

Notes on the Exhibition

Passage Three

JEFF WALL

Mimic

1982

[Figures 3.1 – 3.3]

Consistent with the format of Passages One and Two, Passage Three also begins with an image of reflection that introduces a duality. *Mimic* by Jeff Wall is another work in *Partners* that acts as a prelude to a passage that progresses into a fugue of implications as the viewer moves through these three galleries and back again.

Mimic is the manifestation of a minor gesture with major implications. A Caucasian ruffian, sauntering down the street, his girlfriend in tow, encounters a stranger of another race and bullies him, by making a hand gesture to his own face that mimics the shape of the Asian's eyes. The woman is oblivious to this move. The scenario has been choreographed to portray a racist act, captured by the camera. It places the viewer in a voyeuristic position, bearing witness. Gender politics are portrayed alongside race politics. This crude fellow has made clear his claim to dominance.

There is the notion of “self” and then there is the “other.” The intensity of the gap between the men is manifested by a simple hand gesture.¹ The man making the move and the man who is the recipient of the mockery set in motion dynamics in the relationships not only between one man and another, one race and another, and one gender and another but also the relationship between the photographer and the viewer. This is a work that contains a narrative with a moral core. Not only is the woman coupled with this man, making her an unwitting ally, but the men, too, are paired, by virtue of the recorded gesture of one to the other. There is a perpetrator, a victim and an oblivious accomplice. The viewer is then thrust into the position of picking an alliance with one or more, or none of the three, since what is displayed depicts both

¹ For Wall a gesture is “a pose or action which projects its meaning as a conventional sign.” To him, the gesture generates its power from its ability to manifest ideas as appearances, i.e. because of their visuality (Wall 2002: 76).

human nature (the tendency to identify with one, or some and not with others) and the basic social dynamics of interactions.

As an accessory to the man, the woman, though she is unaware of the moral implications of having made the choice to be with him, is a participant in the scene. In this way she is linked to the woman in the other work by Wall, displayed here, *The Stumbling Block* [Figures 3.1, 3.4, 3.5], as well as to the citizens of countries whose governments act on their behalf and without their knowledge, making them ultimately complicit in acts they may not have knowingly chosen.

What we see is a large, sumptuous, colour photograph. However, when Wall began his work in the form of backlit colour transparencies in 1978, he expressed ambivalence about the medium of photography. His philosophical position was that painting was the foremost medium for the making of art. Convinced photography was an inferior medium by definition, he attempted to tune his art practice to his philosophical position about picture-making. In the mid-'80s, Wall started to make drawings, preparing to fulfill his aspiration at the time to make paintings.² Indeed, early works such as *Mimic* were originally installed almost flush with the surface of the wall, their lightboxes hidden inside the walls so the pictures could lie flat against the surface like paintings and less like the photographic signs seen in subways and airports. It was only later that Wall changed the structure of his work to include the visible display of the boxes.³ *Mimic* was refitted and has one of the original old lightboxes that marked this development. Wall also, at that time, had his works hung high on the wall, to emphasize that they sat within the genre of historical narrative painting and to raise viewers' consciousness of his photographs as compositions, not snapshots.

Wall's work persuaded me against his own hierarchy of artistic forms of expression. In 1995, I curated his work and the *Untitled Film Stills* by Cindy Sherman in an exhibition, *Projections*, together with works by Weegee, Brassai and Alfred Stieglitz. The show explored the similarities and differences between works by contemporary artists who used photography in a cinematic way and those made by straight historical photographers. Weegee's and Brassai's work was much indebted to the imagination of the artist, in ways that compared with Wall's work and Sherman's. Photographs by the historical photographers, while documentary in source and appearance, were actually frequently staged. Juxtaposing Wall's work with that of Weegee, Stieglitz and Brassai became an occasion where his work was placed directly in the context of the history of photography, not just because of the common medium but also because of the shared perspectives on culture, humour and picture-making that this Jewish artist shared with the three historical Jewish artists. Within a year, Wall had built a darkroom, and, in 1996, printed his first large black and white photographs.

² For an exploration of this double bind, or more accurately what it means to be a painter who is a photographer, see: Duve 2002: 26-31.

³ For a philosophical interpretation of Wall's lightbox and for further analysis in this context of the differences between painting and photography, see: Groys 2002: 58-67.

