

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: Illusion and Disillusionment in the Works of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter: Picturing (Post)Modern Life

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This study is a meta-critique of the discourse surrounding the emergence of large-scale, color photography around 1980 and the concurrent “return to painting” through an examination of the art praxes of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter. As Western avant-garde art shifted from conceptual practices toward large-scale, figurative painting and photography during the late 1970s and early 1980s, there developed a vociferous discourse that, to a large degree, was highly critical of the changes that were taking place.

The most strident aspect of the discourse emanated from fundamentally Marxist critics and academicians who viewed the turn to more aesthetically-based art forms as an undesirable capitulation to the political hegemony of the conservative administration in the United States, and to a burgeoning and increasingly international art market fueled by improving economic conditions. This criticism looked less than carefully at the art and the stated positions of the artists. This study mines the critical writings about both Wall and Richter in order to illuminate the discourse and elucidate the limits of art-historical writing that arises from rigid theoretical positions. It focuses particularly on the writings of Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp,

Rosalind Krauss and Jean-François Chevrier. The writings of Wall and Richter are also given considerable weight and their voices are invoked as full participants.

The works of Wall and Richter involve inextricable combinations of photography and painting in very different ways, and the role of medium within the discourse is examined. In addition, the artists' references in their works to art forms of earlier periods in the history of Modernism are also considered. Although this study focuses on the period 1976 to 1990, it pays considerable attention to connections between early twentieth century German and Russian theories of montage and the art of Jeff Wall, and Wall's illuminated transparencies are emphasized.

The geographic scope of the study includes North America and West Germany, where much of the controversy about the "return to painting" was generated, and where exhibitions of the work of both Wall and Richter occurred frequently during the study period.

ILLUSION AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE WORKS OF JEFF WALL AND
GERHARD RICHTER: PICTURING (POST)MODERN LIFE

By

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DEDICATION

To Neal and Robin

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**ILLUSION AND DISILLUSIONMENT IN THE WORKS OF
JEFF WALL AND GERHARD RICHTER:
PICTURING (POST)MODERN LIFE**

Introduction

This study is a theoretical analysis of the discourse surrounding the emergence of large-scale, color photography during the late 1970s, as the prevalence of photographically-based Conceptual Art began to wane. The study focuses on the years 1976 to 1990, with 1980 as the pivotal year in the shift away from Conceptual Art that had prevailed from the mid-1960s during the peak of Minimalism and Pop Art and extended through the late 1970s. The conceptual art movement had valorized work that was typically photographic, utilizing black-and-white, deskilled snapshots frequently combined with text to create art that was not just unaesthetic, but anti-aesthetic. A major goal of Conceptual Art had been to thwart the institution of the museum, the art market and what had come to be termed the “culture industry.” The shift was toward art that was narrative, pictorial, large-scale, and in color. The emergence of the new photographic form occurred in concert with a resurgence of large-scale painting. This study places primary emphasis on the critical and art-historical writings of the period, while paying close attention to the art and writings of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter, artists who played key roles in the described shifts.

A plethora of essays chronicled the changes that art historians and curators were observing, and comprised the discourse of the period. Those who evaluated art from a fundamentally Marxist perspective, primarily in reliance upon the writings of Walter Benjamin and other theorists of the first decades of the twentieth century, abjured what appeared to them to be a tidal wave of art that seemed specifically

designed for the gallery, the museum and the market. They expressed disdain for conservative developments in the American political regime and changes in the economy as they affected art production and consumption. Other writers, of course, celebrated the resurgence of painting evidenced in numerous exhibitions of West German and American Neoexpressionism and the Italian Transavantgarde.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is the creation of a meta-critique through an examination of the key theoretical arguments propounded during the period as they developed, and, particularly, as they were applied to the art production of two artists whose works emblemize the issues at stake. The artists are Jeff Wall, a Canadian photographer whose photographic transparencies derive significant inspiration from historic painting and cinema, and Gerhard Richter, a German painter whose work integrally involves photography. A major purpose of the study is to illuminate the limitations of the criticisms of the resurgence of figurative and pictorial art, which tended to approach it from preconceived theoretical positions, and to gloss over the critical stances that the artists themselves voiced in writings and interviews. Moreover, it is argued that the Marxist historians failed to look seriously at Wall's art, in particular, thus underestimating its conversance with some of the theoretical positions that the critics themselves espoused.

In examining the theoretical discourse of the period, this study historicizes the works of Wall and Richter by placing them in the context of the moment of 1980. Yet, it is emphatically the case that the discourse engages earlier historical periods to which their work directly relates. For example, Jeff Wall's transparencies of the early

1980s reconstruct, or re-present, some well-known nineteenth-century French paintings made on the cusp of Modernism, and some of his later transparencies appropriate ideas that arose within photography during the early twentieth century. As a painter who incorporates photography integrally within his praxis, Richter also has produced a hybrid art that has addressed art forms that range from the readymade, to Pop Art, to history and landscape painting, to Abstract Expressionism. Thus, his painting incorporates art-historical as well as photographic models. As a consequence of the complex kinds of works that both Wall and Richter produce, the immediate focus on the critical writing of the period of the study necessarily requires consideration of earlier periods. It pays close attention, however, to the interweaving of the art and the writings of the artists themselves, in order to reveal the strengths and limits of theoretical approaches that eschew full engagement with the art and related writings, and therefore tend to dismiss them. Given the intellectual orientations of the two artists, their voices are fully integrated into the study.

As implied by the foregoing, the production of art, rather than its reception, is the greater focus of this investigation. Although reception of an artwork is in many ways a consideration inseparable from production, and Chapter Three concerning the disruption of scopical pleasure addresses reception to an important degree, the study's primary focus is the making of the work and the theories that inform that process. The reasons for this emphasis are, first, that the theoretical concerns that underlie much of the writing of the period involve the ways in which art is produced and the related concept of art medium, and, second, the need for economy, clarity and comprehensibility. Thus, exhibitions of art that are mentioned in the study are not

fully analyzed from the perspective of reception. A thorough examination of the reception of Wall's and Richter's artworks would require a very different investigation.

Although the artworks of the two artists are the lenses through which this study is focused, it is not intended as a monograph on either of them. Indeed, their work and careers have been extensively catalogued, chronicled and critiqued by others. The extraordinary amount of critical attention paid to the oeuvres of Wall and Richter, however, facilitates (and complicates) consideration of the larger issues at stake. The study focuses primarily on the photography of Wall as a result of his participation in the discourse through his art-making procedures, his academic study of art history, and his prolific writings and interviews.

Richter, who is half a generation older than Wall and began his mature art practice in 1962, is included more as a touchstone, or perhaps as a foil for Wall, in order to address the complexities of painting in the period. But Richter, too, has produced numerous published writings in the forms of diary entries or notes, letters, catalogue texts and statements for press conferences, and has given interviews that inform his approach. His praxis represents an intellectual approach to painting, which he has conducted in Germany since World War II. Thus, Richter's painting and commentaries provide valuable insights not only into the period, but, also, into the art of others who have contended with the uniquely West German political, social and intellectual issues of the late twentieth century.

It is to be acknowledged that neither Wall nor Richter is treated simply as a representative of photographers or painters during the period of the study. Their

respective bodies of work are extraordinarily complex and multivalenced, and, thus, neither is considered as just one of a group, or as an example of a type of praxis. Rather, each of them can be viewed as a limit case because of the theoretical issues that his work raises within the discourse of the period. That is the primary reason for their selection as subjects for this investigation.

Geographic scope

Geographic considerations have contributed significantly to the choices of Wall and Richter. The locus of much of the discussion about the “return to painting” took place within North America, particularly New York, and in West Germany, and the geographic scope of this study is limited to those venues. Neoexpressionism surfaced in West Germany and New York, and generated controversy that was carried on with regard to art originating in both places. Although some of Richter’s work reveals a specifically national consciousness, particularly his 1960s photopaintings of subjects that relate to World War II, and *October 18, 1977* (1989), his cycle of history photopaintings about the Baader-Meinhof group, interest in contemporary art during the period of the study was decidedly international. It would be difficult and counterproductive to separate West German from American art or the critical writings generated in New York from those of Western Europe. Therefore, this study addresses the circulation of post-1960 West German art in the United States during the 1980s, and the contentious discourse surrounding it.

Moreover, the interest in Wall’s and Richter’s work overlapped geographically. Richter’s painting was first shown in New York in a group exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1969, and his first one-person exhibition in

New York occurred in 1973. His abstract paintings were included in a group exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto in 1985, and a retrospective organized there in 1988 traveled to three U. S. venues. Through the 1980s (and, of course, beyond), Richter's work has been shown at an accelerating pace in Europe and North America. The first example of Wall's mature work was shown in Vancouver in 1978, but it quickly surfaced in West Germany: in Cologne at "Westkunst: Contemporary Art since 1939" (1981); in Kassel at Documenta 7 (1982); and many times in Germany through the decade of the eighties to the present. As one would expect, Richter's work also was included in "Westkunst" and Documenta 7. The point is that each artist was internationally recognized during this period, generating and demonstrating strong interest in both West Germany and the United States.

With specific regard to photography in West Germany and North America during the period of this study, a group of photographers trained by Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy began in the late 1970s to produce bodies of documentary photographic work of large scale and in color that form a significant part of the postmodern photographic art phenomenon. Although the ideas underlying the photography of artists such as Andreas Gursky, Candida Hofer, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth derive, in part, from a long history of the typology and the archive that is particularly German, its presence within the international world of contemporary art undoubtedly influenced many others who produce large-scale color photography. Those artists, along with others such as Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra and Americans

Gregory Crewdson and Joel Sternfeld, for example, populate the photographic milieu in which both Wall and Richter have practiced.

Theoretical discourse

A significant portion of the critical writing of the period concerned with the subject of this study—certainly the most strident—has been published in the journal *October*, founded in 1976 on the cusp of the inception of the shift to large-scale figurative art, and proclaimed by its editors to have a generally Marxist approach to art history and criticism. The writers were based in New York and looked critically at new art as it was shown. It is therefore essential to engage rather extensively with the writings of members of the *October* group who have been most adamant in their criticism of the transparencies of Jeff Wall, yet supportive of the photopaintings of Gerhard Richter. Accordingly, Rosalind Krauss's exploration of the concept of medium, Douglas Crimp's ideological critique of the institution of the museum and Benjamin Buchloh's castigation of painting while valorizing Richter's production are given significant attention in the study. A sustained and positive view of Wall's work has been provided by French photography historian Jean-François Chevrier, who follows a more traditional modernist approach.

Temporal scope

The year 1976 has been selected as the beginning for several key reasons. As noted above, it marked the founding of *October*, which was a signal harbinger of and influence upon the discourse that was to follow. It was also the year in which Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings, perhaps his most aesthetically-oriented ones, emerged. Following quickly were other indicators of this major turn: Douglas

Crimp's 1977 New York exhibition and essay titled "Pictures" and his theoretical writings that followed during the next five years; Jeff Wall's first backlit color transparency in 1978; and numerous international museum exhibitions featuring figurative painting: the 1980 Venice Biennale, "Westkust" in 1981, Documenta 7 and "Zeitgeist" (Berlin) in 1982; and, in 1983, two exhibitions of West German art in the United States: "Expressions: New Art from Germany" organized by the St. Louis Art Museum, and "New Figuration: Contemporary Art from Germany" at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1981 and 1982, Benjamin Buchloh, a German-born art historian who has written extensively on Richter, published two provocative essays deriding the return to painting and praising conceptual, montage-based, reproductive art-making procedures. Those texts engendered vociferous responses, which together helped set the terms of the protracted debate that has continued to the present.

The study is organized as follows:

Chapter One: The Big Picture

Chapter One sets the stage and provides background for the period and issues in question. The "big picture" is defined, and this phenomenon is evidenced by the emergence of large-scale photography and the proliferation of exhibitions of painting in Western Europe and the United States. It is also shown to be related to changes in the economy and the art market. This chapter establishes the start of the discourse around the postmodern concept of the picture, beginning with Douglas Crimp's 1977 exhibition and eponymous essay "Pictures." It then turns to Diderot's eighteenth-century concept of the tableau, and traces it to the period of the study through the writings of Roland Barthes, Michael Fried and Jean-François Chevrier. Finally, Jeff

Wall's and Gerhard Richter's approaches to picturing in their respective praxes are discussed, noting that they are primarily concerned with producing "pictures," whether in photography or in paint.

Chapter Two: What's a Pure Medium?

The question of medium is seminal to this discussion. Robert Rauschenberg's question, posed in 1961, was prescient given the attention paid to this issue ever since. The views of medium espoused by Clement Greenberg, Leo Steinberg and Michael Fried are considered in order to understand where the discourse began and how it evolved during the 1970s.

The *October*-based art historians have been particularly concerned with the notion of medium, as it is so integrally a part of the means of production of an art object, and the choice and handling of the material of a medium or mediums have had much to do with their critical reactions. The concern with medium connects, also, to the issue of authorial presence, which those writers relate negatively to painting. This study therefore focuses at length on issues raised by Douglas Crimp, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh.

Crimp set the stage for the critique of painting and the concept of medium in the postmodern period with a series of essays written in the late 1970s and early 1980s in which he valorized a mix of photographically-based mediums and proclaimed the end of painting. His efforts were directed toward thwarting the institutional authority of the museum. Krauss, too, has focused from the late 1970s to the present on the concept of medium in the course of applying what are essentially early twentieth-century standards (particularly through ideas advanced by Walter

Benjamin) to art of the late twentieth century. She has been a pointed critic of Jeff Wall with specific regard to his medium. Buchloh, a champion of certain forms of conceptual art, is, in some ways, the most perplexing member of the group in espousing standards similar to those of the others in castigating the return to painting. Yet, he has focused much attention since the mid-seventies on Richter, whose painting he finds sufficiently “dialectical.” His goals are more overtly political and social, evidenced by his view that art should contest the dominant culture industry.

The variety of approaches that art historians and critics have taken to Jeff Wall’s enlistment of cinematic and painting models for his photography are reviewed, and Wall’s evolving approach to his own medium is elucidated. Finally, Gerhard Richter’s attitude toward the issue of medium in his photopaintings is discussed, along with the critical response of Benjamin Buchloh and the discourse that his writings have engendered.

Chapter Three: Disillusionment: The Disruption of Scopic Pleasure in Jeff Wall’s Pictures

Although both artists produce pictorial, or illusionistic, art (with the exceptions of Richter’s abstract paintings, gray paintings and mirror works), each, in several and very different ways, obscures, obfuscates or complicates the viewer’s reading and understanding of his pictures. Thus, as a viewer approaches the works, the initial perception of an illusion is gradually dispelled. Intellectual work is required to glean an understanding of what each of Wall and Richter has to say, and one is never certain that enough work has been done.

This chapter looks at the ways in which Jeff Wall has utilized critical avant-garde theories of the early twentieth century to make his backlit transparencies

dialectical or instructive. *The Destroyed Room*, his first work, illustrates Wall's early enlistment of the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. Further examples from the 1980s show the degree to which Wall is conversant with those ideas, particularly the notion of gesture as a form of rupture. His work is then analyzed to show the incorporation of the concept of the radical oblique, recalling the 1920s photography of Aleksander Rodchenko, combined with the depiction of abject subjects, drawing on the work of surrealist writer Bataille and photographer Wols. The examination concludes that the multiple fissures and ruptures in Wall's work, particularly in the 1980s, detract from, or at least complicate, visual pleasure and, for the viewer who is aware of those histories, make the work instructive. Thus, the criticisms that it is "totalizing" or uninventive are unfounded.

This chapter moves from Wall to Richter with a comparison of grisaille forest scenes in which the artists have camouflaged the presence of human figures. Those similar images provide a transition to Richter's very different ways of disrupting or frustrating scopical understanding and pleasure for his viewers. This is a much more abbreviated examination of Richter's extensive oeuvre than is the examination of Wall's work, and focuses on his gray paintings, blind windows and enameled mirrors.

Summary Statement

As Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter emerged onto the international art scene in the late seventies and early eighties (understanding that Richter was rather well known in West Germany by the late sixties), they faced a developing and rather vociferous discourse that would have suggested that each in his own way was swimming against the tide. Painting was said to be dead, and large-scale color

photography was enough like painting to be ignored by art historians and critics who saw postmodern art through the lenses of early twentieth century German and Russian theories. Wall's and Richter's relentless efforts to produce *pictures* that, with sustained looking, could be understood by, in Diderot's terms, "a man of simple common sense," were abjured by those who believed such efforts to be socially and politically regressive.

This study demonstrates that these artists' pictures are extraordinarily complex productions that explore and incorporate many facets of the history of Western art that preceded them. If the pictures respond to the market and museum (which they surely do), they are not simple pictures. Through an examination of the art praxes of Wall and Richter, in combination with their respective writings and statements, this study elucidates the discourse of 1980. It shows that a significant part of that discourse failed to look adequately at their artwork, and analyzed it from preconceived theoretical positions. By so doing, it failed to consider seriously the artists' critical statements about their own work and the positions that they consciously assumed within the North American and Western European art milieu.

This study provides a meta-critique of the discourse of the period from 1976 to 1990 that includes the voices of two artists who were fully conversant with the issues at stake. It reaches no conclusions, as it is a chapter in a long narrative that began with the advent of Modernism. Although the art will change and the terms will shift, the discussion will continue.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIG PICTURE

In 1981, Louise Lawler produced a three-by-six inch, precisely focused, black-and-white photograph of a matchbook leaning against the inside rim of a circular glass ashtray (fig. I-1).¹ The words “WHY PICTURES NOW” are imprinted on the matchbook. Although a question mark does not follow the text, the implied question was of critical importance to art of the period, and prescient with regard to what was becoming a burgeoning photographic practice. Lawler’s photograph speaks to the transition then in progress: the waning of the conceptual photographic practices of the previous decade and a half, and the emergence of what has been termed the “photographic tableau.”

In the late 1970s, and certainly by 1980, a significant and noticeable change had occurred in the kinds of photography that some artists were producing. The scale, clarity and color of the photographs of artists working in Düsseldorf and Vancouver, in particular, had entered a new realm, giving photographs the impact of large paintings. Fabrication could involve placing transparencies in lightboxes, adding stark white borders and wood frames, or mounting photographs to aluminum or Plexiglas plates. These works took on the nature of large objects, quite distinguishable from the familiar notebook-sized black-and-white “art” photographs of the first half of the century, the color-saturated American street and road

¹ Lawler’s work to date has remained critical, often combining image with text. It includes Cibachrome and black-and-white photographs of the work of other artists in the contexts of galleries, museums, auction houses, public buildings, collectors’ homes and storage areas. See *Louise Lawler and Others*, ed. Philipp Kaiser, exh. cat. (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004); and *Louise Lawler: An Arrangement of Pictures* (New York: Assouline, 2000).

photography of the 1960s and 1970s, and the anaesthetic snapshots of Conceptual Art.²

The idea informing this chapter is to define the emergence and the nature of what in simple terms could be called “the big picture,” and to show how it is and is not related to the contemporary, postmodern strategic photography that was the topic of so much critical writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This critical writing took place against the background of a number of exhibitions of national and international scope that were dominated by painting. Those exhibitions took place in Europe, particularly in West Germany, and in North America. They reflected and fueled an ideological divide within the world of art and the discourse surrounding it.

The emergence of large-scale photographic imagery occurred within the context of advances in commercial photographic technology. In the late 1970s, the physical production of large-scale prints and transparencies first became possible, and artists using photography quickly took advantage of advances in the realm of commercial photography. By “large scale,” I am referring to photographs designed for the wall, with dimensions of at least four-by-four feet, and up to six-by-thirteen, or nine-by-six feet. The physical presence of such works commands attention in a

² The art photographs of the first decades of the twentieth century, such as those shown at the several galleries of Alfred Stieglitz from 1908 until 1946, typically measured approximately nine by seven inches, and rarely exceeded ten by twelve inches. See Sarah Greenough, *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and his New York Galleries* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; Boston: Bulfinch Press, Little, Brown, 2000), 530-41. Walker Evans’s documentary photographs taken throughout his career between 1927 and 1974 were frequently approximately nine by seven inches, and many were smaller. See Maria Morris Hambourg, et al., *Walker Evans*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 300-09. The color photographs of Stephen Shore from the 1970s were typically eight by ten inches, and rarely exceeded 11 x 14 inches. William Eggleston’s color works of the same period ranged up to approximately 13 x 19 inches.

way that is comparable to that of traditional history paintings.³ French art historian Jean-François Chevrier has observed that beginning in the 1980s, photography changed notably in terms of its physical enlargement and its adoption of what he has termed the form of the “tableau.” This resulted in a new relationship between photographs and viewers and, thus, moved photography into the realm of “high” art.⁴ Michael Fried has also commented on the “material alterations” that had taken place in the scale of photography by 1980.⁵

Another important influence on the emergence of the photographic tableau was economic. It paralleled painting’s return to figuration: the Neue Wilde in West

³ Sample image dimensions of Jeff Wall’s color transparencies in lightboxes are *The Destroyed Room* (1978), 159 x 234 cm; *Milk* (1984), 187 x 229 cm; *The Storyteller* (1986), 229 x 437 cm; and *The Agreement* (1987), 191 x 370 cm. Andreas Gursky’s chromogenic color prints increased in size beginning in the late 1980s: *Niagra Falls* (1989) is 150 x 120 cm; *Tokyo Stock Exchange* (1990) is 188 x 230 cm; *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993) is 205 x 421 cm; and *May Day IV* (2000) is 207.6 x 508 cm. The dimensions given for Gursky’s work include the wooden frames and white borders, as Gursky does not record the precise dimensions of his images. Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky*, exh. cat., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 184. Unframed dimensions of examples of Thomas Struth’s color images are *The Shimada Family, Yamaguchi* (1986), 94.5 x 133.5 cm; *Louvre IV, Paris* (1989), 137 x 172.5 cm; and *San Zaccaria, Venice* (1995), 180 x 228.5 cm. Gursky and Struth mount their photographs directly to a Plexiglas plate and frame them. Charles Wylie, “A History of Now: The Art of Thomas Struth,” in *Thomas Struth: 1977 2002*, exh. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2002), 152.

⁴ Jean-François Chevrier, a professor at l’École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris, has written frequently on late twentieth-century photography. According to Chevrier, “Until the beginning of the 1980s, it was nearly impossible for a photograph to be a tableau without having been transformed or transposed into painting as Andy Warhol, Richter, and the photorealists did.” Further, “The great discovery of the 1980s was that an image resulting from an operation of recording, restoring a thing seen, can be in itself a visual thing, not just a ‘souvenir’ but an actual image, which delivers itself and reveals itself here, now, at the moment of its presentation, in the actuality of perception by a *regardeur*, who by looking, as Duchamp said, makes the tableau.” “Shadow and Light,” trans. Andrea Loselle, in Jean-François Chevrier and Ann Goldstein, *A Dialogue about Recent American and European Photography*, exh. cat., (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), 16. Chevrier does not address the advances in technology that by the late 1970s made possible the photographic tableau that he identifies as having emerged by the beginning of the 1980s.

⁵ Michael Fried, “Barthes’s *Punctum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005): 562-63. Speaking of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* as a commentary on “an image-making regime that is all but defunct,” Fried said, “In fact two such material alterations were either on the way or currently taking place: digitalization, which by the 1990s would thoroughly transform the ontology of the photograph, and a considerable increase in the size of art photographs, which already in 1980 was enabling works such as Jeff Wall’s light-box transparencies or Thomas Ruff’s blown-up portrait photographs of art students to address more than a single beholder at the same time. Intimately related to the increase of size was the display of those photographs on gallery and museum walls or, rather, the fact that photographs like Wall’s and Ruff’s were made in order to be so displayed.”

Germany, Neoexpressionism in the United States and the Transavantguardia in Italy. It has been asserted that the economic upturn of the period fostered a market for this new art, in stark contrast to the inexpensive, reductivist photographic art of the conceptual period that was intended to circumvent the market altogether. Mary Jane Jacob describes a rejuvenation of the market for painting and the appearance of European painters—notably from Italy and Germany—on the American scene during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, beginning in 1980.⁶ Collectors placed their names on waiting lists for as-yet-unpainted works by young artists, and certain well-known collectors enhanced the reputations of artists by collecting their work in depth and creating private collection museums. The market for new painting was fueled by articles in popular magazines, the opening of satellite branches of the Whitney Museum in Manhattan, and significant increases in corporate art collecting.⁷ A published conversation held in 1981 between Ben Lifson, then photography critic for the *Village Voice*, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, an art historian of photography, concerned the recent “trajectory of photography’s ascent” in the marketplace and the related appropriation of an art-historical, painting-related vocabulary to sell

⁶ Mary Jane Jacob, “Art in the Age of Reagan, 1980-1988,” in *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, ed. Catherine Gudis, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1989), 15-20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-19. Jacob cites an article stating that “the number of corporations collecting art has risen 50% in the past five years, to about 1,000.” Meg Cox, “Boom in Art Market Lifts Prices Sharply, Stirs Fears of a Bust,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 24, 1986. She suggests, also, that corporate collecting in the 1980s was conservative and favored representational painting, citing Calvin Tompkins, “Medicis, Inc.,” *New Yorker*, April 14, 1986, 87. For a perspective on changes in tactics in the sale of art, see Jeffrey Deitch, “The Art Sanctuary,” *FlashArt*, no. 88-89 (March-April 1981): 48, in which Deitch noted a shift in the approaches of New York galleries from the “placement” to the “sale” of art, and Sotheby’s “hyp[ing] paintings like Hollywood movies.” He asked, “Is an art object still ‘art’ after commercial exposure has removed its sacred status? Already, we can get a taste of what this is like by looking at the Dali prints hung up in the model room settings in schlock furniture stores.” An editorial titled “Art World Follies, 1981: A Special Issue,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 3-4, expressed alarm that collectors were curating gallery exhibitions, and the institutions that had previously generated public discourse on art were being bypassed.

photography.⁸ In attempting to account for the markedly increased interest in photography, Lifson said,

The prevalent problem for photography is the notion that it is painting which sets the example, which establishes the visual and intellectual undertaking, and that photography can be respectable only insofar as it repeats or rehearses the pictorial strategies of painting.⁹

By 1987, writing in what she termed “the age of Reagan,” Abigail Solomon-Godeau described the shift from the margins to the center in the approaches of postmodern photographic artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, artists whose earlier work had been acclaimed for its oppositional and critical stance in relation to the dominant culture.¹⁰ Noting that the market for art had been dominated by painting since 1980, she posited three factors that had contributed to making photography “comprehensible and desirable:”

Nonetheless, the fact remains that in 1980, the work of Levine or Prince was largely unsaleable and quite literally incomprehensible to all but a handful of critics and a not much larger group of other artists. When this situation changed substantially, it was not *primarily* because of the influence of critics or the efforts of dealers. Rather, it was a result of three factors: the self-created impasse of art photography that foreclosed the ability to produce anything new for a market that had been constituted in the previous decade; a vastly expanded market with new types of purchasers; and the assimilation of postmodernist strategies back into the mass culture that had in part engendered them. This last development may be said to characterize postmodernist photography the third time around, rendering it both comprehensible and desirable and simultaneously signaling its near-total incorporation

⁸ Ben Lifson and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photophilia: A Conversation about the Photography Scene,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 103-18. In response to Solomon-Godeau’s question, “What do you think the Whitney [Biennial] emphasis on color was about,” Lifson replied, “The Whitney is saying that color is important because painting is in color; it’s the same story: photography approximating the conditions of painting.” *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁰ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Living with contradictions: critical practices in the age of supply-side aesthetics,” in *Visual culture: the reader*, eds. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999), 224-43; previously published in *Screen* 28, no. 3 (1987): 2-23.

into those very discourses (advertising, fashion, media) it professed to critique.¹¹

The shift to the comprehensible picture in the late 1970s has also been discussed by Kerry Brougher with regard to art and film:

The emphasis shifted from a dialogue about art—the attempts to dismantle and examine the phenomenon of art (and cinema)—back to the image and the problems of making pictures. And in turn, the goal of art has shifted from a radical reductivism that sought a kind of anti-art (and acinematic film) back to images that, like film stills, are fragments of a greater, more socially inclined text.¹²

David Company, too, has acknowledged the relevance of the market in considering photography at this juncture: “Photography is now celebrated as the new Picture—the singular, composed image made for the wall (and the market). It often relates to other images less through set or sequence than through the socially absorbed laws of genre, such as landscape, cityscape, still life and narrative tableau.”¹³

The “Return to Painting”

The references to painting in the foregoing discussion suggest that a resurgence of painting, beginning about 1980, particularly in West Germany, was of interest and significant concern to art historians and writers of the period. Suzaan Boettger observed that the reemergence of painterly figuration must have fulfilled a

¹¹ Ibid., 223-24.

¹² Kerry Brougher, “Hall of Mirrors,” in *Hall of Mirrors: Art and Film Since 1945*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 20-137, 119. Following the quoted text, Brougher gave as an example Jeff Wall’s *Eviction Struggle* (1988), which he called “a synthesis of panorama, history painting, and cinematic melodrama.”

¹³ David Company, “‘Almost the Same Thing’: Some Thoughts on the Collector-Photographer,” in *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth-Century Photograph*, ed. Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 33. Company continues: “The work of Jeff Wall is the clearest example of this. It is made explicitly for the gallery wall and like those of many contemporary photographic artists his many books are monographs and catalogues, rather than integral works in themselves.” Company is contrasting the works of contemporary photographers with those of the artists in “Cruel and Tender,” whose photographs were made typically for book projects.

“substantial need” beyond the “excessive hype that accompanied the marketing of this particular return to art as a hand-made expressive object.”¹⁴ Although it is not the purpose of this study to chronicle all of the exhibitions of the period that contributed to this phenomenon, it is useful to mention some of the more notable ones to set the stage for the critical writings that ensued. It will be seen that art connections between West Germany and North America accelerated in the early 1980s.

Exhibitions of importance to this argument include two precursors in New York: “New Image Painting,” 1978, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and “American Painting: The Eighties,” 1979, at The Grey Art Gallery and Study Center.¹⁵ In Europe, the following exhibitions were of particular significance: the 1980 Venice Biennale; “Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939” in Cologne in 1981; “A New Spirit in Painting” in London in 1981; and Documenta 7 in Kassel and “Zeitgeist” in Berlin, each in 1982.¹⁶ “Expressions: New Art from Germany” was exhibited in St. Louis in 1983, and traveled to Long Island City, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, Newport Beach and Washington, D.C.¹⁷ “New Figuration:

¹⁴ Suzaan Boettger, “Regression in the Service of ...,” *Art Criticism* 2, no. 2 (1986): 57-68, 67. See, also, Wolfgang Max Faust and Gerd de Vries, *Hunger Nach Bildern: Deutsche Malerei der Gegenwart* (Cologne: DuMont, 1982), a book about West German painting from 1960 to 1982. Nearly one-half of the images in the book are of works painted between 1980 and 1982.

¹⁵ Richard Marshall, *New Image Painting* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978); and Barbara Rose, *American Painting, The Eighties: A Critical Interpretation*, exh. cat. (New York: Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, 1979).

¹⁶ “Westkunst” included a section titled “Heute,” financed partly by gallery owners, which included the work of 37 artists. Jeff Wall was represented by *Movie Audience* (1979), which is comprised of seven transparencies in three lightboxes. See the review by Richard Armstrong, “‘Heute,’ Westkunst,” *Artforum* 20, no. 1 (September 1981): 83-86. Wall’s work was not mentioned in the exhibition catalogue: Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, exh. cat. (Cologne: DuMont, 1981).

¹⁷ Jack Cowart, ed., *Expressions: New Art from Germany*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, in association with The Saint Louis Art Museum, 1983). The exhibition included the work of five West German painters: Georg Baselitz, Jorg Immendorff, Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lupertz and A. R. Penck.

Contemporary Art from Germany” took place at the Frederick S. Wight Gallery in Los Angeles in the same year.¹⁸ All of the foregoing exhibitions focused primarily or exclusively on painting, with an emphasis on West German and American Neoexpressionism and Italian Transavantgardia. Numerous gallery exhibitions augmented this phenomenon.

Several writers of the period suggested that there was an element of European triumphalism in the emphasis on European painting in the exhibitions. Writing of several French painters, whom she characterized as “just a brushstroke behind their German and Italian neighbors,” French art critic Catherine Francblin observed:

But whether we applaud or mock we cannot deny—especially upon returning from the Venice Biennale and Documenta—that the new figuration has the wind in its sails, and that it is changing the entire art scene—along with a market that for nearly 20 years had seemed moribund to everyone. *This movement, especially in Germany and Italy, constitutes a revival of European art, which now reclaims its place on an international stage previously monopolized by America.* (Emphasis added.)¹⁹

Writing that the London Royal Academy’s “A New Spirit in Painting” was both “good” and “rotten,” New York critic Roberta Smith said,

Rotten because it seemed to have a hidden agenda—showcasing the new German figurative expressionism at the expense of both American and Italian painters in particular....The exhibition’s main goal seemed to have been to increase the visibility and appreciation of the northern expressionist tradition in current painting, and to unseat American painting’s hegemony.²⁰

¹⁸ Donald B. Kuspit, *New Figuration: Contemporary Art from Germany*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983). This exhibition included works of 15 West German painters, including the five shown in “Expressions: New Art from Germany.” More than two-thirds of the works in the exhibition were painted after 1976.

¹⁹ Catherine Francblin, “Free French,” *Art in America* 70, no. 8 (September 1982): 128-31, 128.

²⁰ Roberta Smith, “Fresh Paint?” *Art in America* 69, no. 6 (Summer 1981): 70-79, 71.

In a review titled “Bayreuth ’82,” Craig Owens castigated the retrogressive nature of the art exhibited at Documenta 7, linking it to German Romanticism. He regarded the German artists who dominated the exhibition as “recycling the entire German Romantic reserve of folklore, symbolism, myth and cultural heroics,” and, also, perceived in the selection of artists by exhibition curator Rudi Fuchs an attempt to unseat American cultural hegemony:

This is, of course, the same cultural baggage that was appropriated by National Socialist propaganda as evidence of a German national character, and the rhetoric of redemption that surrounds these painters’ work ultimately boils down to their attempted resurrection and revalorization of cultural traditions discredited by their association with fascism....Theirs is the dreamworld of Romantic protest: they offer (the illusion of) spontaneity, immediacy and irrationality as alternatives to technical rationalization, the progressive “Americanization” of postwar German society.²¹

As suggested by the foregoing, the widely-observed phenomenon of a return to figurative painting was chronicled in a frenzy of articles in the art press that brought into sharp relief the division between those who saw a return to painting as welcome, and those such as Craig Owens who saw it as a regressive political and social retreat to historic bourgeois practices.²² Issues of *Art in America*, from Summer 1981 through March 1983, included numerous articles on the painting

²¹ Craig Owens, “Bayreuth ’82,” *Art in America* 70, no. 8 (September 1982): 132-39, 191; 134. See, also, Benjamin Buchloh’s criticism of Documenta 7 in “A Dictionary of Received Ideas: Documenta 7,” *October* 22 (Fall 1982): 105-26.

