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7. Jeff Wall: Photography as Proof of Photography

One can feel that there is always a camera left out of the picture: the one working now ... If the presence of the camera is to be made known, it has to be acknowledged in the work it does.³⁹⁶

In Jeff Wall's photographs, the camera's job is to register the effect that the invisible presence of the camera has on the world it inhabits. Without the camera, the effect wouldn't exist; without the photograph, it wouldn't be visible. The suggestion made by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, that in movies the camera cannot "state" its own presence without making a statement about the world,³⁹⁷ would seem to apply equally to the work of Jeff Wall. The camera does not merely register the world but invariably does so in conjunction with registering its own impact on the world.

The nature of that impact and the tone of its photographic registration have not always been the same throughout Jeff Wall's oeuvre. In 1978 he made *The Destroyed Room*, his first transparency mounted in an aluminium lightbox. With hindsight, this work can be regarded as a meditation on the violence exerted by the camera's invisible presence. The overt studio setting makes it clear that the whole thing is a set-up, built and destroyed for the sole purpose of a visual record. However, this information does nothing to reduce the sense of aggression; instead, it causes all indications of violence – the ripped mattress, the torn clothes, the shredded furniture – to be related back to the probing eye of the camera.

Although in later works the eruption of violence has always remained a latent possibility, other dimensions and effects of the camera are also explored. In several cases, the picture is organised around a central void. This void or empty space can be read not only as a socially and economically induced phenomenon, but also as a direct product of the camera. In *Bad Goods* (1984) the work that the camera does is to "mark" a

³⁹⁶ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 126-128.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 128-130.

heap of discarded vegetables as untouchable and to keep at bay the man in the middle ground who seems to have spotted the goods shortly before the picture was taken. This push-back-effect is further enhanced by the debris and junk piled up behind him, contrasting strongly with the empty stretch of land that separates him from the vegetables in the foreground and from the camera.

One could infer from this example that the social depth in many of Jeff Wall's photographs is structured as a triangular relationship between – ideally – a material object (a sample of “goods”), the camera and a more or less active individual or “performer”.³⁹⁸ In *Bad Goods* this triangulation is relatively stable and complete – more so than in some other works. In *Passerby*, part of the black-and-white series of 1996-1997, the dramatic triangle is stretched to its limits as one of the three elements – but which one? – is about to disappear into the spatial abyss that the very triangulation has created.

This instability can be traced back to, among other things, Jeff Wall's interest in manifestations of an informal or street economy, which involve the swift, impulsive and improvised exchange not only of goods, but also of gestures and looks (cf. *Mimic*, 1982). More recent works like *Man with a Rifle* (2000) suggest that, even if the artist chooses to imitate the “look” of street photography,³⁹⁹ the end result tends to be something beyond that. The individual identified in the title of that work acts as if he is aiming and possibly firing a rifle. However, contrary to what the title suggests, there is no actual rifle; he is merely pretending; his hands are empty. Or, to put it another way, he is holding a rifle but it is an invisible one. *What else is invisible in this picture?* The empty space in the middle ground, framed by a line-up of parked cars, offers no clue as to what “the man with a rifle” may be pointing his weapon at. The picture shows an everyday urban street scene, lit by harsh mid-afternoon sunlight, with a few people passing by who do not seem to notice what is going on. The man's aberrant behaviour

³⁹⁸ “Performer” is a term used by Wall himself. Cf. “A Painter of Modern Life. An Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier,” in: cat. *Jeff Wall: Figures & Places. Selected Works from 1978-2000*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2001), 169.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

appears to lack any external motivation. The camera is aimed in almost the same direction as the rifle, from a position somewhat to the side so that both the gunman and his invisible or imaginary target are in view. The point of convergence of these two “lines of fire” is at some point in the empty middle ground. In fact, *Man with a Rifle* could be read as suggesting that the invisible rifle in the picture is acting as some kind of stand-in for the invisible camera – the camera that has been “left out of the picture.” (The title of the work seems to contain an echo of Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*.)



Critics and commentators tend to have difficulty with the indeterminate elements around which Jeff Wall sets up works like *Man with a Rifle*. In writing about specific works they often ignore ruptures in the organisation of the pictorial field and pretend that all the knowledge they have about the work was obtained directly from looking at it. Anything “invisible” is immediately filled in. A concept such as “staged” (as against “documentary”) photography is applied very hastily; the narrative content of the work is identified and labelled without restraint, even if the work itself comments sceptically on such schematisations and generalised readings.