In *Mimic*, Wall has orchestrated a social incident. Conscious of each component, he lets the viewer know he is making a picture. It is clear that the orange and red colour of the cars down the street and the red “No Stopping” symbol on the street sign co-ordinate with the orange colour of the man’s shirt and the woman’s red shorts. The shadows behind the man and woman are long and strong, as befit the firm grounding of those who make up any country’s charter-culture elite. In contrast, the near absence of a shadow behind the Asian has him looking less rooted to the ground. The Caucasian has formally and territorially claimed not only the woman and the other man but also the street.

These shadows are reminiscent of those cast by the zeppelins, which were also declarations of territorialism. Wall’s work is a careful balancing act. It proposes a moral situation, but diplomatically. The artist’s restraint results in a picture that is not patronizing to the Asian, nor does it designate the bully as a Fascist, and it does not express an opinion about the woman. The artist says, essentially, “This is the picture. I am leaving you here. Where do you want to take it?” The picture does not pass judgement. The scene is set. The viewer completes it.

JEFF WALL

The Stumbling Block

1991

[Figures 3.1, 3.4, 3.5]

The Stumbling Block is a large colour photograph of a contemporary downtown cityscape from the New World. It happens to be Vancouver, but is generic and could be many other North American cities that have come to define the modern post-war world. It provides in this exhibition a graphic counterpoint to the pre-war European skylines displayed in *Ships (The Zeppelin Project)*, and a destination in the circular route of the ships of the Hamburg-American Line that appear to travel from one side of the gallery to the other and back again. Wall’s works bring out urban icons, indeed stereotypes of the Western world in both architecture and social dynamics.

In this fantasy photo, a prone man in a hockey-like costume provides a human stumbling block for a young woman. The image is staged so that she is photographed air-borne. At first glance, the woman has apparently been tripped up by the man. However, one could also read the woman as having chosen to stumble over this docile fellow. She could have walked around the stumbling block, but didn’t. The staged quality of the event fictionalizes it, making it into an allegory. In this conjured moment of urban life in downtown Vancouver, where none of the passers-by is much perturbed by the inconsequential tumble about to take place, viewers soon determine they have found themselves peering through the eyes of an artist.

Wall has portrayed a benign and gentle man who, because of his fantastic hockey outfit—which makes

mobility impossible—is incapable of harming anyone except by his passivity. While it initially appears to have some of the trappings of an impending traumatic event, it quickly dissolves into what appears superficially to be a comic shot, but presented as deadly serious. Wall's wit is dry and his work diagnostic. He has created a pratfall emblematic of the absurdity of municipal life, with its blocked bureaucracy and many rules suspended in a legacy of politeness. And he has done it so that it appears real as well as realistically impossible. This harkens back to the fantasy of Felix the Cat, who is both there and not there. As with the toy, there is a suspension of disbelief in Wall's works.

The Stumbling Block captures the culture of Vancouver, with its multicultural heritage and its brand-new urban architecture, its keen enthusiasm for outdoor sports and its laid-back style. It also comments on relationships, specifically how we choose our troubles by virtue of our decisions, or inherit them by virtue of our place or our trust. The woman had the option of walking around the hockey-costumed fellow. But she didn't. As Wall said, the fall will give her, like the Asian man on the right who has tripped moments before, "pause for thought."

The tumble is an imagined performance. In *Partners*, it enlarges the repertoire of performances that each affirm individual identity and existence:

In my fantasy, *The Stumbling Block* helps people change. He is there so that ambivalent people can express their ambivalence by interrupting themselves in their habitual activities.... He does not give lessons or make demands; he is simply available for anyone who somehow feels the need to demonstrate—either to themselves or to the public at large—the fact that they are not sure they want to go where they seem to be headed. The interruption is a curative...the ills of bureaucratic society are cured by the installation of a new bureaucracy, one which recognizes itself as the problem, the obstacle.⁴

Just as Fabro's sculpture makes a reference to the identity of Italy, and Cattelan's *Him* makes reference to the identity of Germany, Wall's picture is about the identity of Canada, which looks similar to, but is very different from, the identity of America. The history of this country is not associated with power and might. While Americans have the heritage of a gun-toting Wild West and the patriotic symbol of a high-flying eagle, Canadians, with their national symbol of the industrious beaver, have a history of relative order, and have tended to favour institutionalism over individualism. So this picture of a ludicrously passive government official wearing a badge, "Office of the Stumbling Department, Works Department," is a biting cultural commentary on modern urban life, but in particular, the identity of the country in which Wall resides.

⁴ Jeff Wall in an interview (Pelenc 2002: 21-22).