²² The postmodernist position that representation in art is an “apparatus of power” and, therefore, never politically neutral, was set forth by Craig Owens in “Representation, Appropriation & Power,” *Art in America* 70, no. 5 (May 1982): 9-21. See, also, Owens, “Honor, Power and the Love of Women,” *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 7-13, 11, for his critique of the “Expressionist revival” as antimodernist and fatalistic. Owens was speaking of the Italian Transavantgarde, German Neoexpressionism and American artists Julian Schnabel and David Salle. Owens observed the swift rise of figurative art: “The extraordinary speed with which the pseudo-Expressionists have risen to prominence indicates that their work, rather than creating new expectations, merely conforms to existing ones; when ‘the fulfilled expectation becomes the norm of the product,’ however, we have entered the territory of *kitsch*.”

phenomenon with a focus on European painting.²³ Similarly, issues of *Artforum* in 1981 and 1982 evidenced the same focus.²⁴

The journal *October* was a signal contributor to the discourse on the changes in art around 1980; the Spring 1981 issue included seminal essays by Benjamin Buchloh and Douglas Crimp and the conversation between Lifson and Solomon-Godeau cited above.²⁵ In that issue, Annette Michelson wrote an editorial titled “The Prospect Before Us,” in which she renewed the journal’s commitment to critical, Marxist-based discourse in the face of shifts in political and economic conditions.²⁶ Her statement reprised and emphasized the essentially political stance of *October* and the degree to which its contributors regarded the election of a conservative Republican to the American presidency as emblematic of and integrally connected to

²³ See, for example: Roberta Smith, “Fresh Paint?”; Elizabeth C. Baker, “The ‘Return’ of European Art,” *Art in America* (Special Issue: Europe ’82) 70, no. 8 (September 1982): 5; Donald Kuspit, “Acts of Aggression: German Painting Today,” *Art in America* 70, no. 8 (September 1982): 140-51; Catherine Francblin, “Free French;” Donald Kuspit, “Acts of Aggression: German Painting Today, Part II,” *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 90-101, 131-35; David Galloway, “Report from West Germany: A Season of Artistic Détente,” *Art in America* 71, no. 3 (March 1983): 25-29; Hal Foster, “The Expressive Fallacy,” *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983): 80-83, 137; Prudence Carlson, “Report From Amsterdam: Arriving at the ‘80s,” *Art in America* 71, no. 1 (January 1983), 19-24; Joan Simon, “Report from Berlin: ‘Zeitgeist’: the Times & The Place,” *Art in America* 71, no. 3 (March 1983):, 33-37.

²⁴ See, for example: Stuart Morgan, “Cold Turkey: A New Spirit in Painting,” *Artforum* 19, no. 8 (April 1981): 46-47; Bazon Brock, “The End of the Avant-Garde? And So the End of Tradition. Notes on the Present ‘Kulturkampf’ Painting in West Germany,” *Artforum* 19, no.10 (June 1981): 62-67; Wolfgang Max Faust, “Du hast keine chance. Nutze sie! Tendencies in Recent German Art,” trans. J. W. Gabriel, *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (September 1981): 39; Thomas Lawson, “Last Exit: Painting,” *Artforum* 20, no. 2 (October 1981): 40-47; Donald Kuspit, “The New (?) Expressionism: Art as Damaged Goods,” *Artforum* 20, no. 3 (November 1981): 47-55; and in *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 57-75, articles on Documenta 7 by Annelie Pohlen, Kate Linker, Donald Kuspit, Richard Flood and Edit deAk.

²⁵ Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 39-68; and Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69-86, in which he said: “And, after waiting out the entire era of modernism, photography reappeared, finally to claim its inheritance. The appetite for photography in the past decade has been insatiable. Artists, critics, dealers, curators, and scholars have defected from their former pursuits in droves to take up this enemy of painting. Photography may have been *invented* in 1839, but it was only *discovered* in the 1970s. (p. 76.) Buchloh’s essay is discussed in Chapter Two.

²⁶ Annette Michelson, “The Prospect Before Us,” *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 119-26.

shifts in the art world. The editors had staked out their territory in the first issue.²⁷

The variants on this position, as worked through by Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh, are elucidated in Chapter Two.

It is the contention of this study that the advent of the large-scale color photograph was coincident with and part of the phenomenon of the burgeoning of large-scale, figurative artwork in color that was a radical departure from art of the conceptual period. As suggested by the conversation between Lifson and Solomon-Godeau, photophilia, or the new love of photography, involved photography that took its cues from painting: it was big, pictorial and in color, thus abjuring the abstract, black-and-white characteristics of earlier so-called art photography. The beginning of the turn in photography can be seen in the late-seventies work of an artist such as Jeff Wall, and the early-eighties work of artist Cindy Sherman, who, until that point, had been a major player in postmodern critique with her untitled film stills (1977-1980). Sherman's "Centerfolds," produced in 1981, moved her art from eight-by-ten inch black-and-white photographs, to intensely-colored works that were two-by-four feet in dimension. The significance of Sherman's move was confirmed by Lisa Phillips: "They were shocking, seductive, confrontational, and at 2 x 4 feet were among the largest photographs I had ever witnessed."²⁸ The "Centerfolds" were shown in the fall of 1981 at Metro Pictures, which was then a *new* New York gallery devoted to

²⁷ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, "About October," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 3-5: "As this issue demonstrates, we will publish writing grounded in presuppositions that are materialist, or at times idealist. Indeed, the tensions between radical artistic practice and dominant ideology will be a major subject of inquiry." The name *October* is, of course, a reference to Sergei Eisenstein's eponymous 1927-28 film, commissioned for the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. According to the editors, "We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique." *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ Lisa Phillips, ed., Introduction to *Cindy Sherman: Centerfolds* (New York: Skarsted Fine Art, 2003).

photographically-based art. Commenting upon Sherman's work in Metro Pictures' inaugural group exhibition, reviewer Valentine Tatransky said, "They are glamorous, dramatic self-portraits—and the more glamorous and dramatic they become, the better they get." Speaking of the work of Jack Goldstein, Michael Zwack and Thomas Lawson, he said,

Once they were content simply to abbreviate the photographic; now their work is more lush, opulent, and—one hesitates to use this term, because it is the wrong word to use, but at least it *expresses* what is new in their work—painterly.²⁹

The Picture

The large, visually authoritative photograph marks a rupture with much art that preceded it: it places the viewer in front of a single, large *picture*. The term "picture" implies that the image is legible. By legible, it is meant that a viewer is able to discern from everyday experience what the photograph is a picture of, irrespective of whether one can recognize or chooses to infer any deeper implications, or whether one can tell that the image was staged by the artist or occurred naturally.

The concept of the "picture" will be threaded through this study not just because it is a commonly used and presumably readily understood term, but because it figures prominently in the terminology used by Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter in speaking about their art and their artistic goals. In addition, the term "picture" might be accepted as a synonym for the term "tableau" that is discussed below, which has important art historical references, and is used as well by Jeff Wall in describing his praxis. First, however, it is important to examine how the term picture figured in art

²⁹ Valentine Tatransky, "The Opening of Metro Pictures," *FlashArt* no.101 (January-February 1981): 49.

historical discourse during the later years of Conceptual Art and just before big pictures emerged.

The Postmodern Picture

In 1979, Douglas Crimp published an essay titled “Pictures,”³⁰ a revision of a catalogue essay he had published in 1977, in which he described the photographically-based aesthetic strategies of five artists who were, in his view, committed to “radical innovation.” Using photography, film and performance in combination with traditional mediums,³¹ the most salient characteristic of those artists’ work was recognizable images. Crimp asserted the elasticity of the term “picture,” saying that it lacks specificity to any particular medium, and it functions as a verb as well as a noun, in that it may refer to the mental process of “picturing” as well as to the creation of an aesthetic object.³² While Crimp’s essay “Pictures” described and attempted to categorize a group of photographically-based practices of which Crimp approved, when read closely in the context of the period, it foreshadowed the emergence of a kind of “picture” in both photography and painting that he abjured. His writings of 1979 to 1982 are given emphasis here because, taken together, they reveal critical issues in the discourse of art history in the very period that is the focus of this study.

³⁰ Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 75-88. This essay was a revision and elaboration of an eponymous catalogue essay that Crimp wrote for an exhibition he organized in 1977 for Artists Space in New York. Douglas Crimp, *Pictures*, exh. cat. (New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, 1977). See, also, Douglas Crimp, “About Pictures,” *FlashArt*, no. 88-89 (March-April, 1979): 34-35. Artists Space reinstalled the 1977 exhibition during the summer of 2001, to the extent that original works were available. See the reactions of David Rimaneli and Scott Rothkopf in “’80s Redux: ‘Pictures’ Reframed,” *Artforum* 40, no. 2 (October 2001): 130-34. Hereinafter, references to “Pictures” are to Crimp’s 1979 essay.

³¹ The use of “mediums” as the plural of medium is discussed in Chapter Two.

³² Crimp, “Pictures,” 75.

In “Pictures,” Crimp described the “structures of signification” utilized by Jack Goldstein, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Sherrie Levine and Troy Brauntuch, and explored the variety of ways in which those artists staged pictures without resorting to traditional painting or sculpture. Crimp elucidated the focus on temporality and duration in this art and its disinterest in “the material condition of the signs through which meaning is generated.”³³ He then named the “strategies of signification” that he had described—quotation, excerptation, framing and staging—saying that they represented radical new approaches to medium. In fact, several mediums were sometimes used in a given work.

Crimp’s essay was exploratory—one senses that he was searching for a way to define or simply describe new art practices that he was observing among some young New York artists.³⁴ As the 1970s waned, Minimal and Conceptual Art had essentially run their courses. The production of recognizable images, or pictures, had not been the focus of those critical categories. Minimal Art had eschewed the image altogether, and Conceptual Art had produced socially- and politically-oriented works often combining snapshot-like pictures with text to impart messages and circumvent the art establishment. What Crimp was seeing and describing seemed different to him. He saw in the complex array of tactical approaches a “reinvestment in the pictorial image.” For example, in Jack Goldstein’s endlessly repeated film loop of

³³ Ibid., 87.

³⁴ At the same time, he castigated “New Image Painting,” an exhibition mentioned above that the Whitney Museum of American Art had mounted a year earlier, as a futile attempt to preserve the “integrity” of painting as a modernist aesthetic category, and, with it, the institution of the museum. That exhibition focused on what Crimp viewed as the works’ “least important characteristic: recognizable images.” Ibid., 88. Yet, his essay, starting with its title, is very much about art that produces images. See, also, David Salle’s negative assessment of most of the artworks included in the exhibition: David Salle, “New Image Painting,” *FlashArt*, no. 88-89 (March-April 1979): 40-41.

fencers, what is apprehended is a staged image.³⁵ In Robert Longo's layered photographic images based ultimately on a film fragment of another artist, the central image is that of a "three-part tableau performance."³⁶ In the work of Troy Brauntuch, an image of Hitler asleep in his Mercedes is fetishized by the manner of its presentation."³⁷ According to Crimp,

The picture is an object of desire, the desire for the signification that is known to be absent. The expression of that desire to make the picture yield a reality that it pretends to contain is the subject of the work of Troy Brauntuch. But, it must be emphasized, his is no private obsession. It is an obsession that is in the very nature of our relationship to pictures.³⁸

The work that Crimp chose to address was, by his definition, postmodernist because of its radical approach to medium:

If it had been characteristic of the formal descriptions of modernist art that they were topographical, that they mapped the surfaces of artworks in order to determine their structures, then it has now become necessary to think of description as a stratigraphic activity. Those processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging that constitute the strategies of the work I have been discussing necessitate uncovering strata of representation. Needless to say, we are not in search of sources or origins, but of structures of signification: *underneath each picture there is always another picture.*³⁹ (Emphasis added.)

Crimp's exploration is emphasized here because it came at a moment that was critical in the shift to the big picture that is the subject of this study. Irrespective of the fact that the postmodernist approaches of the five artists he described used photographically-based materials in complex ways that, as he suggested, produced an experience of duration and interacted psychologically with viewers by invoking

³⁵ Crimp, "Pictures," 80.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

anticipation and memory, the point is that those works produced images. Crimp's title "Pictures" for his 1977 exhibition and essay point to this, and his text repeatedly uses the terms "picture" and "image."

The moment at which Crimp wrote "Pictures" was one in which the concept of photography as and in art was undergoing strenuous examination. Crimp soon produced a series of essays in which he explored the role of photography in Postmodern Art, emphasizing its essential role in an assault on the institution of the museum and the concurrent demise of painting.⁴⁰ Crimp traced the beginning of this assault to Robert Rauschenberg's early sixties reproduction techniques of silkscreening and transfer drawing:

Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fantasy of a creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation, and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined.⁴¹

Crimp's essays had as objectives not only the ambitious goal of describing and defining postmodern art as he saw it, but of convincing readers that painting and the institution of the museum were elements of an outmoded modernist episteme that sustained the dominant bourgeois culture. He castigated two recent painting exhibitions, "New Image Painting" mentioned earlier, and "American Painting: The

⁴⁰ "On the Museum's Ruins," *October* 13 (Summer 1980): 41-58; "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (Winter 1980): 91-101; "The End of Painting," *October* 16 (Spring 1981): 69-86; "The Museum's Old/The Library's New Subject," *Parachute* 22 (Spring 1981): 32-37. See, also, Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation," in Paula Marincola, ed. *Image Scavengers: Photography* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), 27-34. By 1982, then, Crimp could observe that the oppositional force of those kinds of photographic strategies was dissipating as museums appropriated them as another object category. These essays are collected, with others, in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 56.

Eighties,” held in the fall of 1979, as Crimp sarcastically put it, to “demonstrate the miraculous resurrection of painting.”⁴²

At the same time that he was criticizing painting, Crimp lamented the application of connoisseurship to traditional photographs by focusing on rarity of age, the vintage print and the photograph’s style, all said to derive from the photographer’s unique vision. Crimp saw this as the creation of an “aura” for photography.⁴³

Although he did not identify particular recent museum exhibitions of photography, his references to “the photographer’s ...eye, his unique vision,” and “the mirrors and the windows” suggest that he had in mind some of curator John Szarkowski’s exhibitions of photography at the Museum of Modern Art during the previous 15 years.⁴⁴

⁴² Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism,” 96. Crimp quoted Barbara Rose’s catalogue essay in *American Painting: The Eighties*, saying that “the return to a painting of personal expression” in all of its various guises “is utterly conformist on one point: its hatred of photography.” Ibid. He reprised his argument against painting in “The End of Painting,” 77, where Crimp criticized the “historicist” view of painting which invests painting’s brush strokes with human presence: “It is a metaphysics of the human touch.”

⁴³ Ibid. The term “aura” is a reference to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2002), 101-33. Crimp’s adoption of this term in respect of photography-as-art drew a direct analogy to the traditional view of painting vilified by Benjamin in his 1936 essay. Thus, Crimp was saying that photographs, which are inherently reproducible, were being treated by curators and connoisseurs by the mid-1970s as unique and valuable works of art. This was a reversal of the process of depleting aura, a role that reproductive photographic practices had played since Rauschenberg and Warhol silkscreened pre-existing images in a contestation of the “uniqueness of the work of art.” For Crimp, the other attempt “to recuperate the auratic” that arose during the mid-1970s was the return to expressionist painting: “By the mid-1970s another, more serious symptom of the museum’s crisis appeared...the various attempts to recuperate the auratic. These attempts are manifest in two, contradictory phenomena: the resurgence of expressionist painting and the triumph of photography-as-art.” Ibid. From the vantage point of 1980, Crimp linked what he saw as two retrogressive moves that diminished the progress achieved by the critical photographic practices that he had described in “Pictures.”

⁴⁴ John Szarkowski, *The Photographer and the American Landscape* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963); John Szarkowski, *The Photographer’s Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966); and John Szarkowski, *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1978). Crimp’s view of Szarkowski’s exhibitions and related catalogue essays was confirmed in his essay, “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject,” in which he decried the reduction of photography to an art form with “essential” qualities as it entered the museum, and the

Crimp's essays serve to highlight the widespread attention that photography was attracting in art journals in this period as art historians and critics endeavored to understand and assimilate the "postmodern activities" of which Crimp was speaking and the changing roles of photography. Several contemporary art periodicals devoted entire issues to the phenomenon of photography in art in the late 1970s and early 1980s,⁴⁵ an indication that photography was generally seen to be in a state of flux and of rising importance. It is the contention of this study that Douglas Crimp was both insightful and prescient in his focus on photography from 1977 to 1982. Photography was changing, indeed, and viewed from the vantage point of 25 years later, Crimp's essays read as dire warnings. Even in 1980, Crimp observed two distinct trends moving in opposite directions:

That we are now experiencing the "decay of the aura" that Benjamin predicted can be understood not only in these positive terms of what has replaced it, but also in the many desperate attempts to recuperate it by reviving the style and rhetoric of expressionism. This tendency is, needless to say, particularly strong in the marketplace, but also in museum exhibitions.⁴⁶

By 1982, he saw that the museum was categorizing and assimilating the work he had hoped would circumvent it, but, even worse, artists whose work he had valorized were adapting their art to the museum.⁴⁷ By 1982, of course, the large-scale color

treatment of a photographer such as Ansel Adams as an artistic genius, much in the way painters traditionally had been discussed.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *FlashArt International* (February-March, 1975); *Studio International* (July-August, 1975); *Artforum* 15 (September 1976); *October* 5 (Summer 1978); and *Art Journal* 41 (Spring 1981).

⁴⁶ Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 56, n. 17.

⁴⁷ Douglas Crimp, "Appropriating Appropriation." Crimp warned that certain artists who had previously used appropriative photographic strategies in critical modes had begun to appropriate their own work by converting to a style or form that fit "the museum's desire for appropriated images." He cited as examples Richard Prince's "extreme mediation of the advertising image," in contrast to his earlier use of degraded unaltered pictures, and Cindy Sherman's large-scale color close-up photographs of herself as "star," as opposed to her earlier critical small, black-and-white film stills. To Crimp, such works augmented, rather than disrupted, the institutional discourse. *Ibid.*, 34. This point

photography at issue in this study had arrived on the scene, joining the expressionist painting discussed above.

The Tableau—an Earlier History

The conventional definition of “tableau” is, simply, “a graphic description or representation: PICTURE.”⁴⁸ Given the revival of this term in the critical discourse of the late twentieth century, it becomes necessary to the current study to look to the eighteenth century in order to ground consideration of the tableau within the first serious exploration of its importance to Western painting.

In his exploration of the relationship between painting and beholder in the mid-eighteenth century, Michael Fried has proposed that the anti-Rococo movement of that period served to re-establish the hierarchy of genres and the supremacy of history painting and, in so doing, established the supremacy of the tableau. He defines the tableau as “the portable and self-sufficient picture that could be taken in at a glance, as opposed to the ‘environmental,’ architecture-dependent, often episodic or allegorical project that could not.”⁴⁹ Fried considers the articulation of the emphasis on unity and instantaneousness in writings of the period to have marked “an epoch in the prehistory of modern painting (or perhaps I should say modern pictorial thought).”⁵⁰

presaged the one made five years later by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in “Living with Contradictions,” quoted above, in which she described the circulation of postmodernist discourses between advertising and the media, on the one hand, and postmodernist photography on the other.

⁴⁸ *Miriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th edition (Springfield, MA: Miriam Webster, 1994), 1198.

⁴⁹ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 89. Although Fried italicizes the word “tableau” in observation of its French origin, I will not do so in this study.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

Looking to the period when the tableau form first emerged and to the discussions of that pictorial form by eighteenth-century critics and theorists is helpful to an understanding of the nature of the photographs that began to appear around 1980.⁵¹ As Fried has said, those writings form the prehistory of modern pictorial thought, and modern pictorial thought is central to this study. For example, Jeff Wall has applied the term “tableau” to his own work, and therefore it has currency in the discussion of certain contemporary photography. Moreover, Wall linked a number of his early works to particular nineteenth-century French paintings.⁵²

In his *Conversations on “The Natural Son,”* a 1760 treatise on the theater, Denis Diderot urged the consideration of certain kinds of painting as models for convincing theatrical action, and suggested looking to the tableau.⁵³ Diderot defined the word “tableau” as “an arrangement of these characters on stage, so natural and so true that faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on a canvas.”⁵⁴ In his view, unities of action, time and place in a work of visual art resulted in a convincing, persuasive and intelligible picture or scene. The goal was to inform, attract and hold the viewer’s attention from the first glance.⁵⁵

Two separate but related characteristics of the tableau as described by those eighteenth-century writers are particularly important to this study: singularity and

⁵¹ It should be stated that the theories of Diderot and others in the mid-eighteenth century concerning the nature of the tableau and the characteristics that made the tableau arresting and persuasive are much more complex than described herein and involve the nature of the subject matter depicted. Fried’s arguments concerning the evolving nature of the relationship between painting and beholder during the period leading to the advent of David include a focus on subject matter as well as form, and revived the issue of genre and the supremacy of history painting. Both the form of the tableau and the hierarchy of genre are integral to Fried’s concepts of absorption and theatricality.

⁵² Examples include *The Destroyed Room* (1978), *Picture for Women* (1979), *Stereo* (1980), *A Woman and her Doctor* (1980-81), and *Backpack* (1981-1982), discussed further in Chapter Two.

⁵³ Fried., 78.

⁵⁴ Denis Diderot, “Conversations on *The Natural Son.*”

⁵⁵ Fried, quoting Anne-Claude-Philippe Caylus, *Ibid.*, 88.

intelligibility. First, the singular and independent nature of the tableau, as opposed, in Fried's words, to the architecture-dependent, often episodic works from which it is distinguished, permitted the picture to be apprehended quickly. A tableau does not have to be considered in concert with a series of related images, or visually distinguished from the wall or ceiling on which it is painted. It is a separate portable object.

British critic Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, writing in 1712, described what he called the "Tablature," or "picture:"

Before we enter on the examination of our historical sketch, it may be proper to remark, that by the word Tablature (for which we have yet no name in English, besides the general one of picture) we denote, according to the original word Tabula, a work not only distinct from a mere portraiture, but from all those wilder sorts of painting which are in a manner absolute, and independent; such as the paintings in fresco upon the walls, the ceilings, the staircases, the cupola's, and other remarkable places either of churches or palaces....But it is then that in painting we may give to any particular work the name of Tablature, when the work is in reality "a single piece, comprehended in one view, and formed according to one single intelligence, meaning, or design; which constitutes a real whole, by a mutual and necessary relation of its parts, the same as of the members in a natural body."⁵⁶

In addition to the independent nature of the tableau—its portability and lack of dependence on placement within an architectural framework or with other related works—the tableau's intelligibility was paramount. Knowing that a painting would be seen by a wide spectrum of the public at the Salons, Diderot said, "A composition, which must be exposed to the eyes of a crowd of all sorts of beholders, will be faulty

⁵⁶ Anthony [Ashley Cooper, Third] Earl of Shaftesbury, "A Notion of the Historical Draught or Tablature of the Judgment of Hercules," in *Second Characters, or The Language of Forms*, ed. Benjamin Rand (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 32. See, also, Shaftesbury, "Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66: "However, [a painting] if it be beautiful and carries truth, must be a whole by itself, complete, independent and withal as great and comprehensive as [the painter] can make it."

if it is not intelligible to a man of simple common sense.” It was important to those writers that a work be easily and quickly understood by the viewer, a standard that Fried has termed “radical intelligibility.”⁵⁷

Singularity and intelligibility are hallmarks of the photographic works at the heart of this study. They stand on their own and command the wall; their mere scale commands attention. These pictures are self-sufficient in that they are not elements of a series, nor are they integrated into architecture. As large as they may be, they are portable. One does not have to consult other images in order to consider or interpret them. As for intelligibility, a person of “simple common sense” can readily understand by looking at large pictures by Jeff Wall or Andreas Gursky or Thomas Struth, for example, what they depict. Deeper meanings and historic references may not be readily apparent and may require extended looking or further research, but, *at first glance*, these photographs are intelligible.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Fried, 90.

⁵⁸ The panorama and diorama, nineteenth-century inventions of public spectacle, might constitute a mid-point, or intermediate touchstone, between the eighteenth-century tableau and the large, late-twentieth-century photograph. Installed in specially-constructed buildings and illuminated from above by daylight, or lighted from behind by candles and lamps, these large paintings on canvas or transparent cloth satisfied a desire to view pictures of current events, literary scenes and distant lands. The public viewing of panoramas and dioramas, in particular, was akin to the public nature of viewing in galleries and museums of the large-scale pictures at issue in this study. See, for example, Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2001), 90-102; Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1978); Arthur T. Gill, “The London Diorama,” *History of Photography* 1, no. 1 (January 1977): 31-36; and Ton Rombout, ed., *The Panorama Phenomenon* (The Hague: B.V. Panorama Mesdag, 2006). The phenomenon of back-lighting can be traced to the Eidophusikon of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, a stage set designer in London in the 1770s. With movable transparent painted screens, he produced theatrical spectacles by shining lamps from behind as well as in front to vary the times of day and the seasons. The Eidophusikon was a stage, or box, six feet high, ten feet wide and eight feet deep in which he presented series of scenes in a theater in his home for spectators who paid admission. See, Richard D. Altick, “The Eidophusikon,” in *The Shows of London*, 117-27.

The Contemporary Picture as Tableau

Roland Barthes's 1973 essay, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,"⁵⁹ can be read as forging a link between the eighteenth-century concept of painting as tableau, and the prominence of that format in late-twentieth-century photography. Writing before the advent of the large-scale photographs at issue in this study and the concomitant return to figurative painting, Barthes was interested in the concept of the tableau in theater, film and literature as something cut out from a greater whole:

The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view. Such demiurgic discrimination implies high quality of thought: the tableau is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social)...The epic scene in Brecht, the shot in Eisenstein are so many tableaux; they are scenes which are *laid out*... which answer perfectly to that dramatic unity theorized by Diderot...⁶⁰

Barthes refers somewhat obliquely to two concerns of Douglas Crimp and others who have focused on some of the political implications of representational or traditional pictorial art: first, the idea that in theater and cinema (and photography) "things are always seen *from somewhere*;" and, second, "a fetishist subject is required to cut out the tableau."⁶¹ The inferences are that a tableau, or picture, has a point of view, meaning that it was selected from among many alternatives, and that someone—"a fetishist subject"--has made the selection based on what he wants to say. According to Barthes, "This point of meaning is always the Law: law of society,

⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," in Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 69-78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 76.

law of struggle, law of meaning.”⁶² These statements suggest that an artist presents to a viewer a social or moral meaning. This is, after all, an idea embedded in the very nature of the tableau as discussed by Diderot, in that it has to be intelligible, or in Fried’s words, “radically intelligible.” The presentation of meaning by means of a tableau, then, is a presentation of a “law,” which is a presentation of or from a particular point of view or position of power. The transmission of meaning from the subject position of an artist within a comprehensible or “totalizing” picture came to be a highly criticized art practice in the postmodern period in the belief that it directs a viewer to think in a prescribed way.

Barthes’s discussion of the tableau in connection with Brecht and Eisenstein can be read as a criticism or warning about the power of the tableau. As discussed in Chapter Three, the theories of Bertolt Brecht figure prominently in some of Jeff Wall’s work, and represent a conscious attempt on Wall’s part to make the work thought-provoking and socially critical. The charge that the works are “totalizing” has been a criticism of Wall’s work, as will be seen.

More recently, another French theorist has enlisted the concept of the tableau in his extensive writings on photography in general and Jeff Wall in particular, without the political implications implied by Barthes. In attempting to define the nature of the big pictures that emerged within the world of fine art in the late 1970s, and writing primarily since 1989, Jean-François Chevrier has offered the notion of the

⁶² Ibid., 76-77. Barthes goes on to say, with respect to Brecht and Eisenstein, “In the long run, it is the Law of the Party which cuts out the epic scene, the filmic shot; it is this Law which looks, frames, focusses, enunciates. Once again Eisenstein and Brecht rejoin Diderot (promoter of bourgeois domestic tragedy, as his two successors were the promoters of a socialist art.)” Ibid., 77.

tableau.⁶³ In choosing this term—one that has been applied to painting since the eighteenth century, and is strongly associated with ambitious French painting of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries before the advent of Modernism—Chevrier implicitly connects photography of the post-conceptual period to pre-modernist painting.⁶⁴

After having observed post-conceptual photography for a decade, Chevrier first used the term “picture-form” in describing the large photographs that had emerged during the 1980s.⁶⁵ By 1991, he had adopted the concept of the tableau:

This notion . . . means first of all a demarcated frontal plane. The plane’s demarcation is traditionally marked by a frame. Its frontality demands and presupposes the confrontation of the viewer. The tableau is a form inherited from painting which developed progressively, when

⁶³ Chevrier’s essays have appeared primarily in catalogues for photography exhibitions. In addition to “Shadow and Light,” referred to above, see, also, “Les aventures de la forme tableau dans l’histoire de la photographie,” in *Photo Kunst Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren=Du XXeme Siecle, Aller et Retour*, exh. cat. (Stuttgart: Graphische Sammlung, Staatsgalerie, and Edition Cantz, 1989), 47-81; “The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography (1989),” trans. Michael Gilson, in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003), in which Chevrier’s essay is a “slightly abridged translation” of his essay in *Photo Kunst*; Chevrier and James Lingwood, “Another Objectivity,” in *Un’ altra obiettivita Another objectivity*, exh. cat. (Milan: Idea Books, 1989); “Play, Drama, Enigma,” trans. Brian Holmes, in *Jeff Wall*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1995); “A Painter of Modern Life: An Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier,” in *Jeff Wall: Figures & Places—Selected Works from 1978-2000*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel; and Frankfurt: Museum fur Moderne Kunst, 2001); “Conversation between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier,” in *Essais et entretiens, 1984-2001 Jeff Wall*, ed. Jean-François Chevrier, (Paris: Ecole nationale superieure des beaux-arts, 2001); “The Interiorized Academy: Interview with Jean-Francois Chevrier 1990,” and “The Spectres of the Everyday,” trans. Brian Holmes, in Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys and Jean-François Chevrier [hereinafter referred to as “de Duve et al.”], *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 104-110 and 164-89; “The Metamorphosis of Place,” in *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonne’ 1978-2004*, ed. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (Basel: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, 2005), 13-31 [hereinafter referred to as “JWCR”]; “The Tableau and the Document of Experience,” in *Click Doubleclick: The Documentary Factor*, ed. Thomas Weski, exh. cat. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung and Walther Konig, 2006), 51-61; and *Jeff Wall* (Paris: Hazan, 2006).

⁶⁴ This connection to history is emblematic of Chevrier’s view that there has been no break with modernism and the pre-modernism of the eighteenth century, and those connections between contemporary photography and art historical precedents should be recognized and studied, but not criticized as postmodern “pastiche.” This view will be seen to coincide with that of Jeff Wall with regard to his works that reference earlier works of art.

⁶⁵ Chevrier, “The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography (1989),” 115, 116. In the Introduction to *Another Objectivity*, Chevrier and Lingwood use the terms “picture” and “image as picture” repeatedly in characterizing the photographic art made since 1980 included in the exhibition.

painting, as flat image, distinguished itself from the three-dimensional object (sculpted, modeled, in relief) and when as an autonomous object it further differentiated itself from the mural surface (to which the fresco belongs).⁶⁶

Having described the tableau in purely formal and derivative terms—a demarcated frontal plane inherited from painting—Chevrier more closely links photography to that tradition by emphasizing the photograph’s autonomy:

The tableau is useful essentially because it actualizes the recorded image and accords it the visual authority of a frontal plane, at the level of the human body (the viewer’s body); it contradicts the frenetic and blind circulation of media images and it gives to the photographic image the autonomy of a work of art....The tableau remains essentially the best model of the artwork’s autonomy at the end of the twentieth century (because it initially cut the painted image off from its functional link with a specific place).⁶⁷

The autonomy of which Chevrier speaks recapitulates Fried’s point (following Shaftesbury, Diderot and Barthes) that the tableau marked a break from “architecture-dependent” art. It conveys the sense that the photographic tableau is an isolated object that cuts into, or disrupts, the “frenetic and blind circulation of media images,” which one could argue comprise the frescoes of the present day. Today’s media images, of course, are photographic, circulating in print, on television, in film, on the internet, on cell phones, and, essentially, everywhere one looks.

The tableau arrests the attention of the viewer. Chevrier’s reference to the level of the human body implies that the work must be of or at least relate to human scale, which would contribute to its “visual authority.” Speaking of the photographs of Thomas Struth, for example, he says, “...Struth’s compositions cannot be looked at, page after page, as images in a book. They need the wall, they call for an

⁶⁶Chevrier, “Shadow and Light,” 16.

⁶⁷Ibid., 17.

experience of confrontation on the part of the viewer. Like a tableau they need space, they must be considered from a distance.”⁶⁸

In describing the tableau solely in terms of its formal means of presentation, scale and authority, Chevrier ignores subject matter, and thereby distinguishes himself from his eighteenth-century predecessor Diderot, for whom the tableau was necessarily a scene of human activity. But if the tableau of the eighteenth century was one apparent historical precedent for the development of modernist painting, we know with hindsight that subject matter in painting evolved and evaporated during the ensuing two centuries.

Chevrier distinguishes the photographic tableau that emerged around 1980 from photographic forms prevalent during the late 1960s and 1970s, such as those considered by Crimp. For conceptual artists, the typically black-and-white and often amateurish photograph was a document, often combined with text and exhibited in open-ended series; it sometimes functioned as a means of experimenting with and demonstrating human perception.⁶⁹ The conceptual art photograph was not an object before which one would pause, did not face the viewer at the level of the body, and had no real visual authority. The tableau is a singular work, neither visually nor conceptually connected to any other.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15. See, also, Chevrier, “The Tableau and the Document of Experience,” 51: “The *tableau* presents itself as a frontal plane with clear borders. Its frontal nature means that the viewer is confronted by the *tableau*, stands opposite it in a posture of contemplation. The *tableau* reflects back a response at the stature of the viewer; it sets up an implicit relationship between the viewer and the image of his own body. It is an anthropological form of art, in the sense that it establishes the vertical stature of the human body within the domain of artistic representations.”

⁶⁹ Chevrier and Lingwood, Introduction to *Another Objectivity*, 12.

⁷⁰ It is noted that some artists’ projects, particularly those emanating from the Düsseldorf Art Academy since the late seventies, such as those of Andreas Gursky, Candida Hofer and Thomas Struth, include numerous photographic images of similar objects and sites in various global locations. Each image effectively stands on its own, however, in its relationship with the viewer, and viewing the entire

Chevrier's earlier-cited observation that beginning in the 1980s, photography changed notably in terms of its physical enlargement and adoption of the tableau form, thus moving it into the realm of "high" art, suggests that photography had to make a backward move--to the format of pre-modernist painting—in order to become part of the long history of Modernism. He asserts that "a continuous round trip from the present to the past is therefore, to my mind, the *sine qua non* for a new historical and critical lucidity...."⁷¹

Chevrier's Theoretical Approach

"Another Objectivity," Chevrier's 1989 essay with James Lingwood, and "Shadow and Light" (1991) together constitute a statement of his fundamental thesis about contemporary photography, and are elements of a series of essays on the history of photography and the nature of recent photography. Those essays were exploratory, as was Crimp's writing of ten years earlier. In stark contrast to Crimp, however, Chevrier approaches contemporary photography from a historical perspective by reciting the history of the medium in art, and displays a bias against Conceptual Art and art produced in New York or the United States.⁷²

project is not necessary for any individual image to be intelligible. But see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Thomas Struth's Archive," in *Thomas Struth: Photographs*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1990), 5-11, in which Buchloh criticizes the architectural photography of Thomas Struth for its failure to depict the conditions of social existence, but then recuperates it because it constitutes an archive of similar scenes in different world cities. By implication, similar photographic works that do not form an archive would fail.

