95]

Perhaps the fantastical pieces that liken themselves to Crewdson's vivid dreamscapes are Wall's way of making sure we are paying attention. If his entire oeuvre existed without a vampire, giant or dead soldier reanimated, would the dark images of a man sleeping on a bicycle (*Cyclist* of 1996) be looked at with such skepticism? Or would *Passerby* be taken as a chance encounter with subjects and a camera's flash in the night? Wall could make a photograph that looked entirely convincing as a matter of chance (and some of his images have come quite close) he has the skill and the tools. He does not, however, have the need or the drive to do so. It is important that his images are not documentary, but near-documentary; not street photography but commenting on Frank,

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[95] With Wall's emphasis on the portrayal of scenes that he reimagines from the street and, indeed, the fact that he has almost full control over how each image comes out, it is a valid question to ask why he would not want to fully deceive the viewer by making his pictures as realistic as possible. Yet, there are instances where this reality is portrayed as being a bit "off". The punctum of the scene, the way it hints toward the sum of all of Wall's process that goes into each image, is sometimes more readily viewable than others. In cases where there is more blatant reference to fantasy or art history, a casual viewer not familiar with Wall's oeuvre might have less trouble figuring out that this is a constructed scene. But, in cases like *Intersection* or *Men Move an Engine Block*, only someone with a skeptical eye or an insight into the pieces' production would know that this image was not captured in a single shot. The question then becomes: Does it matter? And what does this mean?

It is easy to say that it does not matter whether or not the audience "gets" Wall's images. But then, why go to all the trouble to create images that are exceedingly "realistic" along with those that belie their construction through posed stances, more theatrical lighting and contrived settings? It could be that Wall wants to give hints in some pieces to be used in order to understand works like *Siphoning Fuel* as near-documentary and not just full-on documentary.

Perhaps it is necessary to discuss a certain hierarchy of viewing for Wall's audience. There are those that see his works and think them mere single-shot images of everyday life. They leave the gallery remarking upon the overarching thematic elements and societal concerns that they glean from the subject matter. Then there are those that look a bit deeper and begin to discover that there is something not quite "right" with Wall's pieces. They leave the gallery with either a sense of unease or a burning question to be quenched by further research. Then there are those who walk up to Wall's oeuvre knowing full well what they are getting themselves into. They are looking for the punctum. They want to find out what Wall has done to ever so slightly separate himself from the pack and more actively engage representations of vision and his own relation to the history of photography. This assessment is, admittedly, rather simplistic, but it distinguishes an important element of Wall's work, that of the varying audiences' interaction.

Winogrand and other snapshot takers while channeling Neorealist cinema through the invocation of the cinematic still. If Wall's work ceased to hover on the cusp of reality and became a seemingly authentic record of the everyday, its power as a comment on the construction of vision (and the way this construction exists in life, media and photography) would be lost.

Wall's exclusion toward the viewer and the absorption of the subject in street scenes since *Mimic* is an issue which multiple critics have touched upon and which continues in his newer pieces. Many of the human figures, although integral to the composition, do not directly interact with the audience after the early 1980s (as did, for example, *Picture for Women*, where the camera seems to stare directly out of the picture plane). In numerous pieces, including *View from an Apartment* (where the oncoming subject seems to almost avoid our gaze), there is strong evidence of Wall's predilection toward focusing on the scene and not the individual, and of keeping the viewer from interacting directly with the human figures in the photograph.[96] Fried also talks about this "absorptive mode"[97] in relation to 18th century painting, and brings back the idea in relation to Wall. Wall relates this idea in an interview with Martin Schwander when he says: "[Fried] identified an "absorptive mode," exemplified by painters like Chardin, in which figures are immersed in their own world and activities and display no awareness of the construct of the picture and the necessary presence of the viewer. Obviously, the

[96] Wall's "preference for emphasizing the character's context and de-emphasizing individuality. The notable exclusion of the subject's face in Wall's work discourages the viewer's identification with the image or objectification of the subject - two modes of spectatorship noted by feminist film theorists in the 1970s." Blessing, *Jeff Wall: Exposure*, 22.

[97] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

"theatrical mode" was just the opposite. In absorptive pictures, we are looking at figures who appear not be [sic] "acting out" their world, only "being in" it."[98] Indeed, it is this anti-theatrical "being in" the tableau which causes Wall's images to slip into the mind unawares. Thinking themselves in familiar territory, the audience approaches a photograph like *Men Waiting* with a sense of ease. This easy viewing is then immediately challenged by minute details or the temporal dislocation present in Wall's collage-like manipulations of his prints. The punctum of the street pictures is their familiarity; yet the seemingly recognizable figures turn away, absorbed in their constructed lives. And the audience is left to question their vision of their up-until-now common life, having just broken the fourth wall.

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[98] Jeff Wall, "Jeff Wall in Conversation with Martin Schwander," in *Jeff Wall. Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007): 230.

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