But it is also an allegory on the relationship of the individual to the state. As Jeff Wall wrote in 1991 (unpublished):

The Stumbling Block might be subtitled “An Incident in a Possible World.” This world is just over the threshold of ours—the threshold of time, maybe, or of some transformation of public life. Over there, the municipal authorities are asking, “How do we stop the juggernaut? How do we help citizens who need to make a change in their lives to stop going where they are going, to begin to go somewhere else, to live differently, and to help create a better world?” In my utopian fantasy of administrative genius, the government acts negatively and not positively, and so establishes the Office of the Stumbling Block. These new civil servants take no action and provide only the opportunity of an obstacle.⁵

The woman’s trust in the authority of the state is at least in part the reason for her fall. The reaction of indifference by those witnessing the event indicates they are kindred spirits in this acceptance, and partake in a partnership with her.

The Stumbling Block is the first major work Wall made with the assistance of computer technology. While the street scene of cars and passers-by was shot separately, the front five figures were photographed in a studio and subsequently integrated digitally into the background.

Wall has orchestrated an incident, but with certain classical pictorialist devices, in the way a painting would be composed. His works talk to an informed public, aware of classic compositions. He would not, for example, disrupt the composition of his works unexpectedly by placing a shadow in the centre of his picture, upending the composition in the way that Lee Friedlander would. This approach also applies to the content. Like Evans, he has made works based on a cliché. (One has only to think of *Shoe Shine*, by Evans, the photograph where newly shined shoes are lit with an outdoor fixture.) In the process of taking the title back to its literal meaning, Wall has imbued it with metaphorical meaning that is at once perceptive and farcical.

In Wall’s work, separate streams of artistic practice in photography, as well as artistic practice in high-art painting, converge. Stieglitz fought to have photography recognized as art by emulating painting. Evans took a different route and made art from facts, described to the point of transcendence. These very different photographers were appreciated as masters, but always within the realm of photography and not in the larger world of art. Wall’s work brings together the traditions of high-art painting and conceptual art with the traditions of photography, such that we no longer question if his pictures are photographs or art.

⁵ For a completely different interpretation that links this image with technology and postmodern society, see: Dickel 2001: 146-148.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Cat and Cage

American

ca. early-middle 1850s

quarter-plate daguerreotype

[Figure 3.6–3.8]

This photographed image of a grey and white cat, sitting in profile, motionless, in front of a birdcage captures the essence of voyeurism — by the subject and by the photographer. A daguerreotype is a highly detailed image formed on a sheet of silver-plated copper. It was the first successful form of photography capable of producing permanent pictures of startling clarity. However, to accomplish a portrait, the sitter had to remain motionless for a prolonged period. This meant the picture could only have been accomplished with the co-operation of the cat — which required some manipulation on the part of the photographer.⁶

As a daguerreotype, this work highlights the historical impact of the invention of photography. As John Wood has commented in his book, *The Daguerreotype: A Sesquicentennial Collection*: “It was not just the nature of art that was transformed by photography; photography transformed the entire world. The only event we might compare it to is the invention of writing.”⁷ Apart from establishing an art-historical lineage, the cat daguerreotype initiates several other subjects for the viewer. The relationship of the cat to the bird is one of predator and prey. Although set on a domestic stage, the cat is portrayed in this picture as a force of nature. Riveted by the sight of the bird, the cat is bound to it, as if under a spell. Only the tip of its tail and the tips of its ears quivered during the exposure. All else was perfectly still.

The image of the cat, a stalker by instinct, transfixed before the birdcage, frozen in time, becomes, arguably, a symbol of desire. The tableau created by the photographer becomes a metaphor for the exploitation of instinct and desire. With the camera located on the floor, a birdcage had been placed to the left in the composition, so it was partially in the picture plane, housing an unseen but magnetically present bird. The cat was then allowed centre stage, controlled by the photographer who had harnessed the cat’s instincts and voyeuristically recorded his observation of the cat observing the bird. Because of the technical advances of the time, we are able to witness this potent moment plucked out of the past and preserved in perpetuity. By harnessing the cat’s instinctual urge to stalk the bird, the photographer’s product — a replication of the pursuit of the bird by the cat — highlights some of the central subjects in this passage for the viewer. An animal and a person are each looking at, and desirous of, something different.

The cat daguerreotype is not only a portrait of the power of desire and the use of power to manipulate desire, it is also a picture preserved in gold and burgundy velvet, in a decoratively embossed case that fits

⁶ Foresta and Wood 1995.