⁷¹ Chevrier, "Shadow and Light," 14. Chevrier decries the "dogmatic categories and mechanical genealogies which have organized (and limited) the definition of contemporary art as they have that of photography." Ibid., 15. This forms part of his argument that in the United States, the notion of contemporary art too often does not permit looking back at history to contextualize such art with both European and American art of the past.

⁷² The artists whose works are included in exhibitions curated by Chevrier rarely include those from the United States. On the other hand, Canadian Jeff Wall is usually included. See "Another Objectivity," "Click Doubleclick," and "Photo-Kunst." Repeated attention is given to artists from Düsseldorf, Paris and Vancouver.

In “Another Objectivity,” Chevrier brought together 11 artists whose photographic works are quite diverse.⁷³ He lists criteria that distinguish these works from their conceptual predecessors in a way that makes them the obverse of the earlier ones. First, they are singular, by which Chevrier means that they are original images, as opposed to being re-photographed, and, thus, they are produced from “a confrontation with an actual reality;” they include no montage or collage; there is no text; there is no rigorous seriality; there is singularity of image, in that there is a unique central or frontal motif; some are unique prints as opposed to editions; in staged works there is a central fact or gesture; and there is no “purist aesthetic or reduction.”⁷⁴ Finally, “each image exists, isolated, in its frame.”

The second essential characteristic of this photography is the specificity of image as object and picture. In this regard, Chevrier disclaims the importance of the medium per se. For him, the image is the new objective reality; the artists “insist therefore on a descriptive and verifiable reference to a motif (or subject) whose nature is heterogeneous to the image—that is to say, precisely, objective.”⁷⁵ The large format is part of this logic: “it is a means of accentuating the importance of the actuality as picture and not...an opportunistic adaptation made for the hierarchical demands of the market or the spaces of the contemporary museum.”⁷⁶

Chevrier describes the products of the “new perceptual opening” that he observed in 1980 when creativity returned:

⁷³ Robert Adams, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Hannah Collins, John Coplans, Gunther Forg, Jean-Louis Garnell, Craigie Horsfield, Suzanne Lafont, Thomas Struth, Patrick Tosani and Jeff Wall.

⁷⁴ Chevrier, *Another Objectivity*, 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

A transformation has however taken place in the last ten years or so in Europe (a little later than in the United States.) Subjectivity remains the dominant criterion, but it is affirmed less through the specific properties of photography than through procedures borrowed from other art forms, in particular painting and theatre.⁷⁷

This is a dismissal of the photography of Conceptual Art, and Chevrier states that this new work is “beyond the oppositions of 1960-1980.” He credits Christian Boltanski and Gerhard Richter with “reconstituting the possibility of the picture, painted or photographed, within the modern tradition.”⁷⁸

“Another Objectivity” is a narrative history of photography from 1960 to 1989, leading up to the emergence of a “new objectivity” that emerged from the conceptual period. He is directly and indirectly critical of the artists of whom Crimp had written (with the partial exception of Cindy Sherman), and clearly dismisses the notion of Postmodernism as a break with Modernism. Crimp’s re-photographers, for example, had done nothing new according to Chevrier, because both Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol had incorporated pre-existing photographic imagery. To Chevrier, postmodern photography, which he links to New York, had become exhausted and ineffective, its attitudes of critical intervention inadequate. Notably, however, he refers several times to the possibility of art’s offering “sufficient resistance to the equalization of images produced by the culture industry.”⁷⁹ But rather than oppose the culture industry with the deskilled, amateurish photographs of Conceptual Art, through this new work, with its “specific image-pictures, a dimension of experience is reconstructed to stand against the banalizing and reductive effects

⁷⁷ Ibid., 27-28.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 35. The origin of the term “culture industry” is addressed in Chapter Three.

produced by the culture industry.... They propose a model of actuality and produce a lucid beauty.”⁸⁰

Chevrier offers no explanation of the transition from amateurish, conceptual photographic art to the tableau, aside from the reference to the “exhaustion” of the art of the late 1960s and 1970s. Having identified conceptual photography with New York, Chevrier nearly excludes United States artists from his exhibitions and essays in favor of artists from Düsseldorf, Paris and Vancouver.⁸¹ He professes no description that would link the varied practices of the 11 artists included, aside from the criteria outlined above. All of those criteria are traits that serve to distinguish this art from conceptual photography, with the singular, perhaps most important, criterion being their production “from a confrontation with ‘actual’ reality, an aspect of which has been fixed (arrested) by the action of recording.”⁸² Ironically, this would seem to exclude the work of Jeff Wall, whose transparencies of the 1980s were often staged.

Although Chevrier denies the importance or specificity of the medium of this new photography, the characteristics he ascribes to an art that constitutes a single image produced from “an actual reality” that is designed to oppose the images produced by the culture industry would seem to require the medium of photography. He asserts that the critical criterion of this photography is experience, as distinct from perception, which was the critical criterion of conceptual photography. If this work is to provide experience, it is impossible to imagine painting as an alternative. Chevrier

⁸⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁸¹ The exceptions are Robert Adams and John Coplans, who was born in London but has conducted his career in the United States.

⁸² Ibid., 31.

appears to be working to establish the new photography of the 1980s as an art that stands apart from and contradicts “the blind circulation of media images.”

The cultural opposition that Chevrier claims for large-scale photography is unconvincing, in comparison to the opposition that writers such as Douglas Crimp claimed for conceptual photography. Crimp and his colleagues were unalterably opposed to contemporary painting and the museum as it had historically evolved, and valorized postmodern photographic strategies utilizing multiple mediums in the (vain) hope that they could confound the art establishment. Chevrier’s terminology would sound highly retrogressive to Crimp, as would be the intelligible photographs that Chevrier describes. He claims no connection to the avant-garde theories of the first decades of the twentieth century, eschewing the goal of educating the viewer in favor of providing an experience. The single image, the requirement of a viewing distance, and the absence of rupture or montage would seem to turn the photograph of the 1980s into a contemporary version of nineteenth-century painting. In Chevrier’s concept, artists using photography had regained their authority, subjectivity and creativity by drawing upon painting and theater. This study grants to Jean-François Chevrier significant attention because of his extensive writings on post-1980 photography in general, and, in particular, his many essays about and published interviews with Jeff Wall.⁸³ There is a strong convergence of views between Chevrier and Wall on the importance of the tableau format and the exhaustion of conceptual strategies for photography. Yet, as is explored in Chapter Three, Wall’s

⁸³ For example, Chevrier’s *Essais et Entretiens: 1984-2001*; *Jeff Wall* is an edited collection of 21 essays and interviews by, about and of Wall.

work was in the 1980s, and continues to be, about much more than the presentation of images that provide experiences.

Jeff Wall's Pictures

Since the 1990s, Jeff Wall has enlisted terminology quite similar to that of Chevrier to describe his photographic practice, to distinguish it from earlier conceptual photography (in which he participated and about which he has written), and to grapple with the essential nature of the photograph. He interchanges the terms “picture” and “tableau:”

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, Durer, 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.⁸⁴

Wall has called his transparencies “tableaux morts,” playing on the term “tableaux vivant,” and thus linking them to scenes staged by living persons in earlier centuries.⁸⁵ Generally, however, he refers to his works as “pictures” and to his praxis as “making pictures.”⁸⁶

The dialogue between photography and painting centered on the concept of the tableau is quite complex. For Chevrier, and, as will be seen, for Wall, the connections between the large photographic tableaux of the last 25 years and the

⁸⁴ Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art,” in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 248.

⁸⁵ Jeff Wall, “Typology, Luminescence, Freedom: Selections from a Conversation with Jeff Wall,” in Els Barents, *Jeff Wall: Transparencies*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 95.

⁸⁶ For example, *Ibid.*, 95, 101, 102.

paintings of the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century are natural, or at least unproblematic, because neither acknowledges a break in the history of modernism. In stark contrast to Douglas Crimp, for example, they do not view the Conceptual Art of the late 1960s and 1970s to have marked a postmodernist rupture. As Chevrier says, the continuous round trip from the present to the past is essential to understanding current art. Thus, Wall's photographic "remakes" of, and overt references to, particular nineteenth-century paintings may borrow freely the formal qualities of the historic form of the tableau.

Speaking of the process by which he arrived at the medium of the backlighted transparency, Wall has said, "I came back to photography with the pictorial and the picture."⁸⁷ For Wall, the "autonomous image of the pictorial tradition...the pictorial is, par excellence, non-conceptual and non-cognitive....The experience you may have of a picture has no purpose, and cannot be used in any capacity. It forms us, it alters our feelings, and it transforms us: this is why, according to Kant, we need art."⁸⁸

For Wall, the term "picture" is key, as it underlies photography's essential depictive nature by identifying the technology with what it produces: "Photography cannot find alternatives to depiction. . . .It is in the physical nature of the medium to depict things. In order to participate in the kind of reflexivity made mandatory for modernist art, photography can put into play only its own necessary condition of

⁸⁷ Jeff Wall, "Conversation between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier," in *Jeff Wall: Tableaux*, ed. Marit Woltmann, exh. cat. (Oslo: Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 113. Wall continues: "I had a feeling that certain possibilities of photography, as a medium, could be implemented, possibilities that had remained invisible because of the institutional definition of the medium. Painting carried within it traces of these photographic possibilities, which I took pleasure in recognizing, right there in painting, as it happened....Why couldn't photographs be larger and physically involve the onlooker? Why couldn't they be in colour?....It is in fact not exclusively up to painting to be able to produce an image on the human scale."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

being a depiction-which-constitutes-an-object.”⁸⁹ Emphasizing the technology, Wall states, “photography constitutes a depiction not by the accumulation of individual marks, but by the instantaneous operation of an integrated mechanism....Depiction is the only possible result of the camera system, and the kind of image formed by a lens is the only image possible in photography.”⁹⁰

This assertion would suggest that the kinds of pictures that Wall began to make in 1978 demonstrate the essence of photography. He had participated in taking photography through its “deconstructive,” self-critical phase during the conceptual period, utilizing strategies such as the parodying of reportage and the repudiation of skill—making pictures that were as apictorial and anaesthetic as possible.⁹¹

According to Wall, this “self-critique” seemed to be required in order for photography to reach the point of being considered “Art” on its own terms, even though artists participating in this project had hoped to subvert that possibility. Photography’s period of self-criticism, in Wall’s terms, suggests an evolutionary process. But unlike Clement Greenberg’s model of modernist painting’s renunciation of representation and illusion in its march toward “ineluctable flatness,”⁹² photography, as distinct from painting, could not renounce depiction because that is its essential characteristic.

⁸⁹ Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” 247-48.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 260. Writing in 1995, Wall was acutely aware of digital photographic technology, as he had been producing digitally-manipulated pictures since the early part of the decade. Those works are unquestionably depictive, even though they are comprised of multiple images and may have been altered in other ways.

⁹¹ Wall’s snapshots and accompanying text were included in an exhibition of Conceptual Art in 1970. See *Information*, ed. Kynaston McShine, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), 130-33. These pages were excerpted from Wall’s 56-page work titled *Landscape Manual*, 1969-70.

⁹² Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4: *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), 85-93, 87.

Wall's Theoretical Approach

Jeff Wall produced conceptual art during the late 1960s that took the form of a book comprised of blurred snapshots taken out of the window or windshield of a moving car, accompanied by hand-corrected typed text. *Landscape Manual* would become, in Wall's terms, a model or parody of "the genre of the 'book of photographs,' that classical form in which art-photography declares its independence."⁹³ Although Wall does not discuss his own conceptual work in "Marks of Indifference," the essay in which he explicates his theory of the evolution of photography into an "institutionalized modernist form" that emerged by the mid-1970s, *Landscape Manual* clearly would meet the criteria that Wall applied to Ed Ruscha's several books of amateurish snapshots produced between 1963 and 1970, including *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Los Angeles Apartments* (1965). According to Wall, the photographs in Ruscha's books reflect "the low-contrast monochromaticism of the most utilitarian and perfunctory photographs;" they are, "as reductivist works, models of our actual relations with their subjects, rather than dramatized representations that transfigure those relations by making it impossible for us to have such relations with *them*."⁹⁴

Ruscha's (and Wall's) photoconceptual works, the amateurish photographs of subjects that the average non-professional with a camera might have taken, are prime examples of one of the fundamental strategies that artists used to create conceptual art. According to Wall,

Photoconceptualism was then the last moment of the prehistory of photography as art, the end of the Old Regime, the most sustained and

⁹³ Wall, "Marks of Indifference," 265.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

sophisticated attempt to free the medium from its peculiar distanced relationship with artistic radicalism and from its ties to the Western Picture. In its failure to do so, it revolutionized our concept of the Picture and created the conditions for the restoration of that concept as a central category of contemporary art by around 1974.⁹⁵

In 1977, Wall produced his first large-scale fluorescent backlighted Cibachrome transparency.⁹⁶

Wall's essay is a narrative of the process of photography's "auto-critique" in which, during the 1960s and 1970s, it cast off the yoke of mid-century "art-photography," and, drawing on some of the procedures and discourses of the 1920s and 1930s, attempted to follow the example of modernist painting to divest itself of its inessential qualities. Two of the auto-critical processes described by Wall are the "rethinking and refunctioning of reportage" and the "de-skilling and re-skilling of the artist."⁹⁷ Each procedure placed into question the aestheticism of traditional art-photography, and recalled the radical, avant-garde attempts of the earlier period to defeat it. Thus, in the 1960s, the aesthetic again became taboo. Yet, in an ironic twist, by problematizing aestheticism, conceptual photographic practices reestablished and maintained aestheticism as a permanent issue with which artists had to grapple.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁹⁶ The first work was a triptych titled *Faking Death* in which Wall posed as if dead in the center panel, and in the other two panels appeared in the process of being made up for the central image. Each panel was 101.3 x 127.0 cm. The work was shown with three others from April 11 to June 3, 1979. See *Jeff Wall: Installation of Faking Death [1977] The Destroyed Room [1978] Young Workers [1978] Picture for Women [1979]* (Victoria, B.C.: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979). *Faking Death* is no longer included in Wall's oeuvre, and Wall has declined to permit it to be reproduced since 1979. Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death: Canadian art photography and the Canadian imagination* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 168.

⁹⁷ Wall, "Marks of Indifference," 248. The term "deskillling" has been defined as follows: "De'skilling is taken to be a process in which artists separated their antiaesthetic use of photography from the 'fine art' ambitions for the medium—the impetus for the de-skilling in the 1960s being the work of fashion photographers, such as Richard Avedon or Irving Penn." Mark Godfrey, "Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's *Floh*," *October* 114 (Fall 2005), 97.

Wall chose Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Robert Smithson and Douglas Heubler as examples of artists who found ways to imitate or parody reportage, by creating work the content of which was “the validity of the model or hypothesis of non-autonomy it creates.”⁹⁸ The gestures of Smithson and Long and the studio performances of Nauman were staged for the purpose of the photograph, thus inverting the notion of reportage. In his photo-essay *Homes for America*,⁹⁹ Dan Graham produced a model of reportage, designed, according to Wall, to interrogate the legitimacy of the original (Walker Evans’s work, for example) and thereby legitimate itself as art. The work hovers on the threshold of an autonomous work.¹⁰⁰

Ruscha’s de-skilling of photography referenced above was a reductivist procedure designed to test photography for its indispensable elements, and an experiment with the anaesthetic, or “the look of non-art.” It had a utopian element, which was the idea that art-making required no special skill, so the artist imitated the novice with a camera: “It became a subversive creative act for a talented and skilled artist to imitate a person of limited abilities. It was a new experience, one which ran counter to all accepted ideas and standards of art, and was one of the last gestures which could produce avant-gardist shock.”¹⁰¹

Wall’s theory of photography’s auto-critique through photoconceptualism is modeled upon Greenberg’s description of the reductivist trajectory of modernist painting begun in about 1910. According to Wall,

The historical process of critical reflexivity derives its structure and identity from the movements possible in, and characteristic of, the

⁹⁸ Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” 252.

⁹⁹ Dan Graham, “Homes for America,” *Arts Magazine* 41 (December 1966-January 1967): 21-22.

¹⁰⁰ Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” 257.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

older fine arts, like painting. The drama of modernization, in which artists cast off the antiquated characteristics of their *métiers*, is a compelling one, and has become the conceptual model of modernism as a whole.¹⁰²

Wall then quotes Greenberg: “Certain factors we used to think essential to the making and experiencing of art are shown not to be so by the fact that Modernist painting has been able to dispense with them and yet continue to offer the experience of art in all its essentials.”¹⁰³ Wall, again: “Yet photography’s own historical evolution into modernist discourse has been determined by the fact that, unlike the older arts, it cannot dispense with depiction and so, apparently, cannot participate in the adventure it might be said to have suggested in the first place.”¹⁰⁴ In the end, the *medium* of photography was its limiting and defining factor.

Thus, photography’s “drama of modernization” had a different ending from that of painting. It could not dispense with depiction. Having barely survived its prehistory, depiction could return in all its sensuous glory, offering an experience of experience. The lessons had been learned, and the “Western Picture” was restored “as a central category of contemporary art.”¹⁰⁵

It can be seen that Wall’s theoretical approach is very similar to that of Chevrier, in that he abjures a postmodern break and thinks of photography in terms of its “essential” quality. In that respect he follows Greenberg’s evolutionary model for modernist painting. In Wall’s lack of interest in the notion of Postmodernism in the sense elucidated by Douglas Crimp, he sees the conceptual period as a phase in the development of photography to the point it had reached by the late 1970s, when Wall

¹⁰² Ibid., 258, 260.

¹⁰³ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 92.

¹⁰⁴ Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” 260.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 266.

took it up again. Wall accurately describes photographically-based conceptual art without ascribing to it any political or social purpose. Yet, he describes his own mature oeuvre as having emanated from this critical period in which he had participated until 1970. As discussed in Chapter Three, Wall's work of the 1980s and his writings of that earlier period do not eschew all complex earlier theories or the social criticality and utility of art, and, in fact, embrace some of them.

Gerhard Richter's Pictures

More than half a generation older than Jeff Wall and having grown up and trained in what became East Germany following World War II, Gerhard Richter was and is a painter. When he moved to West Germany in 1960, first to West Berlin and then to Düsseldorf, he continued to paint, but began using photographs as the basis for his painting praxis. Richter has discussed the need to find subjects in the life he was beginning in the West, so used pictures he found in magazines, newspapers and in snapshots of family and friends.

Richter, as does Wall, speaks in terms of the picture and making pictures, whether in a photograph or a painting. As elaborated in Chapter Two, for Richter, photography and painting are different ways of making pictures:

Of course, a long time ago, I thought a picture was a picture only if it was painted. Later on I found to my great surprise that I could see a photograph as a picture—and in my enthusiasm I often saw it as the better picture of the two. It functions in the same way: it shows the appearance of something that is not itself.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Gerhard Richter, "Interview with Sabine Schutz, 1990," in Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993* [hereinafter referred to as "DPP"], ed. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, trans. David Britt (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, in association with Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1995), 217.

During the course of his painting praxis since 1962 (the artist destroyed nearly all of his work made in the German Democratic Republic), Richter has painted subjects in every genre, beginning with *Table* (1962) [fig. I-2], which is based on a photograph he found in an Italian design magazine. His subjects have included portraits, such as *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)* (1966) [fig. I-3], a portrait of his wife and the first work painted from a photograph that he took; landscapes, such as *Bridge (by the Sea)* (1969) [fig. I-4]; still lifes, such as *Two Candles* (1982) [fig. I-5]; and abstract works, such as *Marian* (1983) [fig. I-6]. Richter has also based paintings on historic paintings which he has photographed and projected onto canvas. An example is *Annunciation After Titian* (1973) [fig. I-7]. An examination of Richter's painting praxis with specific regard to his integration of painting and photography is included in Chapter Two.

What Is a Picture?

The purpose of this chapter has been to establish the context for the photographic art that developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which emphasized a pictorial rather than a deconstructed approach. The art of Jeff Wall is particularly important to this shift from conceptual, deskilled photographs toward large-scale, pictorial, color photography, because he began to produce his signature work in 1978, and because he has been so conversant with the terms of art history and issues of medium in his essays and interviews. Gerhard Richter is also a touchstone of this period because of his reliance on photographs in his painting praxis and his concern with picturing irrespective of the purity of medium.

The term “picture,” as is evident from the foregoing discussion, is used extensively in the context of photographic art. Douglas Crimp and Jean-François Chevrier have approached the picture from very different perspectives. Crimp appreciated the elasticity of the term, given its lack of specificity to a particular medium and its function as a verb as well as a noun by referring to a mental process as well as to the creation of an aesthetic object. Crimp focused on what he called “structures of signification” in which pictorial images were appropriated and layered, but because the artists he showed often were using pictures made by others, he did not grapple with what a picture is. There is an assumption that the term is understood. It is the contention of this study that Crimp’s series of essays was a concerted effort to stave off the more traditional use of pictorial images in photography that he saw on the horizon in 1977 and in museums by 1982.

Starting with the term “picture-form,” which he exchanged for “tableau,” Jean-François Chevrier has been concerned, approvingly, with the large scale and visual authority of the late twentieth-century photograph. The singular image produced from an “actual reality” provides an experience, one of its key criteria, with the assumption that large-scale photographs can produce an effect that is akin to life experience. Chevrier is interested in the singularity of the object, its scale and its impact, with the implicit assumption that the work is intelligible to the viewer. Beginning his critical essays in 1989, with the advantage of hindsight, Chevrier’s writings disdain Crimp’s postmodernist criteria and attempt to account for what had occurred, particularly in Düsseldorf, Paris and Vancouver.

Jeff Wall repeatedly uses the terms “picture” and “depiction” in describing his praxis, and, as does Chevrier, links pictures to experience:

But, dragging its heavy burden of depiction, photography could not follow pure, or linguistic, Conceptualism all the way to the frontier. *It cannot provide the experience of the negation of experience*, but must continue to provide the experience of depiction, of the Picture. It is possible that the fundamental shock that photography caused was to have provided a depiction which could be experienced more the way the visible world is experienced than had ever been possible previously. A photograph therefore shows its subject by means of showing what experience is like; in that sense *it provides “an experience of experience,”* and it defines this as the significance of depiction.¹⁰⁷ (Emphasis added.)

In Wall’s apparent agreement with Chevrier that pictures emanate from the real world, there is a distinction, however. Most of Wall’s work, particularly during the 1980s, depicts staged or “set-up” scenes that he invented or had observed and caused to be constructed, and for which he hired performers to play parts. Thus, as real as they may seem, they do not fit Chevrier’s criterion that they be recorded from an “actual reality,” unless that reality is a fiction. Moreover, the art-historical concepts and socially-oriented issues embedded in Wall’s work belie the simple notion of the tableau. Richter’s work, also, complicates the notion of picture because of the complex amalgamation of painting and photography, the myriad sources for his paintings, and his history in twentieth-century Germany.

With this background in mind, Chapter Two explores the concept of medium at the critical moment when photography assumed some of the characteristics and roles of painting, and painting returned to prominence in a large-scale, figurative mode.

¹⁰⁷ Wall, “Marks of Indifference,” 266.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT'S A PURE MEDIUM?

“What’s a pure medium?” Robert Rauschenberg asked this question during a symposium held in connection with the 1961 exhibition “The Art of Assemblage” at the Museum of Modern Art.¹⁰⁸ Given the mixture of mediums¹⁰⁹ in the art then under discussion, the question was critical. It was asked of Lawrence Alloway, who was attempting to distinguish art made with one substance, such as oil, pursuant to an established set of procedures, from art that is a “cluster of heterogeneous things.” Rauschenberg had inferred that Alloway posited a hierarchy of mediums, with a “pure” medium at the top, and asserted that a combine is like a Rothko in every way: “I use my material, and he uses his. And I don’t see that there’s any limitation to the possibilities implied in the difference between my work and his.”¹¹⁰

Rauschenberg had chosen the term “combine” for his assemblages because he had tired of answering the question whether his art was painting or sculpture.

¹⁰⁸Joseph Ruzicka, ed., “The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium (1961),” in *Essays on Assemblage*, Studies in Modern Art, no. 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 119-59. The panelists were Lawrence Alloway, Marcel Duchamp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Robert Rauschenberg and Roger Shattuck. William C. Seitz, curator of the exhibition, moderated. The symposium was held on October 19, 1961.

¹⁰⁹The term “mediums” is used in this study as the plural of “medium.” The alternative “media” has been identified with electronic media, and the term “mediums” has been used repeatedly, if not consistently, by art historians such as Douglas Crimp, Clement Greenberg, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Schiff and Robert Storr. See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 57, n. 4: “Throughout this text I will use *mediums* as the plural of *medium* in order to avoid a confusion with *media*, which I am reserving for the technologies of communication indicated by that latter term.” Krauss had hinted at the possibility of confusion in “‘And Then Turn Away?’ An Essay on James Coleman,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 5. See also Clement Greenberg, “Intermedia,” in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 93; and “Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4: 292. See, also, Richard Schiff, “Realism of low resolution,” *Apollo* 144, no. 417 (November 1996): 4, 8; and Robert Storr, Preface to and “Beginnings” in *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), 16, 41 and 42.

¹¹⁰Ruzicka, 143.

Thinking this was an uninteresting and unimportant distinction, the artist deflected it by choosing a word that could accommodate everything from painting to photographs to objects from the outside world.¹¹¹ This indifference toward the notion of medium recalls Marcel Duchamp's readymades of the 1910s, and his mixture of mediums in a work such as *T'um* (1918). Thus, Rauschenberg was asking a question that had been asked before, but had been largely ignored during the intervening years.

In 1961, the importance of the question of medium was mounting. To take an obvious example, Andy Warhol was using the commercially-developed silk-screen process for works in which images taken directly from newspaper and magazine photographs were applied to painted canvas. Rauschenberg, too, was using the silk screen to collage images from popular culture and news sources onto canvas, while he continued to make combines. Particularly important to this study, by 1962, Gerhard Richter began to make paintings based on photographs collected from magazines, newspapers, friends and family albums that he projected onto canvas.¹¹²

With respect to the artists who are the focus of this study, the issue of medium relates specifically to painting and photography, which have led conjoined and somewhat mutually-contentious lives since the announcement of the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839. Both Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter speak of "picturing" without regard to medium. Richter calls his works "photopaintings." Many of Wall's photographic transparencies of the 1980s were contemporary recapitulations of

¹¹¹ "Once I called them 'combines,' people were confronted with the work itself, not what it wasn't....The word really does have a use—it's a free-standing picture." Robert Rauschenberg, "A Conversation with Robert Rauschenberg," interview by Richard Kostelanetz, *Partisan Review* 35 (Winter 1968): 96.

¹¹² Richter's first photopainting, *Table* (1962), was based on a photograph of a table in an Italian design magazine.

historic paintings, and his *Restoration* (1993) [fig. II-1] is a digitalized transparency showing painting conservators working on an enormous nineteenth-century painted panorama in Switzerland. Its subject and its title are emblematic of critical aspects of Wall's oeuvre.

Other artists working with photography since the late 1970s and 1980s who allude to painting in their art include German photographer Thomas Struth, who has raised the issue of connections between photography and painting by photographing museum visitors viewing iconic Western paintings.¹¹³ Struth's Düsseldorf Art Academy colleague Andreas Gursky photographed Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950 (Autumn Rhythm)* in a way that seems to claim the painting as his own.¹¹⁴ Certain of Gursky's large-scale digitalized photographs have been discussed in terms of their engagement with Romantic landscape and contemporary painting, particularly the work of Caspar David Friedrich and Gerhard Richter.¹¹⁵ Gursky has voiced his

¹¹³ Thomas Struth's museum photographs include *Louvre IV, Paris* (1989) 137 x 172.5 cm.; *Galleria dell'Accademia I, Venice* (1992) 184.5 x 228.3 cm.; *National Museum of Art, Tokyo* (1999) 169.5 x 257 cm.; and *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich* (2000) 116.5 x 147 cm. The last photograph depicts Struth from behind looking at Albrecht Durer's *Self-Portrait* (1500), asserting a connection between the two artists over a period of exactly 500 years. Struth studied painting with Gerhard Richter from 1973 to 1976, before switching to photography with Bernd and Hilla Becher, in each case at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Charles Wylie, "A History of Now: The Art of Thomas Struth," in *Thomas Struth 1977 2002* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 2002), 148-50. Although Struth's mature work began in 1977 with modest-sized black-and-white photographs, his larger-scale color photographs emerged in 1986. *Ibid.*, 152, 154. A more recent group of Struth's museum photographs was exhibited at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, in April 2007.

¹¹⁴ Andreas Gursky's *Untitled VI* (1997) 186 x 239 cm., depicts Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* (1950) as exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art. Gursky has also photographed paintings by J.M.W. Turner in Tate Britain (*Turner Collection* [1995]), and has enlarged a detail of a painting by John Constable (*Untitled X* [1999]). See Plates 45, 23 and 52, respectively, in Peter Galassi, *Andreas Gursky* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2001). The scale of Gursky's photographs grew from 92 x 81 cm. in his earliest exhibited works of 1984, to 107 x 131 cm. in 1987, to 207 x 508 cm. in 2000. Galassi, 184-85.

¹¹⁵ Galassi, "Gursky's World," in *Andreas Gursky*, 9-43. This catalogue includes Gursky's work since his emergence from the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1984 until 2000. Galassi sees in Gursky's photographs of the 1990s a strong dialogue with painting, particularly that of Gerhard Richter, beginning in 1993 with *Untitled I* (1993), which he compares to Richter's *Gray* (1973), and Gursky's *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993), which he compares to Richter's *1024 Colors* (1973). Other

admiration for the art of Jeff Wall, and Peter Galassi has remarked that Wall's influence shows in several photographs of the late 1980s.¹¹⁶

Other photographers whose work alludes to painting include Gregory Crewdson and Yasumasa Morimura, both of whom, as does Wall, operate in the directorial mode. They stage elaborate scenes and create sets in which actors or, in the case of Morimura, the artist himself, are photographed. Crewdson's work is narrative and cinematic, and Morimura's replicates works by painters such as Edouard Manet and Vincent Van Gogh.¹¹⁷

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the concept of medium around 1980, in the shift from photographically-based conceptual art to the photographic "grand machines" and large figural paintings that were then emerging. The issue of medium as an aspect of the means of producing works of art—as an integral part of art praxis—was a significant part of the critical art discourse during the period of this study, and, as such, must be examined in depth.

comparisons are made to the painting of Caspar David Friedrich and Barnett Newman, and to minimalist aesthetics. Galassi admits, however, that Gursky has not discussed these connections: "Whether and in what sense Gursky had Richter's gray paintings in mind before or as he made *Untitled I* is now fundamentally irrelevant. For even had he intended nothing more than a homage to the work of a famous painter (which I doubt), the impulse led him through the terms of his own very different art to make an original picture—original with respect to Gursky's own prior work, to photographic tradition generally, and to Richter's painting." Galassi, 33-34.

¹¹⁶ Galassi gives as an example Gursky's *Giordano Bruno* (1989). In a response to a question about influence posed in a 1992 interview with Thomas Seelig, Gursky said the following: "I am in such a tough spot with Jeff Wall. I have made pictures that you would readily take for a Jeff Wall. But these I won't show. I know that I admire him, he is a great model for me. I am trying to get along with that in the most honest way possible and to let the influence run its course." Galassi, 43n45. Moreover, in Gursky's first solo exhibition, which took place in the Düsseldorf airport in 1987, several of his photographs were presented as backlit transparencies in advertising vitrines, similar to the presentation of Wall's work. Galassi, 42n27.

¹¹⁷ For examples of the photographs of Gregory Crewdson, see *Twilight: Photographs by Gregory Crewdson* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2002). For examples of the photographs of Yasumasa Morimura, see Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History: Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 2003).

The large photographs and paintings of this period are distinguished from collage and assemblage, which include various objects and materials, by virtue of the fact that they are materially either painting or photography. The intersection of mediums in such works is therefore much more subtle. The answer to Rauschenberg's question may be that there is no such thing as a "pure medium."

What is a Medium?

In 1961, the year in which Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" was first published in an arts magazine,¹¹⁸ the notion of medium in modern art had seemed generally settled. In "Modernist Painting," Greenberg concluded his thoughts on the essential and unique nature of the medium of painting based on its physical attributes: "the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment."¹¹⁹

In his earlier essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon,"¹²⁰ Greenberg had argued the importance of the separation of the arts from each other-- music and literature, for example—and, in the visual arts, the separation of painting from sculpture. There Greenberg had first expressed his ideas about purity in art and the unfortunate concealment of medium in historic painting that had emphasized illusion in the service of subject matter. Avant-garde art's revolt against the domination of literature beginning in the mid-nineteenth century resulted in a greater emphasis on form, and,

¹¹⁸ Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" was broadcast and first published by Voice of America in 1960; it was published in *Arts Yearbook* 4 in 1961. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 93.

¹¹⁹ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 86. "It was the stressing of the ineluctable flatness of the surface that remained, however, more fundamental than anything else to the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism. For flatness alone was unique and exclusive to pictorial art...Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else." *Ibid.*, 87.

¹²⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 1: 23-38; previously published in *Partisan Review* 7 (August 1940): 296-310.

beginning with Manet, saw the problems of painting as problems of the medium. In this essay, Greenberg focused on the nature of the medium of painting:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to "hole through" it for realistic perspectival space....But most important of all, the picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane which is the actual surface of the canvas.¹²¹

The suggestion of mixing mediums, or of an "impure" medium, was unthinkable to Greenberg, as he blamed the "confusion" of the arts for the decline in painting until Manet began to produce the first modernist pictures: "The arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized."¹²²

It cannot be a coincidence that 1961 was the year in which Robert Rauschenberg asked his seminal and prescient question and Greenberg published "Modernist Painting." It is worth considering to what extent the publication of Greenberg's definitive statement about the medium of painting was a response to some of the art he had seen exhibited in New York since the mid-1950s, which would have included art in which barriers between mediums seemed to be breaking down, including Rauschenberg's combines.¹²³ Greenberg did not review Rauschenberg's work or any Pop Art, but made disparaging comments in passing about both in

¹²¹ Ibid., 34.

¹²² Ibid., 32.

¹²³ Rauschenberg's combines were first exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958. Robert Rosenblum, "Robert Rauschenberg," *Arts*, no. 6 (March 1958): 61.

several essays.¹²⁴ His reviews of photography asserted its status as a separate, “literary” medium.¹²⁵

The discourse concerning the notion of medium accelerated during the 1960s. The advent of Minimalism in the middle of the decade was memorialized by Donald Judd in his essay “Specific Objects,” in which Judd declared that “half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture.”¹²⁶ He proceeded to describe the new three-dimensional work that eschewed “the problem of illusionism and of literal space, space in and around marks and colors—which is riddance of one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art....In the new work the shape, image, color and surface are single and not partial and scattered.”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ In a 1962 essay in which he criticized artists who have “gone in for” “Neo-Dada” and “construction-collage,” Greenberg spoke disparagingly of an artist who “harpoons stuffed whales to plane surfaces,” putting such art into the category of novelty with no staying power. Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4: 133-34. One wonders whether the reference to the harpooning of a stuffed animal was a thinly-veiled criticism of Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* (1955-59), in which a stuffed angora goat was attached to a wooden platform. A critique of Pop Art appeared in a 1969 essay, “Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties,” 302.