Most of the critical writing, both favourable and unfavourable, stresses the “total control” that Jeff Wall is supposed to exert over his production. The underlying assumption seems to be that in every one of his works every single detail has been put there by him, manually, one after the other. Elements that escape or defy control, or that point to a lack of will or intent, are often ignored. Readers could easily get the impression that digital technologies for the manipulation of photographic images have given rise to a new kind of hyper-figurative, magic realist type of painting, a genre of which Wall would be the major representative. The reportage on the

making of *The Flooded Grave* (1998-2000) as published in *Artforum* is probably the epitome of this kind of interest.⁴⁰⁰

If some critics admire Jeff Wall for what they see as his total control, others criticise him for exactly the same reason. In 1997 Norman Bryson raised serious objections against what he saw as Wall's dictation or predetermination of meaning, which in his view leaves the viewer completely passive and submissive vis-à-vis the works. Bryson identifies this as

... the tableau's authoritarianism: its will-to-clarity is intolerant of whatever deviates from its gaze or fails to fit the panoptical account that the image seeks to make. One crucial political consequence is that the viewer is given nothing to do. Since the social reality now comes together with its own explanation, you either accept the whole package, or nothing at all. There is not much room for anything like negotiation. The perspective of the transparency is both godlike and paranoid in its control of every detail.⁴⁰¹

Behind the authoritarianism of the illuminated transparency lurks the authority of its maker:

The difficulty is that by staging everything, the world that is shown banishes all contingency: nothing can be other than it is. The scene is totally determined by its director. What began as a strategy of resistance to mystification passes into a strategy of control in which nothing in the scene can depart by so much as a hairsbreadth from its script.⁴⁰²

Bryson ignores the fact that any "script", once executed, disappears without a trace in the full visual density of the resulting image; and that from then on the responsibility for any "panoptical account" of that image resides fully with the viewer or critic. Also, when Bryson notes the absence of "wayward details, traces of processes other than those being illuminated",⁴⁰³ he may just be searching in the wrong place. He overlooks signs that Wall's

⁴⁰⁰ Jan Tumlir, "The Hole Truth. Jan Tumlir Talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*," *Artforum* 39:7 (March 2001), 112-117. Reprinted in: cat. *Jeff Wall: Figures & Places*, 150-157.

⁴⁰¹ Norman Bryson, "Jeff Wall. Enlightenment Boxes," *Art & Text* 56 (February-April 1997), 61.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 61.

“staging” is part of a strategy to play with and subvert accepted ideas about the production of meaning in photography. A work such as *Milk* (1984), although completely staged according to current criteria, at the same time satirises the very motivation behind “staging”. The elements in this somewhat scruffy street ballet have only been mobilised and put together to create the conditions for the most conspicuous among them – a quantity of milk – to make its appearance as a blatant case of “contingency,” an idiotic eruption of nothingness, whose exact shape is as unpredictable as that of a cloud or a turd.

The work of Jeff Wall can be seen as proving that the dual concepts of predetermined and undetermined forms, controlled and uncontrolled structures, are in fact dialectically interwoven. Many of his photographs demonstrate that it is not the one *or* the other but the one *through* the other. His 1993 *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, to name one of his most openly staged and artificial-looking works, simultaneously shows all the symptoms of “total loss” – a loss of control, a loss of shape and outline, a loss of order and organisation. It is worth stressing that these two opposed events – careful staging and catastrophic collapse – are not separate and sequential operations on a single “object.” Rather, they must be regarded as different modalities of one and the same operation, the object of which remains undetermined until, in the final stage, the incompatibility of the two modalities emerges in a mutual commentary.

In this respect *A Sudden Gust of Wind* is hardly an exceptional work. More examples can be found, such as *The Vampires’ Picnic* (1991) and *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) – works that, in all their grotesqueness, are completely staged and controlled *tableaux*, yet also amount to ruins of pictorial genres and conventions, sharing all the symptoms of structural disintegration and physical decay.