⁷ Wood 1989: 6.

comfortably in one's hand and must be opened to see the picture. The scale and manner in which a daguerreotype must be viewed make the picture a decidedly intimate experience, created for private pleasure. Indeed, the precious materials of its frame locate it in the history of culture as being itself a small, cherished object of desire.⁸

Indeed, this tiny photograph reinforces the notion of voyeurism that was initiated in this passage in the works by Wall, and links them to those that follow by Walker Evans and Paul McCarthy. But it also introduces the notion of surveillance as a form of voyeurism, a concept that is further amplified in the works by Evans and McCarthy, and then, later, in a reconsideration of Wall's work on the return trip.

In addition, this small piece connects with another small object, displayed earlier in the show—the toy with Felix the Cat. Both cats have been co-opted. But the cat in the cage is a product of imagination, while the cat at the cage has been captured by imagination. The relationship between the cats seen so far also provides a paradigm of the divergent approaches by Wall and Evans.

The daguerreotype showing the cat's predatory position in relation to the bird leads to a consideration of the stalking photographer's relation to his subject, which then raises the notion of the exploitation of human instincts by power interests, be it for commercial gain, political power, religious power, media power, sexual power or cultural power—all of which are implicated in this cased image that raises an awareness in viewers of seeing, and, by extension, of the power of the gaze and the alienation that ultimately (as in *Saloon* by McCarthy) results from blindly acting out of instinct.

WALKER EVANS
Self-Portrait
1928
[Figure 3.9, 3.10]

The production by Walker Evans was enormous, not only in images but in variant croppings. (Indeed, Evans' love of pictures extended to postcards, which he collected passionately. By his death he had accumulated 8,000 pictures, all categorized by type.) This exhibition includes only a few of his photographs, several of which are from a series of works.

The first photograph encountered by the viewer is *Self-Portrait*, taken from above with Evans appearing like an object—a lifeless doll, head bowed, eyes unconnected to the camera's lens, lying on a crumpled bed sheet over a mattress on the floor. His hand is placed on what appears to be a camera positioned between his legs at his crotch, like a gun with the power to shoot.

⁸ Walter Benjamin also refers to the handheld aspect of viewing: "Daguerre photographs were iodized silver plates exposed in the camera obscura, which had to be turned this way and that until, in the proper light, a pale grey image could be discerned. They were one of a kind; in 1839 a plate cost an average of 25 gold francs" (Benjamin 1999: 508).

WALKER EVANS

Selections from *Many Are Called*
1938–41
[Figures 3.11–3.25]

These thirteen photographs of subway passengers are portraits of people who were surreptitiously photographed by Evans with a Contax camera concealed in his coat, in a work he later titled *Many Are Called*, a Biblical reference to Matthew 22:14, where Jesus comments, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”⁹

Paradoxically, the copyright laws that protect artists’ and photographers’ rights (and those of their estates) functioned in this case to prioritize the rights of the subjects, setting up a different kind of partnership than have the copyright laws in earlier works in this show. Evans, in part, because he had not obtained any written releases from the passengers he portrayed in his subway photographs, waited until November 1966 before publishing the book, *Many Are Called*, twenty-eight years after the project began. In this way, he was able to avoid any violation of the sitters (or lawsuits from them). During the hiatus, the passengers would either have died or aged so much they would not be readily recognizable.

As with Thích Quảng Đức’s, there is a reversal of power, wherein the subject has a significant position of power in relation to the photographer, even though the photographer has the power to choose or not choose the subject. In other words, there is an implicit partnership between the subject and the photographer, but not one Evans was willing to acknowledge. His interest was in surveillance, in control over his subjects. To achieve candid performances, and the picture he aspired to create, he had to maintain secrecy. One of the by-products of the photographer’s interest in candour is the way it heightens the viewer’s consciousness of sight. One becomes very aware of the physical act of looking as well as the power implications in who sees and who does not.¹⁰

Many Are Called ultimately contained eighty-nine reproductions from the hundreds of pictures of subway passengers Evans took.¹¹ Most of the portraits were of Caucasian passengers in groups of one, two or three. By the time the book was published, the project had become something different than Evans’ original intention. Seen from the perspective of the times in which the book came out (the 1960s), it became a document that was symbiotic with the works of a new generation of photographers such as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus and Gary Winogrand, who were each engaged in explorations of the post-war urban environment.

Now, years after the interest by this subsequent generation of artists, this body of work is presented in yet another context—juxtaposed to Jeff Wall’s work. Unlike my earlier juxtaposition of Wall’s work with

⁹ For a descriptive account of the series’ photographic process see: Fineman 2000: 107-109.