¹²⁵ With regard to his views on photography, see Clement Greenberg, “Four Photographers: Review of *A Vision of Paris* by Eugene-Auguste Atget; *A Life in Photography* by Edward Steichen; *The World Through My Eyes* by Andreas Feininger; and *Photographs by Cartier-Bresson*, introduced by Lincoln Kerstein, in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4: 183-87; previously published in *New York Review of Books*, January 23, 1964. See, also, Clement Greenberg, “The Camera’s Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2: *Arrogant Purpose*, 60-63; previously published in *Nation*, March 9, 1946. In each of those reviews, Greenberg asserted that photography was literary: “The art in photography is literary art before it is anything else....The photograph has to tell a story if it is to work as art.” “Four Photographers,” 183. Speaking of Weston’s photographs, Greenberg said, “In the last analysis this is a confusion of photography with painting—but a confusion not so much of the effects of each as of the approaches proper to each. The result, as is often the case with confusions of the arts, shows a tendency to be artiness rather than art....The final moral is: let photography be literary.” “The Camera’s Glass Eye,” 63. Thus, Greenberg accorded photography the status of art, but it was an art distinct from and not to be confused with modernist painting.

¹²⁶ Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 181; previously published in *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965.

¹²⁷ Judd, 186, 187.

The work that was neither painting nor sculpture but that merged aspects of each and made unique demands on viewers prompted Michael Fried to criticize minimalist art as “theatrical.”¹²⁸ To Fried, an art object that confronted the viewer in his space, was in his way, and refused to let him alone,¹²⁹ lay between the arts. As does theater, minimalist art exists for an audience, the “beholder,” and is incomplete without him or her. Moreover, as with theater, the experience of minimalist art is directed from outside and involves duration, unlike a painting that can be experienced essentially instantaneously, because “*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest.*”¹³⁰ For Fried, a work that is neither painting nor sculpture occupies a category he termed “objecthood,” which is a condition of “non-art.”¹³¹ Although for Donald Judd, a work of art had only to be interesting, for Fried, it had to be “convincing.” Ultimately, Fried was concerned with quality and value, with making a value judgment while experiencing an artwork.¹³² This essay is important here for its criticism of and concern about art that was not confined to a single medium. It is also important for its acknowledgment that art was changing—albeit in ways that Fried did not like—and the changes had to do with the way viewers were forced to experience the newer art.

¹²⁸ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172; previously published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967): 12-23.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 154, 163.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 167. Emphasis supplied.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹³² To illustrate this point, Fried presented the example of the “enormous difference in quality” between the paintings of [Morris] Louis and Robert Rauschenberg to show that “art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theater.” The point was that Louis’s work was pure painting, while in Rauschenberg’s, “the barriers between the arts [between painting and theater] are in the process of crumbling.” *Ibid.*, 164. In language similar to Greenberg’s, Fried went on to say that “the individual arts have never been more explicitly concerned with the conventions that constitute their respective essences.”

In a nearly contemporaneous essay titled “Other Criteria,” Leo Steinberg addressed art that departed from traditional art made for the wall.¹³³ Steinberg focused particularly on Rauschenberg’s combines and other art of the period, which had altered fundamentally the relation between a work of art and the viewer by changing what he called the angulation with respect to erect human posture, and therefore required “other criteria” by which it could be understood and judged. This essay constituted an extensive argument against the narrowness of the view expressed by Greenberg in “Modernist Painting,” which Steinberg regarded as having reduced “the art of a hundred years to an elegant one-dimensional sweep.”¹³⁴ In his last paragraph, Steinberg summed up the “contaminated” state of what he termed “post-Modernist painting:”

The all-purpose picture plane underlying this post-Modernist painting has made the course of art once again non-linear and unpredictable. What I have called the flatbed is more than a surface distinction if it is understood as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer. Yet this internal change is no more than a symptom of changes which go far beyond questions of picture planes, or of painting as such. *It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories.* The deepening inroads of art into non-art continue to alienate the connoisseur as art defects and departs into strange territories leaving the old stand-by criteria to rule an eroding plain.¹³⁵ (Emphasis added.)

¹³³ Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 55-91. This essay was previously published in 1972, and was based on a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968. It reflected a determined effort to understand Robert Rauschenberg’s combines as proposing a horizontal display of information (the “flatbed picture plane”), marking it as art that needed to be assessed by criteria other than those established by Greenberg. In a sense, Fried’s and Steinberg’s essays, although not specifically addressing all of the same art or artists, were nearly contemporaneous efforts to come to terms (or not) with art that did not follow the traditional separation of mediums and that invoked a new relationship with the viewer. It is notable that both were concerned with Rauschenberg.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

Fried's and Steinberg's essays demonstrate the serious attention accorded the concept of medium in the critical discourse of the late 1960s. Those discussions were taking place as artists increasingly ignored Greenberg's admonition against confusion of the arts and his concern with the specificity of the material support. Greenberg himself criticized much art of the 1960s in a 1969 essay in which he disparaged everything from Pop Art to land and performance art as novelties lacking in quality.¹³⁶ In that essay, Greenberg recognized the multiplicity of new forms of art, and referred repeatedly to the "confusion" that appeared to have resulted:

The prevalent notion is that latter-day art is in a state of confusion.... Innovations follow closer and closer on one another and, because they don't make their exits as rapidly as their entrances, they pile up in a welter of eccentric styles, trends, tendencies, schools. Everything conspires, it would seem, in the interests of confusion. The different mediums are exploding: painting turns into sculpture, sculpture into architecture, engineering, theatre, environment, "participation." Not only the boundaries between the different arts, but the boundaries between art and everything that is not art, are being obliterated....And to add to the confusion, high art is on the way to becoming popular art, and vice versa.¹³⁷

Greenberg's "confusion," Fried's "theatricality" and Steinberg's "contamination" were reflections of the major changes that art historians were struggling to come to terms with, and that Rauschenberg had dismissed as irrelevant. They related to the material of which art was made and to the relationship between an artwork and the viewer.

The Postmodern Medium

Douglas Crimp, whose writings on postmodernist photographically-based art are discussed in the previous chapter, found the mixture of mediums in the art that he

¹³⁶Greenberg, "Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties," 300-03.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 292.

observed during the late 1970s praiseworthy. His “strategies of signification” often involved the layering of several mediums in one work, and part of their deconstructive power was derived from radical new approaches to medium.

Crimp’s focus evolved into a critique of the institution of the museum through a Foucauldian approach that viewed the museum as a “discursive system,”¹³⁸ and he saw a mixture of mediums as advancing that critique. Crimp praised the 1960s silk-screen works of Robert Rauschenberg for their destruction of the integrity of painting by “hybridizing it, corrupting it with photographic images.”¹³⁹ By bringing the world into the museum through such hybridized works, photography revealed that the autonomy of art was a fiction. Thus, until the early 1980s, photography performed a salutary deconstructive task when used in conjunction with paint. Crimp lamented the “reclassification” of photography to an art form in the early 1980s, which involved the transfer of the “rhetoric of aesthetics” to photography and the investment of the medium with the “trappings of subjectivity.”¹⁴⁰ The photography of the Düsseldorf photographers as well as Jeff Wall, therefore, would have been for Crimp a step backward in the abandonment of the kinds of adversarial art practices that he valorized, and the consequent failure to challenge the museum.

In 1984, Crimp participated in a panel discussion that was one of several symposia titled “Art for the 80’s” held at New York University. Roger Kimball’s report on the discussion includes the following excerpts regarding Douglas Crimp’s views:

¹³⁸ Douglas Crimp, “Photographs at the End of Modernism,” in *On the Museum’s Ruins*, 13. See, also, Crimp, “On the Museum’s Ruins.”

¹³⁹ Crimp, “Photographs at the End of Modernism,” 14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

He praised the work of Duchamp and German Dada...but the sterling instance of his desideratum was the work of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s. Here, in the productions of Agitprop, the Theater of the Revolution, and the photography and propaganda pieces of Alexander Rodchenko, he found the desired “mass productions for a mass audience.”... Thus the envisioned view of art, Mr. Crimp stressed, “did not consist of an aesthetics with social implications; it consisted of a politicized aesthetic, a socialist art.”

One of the things he would like to see accomplished, incidentally, is the “destruction of easel painting” as an art form....Mr. Crimp—as he surely knows—is attacking the very idea of the museum as a place for the appreciation of art.

For him, one gathered, the only alternative to a politicized art is an extreme aestheticism, a view of art as a completely autonomous activity, unrelated to human hopes, dreams, and fears.¹⁴¹

As evidenced by the foregoing, Crimp’s views on art, certainly by 1984, were fundamentally political, and his praise for hybridized approaches was aimed at dismantling the institution of the museum, particularly the Museum of Modern Art, whose practices he believed had the effect of “de-radicaliz[ing] even the radical works it exhibits.”¹⁴²

Another View of Medium: Rosalind Krauss

Writing contemporaneously with Douglas Crimp and continuing to the present, Rosalind Krauss has engaged in a uniquely intensive and prolonged exploration of the concept of medium.¹⁴³ Krauss’s writings of the last 30 years have

¹⁴¹ Roger Kimball, “‘Art’ for the Eighties?” *The New Criterion* 3, no. 4 (December 1984): 83-88.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 86. Kimball was describing Crimp’s criticism of the placement of a poster by Rodchenko for the Theater of the Revolution directly above a poster advertising martinis, thus “blurring ‘important distinctions in use value’ and ‘transforming Agitprop into advertising.’”

¹⁴³ Rosalind Krauss, “Impressionism: The Narcissism of Light,” *Partisan Review* 43, no. 1 (1976): 102-12; “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America,” *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81; “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America (Part 2),” *October* 4 (Fall 1977): 210-219; “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44; “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311-319; “A Note on Photography and the Simulacral,” in *OverExposed*, ed. Carol Squiers (New York: New Press, 1999), 169-82, first published in *October* 31 (Winter 1984):49-68; “...And Then Turn Away?’ An Essay on James Coleman,”

constituted a major part of the art-historical discourse on medium in general and the function of photography in particular, and therefore they are worth considering at length. As will be seen, Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh, whose writings are discussed below, have continued Crimp's criticism of painting and other art forms that they deem insufficiently critical.

From the outset, Krauss focused on photography's role in and as art, often spurred by specific exhibitions of contemporary art. She has not been as concerned as Crimp with the need for dismantling the museum as an institution, nor has she taken the overtly strident political positions espoused by Buchloh. As will be seen, Rosalind Krauss is more focused upon the structuring of a medium within a work of art based predominantly on certain early twentieth-century theoretical perspectives. That said, Krauss and Buchloh developed their respective approaches to art in the charged environment that emanated from the economic and political upheavals of 1968 in West Germany and the United States, and each pursues a critical posture that is absolutist and grounded in the earlier writings of members of the Frankfurt School. They receive considerable attention in this study because they have each maintained a prolonged, high-relief posture within the discourse on art of the last several decades.

In a rather tentative and uncritical beginning, Krauss described the influence of photography, particularly the calotype, on the painting and print-making of Claude

October 81 (Summer 1997): 5-33; "Reinventing 'Photography,'" in *The Promise of Photography: The DG Bank Collection*, ed. Luminita Sabau (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 33-40; "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 289-305; *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999); "First Lines: Introduction to *Photograph*," in *James Coleman* (Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 1999), 8-25; "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 155-79; "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 3-35; and "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October* 116 (Spring 2006): 55-62.

Monet and Edgar Degas.¹⁴⁴ By 1997, Krauss had concluded that art had entered a “post-conceptual” and “post-medium” age in which photography functioned not as a medium but as a “theoretical object,” a tool for deconstructing artistic practice.¹⁴⁵ Krauss has explored in depth the art practices of James Coleman and William Kentridge, demonstrating her view that they “reinvented” their respective mediums. In contrast, she has castigated Jeff Wall’s pictorial photographic practice as a “revanchiste restoration of the traditional media that was so characteristic of the art of the 1980’s.”¹⁴⁶ A comparison of her views on those artists’ works will be instructive.

Krauss’s approach has been grounded in the ideas and theories of Marcel Duchamp, Roland Barthes and, particularly, Walter Benjamin. She has applied theories of linguistics and montage developed in the early twentieth century to the art of the last two decades of that century, focusing on photography as a process, or a set of logical operations, that has functioned to diminish art’s aesthetic aspects, narrative content and totalizing effects. Accordingly, Krauss has employed words and phrases throughout her writing to describe positive elements of certain kinds of artwork: montage, splinter, shatter, shock, fissure, rupture, gap, interruption, collision, divide, disjunction, contradiction, opposition, subversion of suture, dispersal of unity, and suppression of narrative. In this study, the term “rupture” will stand for the notions

¹⁴⁴ Krauss, “Impressionism: The Narcissism of Light.” This essay ends with a discussion of minimal and video art.

¹⁴⁵ Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” 294-96. This essay was published in a volume dedicated to articles on Walter Benjamin, and exemplifies the degree to which Krauss bases her theories on his writings.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 297.

expressed by those terms. Except as a foil for valorizing the work of an artist such as Coleman, Krauss has no interest in artists who create pictures.¹⁴⁷

Krauss thinks that the notion of medium *per se* in postmodernity is *not* obsolete, and is worthy of continued use. She has not argued for the irrelevance of medium, or for the mixture of mediums seen “ubiquitously” in installation art since the mid-1970s.¹⁴⁸ She argues for the “specificity” of a medium, which she has defined as a “recursive structure—a structure, that is, some of the elements of which will produce the rules that generate the structure itself.”¹⁴⁹ The notion of specificity is elaborated in Krauss’s essays on the art of artists James Coleman and William Kentridge, in which medium becomes an operational term, as opposed to a material term.

The first paragraph of her introduction to *Voyage on the North Sea*, an essay that Krauss termed “this meditation on the medium,” confirms her retention of the concept of medium: “At first I thought I could simply draw a line under the word *medium*, bury it like so much critical toxic waste, and walk away from it in a world of lexical freedom. ‘Medium’ seemed too contaminated, too ideologically, too dogmatically, too discursively loaded.”¹⁵⁰ In retaining the concept of medium, Krauss has defined quite a narrow path for artists working in postmodernity to follow.

¹⁴⁷ Aside from a brief review of the retrospective exhibition of the work of Gerhard Richter at the Museum of Modern Art in 2002, Krauss has not written about his painting.

¹⁴⁸ Krauss’s reference to ubiquity is clearly pejorative: “Whether it calls itself installation art or institutional critique, the international spread of the mixed-media installation has become ubiquitous.” Further, “...There are a few contemporary artists who have decided ...not to engage in the international fashion of installation and intermedia work, in which art essentially finds itself complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital. These same artists have also resisted, as impossible, the retreat into etiolated forms of the traditional mediums—such as painting and sculpture.” *Voyage on the North Sea*, 20, 56.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 5. Krauss credited Stanley Cavell’s notion of “automatism” in his exploration of film for leading her to the concepts of improvisation, internal plurality, recursive structure and self-specification.

They may not mix mediums, or retreat to traditional mediums, but must mine, excavate, deconstruct or reconfigure a single extant medium that is on the verge of obsolescence or collapse.

It is worth tracing the development of Krauss's arguments in order to determine how they reflect on the period and art at issue in this study. She began to theorize about medium around the time that Douglas Crimp began to describe new photographic procedures, beginning with his exhibition "Pictures" in 1977. Rather than follow Crimp's directly oppositional stance toward the museum as an institution, however, Krauss has examined the nature of photography and what she has seen as the progressively critical operations it has performed within contemporary art.

In "Notes on the Index," a two-part essay published in 1977, Krauss noted the pervasiveness of photography during that decade as a method of representation by documenting art forms such as land art, body art and video. Writing before the advent of digital photography, and speaking specifically of documentary photographs, Krauss described photography as "indexical." In a linguistic analysis that pervades both parts of the essay, she defined indexes as "signs that establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents," such as footprint, so that the original object is fixed in a trace.¹⁵¹ The signal advantage of the indexical nature of photography was that it prevented an artist's formal intervention and creation of a style: it "seems to short-circuit or disallow the processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings."¹⁵² This canceling-out of artistic creativity—"the Symbolic finding its way

¹⁵¹ Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," 70.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 75.

into pictorial art through the human consciousness operating behind the forms of representation"-- also avoids "the language of aesthetic conventions and the kind of history they encode." Krauss relied heavily on Marcel Duchamp's idea of the readymade, asserting that the readymade is "parallel" with the photograph by virtue of their similar processes of production: "It is about the physical transposition of an object from the continuum of reality into the fixed condition of the art-image by a moment of isolation, or selection."¹⁵³ The readymade is like a snapshot, in that both preclude the kind of artistic activity involved in making a painting.

In Part 2 of "Notes on the Index," Krauss focused on an exhibition called "Rooms" for the May 1976 opening of P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center.¹⁵⁴ Here, the index was defined as "any type of sign which arises as a physical manifestation of a cause." She cited Benjamin and Barthes for their assertions of the need to encode photographs with text or captions, but allowed that in the case of the P.S.1 artists, the placement of their art within particular spaces of the building and the sequencing of certain works provided "articulate[ion] into a kind of cinematic narrative."¹⁵⁵ In those ways, the exhibited photographs could avoid the internal logic that Krauss found in painting of the 1960s, even in the abstract work of an artist such as Ellsworth Kelly. For Krauss, the use of pictorial means to establish meaning was to be avoided.

By 1979, Krauss had determined that medium no longer functioned in any traditional sense. Observing the earth/land art of artists such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer initiated between 1968 and 1970, Krauss saw a

¹⁵³ Ibid., 78.

¹⁵⁴ P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center was established in 1976 in a former public school building in Long Island City, Queens, New York for the purpose of exhibiting the art of emerging artists. It is now affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art.

¹⁵⁵ Krauss, "Notes on the Index (Part 2)," 219.

“historical rupture and structural transformation of the cultural field” which she termed postmodernism.¹⁵⁶ The site constructions and marked sites created by those artists were neither landscape nor architecture, but could be defined as both, thus ending the negativity of categorical exclusion so crucial to modernist art.¹⁵⁷ “For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture--but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself--might be used.”¹⁵⁸ In the artworks that Krauss considered in this essay, photography was a form of marking integral to a complex of artistic processes. She still characterized photography as a “medium,” but a one that could no longer function as it had in modernist art:

From the structure laid out above, *it is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material.* It is organized instead through the

¹⁵⁶ Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 41: “It seems fairly clear that this permission (or pressure) to think the expanded field was felt by a number of artists at about the same time, roughly between the years 1968 and 1970. For, one after another Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Robert Irwin, Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman...had entered a situation the logical conditions of which can no longer be described as modernist. In order to name this historical rupture and the structural transformation of the cultural field that characterizes it, one must have recourse to another term. The one already in use in other areas of criticism is postmodernism. There seems no reason not to use it.”

¹⁵⁷ Krauss utilized a paradigm borrowed from mathematics, semiotics and structuralism to demonstrate the logical possibilities of expanding a field from a binary one to a quaternary one. The Klein group provided a means of diagramming her concept of the expansion of the field of sculpture to architecture and landscape. *Ibid.*, 36-38. Krauss cited as a source Marc Barbut, “On the Meaning of the Word ‘Structure’ in Mathematics,” in Michael Lane, ed., *Introduction to Structuralism* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 367-88. The Klein group is a prototype of an algebraic structure from which a table can be constructed to describe relationships among elements of the structure. It is purely descriptive, and involves no causal connections or proofs. I would argue that Krauss’s odd enlistment of this mathematical paradigm implies an unwarranted underlying validity to her theory of “this historical rupture.” In an attempt to map photography’s “expanded field” within postmodernism—to trace “the life and potential transformation of a former medium’s expanded field”—George Baker took his terms from Krauss. George Baker, “Photography’s Expanded Field,” *October* 114 (Fall 2005): 120-40. He asserted, correctly I think, that Krauss’s use of the Klein group was a structuralist approach in which she did not abandon the concept of medium.

¹⁵⁸ Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” 42.

universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.... It follows, then, that within any one of the positions generated by the given logical space, many different mediums might be employed.¹⁵⁹ (Emphasis added.)

Krauss's essays of the 1970s are exploratory, in much the way that Douglas Crimp's were.¹⁶⁰ Having first focused on the indexical nature of photography and its consequent usefulness in countering the notions of aesthetics and artistic authorship and oeuvre, Krauss expanded the use value of photography in her description of its marking function within site constructions that she viewed as having opened up the field of sculpture and marked the rupture that was Postmodernism. At that point, medium as material was no longer significant, as artistic practice had become a set of cultural operations within a given field.

In "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," Krauss enlarged her view of photography into a project for the deconstruction of all art. Its "technical existence as a multiple" had collapsed the difference between the original and the copy, not just for photography but for painting and sculpture as well:

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 43. The reference to medium as "material" implicitly invokes Greenberg's emphasis on the material support of painting in "Modernist Painting" and other essays.

¹⁶⁰ Krauss's approaches to photography and medium are different from Crimp's, in that her work tended to be more analytic of particular forms of art and less concerned with criticism of the museum. But in "Photography's Discursive Spaces," she criticized two museum photography exhibitions for their assimilation of the history of photography into the aesthetic discourse of the history of art. Krauss argued for a separate discourse for certain nineteenth-century landscape photography that would connect it to geology and science, the arenas in which it was produced. This essay was a pointed response to Peter Galassi's exhibition "Before Photography," and John Szarkowski's four-part exhibition, "Atget and the Art of Photography," both held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1981. Krauss's concern was what she considered the dismantling of the photographic archive in order to reassemble it within categories established by art history, which is essentially the history of painting and one that is unrelated to the conditions under which the photographic archives in question were formed. The argument is grounded in Foucault's admonition in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to submit an archive to analysis to determine the conditions of its discursive formation, rather than fitting it within externally determined categories. "Photography's Discursive Spaces," 317. Her arguments here also serve to maintain a separate space for photography, which she saw as performing a useful project of deconstruction in late twentieth century.

For contemporary painting and sculpture has experienced photography's travesty of the ideas of originality, or subjective expressiveness, or formal singularity, not as a failed version of these values, but as a denial of the very system of difference by which these values can be thought at all. By exposing the multiplicity, the facticity, the repetition, and stereotype at the heart of *every* aesthetic gesture, photography deconstructs the possibility of differentiating between the original and the copy, the first idea and its slavish imitation.¹⁶¹

Photography's "travesty," in Krauss's ironic term, was to question the possibility of the uniqueness of any art object. Although this concept is clearly derived from Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay, Krauss did not cite Benjamin here. She concluded that the discourse of photography was not aesthetic, and lamented the difficulties of "the growing number of writers on photography as they try to find a language with which to analyze photography in isolation, whether on the wall of a museum, a gallery, or a lecture hall."¹⁶² By 1984, the year in which this essay was published, however, large-scale, aesthetic photography had invaded the museum and the gallery as an art practice and "medium" unto itself, and the discourse was becoming clearly focused on aesthetics.

In a series of three essays published in 1997, 1998 and 1999, respectively,¹⁶³ Krauss delved more deeply into what she meant by the term "medium" and began to define what she considered praiseworthy artistic practices in the postmodern/post-medium era.¹⁶⁴ The arguments developed in these essays embed some ideas that

¹⁶¹ Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," 176.

¹⁶² Ibid., 182. This essay began with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of photography from a sociological perspective. Clearly, Krauss did not regard this approach as productive, irrespective of the fact that it does not focus on photography as art or an art medium.

¹⁶³ "...And Then Turn Away?" An Essay on James Coleman;" "Reinventing 'Photography;'" and "Reinventing the Medium."

¹⁶⁴ The three essays are integrally related in that "Reinventing the Medium" recapitulates "Reinventing Photography," with the addition of a "telescoped version" of Krauss's argument in "...And Then Turn Away?": an Essay on James Coleman." Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," 289n.

Benjamin expressed in the Artwork Essay and “Little History of Photography,”¹⁶⁵ and rely as well upon Roland Barthes’s analysis of Sergei Eisenstein’s films expressed in “The Third Meaning.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, they connect art of the late twentieth century directly to those theorists of the early and mid-twentieth century.

From a historical perspective, Krauss asserted that art and photography converged in the 1960s, as they had in the 1920s and 1930s. Recapitulating the role it had played in the 1930s, photography became a “theoretical object” again in the 1960s and lost its specificity as a medium: in its status as a copy—a multiple without an original—“it splintered the supposed unity of the original ‘itself’ into a series of quotations.”¹⁶⁷ The artist, or author, became a reader, a “pasticheur,” without the possibility of creating something original. Krauss relied on Benjamin’s Artwork Essay to say that the reproducibility of photography denied the value of the aesthetic, and ended the idea of any independent medium: “the ‘Work of Art’ essay will now see the photographic—which is to say mechanical reproduction in all its modern, technological guises—as both source and symptom of a full-scale demise of this aura across all of culture, so that art itself, as celebrator of the unique and the authentic, will empty out completely.”¹⁶⁸ As Conceptual Art developed during the 1960s, according to Krauss, the specificity of medium was abandoned in favor of “art in general.” With photography’s inherently hybrid structure because of its need for a

¹⁶⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Others, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999), 507-30.

¹⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on some Eisenstein Stills,” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 52-68.

¹⁶⁷ Krauss, “Reinventing ‘Photography,’” 33.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

caption, or, in Benjamin's term, an "inscription," it could perform the role of art in general.

It is worth noting that Krauss has cited Jeff Wall's essay "Marks of Indifference" for its account of the history and origins of Conceptual Art. Yet, ironically, by the 1980s, just as an artist such as Wall had come into his own with the production of large-scale color transparencies—when photography had entered into "aesthetic production," according to Krauss--photography became an industrial discard:

Photography has, then, suddenly become one of those industrial discards, a newly established curio, like the jukebox or the trolley-car. But it is at just this point and in this very condition as outmoded, that it seems to have entered into a new relation to aesthetic production. This time, however, photography functions against the grain of its earlier destruction of the medium, becoming, under precisely the guise of its own obsolescence, a means of what has to be called an act of "reinventing the medium."¹⁶⁹

Thus, at the moment of its obsolescence photography acquired the capacity to play a redemptive role in the reinvention of a "medium as such." For Krauss, the notion of a *medium as such* is "a medium as a set of conventions derived from (but not identical to) the material conditions of a given technical support, conditions out of which to develop a form of expressiveness that can be both projective and mnemonic."¹⁷⁰ It is not to be understood as a restoration of any traditional medium, including photography itself.

The notion of the redemptive possibilities of an obsolescent technology derives directly from Benjamin's theorization of the outmoded. This possibility

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

arose, in his view, when a technology passed from mass-use into obsolescence, which was a time when its promise near the time of its invention could be revealed:

In 1935 Benjamin had articulated his idea of the onset of obsolescence as a possible, if momentary, revelation of the utopian dreams encoded within the various forms of technology at the points of their inception.¹⁷¹

James Coleman's "reinvention" of the projected slide tape, a low-tech commercial support, is the example that Krauss first chose to elucidate her notion of a medium as such. The continuous automatic projection of two tapes of slides onto large screens that face each other in a "double face-out," was, for Krauss, an investment of expressiveness into the materiality of an outmoded support. The "paradoxical collision" between stillness and movement at the interstices of the changes of slides is borrowed from Roland Barthes's concept of the "third meaning" in his eponymous essay in which a photographic still—a fragment of a second text—must be read vertically within the horizontal movement of a film.¹⁷² Coleman's

¹⁷¹ Krauss cites Benjamin's "Little History of Photography;" "Letter from Paris (2): Painting and Photography," in *Selected Writings* 3: 236-48; and "The Theory of Criticism," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1996), 217-19. Benjamin quoted Laszlo Moholy-Nagy on finding the new in the old: "The creative potential of the new is for the most part slowly revealed through old forms, old instruments and areas of design which in their essence have already been superseded by the new, but which under pressure from the new as it takes shape are driven to a euphoric efflorescence." Further, "the most precise technology can give its products a magical value, such as a painted picture can never again have for us." "Little History of Photography," 523; 510. In "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin spoke in a different way of the new being embedded in the old: "Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the one to follow, but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it—as Hegel already noticed—by cunning." *Selected Writings* 3: 43-44.

¹⁷² Barthes, "The Third Meaning." Written in 1970, Barthes was looking back to the 1920s at Eisenstein's methods of montage in film. Barthes defined an "obtuse" level of meaning that could be produced in the viewer by an image that "exceeded" the referential motif, thus compelling an interrogative reading of a film. The obtuse meaning could "open the field of meaning infinitely." It is discontinuous with and indifferent to the story and obvious meaning of the film. Thus, the third meaning creates a "counter-narrative," and "radically recasts the theoretical status of the anecdote." Barthes dwells heavily on descriptions of images that produce "third meanings" in particular films. Krauss is much less interested in analyzing images or in creating other readings within a narrative; she

double face-out imposes a “counter-narrative” and a “permutational play,” as the two screens showing persons involved in conversation, but who face “out” rather than each other, subvert the narrative “suture” that traditional films produce, and constitute “a reflexive acknowledgment of the impossibility of the visual field to deliver its promise of either life-likeness or authenticity.”¹⁷³

Krauss also found within the commercial slide tape the presence of the even more outmoded technology of the magic lantern, the nineteenth-century precursor of the slide projector: there is

an imaginative capacity stored within this technical support and made suddenly retrievable at the moment when the armoring of technology breaks down under the force of its own obsolescence. To “reinvent” the slide tape as a medium... is to release this cognitive capacity, thereby discovering the redemptive possibilities within the technological support itself.¹⁷⁴

This language is much more reliant on Benjamin than on Barthes. The goal is not to produce another narrative from a counter-image, but to open up the work altogether.

It is worth asking why Krauss is so laudatory of work such as Coleman’s reinvention, deconstruction or interrogation of a medium that is sliding into obsolescence.¹⁷⁵ What is its value as art for the viewer or society? It would seem

seems focused solely on the process of disruption or rupture within a particular technical support. Thus, I would argue that she has overdrawn her reading of Barthes as an analogy for her own ends.¹⁷³ Krauss, “Reinventing ‘Photography,’” 38. To experience a work by James Coleman, the viewer stands in a darkened room where the apparatuses of two slide projectors make their familiar clicks and whirs as the slides advance in sequence, producing the interstices between images of which Krauss speaks. The different images projected onto two large screens that face each other at an angle provide a confusing juxtaposition from which the viewer works to construct a narrative. The construction of a narrative, however, is just what Coleman’s “invention” works to subvert. The viewer is therefore not “sutured” into a continuously moving picture the way he would be in viewing a film.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷⁵ Kodak’s slides and projection systems were first manufactured in 1939, following the invention of Kodachrome film in 1935. Kodachrome produced an accurate color spectrum that facilitated clear and luminous transparencies. Automated projectors came to market in the 1960s. In September 2004, Kodak announced that it would cease manufacture of the standard slide projector. Darsie Alexander,

that the slide tape prevents the creation of a sense of visual authenticity, obviating the possibility of a viewer's becoming swept up in (or sutured into) the jerky, noisy parade of images to perceive a narrative. This allows the release of "imaginative" and "cognitive" possibilities in the viewer. In Benjamin's terms, the disruption works to "produce an outside to the totality of technologized space."¹⁷⁶ This physical unfolding that permits perception of the interstices of the slide tape, then, allows for an experience that may be similar to the experience that the magic lantern provided, in that there is an opening—a fissure, a rupture, a gap—that provides space for the viewer to invent or dream while experiencing Coleman's art.

Krauss's recent investigation of William Kentridge's "drawings for projection," in which the artist photographs drawings that he continually erases and revises to create a jerky narrative flow, valorizes the artist's physical "shuttling" back and forth between his drawings and his movie camera, producing palimpsests by means of continuous drawings and erasures, a method that is both mechanical and meditational. The momentary stillness between images drags "against the flow of the film," and produces gaps that do not exist in the totalizing medium of film. Krauss credited Kentridge, as Coleman, for having invented a medium on the basis of outmoded supports—the handcraft of drawing and the movie camera. The physical process of producing this art partakes of the prehistory of animation, a regressive move involving the combination of technology and the human body of which the Frankfurt School would approve.¹⁷⁷ Krauss uses terms such as infiltrate, infect,

"SlideShow," in and Introduction to *SlideShow* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 5-6; xxi.

¹⁷⁶ Krauss, "Reinventing 'Photography,'" 39.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

penetrate, invade and permeate to express this mixture of second and first natures, meaning the mechanical and the organic. Moreover, the images have the look of outmoded mass culture of the Weimar period, an indirect reference to Benjamin's theories. Kentridge's method, or medium, also relies on Barthes's third meaning, as Kentridge's still images disrupt the film's forward motion, or narrative. Thus, Krauss's reasons for approving of this unique technical support track her valorization of the work of James Coleman, and rely on the same earlier twentieth-century theorists for support. With Kentridge, as with Coleman, there is the possibility of a glimpse of "an outside to the totality of technologized space" in an age when digital technology has changed everything.¹⁷⁸ The notion of a totality, or art that is "totalizing" is also an issue in considering Jeff Wall's medium.

Krauss Rewrites Clement Greenberg's Concept of Medium

As important as is Krauss's positioning of James Coleman and William Kentridge as resisting the feeble forms of the traditional mediums, Krauss's meditation on medium in *Voyage on the North Sea* was her boldest move: an attack on the Greenbergian story of modernism and the "triumph of the monochrome."¹⁷⁹ This attack involved a reassessment, really a rewriting, of Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting." Krauss has claimed that Greenberg had actually "jettisoned the materialist, purely, reductive notion of the medium" by embracing the notion of opticality, which Krauss asserts placed the "import of painting on the vector that connects viewer and object." She assessed this as a move to horizontality, derived

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 33-34. Here Krauss referred to her "Reinventing the Medium."

¹⁷⁹ "The modernist story that yielded the supposed 'triumph' of the monochrome believed that it had produced this totalization in an object that was utterly coextensive with its own origins: surface and support in an indivisible unity; the medium of painting so reduced to zero that nothing was left but an object." Krauss, *Voyage on the North Sea*, 53.

from his reference to the “optical third dimension” created by the first mark on the canvas. According to Krauss, “opticality” was

an entirely abstract, schematized version of the link that traditional perspective had formerly established between viewer and object, but one that now transcends the real parameters of measurable, physical space to express the purely projective powers of a preobjective level of sight: “vision itself.”¹⁸⁰

What is astounding is Krauss’s claim that in the 1960s opticality became a new medium, an idea, she admits, that neither Greenberg nor Fried theorized or even recognized.¹⁸¹ What this move permits, however, is the assertion that modernist painting of that decade, and color field in particular, was actually “internally differentiated,” even though no one saw it. Krauss’s arguments in praise of the self-differing works of artists such as James Coleman and William Kentridge are grounded in her notion of “medium-specificity,” which, in turn, grows out of the nature of their arts’ literal material supports—a very Greenbergian notion. But rather than move away from Greenberg’s position, Krauss has reinterpreted his statements about the nature of medium to make it sound as if he had been speaking *her* language. It pulls Greenberg’s newly problematized notion of medium into Krauss’s theories of medium in postmodernity.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 29. In the quoted phrase, Krauss was citing Thierry de Duve’s account of Greenberg’s reaction to Minimalism.

¹⁸¹ “Thus it could be argued that in the ‘60s, ‘opticality’ was also serving as more than just a feature of art; it had become a *medium* of art. As such it was also aggregative, an affront to what was officially understood as the reductivist logic of modernism—a logic and doctrine attributed to this day to Greenberg himself. Neither Greenberg nor Fried theorized colorfield painting as a new medium, however; they spoke of it only as a new possibility for abstract painting....And certainly the fact that in both cases the specificity of a medium was being maintained even though it would now have to be seen as internally differentiated... was not theorized either. Ibid., 30.