All this leaves unchallenged the amazing fact that an artist responsible for such works as *The Bridge* (1980) and *The Pine on the Corner* (1990) stands accused of banishing the contingency of the world. Is it not a fact, however,

that, in the full splendour of their everydayness and unremarkability, these suburban landscapes exemplify *nothing but* the contingency of the world? Is it not a fact that in these cases the artist pretends to do *nothing but* “allow the world to exhibit itself”?⁴⁰⁴

On the other hand, it cannot be that simple. Just as the excess of control and determination in *Milk* flips over into its opposite, so the inverse process can be observed in these landscapes. In working to let the world exhibit itself, the artist unavoidably provokes the appearance of emblems of “the world” and emblems of “self-exhibiting” that materialise and insert themselves between the viewing apparatus and its object – another instance of the camera’s effect. Hybridising the modernist dogma of “pure presentness” as well as the post-modernist fetish of surface and spectacle, Wall brings the two kinds of emblems together and makes them overlap. *The Pine on the Corner* is a clear and lucid example. The tall tree at the street corner stands out and asserts itself as an emblematic case of individuation and poise, just as its setting in the middle of a patchwork of roads and houses exemplifies the casual integration of disproportionate objects and events into overall patterns of everyday life.

Sunken Area (1996) achieves a similar result through diametrically opposed means. Here, the strong gestalt of the pine tree is replaced with a number of formless shrubs and weeds, while the “overall pattern” that forms the background acquires a dominant position from which it almost completely blocks the view. Still, just as in *The Pine on the Corner*, the whole thing comes together in an emblematic way, demonstrating how even the blandest and densest accumulations of concrete, plastic and other dead matter attract and accommodate their organic counterparts and even volunteer to act as mere backdrop for them.

In *Swept* (1995), finally, all these emblematic dimensions merge into a single unit, which appears to be a materialisation of the shallow space of the lightbox itself. The closed, crate-like interior space in the picture – perhaps a cellar or basement – has been emptied out (“swept”), yet its emptiness is complicated by a strange sense of cramped materiality which gives a double meaning to every imaginable relation to the outside world.

⁴⁰⁴ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 132.

Paradoxically, human presence is implied here by the absence of dirt and dust, as the title confirms. The room, with its low ceiling, battered paintwork and overall roughness, is lit by a kind of light that, in its flatness, reveals everything equally strongly and therefore never seems to reach its proper object, illuminating instead the spaces *between* objects; in its evenness it resembles the light emanating from the lightbox.

There is the sweeping movement of the broom and there is the linear projection of light into the room. Metaphorically sandwiched between the two is the (invisible) eye of the camera, as it scans every square inch of the walls, the floor and the ceiling in less than a second.

Swept offers a twisted kind of visual pleasure, comparable to *The Destroyed Room*, but with the emphasised notion that, if photography can deliver any kind of proof, it is first of all proof of photography. Still, a work such as this is one of the most powerful arguments Jeff Wall has offered to oppose the categorical application of the notion of “staged” photography to his work. Although the room we see in *Swept* has been identified as the part of his studio used for “staging” works like *An Octopus* and *Some Beans* (1990),⁴⁰⁵ there is proof that, even after removing all the props and emptying out the room, what remains is some artificial reality that is as much the result of the camera’s idleness – in a spare moment between productions – as it is a product of its active intervention.



Stanley Cavell:

To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self. It is our fantasies, now all but completely thwarted and out of hand, which are unseen and must be kept unseen. As if we could no longer

⁴⁰⁵ Rolf Lauter, “Jeff Wall: Figures & Places,” in: cat. *Jeff Wall: Figures & Places*, 56.

hope that anyone might share them – at just the moment that they are pouring into the streets, less private than ever.⁴⁰⁶

Jeff Wall:

Photography ... seemed to prove that there was only one world, not many – one visible world, anyway. But I think that is only a suggestion made by photography, not a conclusion. And the suggestion can be taken in so many different ways.⁴⁰⁷

The crux of the matter is this: we don't need artists or photographers to show us the world through their eyes – in other words, to reduce the contingency of the world and increase its fantasy content. Indeed, what Jeff Wall is doing is something completely different. A work such as *Man with a Rifle* suggests that “the world is *already* drawn by fantasy.”⁴⁰⁸ His work is built on the presumption that the contingency of the world is integral to the fantasies we have about ourselves. The idea that individuals usually act in freedom, without scripts, instructions or the intervention of directors and casting agencies, is the fundamental fantasy that allows us to denounce specific deviant types of behaviour as paranoid or schizophrenic.

It may seem that works like *The Pine on the Corner* and *The Bridge* typically exemplify the contingency of the world. But in fact what they do is to show how the thought that “everything could be other than it is” has the effect of reconciling us with our existing environment. The contingency of the world is the ultimate motivation to leave the world in its present state.

⁴⁰⁶ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.

⁴⁰⁷ Wall, quoted in: Tumlrir, “The Hole Truth”, 115 (repr. 154).

⁴⁰⁸ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 102.