¹⁰ For an interpretation that emphasizes this aspect in Evans’ work see: Olin 2003 (1996): 318-329.

¹¹ Several photographs from this series are reproduced in Greenough 1991.

historical photographers Weegee, Brassai and Alfred Stieglitz in *Projections*, the link to Evans brings up new issues. On the surface, the peering eye of their respective cameras captures the social dynamics of people in public places. Wall's works frequently depict the downtrodden. A parallel is Evans' acceptance of the job of recording the Farm Security Administration's relocation project, which was to provide a group of propagandistic photographs sponsored by the American government, intended to persuade people to leave the lands they owned and on which they had grown up to relocate to more fertile properties where they could prosper.

But neither Evans nor Wall had social welfare as a priority. Evans was preoccupied with picture-making, and took so much time taking his photographs that he did not fulfill his photo quota and was fired. He obsessively cropped his pictures, even entering the Library of Congress archives, where his photographs were preserved, to hand-crop the original negatives.

Wall also controls what happens in his pictures as much as he can. He poses and directs his subjects, and when necessary to realize a picture, hires professional actors and make-up artists, constructs elaborate stage sets and utilizes masterful digital technology. In their control of their pictures, Evans and Wall are united.

Wall's pictures of life on the streets of Vancouver are paired here with Evans' pictures of life in the subway cars of New York. Evans got the photographs he wanted and captured an essence in urban existence in America by surreptitiously shooting his subjects so they would not pose for the camera. Wall also exercised control, but used alternative means.

Though the subject of street photography and control over the image are similar, the differences are notable. Wall, like Darboven, is a romantic. He searches for an ideal—a higher virtue. Unlike Evans and August Sander, he does not elevate everyday people, but, rather, draws our attention to their suffering and exclusion from society. He portrays the modern world in allegories, in the tradition of the history of painting presented in places of worship, palaces and public places. Only recently has he begun to make works in dialogue with photographers he admires, such as Craigie Horsfield and, notably, the European painter/photographer of the 1930s and '40s named Wols (Wolfgang Schulze).

With *Mimic*, Wall provides us with a stereotypical event we might see and that we know about, but are not likely to see caught by a camera. Or he fantasizes an event, as in *The Stumbling Block*. In both pictures, he has created the appearance of a chance encounter on the street and elevated each into a monumental moment. His pictures are carefully composed to be allegories for the further consideration of the viewer. Wall *makes* a photograph. He rarely *takes* a photograph.

Evans ultimately also made photographs, but he started by taking photographs, as he did not know what he was going to get when he set out to shoot. His source was reality. His pictures were not staged, but were

chosen from many, and cropped and printed, by dodging and burning, to highlight the areas of his focus.¹²

Evans, in his series of subway portraits, provides us with an event we can see daily—the commuting of passengers. It is something one may see innumerable times, but because of the mind’s inclination to generalize repetition, one stops “seeing” people in the subway. Evans has taken pictures of ordinary people, with nothing spectacular about them and without particularly notable personalities, and has enabled viewers to see them as they have never before been seen. His work raises the viewer’s consciousness of the act of seeing. He pursued the mundane and managed to make it amazing.

While the pictures by Wall and Evans are thematically linked as street pictures, Wall’s construction is a context to create an allegory that makes the general specific. Evans’ works, in capturing what he sees, make the specific general. Wall presents what we know, and encourages us to think more about it as well as the implications of the way he has presented it. Evans finds something we think we know, and encourages us to look again and see something different.

Evans was ambivalent about the viewer, and made pictures for himself. Indeed, he shares this existential and personal pursuit in his art practice with On Kawara. Waiting thirty years to reveal a picture is not extraordinary for either of these artists, as the works were never initially made for other people. In contrast, Wall is a storyteller who addresses the viewer in the way a cinematographer does—conscious of the audience. He has a social purpose in portraying modern life that was not part of Evans’ agenda, which was to look closely at what was around him and learn from looking.

The progression in *Passage Three* moves from the voyeuristic, allegorical, staged scenarios by Wall, set up to be recorded by the camera, to scenes of surveillance by Evans, surreptitiously captured by a camera as if looking through a peep hole, searching to discover something not otherwise seen before, to the cat daguerreotype that makes emblematic the connection of looking and desire, to *Saloon* by Paul McCarthy, in which the viewer is invited to enter the looking glass of the lens and bear witness to the sexy “set” itself, and experience in three dimensions a parable about culture, desire and human instinct.