Krauss first theorized what she considered a misreading of Greenberg's notion of medium in her 1999 essay, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," appropriating the title of Greenberg's 1948 essay.¹⁸² Krauss asserted that the misreading was the following:

This was the decision to produce the most hypostatized possible reading of the outcome of what Greenberg called the "crisis of the easel picture" by understanding the modernist idea of medium specificity as the radical contraction of specificity itself into a physical characteristic (flatness) that would coincide with a material object: the painting, which could now be seen as equivalent either to a sculpture...or to a readymade....This literalized understanding emptied out the idea of an aesthetic medium by simply making that medium synonymous with its material support.¹⁸³

She asserted further that Greenberg had dissolved the picture "in the fluid of what he was sometimes calling 'openness,' at others 'opticality,' and ultimately, though perhaps least satisfactorily, 'color field.' Which is to say, that no sooner had Greenberg seemed to isolate the essence of painting in flatness, than he swung the axis of the field 90 degrees to the actual picture surface to place all the import of painting on the vector that connects viewer and object."¹⁸⁴ Speaking of Thierry de Duve's reading of Greenberg's reaction to Minimalism, Krauss stated that it "scants...the way Greenberg understood the category of opticality as a support for practice, and thus, *though he never says this*, a medium."¹⁸⁵ (Emphasis added.)

A careful reading of Greenberg's essays cited by Krauss does not support her characterization. In Greenberg's discussions of opticality and openness, the picture might have been leaking beyond the frame, but it did not traverse a horizontal vector

¹⁸² Clement Greenberg, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 2: 221-25. Greenberg's essay described the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey, focusing on the all-over picture that emphasized the surface and rendered every part of the canvas "equivalent."

¹⁸³ Krauss, "The Crisis of the Easel Picture," 164.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁸⁵ Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, 59n24.

extending to the viewer. It remained essentially flat. In his “Crisis of the Easel Picture,” Greenberg did not discuss opticality, thus Krauss’s very appropriation of the title was misleading. In the 1956 essay, “Symposium: Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?” Greenberg noted the “fresher, opener, more immediate surface” of American painting, and said, “Whether it is enamel reflecting light, or thinned paint soaked into unsized and unprimed canvas, the surface *breathes*. There is no insulating finish, nor is pictorial space created ‘pictorially,’ by deep, veiled color, but rather by blunt corporeal contrasts and less specifiable optical illusion.”¹⁸⁶ Greenberg was describing flat paintings made with enamel or thin paint. The reference to “optical illusion” is one that Greenberg often repeated, and that I would argue is related to his intractable idea that viewing a painting is solely a visual or optical experience. Further, for Greenberg, pictorial space, if any, was space that seemed to recede rather than project.

In “American-Type Painting,” Greenberg described the “emphatic flatness” of the paintings of Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.¹⁸⁷ In their works, “the color breathes from the canvas with an enveloping effect, which is intensified by the largeness itself of the picture.” This may be the closest Greenberg came to suggesting that something in the picture reaches toward the spectator, who “tends to react to this more in terms of décor or environment than in those usually associated with a picture hung upon a wall.” But, here, Greenberg was speaking primarily about the scale of the painting and its decorative effects, in contrast to the traditional easel

¹⁸⁶ Clement Greenberg, “Symposium: Is the French Avant-Garde Overrated?” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 2: 156.

¹⁸⁷ Clement Greenberg, “American-Type Painting,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 3: 232: “A concomitant of the fact that Still, Newman, and Rothko suppress value contrasts and favor warm hues is the more emphatic flatness of their paintings.”

picture, or tableau, that is clearly delimited and marked off from the wall by its frame. In speaking of the same artists again in “After Abstract Expressionism,” Greenberg emphasized the large sizes of the canvases and the warm hues, with the ultimate effect of “an almost literal openness that embraces and absorbs color in the act of being created by it.” “Size guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue.”¹⁸⁸ Again, Greenberg was speaking of a purely visual impact: “Openness, and not only in painting, is the quality that seems most to exhilarate the attuned eyes of our time.” In this essay, Greenberg repeated the refrain established in “Modernist Painting” two years earlier:

By now it has been established, it would seem, that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture: thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily a successful one.¹⁸⁹

In describing the painting of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, Greenberg spoke of color in expanding the picture plane:

The effect conveys a sense not only of color as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical, but also of color as a thing that opens and expands the picture plane. The suppression of the difference between painted and unpainted surfaces causes pictorial space to leak through—or rather, to seem about to leak through—the framing edges of the picture into the space beyond them.¹⁹⁰

It seems clear that the apparent expansion of the painting that Greenberg described is lateral and vertical along the *picture plane*: the color of the painting does not form a

¹⁸⁸ Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 131.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 131-32.

¹⁹⁰ Clement Greenberg, “Louis and Noland,” in *Collected Essays and Criticism*, 4: 97.

horizontal vector along which it reaches toward the viewer, but leaks beyond the frame to the wall on either side, and, perhaps, on all four sides. Greenberg went on to state the necessity of a large format for abstract color painting. The reason for this is “the need to have the picture occupy so much of one’s visual field that it loses its character as a discrete tactile object and thereby becomes that much more purely a picture, *a strictly visual entity*.” (Emphasis added.)¹⁹¹

The point here is that Greenberg was very much concerned with the notion of opticality, by which he meant the perception of a painting with the eye. Color field painting, with its lack of visual incident and its large scale, was extremely “optical,” and coincided with his long-held view that art should successfully attack the sensory organs to which it was directed. The emphasis on opticality was derived from Greenberg’s theories of the importance of the separation of the arts that he explored beginning in 1940 in “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” It was an essential aspect of his ideas about the arts and their processes of self-criticism and “purification,” and so must be hammered home. Greenberg admitted in “Modernist Painting” that in order to make his point, he had had to simplify and exaggerate:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l’oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension....The...illusion created by the Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye. The latest abstract painting tries to fulfill the Impressionist insistence on the optical as the only sense that a completely and quintessentially pictorial art can invoke.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 90.

Further, “That visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience, is a notion whose only justification lies in scientific consistency.”¹⁹³

This did not mean that there was a “third dimension,” as Krauss has posited. Her grafting of an optical horizontal vector onto Greenberg’s ideas about painting that he, she admits, did not theorize or even say, is a puzzling and unconvincing attempt to align Greenberg’s notion of medium with her own arguments regarding the operational nature of postmodern medium specificity. As evidenced by the foregoing, Greenberg was focused on the flat surface of paintings that, to be sure, created optical illusions. But color field painting was not an excavation of an art practice that revealed a latent promise present at the inception of easel painting in the Renaissance, or that could release a cognitive or imaginative or intellectual experience in the viewer. For Greenberg, it was directed solely to the eye and intended to create an immediate aesthetic visual sensation. Moreover, he never entered into the discourse of Postmodernism and the linguistic and deconstructive theories that have characterized it. For Greenberg, painting in the 1960s had pared itself down; it was not an excavation or deconstruction of a worn-out or obsolescent modality. His early and late writings bear this out.¹⁹⁴

Having “excavated” Rosalind Krauss’s ideas about medium at the end of the century by tracing their development from the 1970s when photography, for her, assumed the role of theoretical object, reprising its role in the earlier part of the

¹⁹³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹⁴ See, generally, Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, which includes writings from 1970 to 1994.

century, one sees that the only mediums that Krauss has found adequate are those that are grounded in physical processes embedded in outmoded or nearly obsolescent forms of technology and popular culture. These “reinvented” mediums must create temporal gaps—ruptures—within their physical supports that permit viewers to glimpse something outside the technological spectacle that defines contemporary culture.¹⁹⁵ Finding a way to reinvent a medium meeting those criteria is difficult, and Krauss has declared that Jeff Wall has not succeeded.

Jeff Wall's Medium

Jeff Wall began to make his signature transparencies in 1978, at the very moment that the critical discourse around photography and painting began to build steam. Given Wall's incorporation of characteristics of figurative painting and techniques of cinema into his photographic praxis, it is essential to examine how he positions himself with regard to medium, and how art historians have dealt with the complexity of his art in that regard.

The physical support, or material, of Jeff Wall's “medium” is the large-scale photographic color transparency mounted in an aluminum box illuminated from behind by fluorescent light. Although various terms have been used to refer to the physical nature of these works, in this study they will be generally referred to as

¹⁹⁵ In “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition,” Krauss cited artists Christian Marclay and Sophie Calle for having used modern, technological mechanisms as the supports for their art: Marclay, for synch sound, which is the “technical support” of cinema; and Calle, for a combination of photography and text, mimicking investigative journalists' documentary research. Krauss explained her substitution of the term “technical support” for “medium,” as follows: “If the traditional medium is supported by a physical substance...the term “technical support,” in distinction, refers to contemporary commercial vehicles, such as cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit, in recognition of the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums, as well as acknowledging their obligation to wrest from that support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture, should they want to join those works to the canon of modernism.” Idem, 57. Krauss had used the term “technical support” earlier in “...And Then Turn Away?,” 32.

“transparencies.”¹⁹⁶ The physical basis of the work is photography, but its presentation in an aluminum box and backlit was derived directly from commercial advertising. Wall has described an epiphanic moment during a trip to Spain in 1977: “I kept seeing these back-lit things at the bus terminals. And it just clicked that those back-lit pictures might be a way of doing photography that would somehow connect these elements of scale and the body that were important to Judd and Newman and Pollock, as well as Velasquez, Goya, Titian or Manet.”¹⁹⁷ Wall’s references to painters of the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries as well as to minimalist artist Donald Judd presage some of the ways in which writers as well as Wall himself have approached the multi-layered medium of his art. They have compared it to painting, sculpture, theater, cinema, television, advertising, drawing and writing. Before examining the conundrums of those attempts to pin down Wall’s medium, it is instructive to see how he initially described it.

Wall completed a master’s thesis in art history titled “Berlin Dada and the Notion of Context” at the University of British Columbia in 1970, and did doctoral research in art history on Marcel Duchamp and John Heartfield at the Courtauld

¹⁹⁶ These works have been variously described over the years, and Wall has settled on the term “transparency in lightbox.” They are made on Ilfochrome Classic transparent material. (“Ilfochrome” was formerly “Cibachrome.”) Wall’s oeuvre consists of two kinds of photographs: “Cinematographic photographs” are works, whether black and white or in color, are those “in which the subject of the picture has been prepared in some way, ranging from minimal modifications to the construction of entire sets, creation of costumes and objects, etc.” “Documentary photographs” are those “in which the artist chooses the location and time of the picture but without any kind of intervention on his part.” Both cinematographic photographs and documentary photographs may be altered by digital montage. “Introductory Notes,” in *JWCR*, 271-73.

¹⁹⁷ Sheena Wagstaff, “The Labouring Eye,” in *Jeff Wall: Photographs 1978-2004* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 7. The trip to Spain had included viewing works by Velasquez, Goya and Titian at the Prado. See also Robert Enright, “The Consolation of Plausibility: An Interview with Jeff Wall,” *Border Crossings* 19, no. 1 (1999): 45. In a 1985 interview, Wall expressed his discovery this way: “Just at that moment I saw an illuminated sign somewhere, and it struck me very strongly that here was the perfect synthetic technology for me. It was not photography, it was not cinema, it was not painting, it was not propaganda, but it has strong associations with them all.” Wall, in Barents, 99.

Institute of Art in London from 1970 to 1973.¹⁹⁸ His familiarity with German and Russian cultural theorists of the early twentieth century, particularly Walter Benjamin and Berthold Brecht, has surfaced frequently in his interviews and writings.¹⁹⁹ In fact, the neon glow of back-lit transparencies in bus stations that Wall described calls to mind a segment of Walter Benjamin's "One-Way Street" in which Benjamin described the impact of neon advertisements:

The genuine advertisement hurls things at us with the tempo of a good film....What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.²⁰⁰

This is not to argue that Wall had this passage in mind when he decided on his lighted technical support, but to suggest a connection between Benjamin and Wall that has run through Wall's art, writings and interviews as well as others' critical assessments.

Jeff Wall's first solo exhibition took place at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria from April 11 to June 3, 1979,²⁰¹ and consisted of the installation of his first Cibachrome transparency works, dating from 1977 to 1979.²⁰² The use of backlit

¹⁹⁸ Robert Linsley and Verena Auffermann, *Jeff Wall: The Storyteller*, exh. cat. (Frankfurt: Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1992), 63, 71. Wall made little art from 1971 until 1977. JWCR, "Biography," np.

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Jeff Wall, "Gestus," in de Duve, et al., 76; previously published in *A Different Climate: Aspects of Beauty in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Düsseldorf: Städtisches Kunsthalle, 1984); "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," *Parachute* no. 35 (June-July-August 1984): 5-7; and "An Outline of a Context for Stephan Balkenhol's Work," in *Stephan Balkenhol*, exh. cat. (Frankfurt: Portikus, 1988).

²⁰⁰ Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 1: 476. This segment, titled "This Space for Rent," alludes to numerous issues important to Benjamin, including the impact of film and the effects of capitalism on the "man in the street." In different ways, those topics are also important to Wall.

²⁰¹ *The Destroyed Room* (1978), the first color transparency within Wall's extant oeuvre, was displayed that year at the Nova Gallery in Vancouver, where it was set into a wall built facing the gallery window and lighted from within the gallery. It could only be seen from the street, so that it appeared to be a commercial window display. A lightbox was supplied later. *Faking Death*, (1977), a triptych that was actually Wall's first color transparency, was included in the 1978 exhibition, as well as ones in 1979 and 1980, after which it was removed from his oeuvre. JWCR, 275.

²⁰² *Faking Death* (1977) (three panels); *The Destroyed Room* (1978); *Young Worker*, (1978) (four panels); and *Picture for Women* (1979).

Cibachrome transparencies mounted in aluminum boxes was apparently the first use of the ubiquitous advertising medium for ambitious art. Wall wrote the exhibition's catalogue essay titled "To the Spectator" in which he set forth his ambitions and described his art.²⁰³

In terms that reflect the strong influence of Benjamin, Wall referred to his medium as a "delivery system," and dwelled on its source in the commercial world of advertising and public signs. Wall spoke of how advertising has shown how the "repositioning" of the "apparatus" from the factory to that of the "traditionally self-conscious picture...creates conditions for its critical reappréhension within the context of art." He emphasized the effect of the light, noting that the even diffusion of the fluorescent light produced no shadows and had an uncanny, Frankensteinian effect on human body tones. He referred to the "physically unstable, vibratory, irritating character" of fluorescent light in everyday life that produced in the viewer a "restless passivity:"

I'm bothered by and interested in the kind of restless passivity induced in people by overhead fluorescent-lit spaces. These states correspond to the roles the same people are required and encouraged to play by the institutions which illuminate their precincts in this way. I'm thinking of factories, offices and schools, but also of kitchens and bathrooms, public and private, the stages on which "nature takes its course."

Wall compared the effect of his works to those of television that can physically illuminate space and dominate the viewer ideologically. Finally, in the list of the works included in the catalogue, the two that consist of only one large panel—*The Destroyed Room* and *Picture for Women*—were described as "Seamed cibachrome

²⁰³ Jeff Wall, "To the Spectator," in *Jeff Wall: Installation of Faking Death [1978] The Destroyed Room [1978] Young Workers [1978] Picture for Women [1979]* (Victoria, B.C.: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979), np.

transparency, fluorescent light.” The word “seamed” directs attention to the material support, and, particularly, to an artifact of the technology that is unavoidable even today in transparencies of this size, which is the requirement of joining two transparencies with clear tape in order to produce such images.²⁰⁴ A seam implies a rupture, and emphasizes the constructed nature of these works.

Although Wall did not cite Walter Benjamin in this short essay, the terminology regarding his medium—production, apparatus, delivery system, structure, seamed, appropriation—and his focus on the commercial nature of his fluorescent lighting system recall Benjamin’s interest in the technology of photography and film and their effects on those who view it. Given the fact that Wall had studied on a graduate level the art theories of the early twentieth century when art and mechanical production and reproduction were so intertwined, it is not surprising that his approach to making artwork in the late 1970s might self-consciously draw from those influences and experiences.

Benjamin’s Artwork Essay and “The Author as Producer” come to mind as Wall talks about the physical process of his art production.²⁰⁵ In the latter essay Benjamin spoke of the “functional transformation” of “the apparatus of production,” whether for writing, music or theater. Functional transformation, or “*umfunktionierung*,” a word coined by Berthold Brecht according to Benjamin, is

²⁰⁴ *The Destroyed Room* is 134.7 by 198.1 cm., and *Picture for Women* is 149.9 by 200.7 cm. The seams in Wall’s works are not apparent in reproductions, but are obvious to a viewer confronting them in person. Wall has written of the structural and metaphorical aspects of the seam in those two early works. JWCR, 278, quoting Wall, “*The Destroyed Room, Picture for Women*,” in *Directions 1981* (Washington, D. C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 1981), 181.

²⁰⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 2*: 768-82.

essential to giving a work a revolutionary use value.²⁰⁶ With regard to photography, Benjamin looked upon photomontage as a revolutionary form, specifically referring to John Heartfield, “whose technique made the book cover into a political instrument.” In speaking of a still life “put together from tickets, spools of cotton and cigarette butts” he said “the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting.”²⁰⁷ Benjamin criticized New Objectivity photography, a style that had “transformed even abject poverty...into an object of enjoyment.”²⁰⁸ According to Benjamin, “what we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary useful value.”²⁰⁹

Although the foregoing does not pretend to do justice to the complexity of “The Author as Producer,” the point of raising it here is to show how Wall staked out his position as he made and wrote about his first four transparencies—an artist as producer—in correspondence with issues presented by Benjamin. He made art that is based on technology, particularly photography and film, and that has a cognitive use. Chapter Three will show that the subjects of Wall’s works of the 1980s include overtly political and social, if not revolutionary, content. It will show that Wall drew from the theories embedded in the concept of epic theater invented by Berthold Brecht, who influenced Benjamin to a large degree with regard to how the form of an artwork could influence viewers’ cognition. Chapter Three will show as well that

²⁰⁶ In “Notes from Svendborg, Summer 1934,” Benjamin stated that “the theory [in “The Author as Producer” is] that a decisive criterion of a revolutionary function of literature lies in the extent to which technical advances lead to a transformation of artistic forms and hence of intellectual means of production.” *Ibid.*, 783.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 774.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 775.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Wall's essay "Gestus" draws directly upon the ideas of Brecht on the efficacy of gesture in conveying meaning, and that many of Wall's works of the 1980s demonstrate this thinking.

Wall's obvious focus on himself as a producing artist importing commercial technology into ambitious art have opened him to the kinds of criticism leveled by writers such as Rosalind Krauss and T. J. Clark, both of whom take the position that Benjamin's theories are applicable to contemporary art. Wall has complicated the task for those writers by importing subjects and compositional forms of "high" art derived from nineteenth-century France, for example, into this late-twentieth-century practice. In "To the Spectator," Wall spoke not only of technology, but related his work to the history of pictorial art: "I think of the field in terms of the theoretical issues posed by the historical development of the means of production of representation or signification." He saw his work as "antagonistically unifying" high art and show business: "Pictures in the art context are necessarily open to, and constructed out of, elements, texts, or readings generated across the horizon of common or popular as well as academic forms of literacy." Thus, Wall took on the ambitious goal of repositioning the history of pictorial art within the world of mass entertainment, marketing and popular media: "This mode of photography finds itself always in a profound relationship with the history of painting and sculpture." He has also spoken of his desire to make beautiful pictures, a goal that flies in the face of the ideas of Walter Benjamin and of contemporary art historians such as Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh who follow his lead.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ In this regard, in 1981, Wall drafted an essay on Dan Graham's *Kammerspiel* that was rejected for the catalogue for which it was intended, but was later published. It sets forth Wall's complex

The startling combination of technology and art history embodied in Jeff Wall's transparencies has engendered myriad commentaries that purport to define his medium. In "To the Spectator," Wall himself mentioned photography, television, films made for television, painting, sculpture, and the everyday atmosphere created by fluorescent light, as bearing on his work and presaging the debate that has followed. He has spoken also of how the making of his art resembles cinematography.²¹¹ His choice of the term "cinematographic photography" for the pictures he constructs reinforces that analogy.

Wall's Medium Critiqued

Art historians and critics have been concerned with the medium of Wall's work from a variety of perspectives, but primarily as it relates to painting. A complete survey of those many comparisons is not warranted, but it is useful to provide a sample of the extensive efforts to define Wall's work in terms of art historical traditions. Since certain of Wall's early works invoked the compositions of nineteenth-century French paintings, criticism often has described it in terms of painting and painting genres without much concern with its actual physical support.

relationship to the critical theories of the early twentieth century in its criticism of the "defeatist" position taken by Benjamin Buchloh in his reliance on the post-World War II writings of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Here, early in his career, Wall staked out his position with regard to producing art with aesthetic qualities that is also socially critical. Jeff Wall, "A Draft for 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel,'" in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 11-29.

²¹¹ "I thought about my pictures in terms of cinematography, rather than photography proper or maybe art-photography, as it had been defined by the powers that were up until around 1970. My 'straight' or 'direct' photos, ones that don't involve digital technology, seemed to be analogous to the whole cinematographic process but without any editing. Digital technology allows you to put different pieces together after the shooting is finished, so it is something like film editing." Jeff Wall, "Wall Pieces: Jeff Wall interviewed by Patricia Bickers," *Art Monthly* 179 (September 1994): 4.

Thierry de Duve described the works as “composed like classical paintings, in a unitary, seamless space.”²¹² He said, also, that the large format transparency “is the pictorial concept of the tableau,” suggesting an approach consonant with that of Jean-François Chevrier. Although de Duve acknowledged that Wall had created for himself a “double bind” by reflecting in his works painting’s self-critical moves toward modernism that began with Manet, he tended to neutralize this complexity by tying specific works of Wall to particular paintings of Poussin, Monet, Cezanne, Van Gogh, and, of course, Manet. De Duve employed terms such as “filtered through,” and “in dialogue with” painting, thus emphasizing the connections. Although de Duve ended by claiming that Wall’s works constitute “dialectical images,” a phrase directly associated with Benjamin, his litany of comparisons with painting, and particularly with landscape, which de Duve said stands for painting in general, set him for up Rosalind Krauss’s diatribe against Wall as a mere “pasticheur,” as discussed below.

Norman Bryson suggested that Wall was producing paintings within photography and reinventing the classical genres,²¹³ and T. J. Clark asserted that Wall was salvaging the tradition of painting.²¹⁴ Others who have written in such terms include Lucie Beyer, Beatrice Parent and Terry Atkinson, along with Gijs van Tuyl (a painter working with photography); Roger Seamon (color belongs to painting) and

²¹² Thierry de Duve, “The Mainstream and the Crooked Path,” in Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys and Jean-François Chevrier, *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 26, 27.

²¹³ Norman Bryson, “Too Near, Too Far,” *Parkett* no. 49 (May 1997): 85-89, 85: “Jeff Wall’s retention of a history of painting within his photographic practice has the interesting consequence that his work follows the classical system of the genres with unusual fidelity.”

²¹⁴ T. J. Clark, “Three Excerpts from a Discussion with T. J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner,” *Parkett* 22 (1989): 82-85.

Jean-Christophe Ammann (light corresponds to the effect of artificial light in paintings).²¹⁵

Writers who have focused on Wall's later work, when he began producing digitalized images in the early 1990s, have compared it to drawing and painting, as well as to film editing.²¹⁶ Wall has frequently referred to the influence of film, and in the following statement, acknowledged the relationships of his digitalized work to both film and painting:

I have always envied the way a painter can work on his picture a little bit at a time, always keeping the totality in mind by stepping back from his work for a glance at it. A painting is never the rendering of a moment in time, but an accumulation of actions which simulates a moment or creates the illusion of an event occurring before our eyes. By opening up the photographic moment, the computer begins to blur the boundaries between the forms and creates a new threshold zone which interests me greatly.²¹⁷

Other references to cinema include Patricia Bickers (Wall thinks in terms of cinematography); Ian Wallace (his work is comparable to cinematic absorption; is in a cinematic mode); and Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton (Wall's is an art of cinematography).²¹⁸ Arielle Pelenc has also suggested that Wall's transparencies, particularly the gestures of his figures, have a cinematographic character.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Lucie Beyer, "Jeff Wall," *FlashArt*, no. 136 (October 1987): 95; Beatrice Parent, "Light and Shadow: Christian Boltanski and Jeff Wall," trans. Georgia Marsh, *Parkett* 22 (1989): 60-65; Terry Atkinson, "Dead Troops Talk," in *Jeff Wall: Dead Troops Talk*, exh. cat. (Basel: Wiese Verlag, 1993), 29-47, 32: "The dead troops do talk; what they talk is the language of political instruction. This picture is one of Wall's most powerful didactic and polemical works—worthy of the tradition of Gericault's 'Raft of the Medusa' or Manet's 'The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian.'"; Gijs van Tuyl, Introduction to *Jeff Wall: Landscapes and Other Pictures*, trans. David Britt, exh. cat. (Wolfsburg: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 1996), 7; Roger Seamon, "The Uneasy Sublime," *Parachute* 66 (April-June 1992): 11-19; Jean-Christophe Ammann, "Fascination Illuminated in Jeff Wall's Work," in *Jeff Wall: Transparencies*, exh. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts; Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), np.

²¹⁶ Charles Reeve, "A Conversation with Jeff Wall," *Documents*, no. 17 (Winter-Spring 2000): 6-16; 8.

²¹⁷ Jeff Wall, *L'Ere Binaire: Nouvelles Interactions*, exh. cat., (Brussels: Musee Communal d'Ixelles, 1992), np.; quoted in Sheena Wagstaff, 15.

²¹⁸ Bickers, 3; Ian Wallace, "Jeff Wall's Transparencies," in *Jeff Wall: Transparencies*, exh. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts; Basel: Kunsthalle, 1984), np; and Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton,

Several writers have seen Wall's transparencies as literary, including Patricia Bickers (the pictures have a subject); Jerry Zaslove (it is a dialogue between literature and painting; it reflects the generational literacy of 1917 to 1985); and Robert Linsley (*The Storyteller* is a literary form of philosophical dialogue).²²⁰

Perhaps the most strained reading of Wall's work in terms of medium is Briony Fer's comparison of his works to sculpture, such as the minimalist works of Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. She based this, in part, upon the demands placed on the viewer by the three-dimensional nature of the lightboxes, as well as on an expanded view of sculpture that takes into account what Fer termed the psychic spatial registers that objects in the photographs inhabit.²²¹ Comparisons are made also to documentary photographs of land art and to "Involuntary Sculptures," the photographs by Surrealist photographer Gyula Brassai.

The foregoing brief quotations seem to suggest that many authors see Wall's transparencies only in relation to a single medium. Most do see it primarily in terms of the medium identified, but mention others as well. Furthermore, some analyze it in terms of several. For example, Ian Wallace has referred to cinema, painting,

"'Always Elsewhere': An Introduction to the Art of Jeff Wall (*A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October, 1947*)," in *Jeff Wall: Photographs*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 8-33, 21. See, also, Kerry Brougher, *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), 119: "Jeff Wall's *Eviction Struggle* (1988) is a synthesis of panorama, history painting and cinematic melodrama....Not only does he build on classic painterly composition, but he also incorporates elements that recall moments from films by Godard, Antonioni, and other directors."

²¹⁹ Arielle Pelenc, "Arielle Pelenc in Correspondence with Jeff Wall," in de Duve, et al, 10.

²²⁰ Jerry Zaslove, "Faking Nature and Reading History: The Mindfulness Toward Reality in the Dialogical World of Jeff Wall's Pictures," in Gary Dufour, *Jeff Wall: 1990* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1990), 66,78; and Robert Linsley, "Jeff Wall: The Storyteller," in Robert Linsley and Verena Auffermann, *Jeff Wall: The Storyteller* (Frankfurt: Museum für Moderne Kunst, 1992), 25.

²²¹ Briony Fer, "The Space of Anxiety: Sculpture and Photography in the Work of Jeff Wall," in *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, ed. Geraldine A. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 234-245; previously published in slightly abbreviated form as "The Space of Anxiety," in *Jeff Wall*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Paris: Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, 1995), 23-26.

propaganda, advertising and everyday life: “His consistent and specific use of high-resolution Cibachrome transparencies offers the spectacle of deep pictorial illusion, and through this he calls up within his carefully constructed images, a plethora of signs that refer to codes of cinema, painting, propaganda, advertising and everyday life.”²²² John Roberts discussed Wall’s work in terms of the novel and cinema.²²³

But Jeff Wall, perhaps, has best summed up the hybridity of his praxis:

I think it’s possible, through the complex effects of techniques derived from painting, cinema and theatre, to infuse the photographic medium with this dialectic of identity and non-identity.²²⁴

And as long as painting remains “painted drama”—which it always does, in my opinion—then these issues of the dramas of the past and their representations in the present, whether staged or painted or photographed, must be at the centre of the problematics of painting and its relations with other technologies of representation.²²⁵

Finally, Wall has said,

Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms.²²⁶

As suggested by Wall’s statements, his transparencies most crucially embed the notions of representation and depiction. As discussed above, he sees the essential nature of photography as depiction. Having chosen the medium of photography in the form of the spectacular backlit transparency, he set out to make pictures.

Although the scale and spectacularity of the works suggest film or even theater,

Wall’s references to particular nineteenth-century paintings in his works of the 1980s

²²² Wallace, *Ibid.*

²²³ John Roberts, “Jeff Wall: The Social Pathology of Everyday Life,” in *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester, U.K: Manchester University Press, 1998), 189.

²²⁴ Wall, in Barents, 102.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

²²⁶ Wall, “Frames of Reference,” 190.

at issue in this study, along with their frankly pictorial nature, link them primarily to the medium of painting.

Wall began early an artistic and critical engagement with Manet, using his paintings as starting points, including *Picture for Women* (1979), *Stereo* (1980) and *Woman and Her Doctor* (1980-81), which are, from the standpoint of composition, contemporary reconfigurations of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, *Olympia* and *In the Conservatory*, respectively.

Wall has said that he “forced a parallel with painting” in the mid-1970s to open up a space to work and to connect with the use of figure in the tradition of painting from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, saying that the “close-up vantage point” invented by painting has rarely been used in photography except in advertising, where it is designed to have maximum impact.²²⁷

Wall stages his photographed scenes in studio space constructed at his direction to create a particular kind of interior, or on locations in or near Vancouver that he searches out as would a film director. The persons appearing in the pictures are performers hired and directed by Wall, and they are rehearsed to achieve the effects he seeks. Photographs taken outdoors may take days to shoot in order to take advantage of particular weather conditions.²²⁸ Thus, Wall approaches the production of his transparencies as a film director would approach the shooting of a film scene. The large scale and drama of the transparencies have caused them to be described as cinematic, or, perhaps more accurately, as film stills, and Wall has discussed the

²²⁷ Reeve, 7-8.

²²⁸ *The Flooded Grave* (1998-2000), a scene in a cemetery in which a trench is filled with water and various examples of living sea life, took two years to create and photograph. The process is described in Jan Tumlir, “The Hole Truth—Jan Tumlir talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*,” *Artforum* 39, no. 7 (March 2001): 113-17.

influence of cinema on his work.²²⁹ Their scale literally permits a number of viewers to experience them simultaneously, another feature shared with cinema.

Since 1978, Wall's work has intermingled characteristics of photography, painting and film in ways that might suggest that they would fit within the postmodernist paradigm elaborated by Douglas Crimp, who valorized a mix of mediums in the making of art. But since Wall's works are physically produced solely by means of photographing scenes that he has either come upon or set up, they do not utilize the specific kinds of "strategies of signification" that Crimp described. Thus, in the most literal sense, they do not fit Crimp's paradigm. Moreover, as a trained art historian with a deep knowledge of art forms and theories of earlier periods that are revealed in many works, Wall insists that he operates within the continuum of Modernism, and refutes attempts to judge his work by postmodernist standards. Chapter Three, however, explores ways in which Wall's transparencies include critical aspects that reveal a complexity that is not immediately apparent.

Rosalind Krauss on Jeff Wall

Rosalind Krauss has not addressed an essay to Jeff Wall's work, yet, as outlined earlier in this chapter, in some passing remarks, she has compared Wall unfavorably to James Coleman on the basis of their respective mediums. Asserting that photography was passing into obsolescence at this moment of "postconceptual, 'postmedium' production,"²³⁰ the only possible use of photography for Krauss was the reinvention, not the restoration, of a medium. Krauss appreciated Wall's use of the illuminated advertising panel as a "support for his postconceptual photographic

²²⁹ Wall, in Barents, 95; and Pelenc, 9-11.

²³⁰ Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," 296.

practice,” because it is a “low-grade, low-tech commercial support.” But although that that support might have been used as a way of reconsidering the idea of a medium Wall, instead, returned to the medium of painting:

Thus though Wall’s activities are symptomatic of the present need to reconsider the problem of the medium, they seem to partake of the kind of *revanchiste* restoration of the traditional media that was so characteristic of the 1980s.²³¹

She explained further: “Wall’s supporters see this staging [of nineteenth-century paintings] as a strategy for reconnecting with tradition. I feel, however, that such a reconnection is unearned by the works themselves and must therefore be characterized, negatively, as pastiche.”²³² Here, Krauss aligned Wall’s photographic works with those of artists who had returned to large-scale painting around 1980, and had been severely criticized by Douglas Crimp as well as art historian Benjamin Buchloh.²³³

Krauss’s more vituperative and extensive criticism of Wall was included initially as part of a catalogue essay written about the work of James Coleman, which she removed at the request of the publisher and later published in *October*.²³⁴ Having been motivated by the “luminous seduction” of Wall’s *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision*

²³¹ Ibid., 297.

²³² Ibid., n14.

²³³ See Crimp, “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism” and “The End of Painting.” See, also, Buchloh, “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression.” Buchloh decried the revival of the pictorial in neoexpressionist painting as bad art and bad politics: “The specter of derivativeness hovers over every contemporary attempt to resurrect figuration, representation, and traditional modes of production.... The primary function of such cultural re-presentation is the confirmation of the hieratics of ideological domination.” Buchloh saw in the return to representational picturing the recapitulation of an earlier period in which artists had repudiated the procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization and the mechanization of pictorial production processes developed immediately after World War I. While he was speaking in this essay of painting, and not large-scale, pictorial photography, which was just beginning to materialize, I would argue that Buchloh would place the 1980s work of Jeff Wall in the same derided category as neoexpressionist painting, and would view it as supporting the same late-capitalist hegemony.

²³⁴ Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away?” 32-33.

after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Mogor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (1991-92) as she saw it on exhibit in the Louvre, Krauss said,

I am astonished all over again by the position taken by his supporters when they argue that Wall simply returns to the moment when painting was internally riven by modernism...and the drive for a reflexive visual unity which proscribes narrative abruptly split itself off from history painting...This is the point after which the portrayal of modernity (the painting of modern life) comes into unbreachable conflict with the aesthetic ambitions of modernism. Going back to this moment, yet traveling over this same road but now as a photographer, Wall's restagings of Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere* or Courbet's *Source of the Loue* (or even more bizarrely, Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes*) are seen as gaining access to a narrative (and figurative) tradition that modernism simply, perversely, interrupted. And not only do they argue that Wall has reforged a kind of historical continuity, but that he has reconstituted the kind of pictorial unity of the old master *tableau*, a unity in which composition is able to weld a variety of elements seamlessly together. Thus does Wall gaily vault over the unhappy choice modernism gave itself of either gaining access to pictorial unity at the cost of narrative, three-dimensional space (unity therefore lodged in the material conditions of the surface), or admitting that such unity was irrevocably incompatible with the texture of real experience by means of the strategies of figurative dis-unity vested in collage and photo-montage.