PAUL McCARTHY
Saloon
1995–96
[Figures 3.26–3.43]

While Evans’ photographs were taken from inside a public structure, Paul McCarthy’s work can be viewed only from outside a public structure—a saloon. Saloons were made primarily for cowboys’ recreation and to

¹² Judith Keller in her article on this series discusses the numerous and sometimes radical cropping that Evans made in his later prints (Keller 1993: 152-165).

fleece them of their expendable income. West Coast American artist Paul McCarthy made a large sculpture in the form of this bar-room, animated with moving sculptures and period ragtime piano music. Occasionally, gun shots fire out loudly.

Saloon, with its theme-park structure, is located at the conclusion of the pictorial journey through the photographs by Wall and Evans, but it can be heard from the moment one enters the first gallery of the exhibition.¹³ This raucous music of the '30s pervades the show as strangely as the classical music played by inmates of the WWII concentration camps must have sounded to the others incarcerated with them. It is a lively audio intrusion into the calm neo-Classical spaces. As well, the gun shots fire loudly and are heard throughout the galleries, piercing the spaces unexpectedly and giving sound to the several other gun shots pictured or referenced in the show. *Saloon* concludes the show with a very direct statement about frustration and desire.

Saloon, like so many of the works in *Partners*, is a tableau. It is composed of a painted stage-set structure of a Western wooden bar-room. Viewers can see animated and automated figures by looking over a pair of swinging saloon doors, and then through two open windows and a back door.

Two molded Fiberglas dance-hall girls gyrate and rock their rears, anuses aimed towards a partially dressed cowboy with a hat and one leather glove, who masturbates while gazing not at either of them but somewhere yonder. Meanwhile, the literally pig-headed, blue-eyed bartender repeatedly pours shots of whisky, which he sends sliding like missiles down the length of the bar. Everybody in the set is moving and looking, but blind to each other. The viewer is confronted with wide-open eyes, but soon becomes aware the eyes of the standing figures are not trained on anything and simply do not "see." Nor do any of the women's butts connect to the cowboy's cocked cock. Everyone is alienated, performing a perpetual mating ritual that is never fulfilled. At the back of the structure, a dance-hall girl on her knees rotates forward out the back door, poking her big, painted Fiberglas, pussycat head at about the level of the viewer's crotch and swivelling her head from side to side.

The figures are almost comic and made to look unreal, though the masterful molding of the cowboy's face makes it clear this is an ability the artist has, when needed. More realistic figures might enable one to identify an actual person, which would let the viewer off the hook.

In this sculpture, McCarthy has addressed the stereotypical myth of the cowboy. The cowboy in American culture is an icon of power and sexual prowess. He was always the good guy, who, in the movies, got the girl. Anyone who grew up in 1940s and 1950s North America knew cowboys were heroes to be emulated. The entire history of America is based on the mythology of a gun-toting cowboy forging ahead in the uncivilized Wild West.¹⁴

¹³ Ralph Rugoff also used the term "theme park" to describe McCarthy's work, in a 1994 review of McCarthy's sculptures (Rugoff 1994: 80-83, 118).

¹⁴ For further analysis of the imaginary aspect of "the western" especially in the cinematic representations of the theme, see: Lusted ca. 2003.

By choosing this character from fictionalized American history, McCarthy has undertaken to dissect this myth of power. This is a work that deals with what it's like to be a man. It points out the confusion between a real cowboy and the myth. And, by analogy, it dismantles and diagnoses the whole myth of men who have grown up thinking of themselves as virile cowboys. This work looks at men lusting after women and what it is really like for most men—in particular, what the moment-to-moment phenomenon of sexual desire is for men.

The cowboy in *Saloon* is not mounted on his horse. This alone deprives him of a good measure of his power. Off the range (where he is “at home,” as in the popular song, “Home on the Range”) and in a saloon, he is just another guy. In reality, though, a cowboy is not a man but a boy. Though mythologized as being potent and able to get girls, the cowboy is only actually powerful on his horse. After all, a cowboy is merely a herder of cattle—a shepherd and not, in fact, the ranch-owner. He is not in a position of economic power. He is not inherently more powerful than men who have grown up wanting to be cowboys.

The relationship of the cowboy in *Saloon* to the two dance-hall girls is telling. The bar girl is there, either as employee of the bar or as a flirt. She wants to earn money or titillate men, but not necessarily to consummate a relationship—which is clear from her actions in the bar. The body language of the dance-hall girls is articulate about what they want. Both present their backsides, each directing their butts to the cowboy, round holes bared for potential penetration. This makes their gestures entirely sexual. There is no invitation to interact frontally, which would require and result in eye contact, of which there is none in this scenario. But they are each nowhere near him. The moment is never right. There is no connection. The cowboy is only in the same vicinity as the women—in the bar-room.

More often than not, the cowboy is facing the wall or looking out the window, indifferent to the women or any interaction between him and them. His gaze is generalized. He is wearing two holsters and two guns. But his hand is sheathed in a leather glove, rhythmically stroking his steel-rod simulation of a phallus. It is, notably, not a tube, which would suggest the possible discharge of fluids to one of the women. Instead, it is a solid rod. While there may be a technical explanation (that the mechanical function of the hand works better with a rod than a tube), a solid piece of steel has its own justification in adding to the sense of power: it looks like the piston of a machine. But again, the appearance of power is deceptive. There can be no successful connection to the girls without a tube to disseminate fluids. A tube would have suggested this as a possibility. The absence of one makes it definitive: it will never happen.

Indeed, there is every evidence the women do not even want it to happen. This may be a confirmation of the stereotypical notion that what attracts women is power of some sort, be it personal, physical, financial, intellectual. This dovetails with the stereotypical notion of what men desire for themselves: power. McCarthy is proposing that the traditional, stereotypical fantasy men have (if they admit it) is to impregnate as many

women as they can. But, he is saying, in reality, they are personally and culturally sabotaged, unable to fulfill their sexual fantasies. Unless they have a special dose of power to do so, they are stymied.

The cowboy is therefore destined to be always in the position of wanting and never being able to fulfill as many sexual couplings as he would, in his heart of hearts, really like. Without the power to make sexual conquests, the everyday cowboy, as depicted in *Saloon*, has to resort to masturbation in order to satisfy his desires. Though surrounded by bimbos, he is unable to make any connection to them sexually. He is in their area, but lacks the power to connect to them.

Meanwhile, the ragtime music plays on gaily, though not continuously. And every once in a while, at unpredictable, intermittent moments, startlingly loud gunshots fire. The gun never goes off at the same time in the programmed sequence of moves by the figures, suggesting the cowboy never “scores.” Five shots bang out, and then, seconds later, another two follow. But the cowboy has only a six-shooter. The seventh shot must be the orgasm from the masturbation. The cowboy, again, is powerless, in that he never “hits the target.”

Yet the bartender makes it every time. He pours the shot into the glass and it always hits the glass and he consistently shoots it down the bar. He is the opposite of the cowboy. He’s in the position of power—he runs the bar. He’s the master. Why else would he be a pig?

The body language of each of the characters is noteworthy. Where, for example, is the pig’s hand? What is it doing underneath the bar? Could he be doing something sexual? This ambiguous scenario is well known in the field of television broadcasting, where newscasters are instructed always to have their hands showing above the desk to avoid any lewd innuendoes.

The body parts are additional contributors to a reading of the work. While the man has five fingers, according to the leather glove, the bartender and the blond bombshell have only three, and the pussy-headed dance-hall girl is completely without hands. These decisions take the three non-cowboy figures even more out of the real world and further into the realm of cartoon, isolating the cowboy as the primary protagonist for the viewer’s identification. The body-to-head proportions are also somewhat distorted. While the bodies are proportioned to be slightly smaller than life-sized, perhaps the size of people living in the period of history of the fictionalized scene, the heads are significantly oversized.

There is also an aspect of sexuality in the Duchampian sense. *Saloon* brings to mind the splayed out woman and the peep show aspect of *Étant Donnée*, and also suggests *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, where there are nine bachelors but no groom. None of the bachelors “made it” with the woman, any more than the cowboy does with the dance-hall girls.¹⁵

It is important for any discussion of this work to emphasize to anyone who has not seen *Saloon* in

¹⁵ For another analysis of the relationship between Duchamp and McCarthy, see: Rugoff 1996: 74.

motion—with its figures that fascinate visually as they rock, rotate, gyrate, and slide—that this is a work that only communicates in real time. Unlike the other tableaux in the show, this is not a tableau of frozen moments that could be captured in a handful of still photographs. The script of performances by the figures takes seventy-two seconds. In the course of the figures' interaction, they act out different gestures that modulate in different ways, at different times. At every moment, the figures engage with each other in some identifiable manner. Each action changes the dynamics of the scene in subtle but significant ways. The work can only be studied in real time to identify and analyze the implications of each moment.