Krauss continued by lamenting the failure of Wall's supporters to analyze his medium by treating him as having rehabilitated the medium of painting, thereby ignoring the fact that he is a photographer. Thus, their analysis had focused on genres of painting rather than those of photography, with a concomitant failure to engage with the specificity of Wall's actual medium. According to Krauss, both the supporters and Wall himself assume that the "unassailable *now* of the photograph can be dilated endlessly by the chatter of narrative, which not only suffuses Wall's images insofar as they produce themselves as 'history paintings' but is repeatedly thematized by the works themselves: the soldiers telephoning in *Dead Troops Talk*, the conversation of

the two women in *Diatribes...*”.²³⁵ The failure to deal specifically with his medium, according to Krauss, “consigns his reworkings of old master art to nothing more ambitious than pastiche.”²³⁶

On Krauss’s terms, Wall failed on at least two counts. First, although he made a good start by enlisting a low-tech, commercial support lacking an aesthetic lineage, he ignored the specificity of that support by not devising an art practice through a deconstruction of its very material. Rather, Wall turned to the history of painting and, with contemporary scenes and costumes, used photography to recapitulate well-known paintings created around the beginning of modernism. Thus, for Krauss, his work is really a restoration of painting in another medium, and is as useless, or as “*revanchiste*,” as the work of neoexpressionist painters of the 1980s.

The second problem, which is a subtext of the foregoing criticisms, is the pictorial unity in Wall’s restored images. To repeat, “And not only do [Wall’s supporters] argue that Wall has reformed a kind of historical continuity, but that he has reconstituted the kind of pictorial unity of the old master *tableau*, a unity in which composition is able to weld a variety of elements seamlessly together.”²³⁷ For Krauss, as argued above with respect to James Coleman and William Kentridge and

²³⁵ Ibid., 29. The phrase “traveling over this same road” seems to be a direct reference to Thierry de Duve’s essay “The Mainstream and the Crooked Path,” in which he said, “It is as though Wall had gone back to a fork in the roadway of history, to that very moment when, around Manet, painting was registering the shock of photography; and as though he had then followed the route that had not been taken by modern painting and had incarnated the painter of modern life as a photographer.” de Duve, et al., 44-46. De Duve discussed Wall’s landscape photographs in terms of the history of modernism, as mentioned above. His essay, first published in 1996, was the basis for his presentation at a symposium entitled “Modernist Utopias: Postformalism and the Purity of Vision,” held in December 1995 in Montreal. There, speakers Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh castigated de Duve for proposing continuity between a postmodern work (*The Storyteller*) and early modernism, and for his use of the term “photographic transparency.” See Douglas Ord, “Magic Lanterns, Stars and No-Place: The Symposium as Art Form,” *Parachute* 82 (April-May-June 1996): 62.

²³⁶ Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away?”, 29.

²³⁷ Ibid., 28.

as illustrated by the litany of terms that have been defined herein as “rupture,” the notion of pictorial unity is an effect to be studiously avoided. The “pictorial unity” in which composition “welds” elements “seamlessly together” is diametrically opposed to the goal of fracturing imagery and disrupting the flow of narrative in, or the apparent intelligibility of, a work of art. In Wall’s static transparencies, there is no flow, as there is no motion that gaps or fissures in the technical support could disrupt. In contrast to Coleman’s slide-tapes and Kentridge’s drawings for projection, there are no interstices to work against the grain. There is only one big picture that reinscribes visual narrative, or, at least, presumptive intelligibility.

The “pictorial unity” in Wall’s phototransparencies has led certain other art historians to criticize his work as “totalizing.” Krauss nods to those writers, T. J. Clark in particular, when describing Wall’s work as a variety of elements welded seamlessly together.²³⁸ In its simplest terms, this critique relies on the assumption that a unified picture such as a nineteenth-century history painting or a late twentieth-century transparency by Jeff Wall leaves no opening for the viewer to experience anything on his own, and, thus, is complicit with the dominant political and economic order. As considered in Chapter Three, Wall answers those criticisms as they relate to the criticality that he believes he has embedded within the subject matter and human gestures in his pictures, using arguments that originated in the period to which Krauss and Clark allude.

²³⁸ Ibid., n27: “For insofar as Wall tightly manipulates the relation between his images and their art-historical sources, the viewer of this work becomes a subject rigidly controlled by Wall (as the single subject/author).” Krauss was referring to an interview conducted in 1990 by T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner, “Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency,” *Parachute*, no. 59 (July-August-September 1990): 4-10. See, also, the related interview “Jeff Wall: Three Excerpts from a Discussion with T. J. Clark, Claude Gintz, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner cited above.

Gerhard Richter's Photopaintings

Turning to Gerhard Richter, whose painting praxis is deeply infected by photography--a praxis as hybrid as Wall's--it will be useful to see how one of his preeminent critics has theorized Richter's painting of pictures in the postmodern period.

Gerhard Richter's photopaintings²³⁹ are produced by a nearly literal mixture of painting and photography. His practice involves enlarging a photograph and projecting it onto canvas.²⁴⁰ Richter then paints the image, often omitting details and adding other nuances. His early work, through the 1960s in particular, was painted in shades of what Richter once called "non-color gray,"²⁴¹ typically excluding strong blacks and whites. Some work has been painted in color. The final stage of the process is the degradation of the clarity of the image by dragging a dry brush or squeegee across the canvas to produce what has been termed the "blur."²⁴²

The critical role of photography in Richter's painting praxis cannot be overstated. Since the early 1960s, Richter has collected photographs from sources such as magazines, newspapers, friends' snapshots, family albums and his own camerawork into an ever-growing archive that now numbers in the thousands. The photographs, including those that have played important roles in his paintings, have been compiled into an autonomous work referred to as *Atlas* that consists of original

²³⁹ Richter uses the term "photopainting." Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977, October 48* (Spring 1989): 89 n1. Richter's Notes from 1964 indicate, however, that an early term for this combination was "Photo Picture." Richter, DPP, 22.

²⁴⁰Richter, "Notes, 1964-1965," in DPP, 35.

²⁴¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Richter's Abstractions: Silences, Voids, and Evacuations," in *Gerhard Richter: Paintings from 2003-2005* (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 2005), 22.

²⁴²See, for example, Gertrude Koch, "The Richter-Scale of Blur," *October 62* (Fall 1992): 133-42, 136: "Some of the motifs that recur in Richter's pictures, photographs, and paintings take shape as embodiments of a conscious preference for the out-of-focus, for the blurred. It is not simply a case of imprecision; rather, it is the capture of a sliding glance."

photographs, enlargements, reproductions and illustrations categorized generally by content and form and mounted on panels for display.²⁴³

Richter has valorized the photograph for its power to evoke reality. In his Notes from 1964-1965, speaking of his painting praxis, Richter said the following about the photograph:

It's what everyone believes in nowadays: it's "normal." And if that then becomes "other", the effect is far stronger than any distortion, of the sort you find in Dali's figures or Bacon's. Such a picture can really scare you.

The photograph took the place of all those paintings, drawings and illustrations that served to provide information about the reality that they represented. A photograph does this more reliably and more credibly than any painting. It is the only picture that tells the absolute truth, because it sees "objectively". *It usually gets believed, even where it is technically faulty and the content is barely identifiable.* (Emphasis added.)

The photograph is the most perfect picture. It does not change; it is absolute, and therefore autonomous, unconditional, devoid of style. Both in its way of informing, and in what it informs of, it is my source.

A photograph is taken in order to inform. What matters to the photographer and to the viewer is the result, the legible information, the fact captured in an image. Alternatively, the photograph can be regarded as a picture, in which case the information conveyed changes radically. However, because it is very hard to turn a photograph into a picture simply by declaring it to be one, I have to make a painted copy.²⁴⁴

A photograph—unless the art photographers have "fashioned" it—is simply the best picture that I can imagine. It is perfect; it does not change; it is absolute, and therefore autonomous and unconditional. It has no style. The photograph is the only picture that can truly convey

²⁴³ *Atlas* has been exhibited as a work in itself since 1972. An exhibition history is included in *Gerhard Richter, Atlas of the photographs collages and sketches*, ed. Helmut Friedel and Ulrich Wilmes (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1997), 374-83. An exhibition in Barcelona in 2000 is pictured in B. H. D. Buchloh, J. F. Chevrier, A. Zweite and R. Rochlitz, *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on Atlas*, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Consorci del Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2000), 137.

²⁴⁴ Richter, "Notes, 1964-1965," in DPP, 30-31.

information, *even if it is technically faulty and the object can barely be identified.*²⁴⁵ (Emphasis added.)

The emphasized portions of the foregoing quotations are reminiscent of a statement of André Bazin, a French writer on cinema, who also commented on the power of even fuzzy photographs:

Painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the processes of reproduction. Only a photograph lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation....The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. *No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.*²⁴⁶ (Emphasis added.)

Yet, Richter paints, and he has suggested that painting and photography are simply different ways of producing a picture:

It isn't a different medium at all. It's fundamentally the same. Of course, a long time ago, I thought a picture was a picture only if it was painted. Later on I found to my great surprise that I could see a photograph as a picture—and in my enthusiasm I often saw it as the better picture of the two. It functions in the same way: it shows the appearance of something that is not itself—and it does it much faster and more accurately. That certainly influenced my way of seeing, and also my attitude to fabrication: for instance, the fact that it doesn't matter at all *who* took the photograph.

I meant the pictures to have this likeness to photography—if only for the sake of the credibility that photographs have, especially black-and-white ones. There's something documentary about them. More than any other kind of depiction, you believe in them.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Richter, Interview with Dieter Hülsmanns and Fridolin Reske, 1966," in DPP, 56-57.

²⁴⁶ André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

²⁴⁷ Richter, "Interview with Sabine Schutz, 1990," DPP, 217-18. The quoted paragraphs are Richter's responses to questions about the use of photography as "an intermediary" to painting, and the fact that the paintings appear "photographic."

As a painter, Richter takes and saves photographs for the purpose of using them as the sources for his painting. His lack of interest in who took the photograph is eloquent testimony to the indifference, if not the antipathy, he feels toward “art” photographs. He focuses on documentation in both the photographs and his “copies” of them in paint. His early grisaille photopaintings, as indicated above, were made to look like blurred photographs, which in Richter’s view have credibility even if “technically faulty and the content barely identifiable.” The issue of the blur and the distancing that Richter achieves by basing paintings on photographs is discussed in Chapter Three in connection with the disillusionment that they create in their effect on the viewer. The point here is that Gerhard Richter considers painting and photography to be different ways of making pictures—of depicting—and has developed a praxis that is an inextricable mixture—a fusion--of the two, although the physical support, or product, is always a painting. The goal is to create a picture, and, as with Wall’s view of his transparencies of the 1980s, which incorporate aspects of photography and nineteenth-century paintings, the fact that Richter’s praxis involves two mediums is of no theoretical consequence to the artist. Richter does not speak in the terms of postmodernist critical discourse.

Critical Response to Richter’s Photopaintings

There is a great deal of writing on the art of Gerhard Richter, in significant part because of the large number of exhibitions of his work that have been held in Western Europe and the United States since 1964, including major international exhibitions beginning with the Venice Biennale in 1972.²⁴⁸ The writing tends to

²⁴⁸ In the United States, Richter’s first group exhibition took place at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1969, and his first one-person exhibition was held at the Reinhard Onnasch Gallery in New

focus on two major issues: Richter's fusion of painting and photography, and the relationship of his subject matter to the history of Germany, both before and after World War II. Richter's unique personal history, including his early years in what became the German Democratic Republic, his move to the West in 1961 at age 29, and his immediate transition from the Socialist Realist pictorial painting style in which he had been trained, to photopaintings of banal, superficially Pop Art subjects, has engendered speculation about the relationship between his work and his bifurcated life during a tumultuous historical period.

Benjamin Buchloh, a fellow German who immigrated to the United States in 1977, has written extensively on Richter since 1976.²⁴⁹ Buchloh's doctoral dissertation is a monograph on the artist, he has published numerous articles and catalogue essays on Richter's work and two interviews with the artist, and a book is said to be forthcoming.²⁵⁰ Moreover, Richter's color photopainting *Court Chapel*,

York in 1973. Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 314-315. But Storr has acknowledged that Richter did not "fully emerge in his own right" until the late 1980s, as a result of the polemics that had developed around the politics of German painting since the late 1970s that made understanding Richter particularly difficult. For example, Richter was not included in the exhibition "Expressions: New Art from Germany" organized in 1983 by the St. Louis Art Museum and shown in five other cities. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁴⁹ Buchloh's and Richter's professional lives have intersected since 1975, when Buchloh began teaching the history of contemporary art at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, where Richter had taught since 1970. Their teaching also intersected at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, when Richter taught for a semester in 1977 at Buchloh's invitation. Robert Storr, 316. According to Romy Golan, Buchloh was "put on the American map as the great bard of institutional critique" by his essay in the catalogue for "Europe in the Seventies" at the Chicago Art Institute in 1977. Romy Golan, "Review of *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*," *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 381-82. See B. H. D. Buchloh, "Formalism and Historicity—Changing Concepts in American and European Art Since 1945," trans. Barbara C. Flynn, in *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1977), 83-112.

²⁵⁰ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter: Painting after the Subject of History," Ph.D. diss. (City University of New York, 1994). In the Acknowledgments to his volume of collected essays, Buchloh said the following about his relationship with Gerhard Richter: "Of equal importance, and fortunately still continuing, is my friendship with Gerhard Richter. Since the early 1970s, he has taught me the opposite half of the dialectical engagement, the one that posits at all times a commitment to the most differentiated specificity of practice and perception (not just in painting) against any theoretical or political doctrine. If I have included only the first of my numerous essays on his oeuvre in this

Dresden (2000) [fig. II-2], depicts the artist and Buchloh in front of a church door in Dresden.²⁵¹

Buchloh's writings on art have been published often in the journal *October*, and he has been a colleague of Rosalind Krauss in connection with that publication, as a graduate student advisee, and as a professor of art history. Buchloh's overtly Marxist approach to art produced a vituperative attack on postwar West German figurative painting in his 1981 essay, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," in which he stridently criticized German painters such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz for their regressive art practices.²⁵² Buchloh's derision of painting was complemented the next year in an essay in which he valorized montage and appropriation as allegorical art-producing strategies, relying heavily on the theories of Walter Benjamin.²⁵³ In the second essay, he praised contemporary artists such as Sherrie Levine, Michael Asher and Dara Birnbaum for using methods such as confiscation, superimposition and fragmentation (the kinds of tactics valorized by Douglas Crimp), based on theories developed in the early twentieth century by Sergei

volume, it is because my monographic study of Richter's work will follow the publication of these essays in the not too distant future." *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), xiii.

²⁵¹ Karen Rosenberg, "The Real Richter?" *Art Monthly* no. 255 (April 2002): 2. This painting was included in an exhibition titled "What Is Painting: Contemporary Art from the Collection" at the Museum of Modern Art during the summer of 2007. Given Buchloh's general derision of painting, yet his acclamation of Richter, there is a certain irony in curator Anne Umland's selection of this work to represent Richter in an exhibition that questioned the nature of painting.

¹⁴⁸ In "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," focusing particularly on German Neoexpressionism and Italian "Arte Ciphra," Buchloh saw such painting as regressive contrivances of aura and fetishized modes of artistic production: "Concomitant with the fetishization of painting in the cult of *peinture* is a fetishization of the perceptual experience of the work as *auratic*. The contrivance of aura is crucial for these works in order that they fulfill their function as the luxury products of a fictitious high culture." *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁵³ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* 21, no. 1 (September 1982): 43-56.

Eisenstein, Berthold Brecht, Walter Benjamin and others. At the same time, he again criticized contemporary painting:

We can find strategies and procedures of quotation and appropriation in contemporary painting, but the very mode of painting provides an experience of reconciliation....Even the “conspicuous” delegation of certain painterly tasks of figurative representation to anonymous commercial experts or professionals, who draw bunnies or bombers, does not resolve the historical limitations of this production procedure and its incapacity to develop an adequate viewer-text relationship.²⁵⁴

Those two essays, written at the critical moment of the heralded return of painting to Western Europe and the United States, were instrumental in elucidating Buchloh’s fundamental approach to postwar art. Buchloh’s antipathy toward West German figurative painting in particular would seem to make him a most unlikely champion of Gerhard Richter. For purposes of this study, Buchloh’s writings on Richter will be considered from the standpoint of his commentary on Richter’s combination of mediums within the practice of painting, which Buchloh has been able to defend because of what he sees as dialectical oppositions that facilitate its inclusion within his Marxist perspective. Somehow, he has had to be convinced that Richter’s painting does not produce “an experience of reconciliation,” and that it resolves “the historical limitations of this production procedure.” As will be seen, the process of Richter’s praxis is as important to Buchloh as is the product, and the issues of the dialectic and negation within individual works and between types of works are paramount.

Buchloh’s first published article about Richter’s painting was written in 1976, just before Richter’s abstract paintings appeared and five years prior to Buchloh’s

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 52. “Bunnies and bombers” may be references to the paintings of Sigmar Polke and Anselm Kiefer, respectively. Richter, too, painted images of World War II-era bombers.

wholesale castigation of figurative painting.²⁵⁵ In that essay, Buchloh traced Richter's historical trajectory from his training in Socialist Realism, to his exposure to Duchamp, Pop Art, Minimalism and Robert Rauschenberg, and concluded that Richter's photopainting was a unity of three dialectically contradictory links: the readymade, the iconography of photography, and the practice of painting.²⁵⁶ Calling Richter "a dialectician" [sic.], Buchloh saw Richter's paintings as "acting against the reifying function of the copy and of the reproduction," and as "discourses filled with reality (devoid of any subjective expression)." Buchloh found structural oppositions within Richter's oeuvre. For example, within early 1960s photopaintings of banal subjects such as rolls of toilet paper and groups of tourists, Richter used amateur or reportage photographs as readymades along with the traditional materials of painting to produce painted photographs. This combination presented "a perceptual illusion" and a "misleading" impetus to see the works as conventional paintings, yet with an authenticity that photographs confer because of their indexical, or empirical, nature. Using such photographs as a "dictionary of culture," Richter was "studying the collective conditions of perception, and endeavoring to demonstrate the indissoluble link between culturally conditioned elements and the natural process of perception."²⁵⁷ Buchloh also found dialectical relationships within Richter's 48

²⁵⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Readymade, Photography, and Painting in the Painting of Gerhard Richter," in *Gerhard Richter*, exh. cat., ed. Daniel Abadie (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1977), 11-58; republished and expanded in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, 365-403. Buchloh established his interest in Richter's work in this first essay, which was the only one in which he dealt with the work of the 1960s. Later catalogue essays were written in connection with exhibitions of abstract paintings, primarily, with some commentary on the portraits and still lifes. A notable exception was Buchloh's essay on Richter's 15-painting cycle concerning the Baader-Meinhof group, *October 18, 1977* (1988), which are history paintings of recent events: "A Note on Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*," *October* 48 (Spring 1989): 89-109.

²⁵⁶ Buchloh, "Readymade, Photography, and Painting," 375.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 378.

Portraits, paintings of German historical personages made for the West German pavilion at the 1972 Venice Biennale. This serial work lent itself to a minimalist presentation (a single line of 48 nearly identical objects), and reflected a random selection procedure based solely on the “paintability” of the original photojournalistic pictures of iconic historic figures, although certain professions were intentionally avoided.

There was for Buchloh a “double negation” in the painting groups that followed: the *Color Charts* (1971-1973) and the *Gray Pictures* (1972-1975). Each eschewed a photographic source, and thereby avoided the issues of a relationship to a referent and of representation and expression. Together, they served to negate “the historically defined, representational value of color,” and, moreover, the *Gray Pictures* removed “the historically determined qualities of pictorial practice as gestural activity,” thus “conferring on them a linguistic objectivity of pictorial form.”²⁵⁸

It can be seen from the foregoing that Buchloh’s fundamental focus was the negation or absence of the traditional aspects of painting, such as representation and reflections of the painter’s subjectivity and hand by finding dialectical or oppositional relationships within works. He evinces no interest in aesthetics.

Buchloh’s most strained arguments arise in addressing Richter’s colorful Abstract Paintings, which first appeared in 1976 and have the most obvious aesthetic appeal within his oeuvre. Beginning in 1985, Buchloh was careful to negate any idea

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 393, 395.

that those works constitute “third generation Abstract Expressionism.”²⁵⁹ Calling these colorful and gestural works a “dialectical negation” of the implications of the earlier *Gray Paintings*, and distinguishing between the mechanical and the organic aspects of modernist painterly procedure, Buchloh found that Richter’s mechanical process of producing the Abstract Paintings was their salvation. “Color sketches,” as Richter called them, were transferred, enlarged and reproduced on canvas to create the larger oil paintings under scrutiny. For Buchloh, this process of “structural transformation” kept the works in the mechanical category:

The “Abstract Paintings” therefore provide us with immediate insight into the contemporary conditions of painting: to exist between the irreconcilable demands of the spectacle and the synecdoche and it is this dialectic that determines the reading of the “Abstract Paintings.”²⁶⁰

Thus, although the Abstract Paintings might appear to the uninitiated viewer to be the inheritors of both the process and the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism, it was the fact that the process of their making involved the mediation of a partly mechanical photographic transformation of smaller oil sketches that kept them from being the immediate expression of the artist’s inner thoughts and feelings, his subjectivity. But as will be seen in interviews between Buchloh and Richter, the two often did not speak the same language, and Richter did not speak of the Abstract Paintings in Buchloh’s terms:

“Polychrome and complicated” were the terms that Richter used to identify the qualities of the paintings with which he wanted to be engaged, yet he did not mention that they would be mediated through changes of scale and photographic technology, that their “facture” would be shifted from the immediate to the constructed, that the

²⁵⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Richter’s Facture: Between the Synecdoche and the Spectacle,” in *Gerhard Richter*, exh. cat. (New York: Marian Goodman and Sperone Westwater, 1985), np.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

catalogue of pictorial devices—the memory of painting—would assume suddenly the dimension of a manifestation of the conditions of spectacle within the practices of painting itself, that it would betray the heretofore unknown degree to which the pursuit of the modernist high art of painting had already assumed its historical share to exist in the culture of the spectacle itself, as the one practice that remained outside of the totality it had become its most precious domain.²⁶¹

I would argue that Richter’s description, “polychrome and complicated,” does not suggest that his procedure was the most important aspect of the work for him, or that he had in mind Buchloh’s goal of “resistance and opposition against the totality of myth in the mass cultural forms of representation that governed everyday life: the spectacle of consumption and the consumption of spectacle.” Mis-identifying these works as the result of a practice of synecdoche and in a dialectical relationship with Richter’s immediately prior practice of painting in monochrome allowed Buchloh to define them in terms of radical resistance.

Writing in 1992 in connection with Richter’s installation of paintings and glass panes in a “simulacral cabinet” at Documenta IX, Buchloh continued to connect Richter with his arguments against spectacle culture in general, and art installations in particular. Although he regarded typical installation art as complicit with the “scopic regime of commodity culture where every utilitarian object has to be transformed into a visual display,” Richter’s installation, in Buchloh’s view, was a demonstration of the contradictions inherent in artistic practice: “This condition is undoubtedly one of the most paradoxical challenges artistic practices currently confront: to have to construct objects of visuality that resist the continuous process of the transformation

²⁶¹ Ibid.

of experience into specularity.”²⁶² In this case, Richter’s placement of abstract paintings in a wood-paneled simulated railroad car,

foreground[ed] the actual conditions of temporality and ephemerality that currently determine the status of the work of art: to be shipped from one exhibition to another. This was one form of opposition to the culturally-defined position of painting, while it performed a second: the allegorical enactment of “the failure and decorative misuse of abstraction.”²⁶³

Buchloh noted that German critics of the installation were unable to understand Richter’s “painterly intervention in the territory of current installation art,”²⁶⁴ and he offered no evidence that Richter’s personal intentions were consistent with the writer’s interpretation. He could suggest only that El Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* (1926-28) for Dresden and Hannover, and Marcel Broodthaers’ *La Salle Blanche* (1975) in Paris were “present in Richter’s art-historical unconscious.”²⁶⁵ Buchloh admitted that Richter did not share the “radical pessimism” of Broodthaers, but asserted that he mourned “the destruction of those forms of knowledge and experience once provided by painting for its spectators.” He also failed to acknowledge Lissitzky’s utopian leanings when comparing the works of Richter and Lissitzky.

Even in the small floral still life (the only work in the exhibition based on a photograph and representing a genre that had descended to a “profound level of painterly decrepitude”), Buchloh found aspects of opposition. First, in the source photograph and in the painting, the flowers are viewed from below, depriving viewers

²⁶² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Allegories of Painting,” in *Gerhard Richter: Documenta IX, 1992*, exh. cat. (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1993), 9.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10, 11.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

of the traditional “gasp or a gaze of control and possession.” Second, “the degree of obsolescence inherent in the category of the floral still life...allows Richter to spark a moment of resistant experience without that moment being instantly adapted to the terms of the spectacular.” The choice of the obsolete genre “might originate in an inverted gesture of opposition to the universal spectacularization to which all avant-garde models are now incessantly subjected.”²⁶⁶

Richter simply does not speak in Buchloh’s terms. In an often-cited interview that Buchloh conducted with Richter in 1986,²⁶⁷ they spoke at cross purposes throughout as Buchloh attempted to obtain Richter’s agreement about dialectical aspects of his works and their potentially socially critical nature. It is difficult to tell whether Richter is amused or aggravated by Buchloh’s attempts to characterize his work. For example:

B: So you would dispute the charge that has so often been made against you, that you have cynically acquiesced to the ineffectuality of painting?

R: Yes. Because I know for a fact that painting is not ineffectual. I would only like it to accomplish more.

B: In other words, you are making the spectacle of painting visible in its rhetoric, without practicing it.

R: What sense would that have? That would be the last thing I’d want.

B: Why is it inconceivable for you to consider or to discuss in social and political terms the idea of an existence free from domination? Why is your only recourse that to the metaphor of nature, like a Romantic?

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁶⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Interview with Gerhard Richter,” trans. Stephen P. Duffy, in Terry A. Neff, ed., *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, exh. cat. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 15-29.

R: No, like a painter. The reason I don't argue in "socio-political terms" is that I want to produce a picture and not an ideology. It's always its factuality, and not its ideology, that makes a picture good.²⁶⁸

Commentary on Benjamin Buchloh

Criticism of Buchloh's writings on art of the late twentieth century in general, and his assessment of Richter's work in particular, has not been extensive. Robert Storr has been gentle, but clear, in his criticism of Buchloh. In a 2001 interview about the Museum of Modern Art's forthcoming Richter retrospective, Storr said, "Buchloh's understanding of conventions is that they are inherently evil and that they need to be exposed....Buchloh [in his 1986 interview with Richter] raises many, many good topics, but he assigns Richter only one role in relation to each of them."²⁶⁹

In his Introduction to the retrospective catalogue, Storr noted the irony of condemnation as a compliment in Buchloh's back-handed praise of the painter: "At the moment, this makes you particularly attractive to many viewers because your work looks like a survey of the whole universe of twentieth-century painting, presented in one vast, cynical retrospective." According to Storr, Buchloh and other "doctrinal exponents of Marcel Duchamp's conceit that 'retinal,' or perceptual, forms of art had been permanently eclipsed by conceptual ones cast Richter as the man who could thoroughly undo painting precisely because he could do it so well."²⁷⁰ Storr

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 21, 28, 29.

²⁶⁹ Robert Storr, "Call to Order: Gerhard Richter at MoMA: Tom Holert talks with Robert Storr," *Artforum* 40, no. 5 (January 2002): 105.

²⁷⁰ Storr, *Gerhard Richter*, 17. Storr stated, also, that by "those dedicated to the proposition that painting was a social and aesthetic anachronism [including Douglas Crimp], Richter the postmodern polymath was accorded a special—and especially—problematic role as the unrivaled anti-master of his craft who could demonstrate once and for all that painting had exhausted its formerly protean possibilities—possibilities which could never be revived no matter how skillfully they were evoked." Ibid.

concluded his Introduction with the thought that since painting is no longer such a dominant medium, it was time to see Richter's work "at one remove from these increasingly dated and preemptive ways of looking....Whatever has been or may be said about his contribution to the medium...Richter has, paradoxically or stealthily, demonstrated painting's resiliency."²⁷¹

In an essay on German figurative painting from 1960 to 1988, Thomas Krens presented a concise and uncritical overview of Buchloh's criticism of painting as expressed in "Figures of Authority," calling him a "principal contestant in the international critical debate...based on the strength of a penetrating Marxist critique."²⁷² According to Krens, Buchloh's critique is based on "an insightful, if selective, Marxist reading of history that is systematically organized to attack the obvious and superficial characteristics demonstrated by an oeuvre that threatened the adversarial stance that a radical art had traditionally maintained against the cultural

²⁷¹ Ibid., 18. See, also, Robert Storr's characterization of the ideological position of the authors in his review of *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, of whom Buchloh is one: Speaking of "the method of those who seek intellectual hegemony," Storr said, "On that score, one wonders how it is that the October 'revolutionaries' of 1976 have become figures of authority so well entrenched within their positions, or why their carefully hedged, dogma-heavy version of twentieth-century art serves the needs of so many sectors of institutional American culture at its most conservative moment since the 1950s." Storr, "Review of *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*," *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 2 (June 2006): 382-85.

²⁷² Thomas Krens, "German Painting: Paradox and Paradigm in Late Twentieth-Century Art," in *Refigured Painting: The German Image 1960-88*, ed. Thomas Krens, Michael Govan, and Joseph Thompson (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Munich: Prestel, 1989), 15. According to Krens, the other "principal contestant" was Donald Kuspit. See Donald Kuspit, "Flak from the 'Radicals': The American Case Against Current German Painting," in Cowart, ed., *Expressions: New Art from Germany*, 43-44, in which Kuspit attacked critics of German Neoexpression, particularly Buchloh. For example, "Buchloh never considers the possibility that Modernism might have become an empty stereotype of itself, and that its strategies of 'parody and appropriation' might have been overused and abused to the point of becoming mechanical reflexes." Speaking also of Douglas Crimp, Thomas Lawson and others, Kuspit said, "They have an unwittingly ahistorical and thus subtly irrelevant conception of avant-garde radicality. They refuse to see themselves as traditionalists loyal to an old cause of Modernism, for then they would have to see themselves, rather than the Germans, as decadent."

status quo.”²⁷³ Krens suggested that Buchloh’s derision of the new German painting was based on three points: (i) that the modernist paradigm has suffered periods of exhaustion, and at such times there has been “a call for a return to traditional values of craft and representation,” so that the newness of this art, quoting Buchloh, “consists precisely in [its] current historical availability, not in any actual innovation of artistic practice;” (ii) the aesthetic appreciation for this art relies on “an obsolete critical language of ‘false naivete and bloated trivialities’;” and (iii) this art is a derivative attempt to revive figuration and representation, and is therefore, again quoting Buchloh, “a confirmation of the hieratics of ideological domination.”²⁷⁴ In the final assessment, for Buchloh, the return to figurative painting was politically dangerous. Krens’s objective was not to refute Buchloh’s view, but to place it in the context of alternative readings furnished by German art historians who agreed that opposition in art production was essential, but believed that using so-called bourgeois conventions could be a “radical mechanism for exposing a mentality of repression.”²⁷⁵

The most direct attack against Buchloh’s attack on painting was voiced by Michael Peglau, who focused on both “Figures of Authority” and “Allegorical Procedures.”²⁷⁶ Peglau’s critique is based on what he termed Buchloh’s eclectic reliance on several Marxist writers who held somewhat inconsistent views, and, particularly, on his authoritarian rhetoric and his failure to define terms and back up

²⁷³ Krens, *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷⁶ Michael Peglau, “Against Benjamin Buchloh’s Attack on Painting,” *Art Criticism* 3, no. 2 (1987): 1-33. For another critical view, see Rainer Rochlitz, “Where We Have Got To,” in *Photography and Painting in the Work of Gerhard Richter: Four Essays on Atlas* (Barcelona: Consorci del Museu d’Art Contemporani del Barcelona, 2000), 103-25.

his arguments. He called Buchloh “the most convinced and vehement of Marxist critics writing in English” and one who hates the “auratic status” of “high art.”²⁷⁷ Ultimately, Peglau asserted that “Figures of Authority” “reads finally as an exercise in nostalgia, as a eulogy to dead and explorative figures such as Benjamin...and also to some of the art in the radicality of its original moment.”²⁷⁸

Pegla’s criticism of Buchloh’s “vehement” castigation of the painting that had come to the fore in the late 1970s and was featured in the 1980 Venice Biennale, where the work of painters such as Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz was shown in the West German pavilion makes a number of valid points.²⁷⁹ The language and tone of “Figures of Authority” is strident and unconvincing and lacks arguments as to why practices such as collage and montage developed in the early twentieth century should be the standard for art produced 60 years later. Buchloh is wedded to a dialectical process that includes unending opposition to the status quo. For Buchloh, all art is politically potent, and if it is auratic or aesthetic, it is a bourgeois commodity that supports a repressive social order by participating in the spectacle of the culture industry. He does acknowledge that the utopian aspects of earlier avant-garde art theories that held that art could lead to changes in the social order are no longer viable. Thus, at this stage of history, what advanced art must resist is the cultural spectacle of late capitalism, utilizing “critical interventions” and “other structures generating the dissolution of power and repression.”²⁸⁰

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 1,4.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 26.

²⁷⁹ Thomas Krens outlined the spate of international exhibitions of German figurative painting from 1979 to 1984, when “the meteoric rise of German figurative painting to international prominence was established as an indisputable if nevertheless controversial fact.” Krens, 14-15.

²⁸⁰ Buchloh, Introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, xxiii-xxv.