The dance-hall girl with the pussycat head has a particularly important function in the dynamic of this work and its relationship with the viewer. Upon first entering the gallery and looking through the saloon's swinging doors, this figure is not entirely visible, as she is partially blocked by the bar, which acts as a barrier, as well as by the cowboy and the blond. In fact, it is difficult to see much through these doors, which are the first access viewers have to the action in the bar. It is not until they move around the entrance to the side of the structure that they can see what is taking place inside. The first sighting of the cat-headed woman is through the two windows of *Saloon*, where visitors can peer in from the side. And then one can only see her from the back, rotating to and fro, with her backside pointed in the direction of the cowboy.

This sets up a dynamic that is all the more powerful because it resonates with art-historical and pornographic overtones. More than the other single figures, the cat woman functions in the work as classical sculpture. Her relationship with the viewer is classic in that one has to move around the sculpture to see it. This figure invokes classic sculpture's fourth dimension—time.

However, the artist provocatively plays with these aspects. Despite the conventionality of the cat woman existing as classical sculpture, she also comes out of the end of the bar-room, which then violates the convention. By this time, the cat-headed woman has become more of a pussycat at the height of a human crotch, reinforcing the slang term for female genitalia. She extends beyond the barrier of the bar, coming into the area that the audience inhabits, which increases the involvement with the viewer. By extending beyond the tableau, the cat engages in the viewers' space beyond the wall, acknowledging that viewers cannot get into *Saloon*, not only because they are the wrong scale but because they are not invited into the bar. This precipitates a conflict as to what the viewer is expected to do. The cat crosses the line into the viewer's space and, in the process, challenges the traditional dynamic of classical sculpture, as well as the dynamic initially set up by the work. The viewer is no longer looking into *Saloon* exclusively in the role of voyeur. The rules have changed, and, surprisingly, the object is now engaging the viewer, which raises the question of where the zone of the sculpture really ends, making ambiguous the point where the viewer and the object interact.

The cat's extension beyond *Saloon*, projecting out of the sculptural building, also interferes with the viewer's space and time, which is a completely private experience. It intrudes and looks around to see if

anybody is out there. In a sense, it acknowledges the viewer by looking for him or her. Unlike the previous, more public positions for viewing at the side, this is a much more private experience for the viewer. Tucked in the back of the structure, viewers at the side cannot determine how the viewer at the back is responding to the cat because he or she is shielded. There are no windows there, and the cat blocks the door.

From the window, the cat is encountered in a position of submission. However, if the viewer walks around and looks at the cat from the back door, it is in a position of dominance. The view from the inside is flipped. The dance-hall girl with the cat head pivots physically as well as psychologically, from a position of submission to one of dominance.

The cat coming out of *Saloon* references the cat in the daguerreotype. The private experience of viewing the daguerreotype in the 1850s is formally contrasted with the public display of primary instincts and another kind of relationship with an object. The pursuit is still on—the cat for the bird, the cowboy for the girl, and now, the cat for the viewer—each in a moment-to-moment relationship doomed to failure, with the viewing audience as voyeurs of these critical *mises-en-scène* of unfulfillable desire.¹⁶

Saloon may well be one of the frankest expressions of male sexuality in contemporary art. McCarthy has given us, perhaps to our consternation, a complex work that is deceptively simple but perceptively diagnostic of a male perspective. In the process, he opens up for discussion one of the last male taboos—the contradictory nature of men’s sexual relationship with women. The cowboy in *Saloon* shows what he really is—a man with a perpetual desire to have sex with women, but who is unable, for a variety of reasons, to have it. McCarthy has taken the stereotype of the American cowboy, dismembered it, and then thrown it in the male viewer’s face, saying, in a sense, “You may want to think you are a cowboy, but you’re not.”

McCarthy confronts the viewer directly to deal with his tableau. He presents his work as if to say, “Here’s the situation. How are *you* going to react? Do you want to butt-fuck the blond, or have a drink at the bar, or simply stand at the window?”

The cat daguerreotype sets up the narrative in *Saloon*, which concludes with a cat at the back of the bar. The difference, of course, is that the cat in the daguerreotype is actually more sophisticated than the man in *Saloon*. The cat at least *knows* he cannot get the bird.

¹⁶ To similar effect, *Saloon* and the daguerreotype were included in the curator’s exhibition, *Observations*, at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto, in 1997.