In an argument in defense of what she calls critical figuration, Suzaan Boettger criticized Buchloh's false dichotomy "between representational form (seen as a retreat to tradition) and modernist abstraction (with its corollary avant-garde, constantly and radically innovative)" expressed in "Figures of Authority."²⁸¹ She asserted that some regression can be productive, attributing Buchloh's failure to accept this possibility to his reliance on a Lacanian, linguistic conception of reality and a Freudian view of regression as pathological. Ultimately, Boettger asserted a vague and unconvincing psychological explanation for the "way neo-expressionism [had] dominated the field in the last decade," suspecting that such images fulfilled an undefined "substantial need."²⁸²

Overall, Buchloh has misconstrued Gerhard Richter's project by finding within his praxis and products oppositional and critical qualities that Richter either denies or sees as less important. Buchloh cannot completely accept the fact that Richter is an unapologetic, consummate painter. Buchloh's acclamation of Richter's painting remains a puzzling and strained aberration within his considerable critical writings.²⁸³

²⁸¹ Suzaan Boettger, "Regression in the Service of...," *Art Criticism* 2, no. 2 (1986): 57-68.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸³ His most direct statement on this point was made in the Introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, in which he said, with regard to his recent work on Gerhard Richter, "I have focused on the aesthetic capacity to construct the mnemonic experience as one of the few acts of resistance against the totality of spectacularization." (p. xxv.) With one minor exception, Buchloh has not written directly about Jeff Wall. His attack on Thierry de Duve at the Montreal symposium cited above, however, was an indirect criticism of Wall, whose work *The Storyteller* was the subject of de Duve's presentation and who does not acknowledge a break in the history of Modernism. Buchloh was quoted as saying that de Duve's approach was enough to merit "howls of laughter." Ord, 62. In addition, in Buchloh's Introduction to *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, referring to "a certain light-box photo-conceptualism," he said: "This type of installation art and photo-conceptualism now produces a techno-lingo of the image that can pride itself in being the first to have fully absorbed the very technologies that made the culture of spectacle and the production of advertisement imagery a monolithic global power. Such affirmative mimesis makes it seem inescapable that artistic practices would, if not actually pave the way for, at least finally succumb to the powers of spectacle culture to

Peter Osborne has also managed to find a way around the fact that Richter is a painter. Speaking in Buchloh's terms, Osborne has argued that Richter's photopainting is a "double negation:" the enactment of a painterly negation of the historical negation of painting by the invention of the photograph.²⁸⁴ Richter has said, "I don't copy photographs laboriously with painstaking craftsmanship: I work out a rational technique—which is rational because *I paint like a camera*, and which looks the way it does because I exploit the altered way of seeing created by photography."²⁸⁵ (Emphasis added.) By using the photograph as the source and subject matter of his paintings, according to Osborne, Richter

uses the objectivity or givenness of the photographic image...to counter the perceived subjectivism of painting at two distinct levels: extrinsically, by taking away the responsibility for the representational content from the painting and displacing it onto the photography, and intrinsically, by thereby predetermining the compositional form of the picture and reducing its representational task to that of the apparent replication or simple reproduction of the mechanically produced

permeate all conventions of perception and communication without any form of resistance whatsoever. It implies that even the mere thought and the slightest gesture of opposition appear dwarfed and ludicrous in the face of the totalitarian control and domination by spectacle." Ibid., xxi-xxii. It is inconceivable that this does not refer to Jeff Wall, who initiated and popularized the lightbox format, and who has taken the position that gestures produce critical meanings within his pictures. This use of gesture is explored in Chapter Three. In a later postscript to "A Draft for Dan Graham's *Kammerspiel*," cited above, although critical of Buchloh, Wall states, "It will be clear in the text that my critique of Buchloh's writing was developed in an atmosphere of respect and admiration for his work. It was conceived as a contribution to a dialectic in which Buchloh had set exemplary standards." Yet, Wall is clear that he regards Buchloh's position as unproductive and defeatist: "This strategic self-dissolution of the aesthetic as a conscious antagonistic response to the 'decreed abolition' of critical negation by the culture industry is the central term of Buchloh's thesis, and it is the essence of what he wishes to preserve from conceptualism. The act of the self-dissolution of the aesthetic, still instinctive in conceptualism, becomes conscious and deliberate in Buchloh....But this supremely conscious act of negation is of course not original to Buchloh; it is Adorno's. For all its trappings of the productivist 'redesigning of reality,' this act is centered on the gesture of consciously willed abnegation, self-cancellation, and defeatism which Adorno concluded was the essential condition of art in a situation of advancing barbarism." Ibid., 25. Here, in 1981, Wall established his claim to the validity of making art with aesthetic qualities that is at the same time socially critical, while providing a complex history and argument for the failure of Conceptual Art.

²⁸⁴ Peter Osborne, "Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 102-13. The notion of double negation sounds similar to Jeff Wall's arguments about "transgressing transgression" in his pictorial praxis. Wall's position opposing the need for physical rupture in a work of art is explored in Chapter Three.

²⁸⁵ Richter, "Notes, 1964-1965," in DPP, 35.

image, in painterly mimicry of the aspiration to objectivity of the naturalistic representational function itself, usurped by photography from an older tradition in painting.²⁸⁶

On this point, Richter has said, “In 1962, I found my first escape hatch: by painting from photographs, I was relieved of the need to choose or construct a subject. I had to choose the photographs, of course; but I could do that in a way that avoided any commitment to the subject, by using motifs which had very little image to them and which were anachronistic.”²⁸⁷ Yet, although Richter has acknowledged that deciding what to paint had been a problem for him even in his youth, another way to look at the act of painting from found photographs is that it necessarily entails choice. He has said,

I am continually composing and above all deleting (i.e., avoiding), and I restrict myself to a very small repertoire, which is to say that I act very deliberately....But it is also untrue that I have nothing specific in mind. As with my landscapes: I see countless landscapes, photograph barely 1 in 100,000, and paint barely 1 in 100 of those that I photograph. I am therefore seeking something quite specific; from this I conclude that I know what I want.²⁸⁸

Given the thousands of photographs included in Richter’s *Atlas*, the process of selection (and avoidance) is of critical importance.

As for the “the apparent replication or simple reproduction of the mechanically produced image” posited by Osborne, there is overwhelming evidence of alteration and manipulation of the original photographs to produce significantly different impressions between the paintings and the photographs—they are simply different pictures. Richter recodes the source photographs in numerous ways. First, he typically leaves out many details, so that there is a high degree of abstraction.

²⁸⁶ Osborne, 104-05.

²⁸⁷ Richter “Notes,” in DPP, 130.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

Second, of course, they are paintings, and the tactility of the brush and oil paint on canvas is very visible: one is looking at an entirely different object. The blurring technique that the artist employs, although it serves, ironically, to bring forth into the paintings the credibility of the photograph, even though “faulty,” creates a distance that an out-of-focus photograph also necessarily creates. This technique keeps the viewer from an immediate and easy apprehension of the subject. Yet, these are only the most obvious differences. The nuances occur in both the choices of images and the revisions made in the paintings. Since *Atlas* makes many of the source photographs available, comparisons may often be made.²⁸⁹

In light of the differences between Richter’s source photographs and his paintings, Peter Osborne’s idea about Richter’s “painterly mimicry of the aspiration to objectivity of the naturalistic representational function itself, usurped by photography” is simplistic. There is no question that Richter is interested in photography as a model for painting and a source of subjects. Richter is engaged, however, in far more than the “double negation” focused on painting as an obsolete technique that Osborne presents in order to place Richter comfortably within postmodernist practice. Even with the doubled distance between the painting and the object of which the photograph is a trace, the effects of the trace are in the painting, but vastly complicated by the recoding that Richter performs by erasing details, emphasizing parts and rearranging objects. The product is a painting that has embedded within it a photograph that has been altered to produce another picture. Its superficial appearance as a fuzzy, distorted or discolored photograph adds, oddly, to

²⁸⁹ The most direct opportunity for this kind of comparison is with *October 18, 1977*. See Robert Storr, “The Paintings,” in *Gerhard Richter: October 18, 1977*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 95-117.

its credibility as a picture, but the apprehension of the original photograph and the apprehension of the painting are entirely different experiences. As Richter has said,

Life communicates itself to us through convention and through the parlour games and laws of social life. Photographs are ephemeral images of this communication—as are the pictures that I paint from photographs. Being painted, they no longer tell of a specific situation, and the representation becomes absurd. *As a painting, it changes both its meaning and its information content.* (Emphasis added.)²⁹⁰

Is There a Pure Medium?

From the vantage point of more than 25 years since 1980, the pivotal year of the period of this study, concern about medium *per se* seems to have diminished, if not evaporated. Photography has become such an integral part of so many art practices, that its physical properties as a “technical support” are not labored over.²⁹¹ Emerging from the controversies of the early 1980s, some recent art surveys demonstrate the status of photographic art.

In a 2003 survey of art utilizing photography during the previous three decades, David Campany asserted that “In what might now have become a post-medium condition for art, photography is so often the medium of choice”²⁹²

Appropriating the title of Aaron Scharf’s 1968 book on the history of the relationship between photography and art, *Art and Photography*, Campany extended the

²⁹⁰ Richter, “Notes, 1964-1965,” DPP, 31.

²⁹¹ See, for example, Andy Grundberg and Kathleen McCarthy Gauss, *Photography and Art: Interactions Since 1946* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987). Earlier studies of the historic relationships between photography and art include Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), previously published in 1968; Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph: From Delacroix to Warhol* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974); and Volker Kahmen, *Art History of Photography*, trans. Brian Tubb (New York: Viking Press, 1974). A more recent discussion is Mark Prince, “Painting & Photography,” *Art Monthly* 260 (October 2002): 2: “Whereas the boundaries between the media were relatively rigid for Gerhard Richter or Chuck Close—and transgressing them was a significant move in itself—painting and photography now exist at either end of a non-hierarchical axis on which the poles can variously merge and overlap, seeking contrasting qualities.”

²⁹² David Campany, ed. *Art and Photography* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 15.

discussion with images and documents from the period, including works by both Wall and Richter.²⁹³ Company noted that given the recent acceleration and largely electronic media culture, “photography is now grasped as a medium characterized by slowness. Where once it might have been the pinnacle of cultural speed, it now seems a more deeply contemplative medium, detached even while it describes.” This slowness, coupled with “the move toward very large prints that hold the attention of the gallery viewer in a very different way to the precious and small formats of the past...has allowed photography to assume the scale and modes of attention formerly ascribed to painting.”²⁹⁴

In a 2001 exhibition entitled “Painting at the Edge of the World,” curator Douglas Fogle included two digitalized photographs by Andreas Gursky among works that were otherwise paintings.²⁹⁵ The Gursky photographs were *Untitled X (Constable)* (1999), a C-print showing a detail of a painting by John Constable; and *Untitled VI* (1997), a C-print showing the entire image of Jackson Pollock’s *One: Number 31, 1950 (Autumn Rhythm)* as exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Gursky has engaged with painting within his photographic oeuvre, although I would argue that Peter Galassi’s comparison of certain works to those of Gerhard Richter is overdrawn. To include Gursky’s

²⁹³ Company also included one of Thomas Struth’s museum photographs, mentioned earlier. *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20, 40.

²⁹⁵ Douglas Fogle, *Painting at the Edge of the World*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001). In his essay, “The Trouble with Painting,” 13-25, Fogle acknowledged the controversies regarding painting, including the suspicion that was mounted during the 1960s and the refusals to paint exemplified by the work of Daniel Buren. In a nod to the ideological and ontological issues in this history, he included works by Helio Oiticica, Paul Thek and Marcel Broodthaers in the exhibition. Broodthaers’s work was *Tableau Bateau* (1973), an 80-slide installation that showed small fragments of a historic seascape painting, thus invoking connections between painting and photography while deconstructing the notion of the tableau. This work is the source of the title of Rosalind Krauss’s long essay, *A Voyage on the North Sea*, discussed above.

photography in a painting exhibition, however, is to equate it with painting in a way that takes the argument a step further. Acknowledging the inspiration of a review of Gursky's work, Fogle quoted a critic as justification for including the photographs in the exhibition:

“Painting” is a philosophical enterprise that doesn't always involve paint...It is “a way of organizing the world that represents neither truth nor fiction exclusively but rather a little of both. Whether an artist uses a brush or a camera to achieve that goal scarcely matters.”²⁹⁶

In the entry on Gursky, Fogle offered the idea that Gursky's “large-scale, saturated photographs inhabit a space between painting and photography....The resolute flatness of his compositions references the geometric forms of minimalist art and the all-over quality of Jackson Pollock's paintings.” Simply put, these photographs of paintings apparently look like paintings.

Another 2001 exhibition, “As Painting: Division and Displacement” carried the expansion of the field of painting far beyond its traditional boundaries by including photography, sculpture, architecture and installation.²⁹⁷ In a philosophical discussion incorporating the ideas of writers such as Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Greenberg and Fried, Stephen Melville attempted to define what “counts as painting” since the 1960s, when, he says, Minimalism placed painting into question. Melville based his conclusions on which works of art offer an experience of what we know is continuous with painting:

It will be enough that a work shows itself as painting—that it be able to, as Fried puts it, “stand comparison with the painting of the past whose quality is not in doubt,” or, as I would put it, that it offer an

²⁹⁶ Fogle, quoting Howard Halle's review of an exhibition of Gursky's photography, “Photo-unrealism,” *Time Out New York* (December 30, 1999-January 6, 2000): 55-56.

²⁹⁷ Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, exh. cat. (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2001).

experience that we recognize as continuous with what we know to be the experience of painting—for it to be a painting.²⁹⁸

The exhibition included works by Mel Bochner, Sherrie Levine, James Welling and Donald Judd, among works by many French artists whose work since the 1960s the curators felt had been overlooked. The philosophical reach of the exhibition can be illustrated by the inclusion of five works by Gerhard Richter: *Shadowpicture I* (1968), a calotype; *Doppelglasscheibe (416)* (1977), two large mirrors mounted on a metal stand facing in opposite directions; *I. G. (790-4)* (1993) and *I. G.(790-5)* (1993), each, a photopainting of the upper torso of a young man who faces a blank wall; and *Abstraktes Bild (825-10)* (1995), a colorful Abstract Painting. The variety in Richter's oeuvre fairly demonstrates the "division and displacement" inherent in the conception of the exhibition overall. With regard to Richter's works, Melville said, "painting clearly has no one place in which it finds its essential form but is permanently given over to a dispersion across a number of 'genres.'"²⁹⁹ He asserted further that "painting evidently does not happen for Richter apart from an engagement also with other practices, most obviously photography but also sculpture."³⁰⁰

In the exhibition "As Painting," the notion of medium was opened to the point of erasure, as confirmed by the tortured explanation of the difficult process of choosing artists and works to include. Ultimately, Melville said, "It is the exhibition

²⁹⁸ Stephen Melville, "Counting/As/Painting," in *As Painting*, 1-26.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

that sets a certain limit to theory,”³⁰¹ meaning, it would appear, that each included work was “as painting” to someone.

Conclusion

This Chapter began with Robert Rauschenberg’s question, “What’s a pure medium?” That was a very important question in 1961, and, as has been demonstrated, it became vastly more important as Conceptual Art gave way to the emergence of large-scale color photography and the re-emergence of painting around 1980. The discourse that developed, as art that appeared to be less critical of social and political conditions in the United States and West Germany seemed to take over the museum, gallery and the market, evidenced a degree of hysteria. The most vociferous critics of the developments were Douglas Crimp and Benjamin Buchloh, while Rosalind Krauss, their colleague, engaged in a less political, but protracted excavation of the meaning and function of medium that continues to the present.

The two artists whose work is the focus of this study, Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter, engaged in hybrid art practices that merged the mediums of photography and painting throughout the period under study. They produced transparencies in lightboxes and photopaintings, respectively, which draw on influences from the conceptual period, while remaining grounded in a dominant medium. Jeff Wall is fundamentally a photographer, and Gerhard Richter is fundamentally a painter, yet one could not argue that the medium of either is “pure.”

As evidenced by the works included in the three exhibitions described at the end of this Chapter, by 2001 the notion of medium was, at least in some circles, being elided. Yet, curators remained compelled to adduce complex arguments describing

³⁰¹ Ibid., 25.

and justifying the mix of mediums in their exhibitions, indicating that the issue of medium, however impure, continues to be important.

CHAPTER THREE

DISILLUSIONMENT: THE DISRUPTION OF SCOPIC PLEASURE IN JEFF WALL'S PICTURES

Jeff Wall disrupts and obstructs the images he creates. For all of their monumental scale, vibrant color, and clarity of detail--in a phrase, their participation in spectacle culture-- Wall's images thwart clear viewing and defy easy understanding. Consideration of the varied ways in which Wall has complicated the reception and understanding of his art will elucidate some of the theoretical issues that underlie the process of picturing since the late 1970s.

Jeff Wall's disruptions draw upon some of the critical avant-garde art theories developed in the early twentieth century. They emanate from use of the following techniques: the depiction of exaggerated human gestures; the placement of figures in borderline or transitional locations and situations; the use of oblique perspectives; the depiction of abject subject matter; and the inclusion of visual interference with images. Moreover, Wall's references to particular historic paintings and tropes in the history of modernism in some transparencies invite an additional level of interpretation that prolongs and complicates the process of reception. Several of these techniques may appear in the same work.

The Destroyed Room (1978) [fig. III-1] is emblematic of the ways in which the artist has invoked the discourse of the avant-garde since the beginning of his mature praxis. It initiated the paths that Wall would traverse through the 1980s and, in some cases, beyond. His problematizing of the production of meaning through pictures was conscious and intentional, as Wall's 1979 essay "To the Spectator" that accompanied his first solo exhibition emphatically confirms.

The Destroyed Room is a staged scene of destruction in the bedroom of a young woman in which only the lithe figurine on the bureau and one black stiletto-heeled shoe remain standing. The figurine stands in for the room's absent occupant, who might have been the perpetrator, or, perhaps, the victim who has been removed. A mattress is upended and resting on an angle, forming a diagonal central focus that is doubled by a huge gash running from its lower right to its upper left corner. The rifled bureau drawers are open and overflowing with what appears to be women's underwear, and the objects piled in disarray on the floor are women's clothing, jewelry and sunglasses. The discarded objects are the debris of commodities that promise personal beauty, but are subject to constant changes in style and planned obsolescence. This illuminated large-format transparency is shocking: it assaults the viewer and compels consideration of what could have happened.³⁰²

The destroyed state of this room might also be a metaphor for the destruction of painting. Wall has said that he "filtered" the work through Eugene Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalous* (1827), a painted depiction of aggression and violence.³⁰³ Thus, Wall has associated the work with the tradition of Western painting just as it was turning from the idealization of history painting toward a preoccupation with the late Romantic emotional turmoil or psychological disruption. This period has been characterized by Wall as one when the "eroticized zeal of military glory which characterized the Napoleonic period...turned back inward, back toward domestic life

³⁰² *The Destroyed Room* is 159 by 234 cm.

³⁰³ In the catalogue for Wall's 1979 exhibition cited above, with reference to *The Destroyed Room*, he included images of *The Death of Sardanapalus*, as well as of Marcel Duchamp's *Given: 1. The Waterfall/2. The Illuminating Gas* (1946-66), and photograph of a shop window in Paris in which items of costume jewelry are displayed. The references to Delacroix's and Duchamp's works suggest that the missing occupant of *The Destroyed Room* should be considered a victim.

at the end of that epoch, at the beginning of modern, bourgeois, neurotic private life.”³⁰⁴

Yet, Wall’s work is not a painting, but a photographic transparency that blatantly shows its own artifice. The clues are the openings for the door and window that reveal brick walls, the wooden planks that support the wall from the outside, and the torn wall surfaces, all of which undercut the illusion by revealing that this is a staged set constructed for the purpose of creating a picture. The destruction of the illusion asks the spectator to puzzle over the meaning of the work, and, potentially, to consider its resemblance to Delacroix’s painting. Moreover, the spectator is put off by having been drawn to a lush, colorful picture only to have found that it belies the photograph’s traditional claim to “truth” by revealing its own falsification.

The intense colors of *The Destroyed Room* are characteristic of late twentieth-century advertising, in contrast to the lush, warm colors of Delacroix’s Romantic painting. This effect is exaggerated by the set’s bright, artificial lighting, and, particularly, by its fluorescent backlighting. As discussed above, Wall was influenced by the format of backlighting commercial advertisements in selecting that support for his pictures. He inserted this first work directly into commercial “spectacle culture” by showing it in a street-level gallery window, set into a wall built facing the window. A passer-by might have taken it to be a commercial display or advertisement rather than a work of art.³⁰⁵

This large, colorful, lighted image is disrupted by the fact that it hangs in the balance between the spectacle of illusion and its destruction. First, there is the shock

³⁰⁴ Wall, in Barents, 96.

³⁰⁵ *The Destroyed Room* was Wall’s first completed photographic transparency. After its second exhibition in 1979 as described here, a lightbox was provided for the work. JWCR, 274-5.

of viewing the inherently disorienting subject matter, a “destroyed room.” This raises questions of what happened and why, but unlike most of Wall’s images that followed in the 1980s, this one lacks an apparent human actor. Thus, the agent of the destruction, who would have engaged in the kinds of exaggerated gestures featured in many later pictures, is to be imagined by the observer. The only “figure” present is the plastic statuette that holds out its skirt to display its body to the viewer. Perhaps this cheap mass-produced object can be comprehended as a contemporary version of the sturdy bronze statuette—a work of art—in Walter Benjamin’s example of a family row in his discussion of epic theater:

Suddenly a stranger comes into the room. The wife is just about to pick up a bronze statuette and throw it at the daughter, the father is opening the window to call a policeman. At this moment the stranger appears at the door....That is to say, the stranger is confronted with a certain set of conditions: troubled faces, open window, a devastated interior.³⁰⁶

Benjamin was describing the way in which an interruption in the progress of a play can raise awareness in the audience within the concept of epic theater developed by Bertolt Brecht. The aim is to arouse “astonishment” in the spectator at the circumstances or conditions in which the hero of the play exists, by virtue of an interruption that “uncovers” or makes those conditions strange.³⁰⁷ In his example, which functions as a rupture within his own narrative, Benjamin described a tableau that cuts the flow of the drama. A tableau is a circumscribed still picture, like a

³⁰⁶ Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre? [Second Version]” in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1983), 18-19.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 18. “Rather, the first point at issue is to *uncover* those conditions. (One could just as well say: *to make them strange* [*verfremden*].) This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted.”

photograph. The viewer of Wall's *The Destroyed Room*, a tableau, is a stranger at the door who confronts a devastated interior and a set of conditions that astonish.

The personal possessions strewn across the floor invoke not only images of aggression and anger, states of mind that the imagined gestures would have revealed, but, also, the notion of the abject embodied in commodity fetishes in a culture of waste. All of the objects on the floor of the room are women's clothing and accessories. They are abundant and redundant: three pairs of shoes, one pair of boots, several pairs of sunglasses (one broken), several combs, some straw baskets and many pieces of plastic jewelry, in addition to a pile of clothing spilling from a chair. With the exception of two gold rings at the lower right edge of the transparency, there is nothing of intrinsic value in this detritus that exposes the perpetual attempt to be fashionable, an effort doomed to fail in a culture that promotes gratification through the consumption of goods that quickly become obsolete.

Ideas expressed in the 1930s by Walter Benjamin regarding the alluring phantasmagoria of commodities in the Paris arcades and world exhibitions of the nineteenth century, by the 1960s had evolved into criticism of late-twentieth-century capitalism.³⁰⁸ Technology-based consumer culture has been blamed for conflating art and culture and for lulling the populace into a false consciousness and acceptance

³⁰⁸ Speaking of the arcades, Benjamin said, "The arcades are a center of commerce in luxury items. In fitting them out, art enters the service of the merchant." He quoted an *Illustrated Guide to Paris*: "These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the *passage* is a city, a world in miniature." Benjamin, *Selected Writings* 3: 32. With respect to world exhibitions, Benjamin said, "World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish....World exhibitions glorify the value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity....Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped." (Ibid., 36-37.)

of the political and economic status quo. The immediate gratification of needs that are created and manipulated by the culture produces waste.³⁰⁹ That waste flirts with the idea of the abject and, perhaps, the *informe*, in *The Destroyed Room* and in subsequent works by Jeff Wall.

Wall's invocation of the concepts of interruption and the abject can be expanded by a close examination of some later works. It will be seen that Wall has drawn directly on the theories of Benjamin, Brecht, Theodor Adorno and Fredric Jameson, among others, as well as on surrealist notions of the abject, in both his writings and his art production. As discussed in Chapter Two, his reliance on such theories has led to criticism by those art historians who continue to depend on earlier Marxist-based theorists and think that he has not faithfully followed the precepts of his theoretical mentors. They see his lighted images as contributions to the "society of the spectacle."³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ These ideas are expressed, for example, in Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 57: "Today's novel feature is the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent elements in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted *another dimension* of reality. This liquidation of *two-dimensional* culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the "cultural values," but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale." (p. 57.) See, also, Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1-54. The conflation of culture and social reality was described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136; previously published in 1947 and reissued by the authors in 1969. Continuing use of the term "culture industry" by Benjamin Buchloh, for example, can be traced to this essay.

³¹⁰ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994). The title of this book is invoked to stand for the extreme aspects of commodity culture in the late twentieth century described by Debord, and expanded by Jean Baudrillard who has claimed that signs of the real have been substituted for reality, so that we live in a hyperreal in which there is no distinction between the real and the imaginary. See, for example, "The Precession of Simulacra," trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. and intro. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 253-81.

Gestus and Gesture: The Legacy of Brecht and Benjamin

Jeff Wall has invoked the principle of gesture in two ways that have historical origins. First, in basing some of his 1980s transparencies on paintings of early French modernism, he has indirectly connected his use of the descriptive and communicative nature of gesture to the writings of Charles Baudelaire. Second, and more germane to this study, Wall has employed Bertolt Brecht's technique of *gestus* as a form of interruption, or montage, to disrupt his images.

Baudelaire wrote of the revealing nature of gesture in mid-nineteenth century Paris, the era in which Edouard Manet was beginning to paint images of modern life that Wall has used as bases for several of his works.³¹¹ Wall has referred to himself as “a painter of modern life,” recalling Charles Baudelaire's eponymous 1863 essay.³¹² Baudelaire asserted that every age “had its own gait, glance and gesture....Within that unity which we call a Nation, the various professions and classes...all introduce variety, not only in manners and gesture, but even in the actual

³¹¹ Wall used paintings by Manet as starting points for *Picture for Women* (1979), *Stereo* (1980), *A Woman and Her Doctor* (1980-81) and *Backpack* (1981-1982), which are, respectively, contemporary reconfigurations of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, *Olympia*, *In the Conservatory* and *The Fifer*. It is interesting to consider Wall's metaphorical placement of himself in the period in which Manet established his career as an innovative modern painter, rejecting the stylistic rules of the Salon. Given Manet's high degree of historical consciousness, including references in his work to predecessors such as Watteau, Raphael, Velasquez and Titian, Wall has linked his own efforts at depiction to the history of Western painting since the Renaissance. It has been suggested that Wall's *The Storyteller* (1986) is a recapitulation of Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, although Wall has denied this, most recently in a talk at the Museum of Modern Art on February 26, 2007. He acknowledges, of course, that he was familiar with Manet's painting, but claims other reasons for having placed Native Americans on the grass next to a highway overpass, listening to one who is telling a story. It would be more instructive, I think, to consider this work in connection with Walter Benjamin's essay “The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in which Benjamin decried the loss of the craft of storytelling with the rise of the novel in modern society, and remarked on the role of the “work seasoned gestures of the hand” in traditional storytelling. *Selected Writings*, 3: 143-66, 162. Moreover, the picnic on the grass is a trope in Western art that long predated Manet.

³¹² Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 1-43. The essay was written in 1859-60, and first published in 1863. Walter Benjamin's interest in nineteenth-century Paris included a focus on Baudelaire. See “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 155-200.

form of the face.”³¹³ Moreover, “the gesture and the bearing of the woman of today give to her dress a life and a special character which are not those of the woman of the past.”³¹⁴ He considered gestures to be revealing of social class, “breed” and profession, and made numerous references to the bodily attitudes, poses, glances and gestures of modernity. For example, the courtesan “delicately uses two fingers to tuck in a wide panel of silk, satin or velvet which billows around her, or points a toe whose over-ornate shoe would be enough to betray her for what she is;” and young women of fashionable society “tap their teeth with their fans” as they gaze at an opera “that they are pretending to follow.”³¹⁵

Jeff Wall’s images of the 1980s do not depict members of fashionable society, but persons on the margins by virtue of their ethnicity, gender or social class. They are not depicted in attendance at an opera, but are shown in encounters on city streets, walking across scrubby back lots, or working in sweatshops. They are images of contemporary urban life in which individuals are in conflict and competition for subsistence and safety. Yet, as posited by Baudelaire, their class, “breed,” and profession (if any) are readily revealed by Wall’s close attention to the costume, demeanor and gesture of the actors who play the roles he has created. Although Wall has taken his photographs in and around Vancouver, that modern port city with its variety of immigrant and Native American populations can stand in for almost any contemporary city in North America or even Western Europe. Thus, his figures appear instantly recognizable.

³¹³ Baudelaire, 13.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 37, 35.

Wall's use of Brecht's theories is intentional and direct. Brecht's didactic approach to theater, which he called "epic theater," utilized techniques of interruption to produce instructional experiences. Conflating the realms of culture and politics, epic theater was designed to keep audiences from empathizing with the play's characters. Brecht believed that disrupting the course of a play with projections of text, songs, and the interspersal of tableaux in which actors paused to display exaggerated but recognizable gestures, could educate audiences to recognize social conditions that they might be motivated to change—in his words, "to cast a vote."³¹⁶ Thus, Brecht's plays were episodic, periodically breaking the audience's concentration on the story and forcing it to think about what was being shown. His ideas grew out of his reading of Marx and others' theories of aesthetics based on the idea that montage, or the disruption of an aesthetic experience, would engender an "alienation effect" that would promote the viewer/audience's use of reason instead of emotion:

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding....What is "natural" must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect....The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it—That's not the way—That's extraordinary, hardly believable—It's got to stop—The sufferings of this man appal [sic] me, because they are unnecessary—that's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964). "Once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function." (p. 39.)

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

Brigid Doherty has elucidated the notion of *gestus* in Brecht's plays, as distinguished from mere gesture. *Gestus* is a realm that includes bodily posture, tone of voice and facial expression, according to Brecht, and, according to Doherty, the term indicates "the embeddedness of a particular gestic element of speech or posture in a complex of social relations and processes."³¹⁸

In Brecht's epic play *Mann ist Mann*,³¹⁹ the protagonist Galy Gay goes out to buy a fish for his wife, but, instead, is transformed into a warrior through the actions of soldiers he meets and his own passivity in adopting the identity of a soldier. In the words of another character in the play, "This evening you'll see a man assembled like a car, without his losing anything by it." Further, the lesson for the audience is stated as follows:

Herr Bertolt Brecht hopes you will see the ground on
which you stand
Melt beneath your feet like snow
And will learn from the packer Galy Gay
That it's easy in life to go astray.³²⁰

³¹⁸ Brigid Doherty, "Test and *Gestus* in Brecht and Benjamin," *MLN* 115, no. 3 (April 2000): 457. According to John Willett in a translator's Note to Brecht's essay "Notes on the Opera," the term "*gestisch*" is the adjective of "*Gestus*," which "means both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions." Brecht, 42. In an essay titled "A Short Organum for the Theatre," published in 1948, Brecht described "gest" as follows: "The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another, and so on... These expressions of a gest are usually highly complicated and contradictory, so that they cannot be rendered by any single word and the actor must take care that in giving his image the necessary emphasis he does not lose anything, but emphasizes the entire complex." Brecht, 198, 205.

³¹⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *Mann ist Mann*, in *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays: Two of 8*, ed. and intro. John Willett and Ralph Manheim (London: Eyre Methuen Drama, 1994), vii-xiv, 257-302. This play was Brecht's model for epic theater, according to Walter Benjamin. See "What is Epic Theatre? [First Version]," in *Understanding Brecht*, 3.

³²⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Bert Brecht," in *Understanding Brecht*, 369.

The audience will view the “reassembling” of Galy Gay by means of changes in his costume, demeanor and gesture, and with the aid of pauses in the flow of the action will foster the development of an attitude toward what they see.

Two examples of Wall’s use of gesture for the purpose of elucidating contemporary socio-economic conflict are *Mimic* (1982) and *Outburst* (1989). In *Mimic* (fig. III-2), the three people shown walking down a city street toward the viewer include a Caucasian couple and an Asian man walking alone. The man of the couple holds his companion’s hand with his left hand, while he mimics and insults the Asian man by pulling up his own eyelid with his middle finger. The mimic’s companion appears oblivious to this remarkably economical and insulting gesture, as, with her eyes half closed, she appears to be dragged along toward their destination. It is unclear whether the victim of the insult is aware of it, although he is glancing in the direction of the couple and his left hand is slightly clenched. The dress and demeanor of the three figures define their social status, as they appear to be members of the working class. The Asian man might be wearing clothes for work as a delivery person, while the couple is dressed in a more countercultural style, as the man has long hair and a beard. The picture exposes conflicts between genders, races and classes by showing a Caucasian male attempting to dominate a woman and a person of color presumably by virtue of his race and gender.³²¹ Wall once described the Caucasian male figure as “the abusive white lumpenproletarian.”³²²

Outburst (fig. III-3) depicts another scene of tension dealing with issues of ethnicity, gender and class. The central figure, an Asian male, gestures theatrically

³²¹ Wall has said that he based this image on an occurrence that he observed. JWCR, 293. He describes images that he constructs based on observations as “near-documentary.”

³²² Wall, in Barents, 101.

with a Kung-fu-like gesture toward an Asian female working at a sewing machine in a sweat shop.³²³ Other Asian women sew nearby, and a Caucasian male, perhaps the boss, glances up from the rear of the room. One is not certain whether the gesturing figure has just arisen from his seat at the sewing machine in the foreground, or is overseeing the work at the direction of the white man, who certainly does not sew. The eruption of anger appears to have shocked and terrified the worker on the right. The closed curtains suggest that this may be an illegal operation on which immigrants are dependent for survival.³²⁴ The martial arts-like pose of the central figure clues the viewer to the fact that these are actors playing roles. Yet, as in *Mimic*, it is clear that this is a demonstration of race, class and gender-oriented tensions. The gestures, bodily attitudes and facial expressions of the figures operate to startle the viewer, disrupt what is otherwise a large unified picture, and create ambiguity about what is occurring.³²⁵

Wall consciously used Bertolt Brecht's theory of gesture to disrupt his images, but projected a late-twentieth century gloss onto its function. Speaking of his use of gesture, Wall said,

The ceremoniousness, the energy, and the sensuousness of the gestures of baroque art are replaced in modernity by mechanistic movements,

³²³ Thomas Crow has observed that this figure's pose, portraying the terror of factory discipline, is a "martial-arts pose reminiscent of Asian film." Thomas Crow, "Profane Illuminations: The Social History of Jeff Wall," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 151-69, 166.

³²⁴ The obscured or blind window is not unusual in Wall's work, imparting a sense of being closed in with an unknown realm beyond. See, for example, *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* (1990); *Insomnia* (1994); *Swept* (1995); and *Blind Window no. 1*, *Blind Window no. 2* and *Blind Window no. 3* (each 2000), discussed below.

³²⁵ Other works in which theatrical gestures are prominent include *No* (1983), *Milk* (1984), *The Agreement* (1987), *An Eviction* (1988/2004), *The Drain* (1989) and *Jell-O* (1995). Speaking of the micro-gesture of the presumably homeless man sitting on a city sidewalk clenching one fist and squeezing a carton of milk with the other so that milk virtually explodes into the air, in *Milk*, Wall has said, "The white man's gesture is welling up with incredible rapidity from his own personality, and he hasn't any control over the expression." Wall, in Barents, 101.

reflex actions, involuntary, compulsive responses. Reduced to the level of emissions of bio-mechanical or bio-electronic energy, these actions are not really “gestures” in the sense developed by older aesthetics. They are...more condensed, meaner, more collapsed, more rigid, more violent. Their smallness, however, corresponds to our increased means of magnification in making and displaying images. I photograph everything in perpetual close-up and project it forward with a continuous burst of light, magnifying it again, over and above its photographic enlargement....Possibly, this double magnification of what has been made small and meager, of what has apparently lost its significance, can lift the veil a little on the objective misery of society and the catastrophic operation of its law of value.³²⁶

With his phrase, “the objective misery of society and the catastrophic operation of its law of value,” Wall has located the subject of his project securely in the realm of the social, where the socio-economic conditions of his figures reveal through their gestures their inner conflicts and their anger at the “dirt and ugliness of the way we have to live.”³²⁷ Moreover, the near-life-size scale of his works, combined with their fluorescent back-lighting, magnifies these gestures so that the viewer is confronted with an image that undercuts the expectation of visual pleasure from the illusion of the lighted image. Speaking further of the social class of the figures in these 1980s works, Wall said,

To me, the figure of the lower middle class and working class man, woman, or child is the most precise image of this ruin. Here we can also locate the image of the destitute person, who is always part of the working class, the sub-proletariat. But this ruined person, or ruined class, can be looked at in different, even completely opposed ways. It's very possible to use this image of a ruined class as consolation and reinforcement, to absolutize the ruination of things and thereby come to the view that this is the eternal order of nature. Benjamin called this “left-wing melancholy”. I feel that it is most true to see both the existing damage and at the same time to see the possibilities which have been covered over by that damage. The effects of capitalism are like scar tissue which has encrusted a living body. This living body

³²⁶ Jeff Wall, “Gestus,” in de Duve, et al., 76; Wall’s use of the Latin word *gestus* for his title is further evidence of his reliance on Brecht.

³²⁷ Wall, in Barents, 102.

retains the possibility to become something else, although it will have to become that carrying its scars and wounds along with it.³²⁸

Wall's interest in the sub-proletariat class and the ruinous effects of late capitalism reveal his fundamentally Marxist orientation in the first decade of his mature praxis and his familiarity with the writings of Benjamin and Brecht. The last three sentences of the quotation, however, give an inkling of the possibility of, as Wall says, becoming something else. Thus, he shows figures who are in "liminal, or threshold" situations, in crises, in which "a person is both himself and not himself at the same instant. This non-identity with oneself is the germ of all transformation and development." Further,

I think it's possible, through the complex effects of techniques derived from painting, cinema and theatre, to infuse the photographic medium with this dialectic of identity and non-identity. And the reason I want to do this is to represent both the surface of damaged life, and its opposite, the possibility of another life, one which will come out of this one as its negation....We can imagine it, we can make pictures of it. So when we experience the picture, we experience a kind of dissociation. The key experience for modernist art is this dissociation of identity, I think. In it, we see both our actual existence for what it is and, at the same time, catch a glimpse of something extremely different. Something better.³²⁹

³²⁸ This statement was made during an interview conducted in connection with an exhibition of his work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in September 1985. Ibid., 95. "This ruin" refers to Walter Benjamin's phrase the "ruins of the bourgeoisie," which Benjamin quoted from Honore de Balzac in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLoughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1999), 87, and repeated in "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century." The source of the phrase "left-wing melancholy" is an eponymous essay published by Benjamin in 1931 in which he criticized the writer Erich Kastner for writings critical of the status quo that did not engender action: "In short, this left-wing radicalism is precisely the attitude to which there is no longer, in general, any corresponding political action....For from the beginning all it has in mind is to enjoy itself in a negativistic quiet." Later in the essay, Benjamin praised Brecht, whose writings created needed tension between professional and private life: "To create it is the task of all political lyricism, and today this task is most strictly fulfilled by Bertolt Brecht's poems. In Kastner, it has to give way to complacency and fatalism." Walter Benjamin, "Left-Wing Melancholy," in *Selected Writings 2*: 423-27. Wall's several references to Benjamin in the quoted passage are augmented by a statement in the same interview that he had been "strongly influenced by the discussions and disagreements that Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno had during the late 1930s." Wall, in Barents, 102.

³²⁹ Wall, in Barents, 102-03.

The possibility of change is expressed also at the end of Benjamin's *What is Epic Theatre [First Version]* in his discussion of man's capacity for recognition and change while watching an epic theater performance:

The simple fact that man can be recognized in a certain way creates a sense of triumph, and the fact, too, that he can never be recognized completely, never once and for all, that he is not so easily exhaustible, that he holds and conceals so many possibilities within himself (hence his capacity for development), is a pleasurable recognition. That man can be changed by his surroundings and can himself change the surrounding world, i.e. can treat it with consequence, all this produces feelings of pleasure.³³⁰

Wall's idea that a photograph can show a person in the process of transformation draws directly upon Brecht's directive that the actors in epic theater stand apart from their roles to resist identification with the characters they play, thus enabling the audience to gain distance and make judgments or "cast votes."³³¹ Wall has taken on the task of showing in a single image persons whose "ruined" social conditions the spectator can recognize, while he perceives at the same time the figures' non-identification with those conditions and, thus, gains a glimmer of hope that change is possible. Wall's use of actors in his photographs is intended to project

³³⁰ Benjamin, *What is Epic Theatre [First Version]*, 13. The Second Version includes no such discussion.

³³¹ In an essay titled "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," Brecht described how epic theatre was instructive: "Not only did the background adopt an attitude to the events on the stage—by big screens recalling other simultaneous events elsewhere, by projecting documents which confirmed or contradicted what the characters said, by concrete and intelligible figures to accompany abstract conversations, by figures and sentences to support mimed transactions whose sense was unclear—but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him. The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically...by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding...And as the 'background' came to the front of the stage so people's activity was subjected to criticism. Right and wrong courses of action were shown. People were shown who knew what they were doing, and others who did not. The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it." Brecht, 71-72.

a sense of non-identification or alienation because the actors are playing roles that diverge from their personal situations. In this process, Wall hoped to generate an identity crisis in the spectator:

In general, my primary objective is to create a sort of identity crisis with the viewer in some form, maybe even a subliminal one....Another way of looking at it is that one sets in motion a sequence of identifications, recognitions, mis-recognitions, de-identifications and re-identifications, in which the audience is continually decomposed, fractured, reformed and re-identified with itself.³³²

The task that Wall described with respect to his earlier works was enormously ambitious. Each image stands alone, having no specific relationship to any other. Although numerous works of the 1980s depict persons who might be recognized as “sub-proletariat,” each work shows different people in different contemporary contexts and conditions. Moreover, there is no directive to exhibit them in a way that connects them.³³³ Therefore, the viewer is expected to apprehend a layered set of ideas while viewing a single apparently unified picture, the subject matter of which is in some way internally riven. The viewer is expected to understand the condition of the actors, to see that one or more of them are beginning a process of transformation,

³³² Wall, in Clark, Guilbaut and Wagner, 8.

³³³ John Roberts has suggested that montage underpins Wall’s works through his use of the genre of the everyday and the emphasis on dialogue within his works: “The dialogue between two individuals we find in many of his works, and the dialogue between their lives and the social setting we see them in, form the basis for the dialogue between multiple voices in the panoramic images and between the voices in different images themselves.” Based on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, Roberts sees different class positions included within the single panoramic photographic space and within the work as a whole. John Roberts, 190. I disagree to the extent that the works are not necessarily shown together, or in any particular combination if they are. They do not form a series, and there is not a reasonable way for a viewer to apprehend them in combination without making a comprehensive study of Wall’s oeuvre. Moreover, the class position that predominates is what Wall has called the “lumpenproletariat” or “subproletariat.” Roberts concedes later in his essay that “Wall’s dialogic inclusiveness produces a totalizing consciousness out of a multiplicity of subject positions *internal* to the working class and the dominated (Asian factory workers, native Indians, the unemployed, petty criminals, impoverished mothers).” (p. 192). This study identifies a number of ways that Wall’s work is fissured, but the depiction of multiple class positions, particularly in the works of the 1980s to which Roberts refers, is not one of them.

and, simultaneously, take comfort in the possibility of something better for those persons, or for society at large. And, at the same time, it is hoped that the viewer will experience a personal transformation.³³⁴

In stark contrast to Wall's singular transparencies, Brecht's epic theater involved plays of traditional length, divided into scenes and acts, with narratives that progressed, however haltingly. There were many opportunities for disruptions and lessons of various kinds through the course of the play by means of projections of text between acts, musical interludes, and, of course, gestures.³³⁵ For example, in *Mann ist Mann*, Galy Gay used the same gesture in non-contiguous scenes to renounce the fish he wanted to buy and to accept the elephant, thus challenging the audience to notice that the same gesture can have diametrically opposed meanings, depending on the context.³³⁶

In "What is Epic Theatre [First version]," Benjamin described the notion of "dialectic at a standstill" in which he explained that the sequence of scenes is not as important as the gestural elements in which actors represent conditions: "The thing that is revealed as though by lightning in the 'condition' represented on the stage—as a copy of human gestures, actions and works—is an immanently dialectical attitude.

³³⁴ In "Studies for a Theory of Epic Theatre," Benjamin described the relationships within epic theater that were dialectical: "that of the gesture to the situation, and *vice versa*; that of the actor to the character represented, and *vice versa*; that of the attitude of the actor, as determined by the authority of the text, to the critical attitude of the audience, and *vice versa*; that of the specific action represented to the action implied in any theatrical representation." The supreme dialectic was the dialectic between recognition and education. Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 23-25.

³³⁵ "Epic theatre proceeds by fits and starts, in a manner comparable to the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the forceful impact on one another of separate, sharply distinct situations in the play. The songs, the captions, the gestural conventions differentiate the scenes. As a result, intervals occur which tend to destroy illusion." Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre [Second Version]," 21.

³³⁶ Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater [First version], 12. Benjamin made similar comparisons from other plays in "What is Epic Theater [Second Version] in discussing "The Quotable Gesture," 19.

The conditions which epic theatre reveals is the dialectic at a standstill.”³³⁷ This would suggest that a single image can be dialectical, or instructive, and the revelation by “lightning” could even suggest a tableau or a photograph. Yet, within epic theater, the poses and postures—the imitations of conditions—are always shown within the context of the play, and their meaning is necessarily enhanced by repetition and juxtaposition, as indicated by Benjamin in his examples of the use of the same gesture to mean two different things. That kind of “learning opportunity” is not present in Wall’s work with each image standing on its own.

Wall has spoken of providing a “complicated glimpse of something better....The glimpse of something ‘other’ which you experience in art is always a glimpse of something better because experiencing art is, as Stendhal said, the experience of a ‘promesse de bonheur,’ a promise of happiness.” When asked how his pictures that show the oppression and unhappiness of the present offer a promise of happiness, Wall replied, “I always try to make beautiful pictures.”³³⁸ Thus, he locates the possibility of change in the very nature of his medium, in its spectacular, lighted, pictorial essence.

The making of beautiful pictures of the ruins of the bourgeoisie is the critical paradox of Wall’s work. It mixes the pleasure of viewing with the dialectical experience of confronting gestures that reveal social and economic discord. It therefore contradicts the exclusively educative function of art advocated by Brecht

³³⁷ Ibid. Further, “The damming of the stream of real life, the moment when its flow comes to a standstill, makes itself felt as reflux: this reflux is astonishment. The dialectic at a standstill is its real object.” Ibid., 13.

³³⁸ Wall, in Barents, 104. Wall’s stated goal of making beautiful pictures underlies his unease with Benjamin Buchloh’s valorization of certain kinds of Conceptual Art, as expressed in Wall’s 1981 essay, “A Draft for ‘Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel,’” referred to in Chapter Two. In essence, it distinguishes Wall’s praxis from what he considers a “defeatist” approach to art-making, which he identifies with both Adorno and Buchloh.

and Benjamin, who would permit only intellectual pleasure. Having chosen the support of the illuminated transparency in tableau format, Wall has resisted postmodern strategies based on an obviously ruptured image or a disruptive apparatus. Instead, he devised a methodology reliant upon subject matter, gesture, and the sheer shock of depiction for providing critical commentary upon contemporary capitalist society.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it would seem more than fair—in fact, imperative—to return to Wall’s photographic tableau of *The Destroyed Room* and connect it with Benjamin’s literary tableau of a devastated interior. As has been demonstrated, Wall consciously and repeatedly quoted Brecht and Benjamin and their theories of epic theater and the shock or astonishment that it could generate through the use of gesture. If his choice of support does not satisfy contemporary art historians who insist on being true to the theories of the 1920s and 1930s, it is not because Wall does not understand them. He has elected to use the pictorial essence of the lighted transparency to magnify and illuminate the gestures and conditions of today’s ruined bourgeoisie.

There are other views, however, of the degree to which the Brechtian formula should be expected to work. Brecht himself expressed the limits of epic and didactic theater in terms of locales and circumstances:

Up to now favourable circumstances for an epic and didactic theatre have only been found in a few places and for a short period of time....It demands not only a certain technological level but a powerful movement in society which is interested to see vital

questions freely aired with a view to their solution, and can defend this interest against every contrary trend.³³⁹

Theodor Adorno, colleague and critic of Walter Benjamin, expressed strong skepticism that dialectical art could be expected to alter human behavior. Susan Buck-Morss has asserted that, in contrast to Brecht, Adorno's theory did not include a theory of political action, and that "he never fully explained the nature of the relationship between theory and social change." This position placed him at odds with Brecht, who claimed, "that the artist had to ally himself with the workers' cause and appeal to the empirically existing consciousness of the proletariat for the purpose of political education. But Adorno insisted that the criterion for art could not be its political effect on the audience."³⁴⁰

More recently, within the decade in which Wall's use of *gestus* was most evident, cultural critic Fredric Jameson labeled the period "postmodern" and admonished readers to historicize their views. Referring specifically to Brecht, Jameson said,

The teaching function of art was, however, always stressed in classical times (even though it there mainly took the form of moral lessons), while the prodigious and still imperfectly understood work of Brecht reaffirms, in a new and formally innovative and original way, *for the moment of modernism proper*, a complex new conception of the relationship between culture and pedagogy.... We cannot... return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours.³⁴¹ (Emphasis added.)

³³⁹ Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction," in *Brecht on Theatre*, 76. According to the translator's Note, this essay is believed to have been written in 1935 or 1936, but it was unpublished in Brecht's lifetime.

³⁴⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 24, 34.

³⁴¹ Jameson, 50. The quoted essay was first published in *New Left Review* no. 146 (July-August 1984): 59-92. Jameson adopted Ernest Mandel's division of capitalism into three temporal stages: market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and what Jameson terms "multinational capital" or "late capital," corresponding to the period of postmodernism. *Ibid.*, 35.

The italicized phrase stresses the importance for Jameson of linking forms of cultural production and critique to the socio/economic milieu in which the subject of the critique arises. Thus, Brecht's concept must be evaluated in light of its time and place, Germany during the rise of National Socialism. That was a period of burgeoning technology within the era of high modernism and what Jameson refers to as monopoly capitalism.³⁴² Aesthetic forms and practices necessarily relate to their particular situations, and, for the era of postmodernism that is the subject of Jameson's essay, he proposes "the aesthetic of this new (and hypothetical) cultural form as an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*."³⁴³

Jameson's principle of historicizing cultural models and criticism is of particular importance to this study, given the emphasis placed on theories of the twenties and thirties by artist Jeff Wall and by art historians Rosalind Krauss and Benjamin Buchloh described in Chapter Two. The question of the applicability of the ideas of Brecht and Benjamin to late twentieth-century art is an obvious one, particularly as regards Krauss, who accepts the notion of a postmodern break and has quoted Jameson at times. To emphasize Jameson's point, "we cannot...return to aesthetic practices elaborated on the basis of historical situations and dilemmas which are no longer ours."

³⁴² See, also, Doherty, 442-81, in which the author convincingly connects the notion of *gestus* in epic theater to the prevalence of physical and psychological aptitude testing for occupational and military purposes in Germany during and after World War I.

³⁴³ Jameson, 51. Colin MacCabe has identified the source of the term "cognitive mapping" as the geographer Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (MIT Press, 1960). For Jameson, it is "a way of understanding how the individual's representation of his or her social world can escape the traditional critique of representation because the mapping is intimately related to practice—to the individual's successful negotiation of urban space." "Fredric Jameson," in Colin MacCabe, *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language, Cinema and the Politics of Culture* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 123-24.

Writing more or less contemporaneously with Buchloh and Krauss, Jameson was speaking to those who would suggest that his model of cognitive mapping “is in any way easily vitiated by the conventional post-structural critiques of the ‘ideology of representation’ or mimesis.”³⁴⁴ This statement is consistent with a theme that runs through an earlier essay in which Jameson distinguished the period and theories of Brecht and Benjamin from those of Theodor Adorno writing after World War II, asserting that it was no longer a propitious “climate for older, simpler forms of oppositional art, ... whether it be that produced by...Brecht or indeed those celebrated in their different ways by Benjamin and Bloch.”³⁴⁵ Calling for aesthetic forms appropriate to a culture of “post-modernism,” Jameson said,

In these circumstances, indeed, there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be...realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of “estrangement” have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be “estranged” and corrected by a more totalizing way of viewing phenomena....If the diagnosis is correct, the intensification of class consciousness will be less a matter of a populist or ouvrierist exaltation of a single class by itself, than of the forcible reopening of access to a sense of society as a totality and reinvention of the possibilities of cognition and perception that allow social phenomena to become transparent, as moments of struggle *between* classes.³⁴⁶

Although this essay was written in 1977 as a conclusion to the original publication of *Aesthetics and Politics*, it stands as criticism of the practice of bringing theories of a long-departed era to bear on art of the late twentieth century. It is important to note that its publication occurred one year before Wall very directly addressed issues of

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁴⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 208.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 211-12.

late capitalism in his first large transparency, *The Destroyed Room*. Moreover, Jamison seems to call for a “transgression of transgression,” or the rejection of aesthetic fragmentation as a formulaic approach, which, as discussed earlier, is very much the way Wall talked about his shift from conceptual photographic art to large-scale pictorial transparencies.³⁴⁷

Wall sees his art as a continuation of modernism, denying the validity of a postmodernist “break,” and, thus, his employment of Brecht’s theories is even more complex. Wall speaks Jameson’s language about late capitalism and commodity culture, and, in part, his work is emblematic of Jameson’s notion of the merger or collapse of the distinction between the cultural and the economic by his production of spectacular artworks in an advertising format. *The Destroyed Room*, in particular, is a cogent demonstration of the integration of aesthetic and commodity production, and its first showing in a street-level gallery window was an enactment of that idea. Moreover, the initial period of Wall’s mature praxis coincided with Jameson’s view that the “cultural dominant” of postmodernism began in 1973: Wall’s first work was produced in 1978, and his most socially critical images were produced in the 1980s, the decade during which Jameson wrote frequently on postmodernism and spoke of the prevalence and importance of photography in that period.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Wall, “Marks of Indifference.” See, also, Wall’s adamant rejection of aesthetic fragmentation in Jeff Wall, “An Artist and His Models: Roy Arden,” *Parachute* 74 (April-May-June 1994): 4-11.

³⁴⁸ See, for example, Jameson’s reference to “the remarkable current intensification of an addiction to the photographic image,” in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 18; “In the visual arts the renewal of photography as a significant medium in its own right and also as the “plane of substance” in pop art or photorealism is a crucial symptom of the same process.” Fredric Jameson, “Theories of the Postmodern,” in *Postmodernism*, 64; and “(whereas [photography’s] ultimate achievement of this status in the postmodern involved a *demotion* of painting and “art” as such),” in “Immanence and Nominalism in Postmodern Theoretical Discourse,” in *Postmodernism*, 214.

The foregoing is not an attempt to argue that Wall's work and Jameson's conception of the mutual infection of culture and commodity are completely congruent. Jameson cited the example of the "neofigurative" painting of artist David Salle, whose work exhibited multiple panels and images that could not be deciphered in a coherent way, as reflective of the postmodern condition.³⁴⁹ Further, he described the photography exhibited in a 1988 exhibition as follows:

In this respect, then, it seems useful and instructive to juxtapose this practice of fragmentation within the picture—dyptich framing, sequential collage, scissored images, which it may be best to term *screen segmentation*—as it is practiced in what I'm tempted to call the base-and-superstructure features of David Salle and also in various ways in the photographers exhibited here: Wasow's rephotographed and recombined images, Simpson's "iris"es and illustrative captions, Larry Johnson's mottoes, Cypis's multipaneled anatomy exhibits, Welling's literal *analyses*; even Wall's transparencies may be looked at in this way, if the actual photograph is separated from the luminous or even stereoscopic performance to which it is subjected (like a dimension underneath, rather than, as in Salle, the overprint or the side by side).³⁵⁰

In the quoted passages, Jameson was not interested in evaluating either Salle's painting or the photographers' works from an ideological point of view or even an aesthetic one, but in describing them in ways showed their alignment with the cultural dominant he saw in society at large. I would argue that his inclusion of Wall's transparencies within the postmodern paradigm exemplified by Salle and the others is

³⁴⁹ "It strikes one then, in that spirit, that neofigurative painting today is very much that extraordinary space through which all the images and icons of the culture spill and float, haphazard, like a logjam of the visual, bearing off with them everything from the past under the name of "tradition" that arrived in the present in time to be reified visually, broken into pieces, and swept away with the rest. This is the sense in which I associated such painting with the term *deconstructive*, for it constitutes an immense analytic dissection of everything and a lancing of the visual abscess." Fredric Jameson, "Utopianism after the End of Utopia," in *Postmodernism*, 175; previously published as "Postmodernism and Utopia," in *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 11-32.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

expansive, given that the phrase “luminous or even stereoscopic performance” seems to be a criticism of the lightbox support.³⁵¹

The larger point is that as products of the postmodern period, Jeff Wall’s transparencies need not be dismissed for their lack of rupture in the Brecht/Benjamin sense. Brecht himself asserted that epic theater could be effective only in particular social conditions. Moreover, if some of Wall’s works quote or reformulate historic paintings, Jameson would include that practice within the phenomenon of “pastiche” that he saw as emblematic of the era, and not as a fatal transgression of an ahistorical ideological perspective.³⁵²

Borders and Wires

Wall’s outdoor settings are the liminal, unplanned, chaotic borders between city and suburb, areas that are inherently ugly and typically populated, if at all, by persons in transit or transition. The settings and the people are on the margins. One

³⁵¹ The works of Jeff Wall that were included in “Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, were *Bad Goods* (1984), and *Abundance* (1985). *Utopia Post Utopia: Configurations of Nature and Culture in Recent Sculpture and Photography*. Without his being more specific, it is difficult to know exactly how Jameson identified fragmentation or “screen segmentation” within Wall’s works. It is clear, however, that he thought that the luminous treatment of the transparency interfered with what was more important.

³⁵² Jameson described pastiche as emblematic of postmodern cultural production, resulting from the disappearance of the individual subject, and, along with it, the “increasing unavailability of the personal style.” He distinguished pastiche from parody: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.” It is in this context that Jameson commented on “the remarkable current intensification of an addiction to the photographic image...a tangible symptom of an omnipresent, omnivorous, and well-nigh libidinal historicism.” “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 16-19. In his descriptions of pastiche in architecture, music, film and fiction, Jameson was commenting on what he observed. In contrast, in her discussion of Jeff Wall’s “medium” and its lack of “redemptive possibilities,” Rosalind Krauss dismissed Wall’s cinematographic transparencies as “reworkings of old master art...[not] more ambitious than pastiche.” Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away?”, 10, 29. She cited Jameson’s essay as the first to characterize “postmodernist art as inherently infected by pastiche” (n. 29, p. 10), but, as examined in Chapter Two of this study, found the failure in Wall’s work to be a deficiency inherent in his medium stemming from his failure to “reinvent” it.

of the clearest representations of this concept appears in *A Villager from Aricakoyu Arriving in Mahmutbey—Istanbul, September, 1997* (1997) [fig. III-4], in which a young man arrives on foot on the outskirts of Istanbul.³⁵³ Such an arrival carries with it hope for the future, yet the apparent poverty of the young man, indicated by the fact that he is walking and his baggy clothes and small bag, cast doubt on the likelihood that his life will be appreciably better. The scrubby, patchy vegetation along the poorly-paved road is littered with trash and is traversed by a crooked path leading toward some industrial buildings in the distance, not far from a sea of small row houses. The houses appear to be of recent, cheap construction, and are dwarfed by the towers of a nearby mosque. The transition that the young man is making portends a modest outcome at best. Thus, the subject matter of this image undermines its scale, light and color by suggesting a situation that is ambiguous and that raises concern that a young man coming to the city from a small town faces dirt, crowded housing, perhaps overwhelming religious oversight and ugliness—the dirt and ugliness with which we have to live. This image engenders contemplation, if not shock, in the viewer.

A notable feature of this image is the presence of seven communication and transmission wires that cross the picture at angles from just below center to the upper edge, in a pattern that obstructs and nearly dominates the scene. The wires and the poles to which they are attached constitute forms of visual interference common in the contemporary landscape, at the same time that they facilitate communication and the transmission of power, two essential concomitants of modern life. Here, they

³⁵³ This work was photographed in the location indicated in the title, using as a model a person who had arrived in Istanbul a few weeks before Wall met him. He was engaged to re-enact his arrival for the photograph. The image was digitally montaged. JWCR, 385.

serve to emphasize the unattractive and uninspiring nature of the city's outskirts. The traditional notion of landscape as bucolic or idyllic is significantly disrupted.

A third form of visual disruption is also important. An artifact of Wall's technology is a very narrow black seam that joins two panels of the transparency in the larger images.³⁵⁴ Conceptually, the seam serves to emphasize the constructed nature of the work—it is literally pieced together. Although the seams are not visible in reproduction, one is acutely aware of them when viewing the works in person. They are hard not to notice and, then, not to look for. They disrupt vision and disturb viewing pleasure.

Three other works that are emblematic of Wall's depiction of unattractive sites of urban sprawl are *Steves Farm*, *Steveston* (1980), *Bad Goods* (1984), and *Diatribes* (1985). *Steves Farm* [fig. III-5], Wall's first documentary photograph, is a remarkable demonstration of the encroachment of the suburbs on farm land, as a housing development seen in the distance on the right side of the picture seems to march across the landscape. On the left two horses graze on the farm not far from the road, and their small field is crowded by farm buildings, some dilapidated houses and piles of junk. The panoramic image is cropped so that it is nearly four times as wide as it is high, compounding the claustrophobic sense of space. The expanding suburbs are extinguishing the farm.

Bad Goods [fig. III-6] is another liminal, transitional site traversed by power lines in the background that cross near a warehouse and a line of storage tanks that are surrounded by the detritus of recent construction that no one has cleaned up.

³⁵⁴ The maximum dimension of a transparent panel is 50 inches, thus any work with a greater dimension in both directions will require fabrication and a seam, which is always visible. Peter Galassi, "Unorthodox," in *Jeff Wall*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 26.

These are examples of the ubiquitous unchecked sprawl of commodity culture. In the foreground, heads of iceberg lettuce (wrapped in cellophane, with some partly open) have been spilled from boxes onto the ground, becoming sandy and left to rot. A Native American stands in the middle ground, near other dumped trash and behind the lettuce that he may hope to scavenge. It seems that he is aware of the viewer, who monitors and arrests his behavior. The triangulation among the figure, the “bad goods” and the viewer is arresting in itself. As with most of Wall’s images, this one was taken in Vancouver and foregrounds the tension between the Native American minority, whose land has been scarred by warehouses and dumps, and the presumably Caucasian viewer who is assumed to have scarred it. This picture is disrupted not so much by visible fissures, but by the racial and economic tensions that are its subjects. Moreover, an element reminiscent of *The Destroyed Room* is present in the discarded abundant commodities that no one in the dominant culture has bothered to retrieve.

Diatribes [fig. III-7] shows two women walking along an unpaved path littered with trash, near houses overwhelmed by dangerous power lines. The Caucasian woman, who holds a young child, is talking animatedly to the African-American woman, as if telling her a profound truth or complaining about an injustice. There must be a message relating to race relations between women of similar economic circumstances and power. Ambiguity and discomfort emanate from the dirty, scrubby setting and the circumstances of the women. As with all of these images, there is a stark discrepancy between the illuminated, commercial support and the subject matter.

Perhaps the most dramatically discordant and disrupted image within Wall's work of the 1980s is *The Storyteller* (1986) [fig. III-8]. Six individuals sit on the ground as though in a pastoral setting around a small fire, only to be overwhelmed by a highway bridge that veers into the picture from the right. Two sets of cables bisect the image at eye level. Raised highway signs block what would otherwise be the vanishing point formed by the bridge and a row of trees on the left. Transportation and communication infrastructures have relegated these Native Americans to the interstices of the contemporary landscape as they continue their tradition of storytelling, one of the earliest forms of human communication.³⁵⁵ The physical ruptures within this picture confine descendants of the earliest settlers of this land to a desolate strip. Moreover, the discarded fast-food wrappings that litter the ground are evidence that they were not cooking a meal, as would have been the tradition, so even their diets and health may have been compromised.

Each of the images described above shows the encroachment of the built environment on the land in the era of late capitalism. The places where city meets country are ugly, with their obvious absence of planning or concern with architecture, and they are dirty.³⁵⁶ Some reflect tensions as people encounter others whom they

³⁵⁵ Wall's image of the storyteller, as mentioned above, seems a reference to the writings of Walter Benjamin, in that his essay "The Storyteller" laments the lost art of oral communication of a group's multi-generational history: "One meets with fewer and fewer people who know how to tell a tale properly....It is as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences." Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," 143.

³⁵⁶ One might compare Wall's liminal sites around Vancouver to some of Ludwig Meidner's "apocalyptic landscapes" of the desolate outskirts of Berlin in the early twentieth century, again invoking an earlier period of modernism and another era of ugly urban sprawl. See, for example, plates 3, 6, 68, 69 and 78 (all 1910-1913) in Carol S. Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1989). Although, of course, one could not compare Meidner's agitated expressionist painting style to Wall's photographs, his depictions of the edges of a rapidly expanding metropolis seem consonant with Wall's selections of semi-urban sites, as well as noting the physical and moral decay of a promised era of economic and social

might not have met in an earlier era, and all are forced to make transitions and adjustments. These pictures are not shocking in the sense that Brecht or Benjamin would have prescribed, yet, their difficult subjects and visual disruptions do engender discomfort and thought. The images are familiar, as the outskirts of Vancouver could be those in any North American or European city, or even Istanbul. They show the world and its people in transition in an un-idealized environment within the globalized economy. They merge culture and commodity, a combination that is aesthetic in Wall's transparencies only until you really see what is in the picture.

The Radical Oblique and the Abject Subject

According to the surrealist Georges Bataille, "It seems that the desire to see is stronger than horror or disgust."³⁵⁷ Jeff Wall has produced a number of transparencies that show abject subjects and substances, often in tightly-cropped smaller pictures. In order to force the viewer to look even more closely, Wall has made use of diagonal and oblique views that serve to prolong the experience of looking at worn, scarred, dirty and extremely unaesthetic sights.

In *Diagonal Composition* (1993) [fig. III-9], *Diagonal Composition No. 2* (1998) [fig. III-10], and *Diagonal Composition No. 3* (2000) [fig. III-11] Wall has created a group of images whose titles provide an immediate clue to their theoretical precursors. These are closely-cropped views of fragments of rooms that one normally would not focus on. The first two images show parts of a stained sink surrounded by

improvement. Thomas Crow has noted a resemblance between the "suburban *terrain vague*" depicted in *Diatribes* and Van Gogh's *The Outskirts of Paris* (1886), used as a basis for discussion in Chapter One of T. J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 25-31. Crow, 162.

³⁵⁷ Georges Bataille, "X Marks the Spot," *Documents* 2, no. 7 (1930): 438; *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 256, cited in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 43, 260.

stained formica and other scarred, faux, outmoded materials, as well as a piece of trash and a dirty bar of soap in the first case, and a discarded rubber or plastic glove in the second. The third diagonal image is that of a portion of the floor and parts of a wall and a wooden cabinet that form a corner of a room that includes a filthy, splayed rag mop and a metal bucket containing water through which the rusty bottom of the bucket is visible. The floor is covered with dirty, scarred linoleum in which worn patches reveal the underlying wood. The diagonal compositions are documentary photographs from a body of work that Wall began in 1990 that does not involve any intervention by the artist.³⁵⁸

The impact of the diagonal compositions arises from a combination of four means of forcing the spectator to confront abject subject matter: small format; tight cropping of the image close to the picture plane; oblique perspective; and, of course, vivid illumination. The small format and tight cropping combine to force the viewer to approach the works closely in order to apprehend their details. Unlike the large-format cinematographic transparencies that are nearly life-scale and allow the viewer to stand back and feel a bodily connection to the scene, these smaller works operate more like a miniature jeweler's window, as a lure to draw one in. When the spectator arrives at the image, however, he finds not a jewel but a disgusting scene that Wall has photographed in minute detail and lurid color. One feels that he is all too close to the stained sink, the dirty, cracked soap, the ancient gray mop and the rusty water. At the same time, the colors of the objects in these works, however scarred and stained, possess their own beauty: the yellow and blue of *Diagonal Composition*, the turquoise wall and blue ink-like stains of *Diagonal Composition no. 2*, and the

³⁵⁸ JWCR, 326; 11n11.

turquoise wall that forms a background for the galvanized bucket of *Diagonal Composition no. 3*.

The third aspect of the diagonal compositions that affects viewing is the vertical, oblique angle with which they were photographed. The angle is more pronounced in the first and third images than the second, although it is present there, too. This perspective causes the viewer to rotate the image mentally in order to decipher the subject and orient his body in relation to it. *Diagonal Composition* appears initially to be a geometric abstraction until one rotates it about 45 degrees to comprehend the sink, counter and wall, and to notice a small triangular fragment of dirty fabric that hangs down from the upper edge just to the left of center. The downward trajectory of *Diagonal Composition no. 2* requires a mental up-tilting of the picture plane in order to recognize the sink and adjacent wooden countertop, since, initially, the sink appears to be inches from the floor. In both of the first two images, depth perception and traditional perspective are thwarted by the close proximity of the walls behind the sinks.

In contrast, the vertical oblique angle of *Diagonal Composition no. 3* is not so confusing because it was shot from a slightly more distant position and is larger than the others,³⁵⁹ and the mop and bucket—notably a triangle and a near-circle—are instantly recognizable apart from the wall, cabinet and floor. Here, also, Wall has created something of a traditional vanishing point by centering the point where the floor, wall and cabinet intersect. This play on perspective and geometry seems

³⁵⁹ *Diagonal Composition* is 40 x 46 cm; *Diagonal Composition no. 2* is 52.5 x 64 cm; and *Diagonal Composition no. 3* is 74.5 x 94 cm.

contrived, yet it required the artist simply to circle the scene until he found himself and his camera lens in the proper location.

In the geometricity and oblique angles of the diagonal compositions, Wall has once again invoked theories of the early twentieth century, particularly those of Russian formalist writers and constructivist artists.³⁶⁰ Within the concept of *ostranenie*, or making strange, propounded in 1916 by Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, was embedded the utopic belief that radically oblique angles that undermined the illusion of traditional one-point perspective could serve to destroy old habits of vision and reconstruct the subject/viewer.³⁶¹ Although Shklovsky's *ostranenie* was a purely aesthetic concept related to the renewal of perception,³⁶² the goal of reconstructing the viewer, and, through him, society, became a political one consistent with the advanced society that post-revolutionary Russia was believed to exemplify, or to be in the process of developing. Those goals were evidenced in the work of the writers and artists of the early 1920s associated with the journal *Lef*. In an era in which photography and film were considered revolutionary means of making art that could have the intended social effects, the "radical oblique" perspective was prevalent in photography. The 90-degree angle can be seen, for example, in Aleksandr Rodchenko's photographs of his Moscow apartment building taken from the roof or

³⁶⁰ Connections of these images to Suprematism, Constructivism and the De Stijl group have been proposed by Rolf Lauter, ed., *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places—Selected Works 1978-2000* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel; Frankfurt: Museum fur Moderne Kunst, 2001), 50-53. Briony Fer has also commented on the references in these images to Russian Constructivism in "The Space of Anxiety," 23, as has Peter Galassi in "Unorthodox," 49-50.

³⁶¹ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as a Device," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and intro. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1916), 3-24.

³⁶² Stanley Mitchell, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some preliminary remarks towards a history of the politicization of Russian Formalism," *Screen* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 74-81.

the ground, looking downward or upward through stacked balconies.³⁶³ *Lef* poet Nicolai Aseev, who lived in the same building, described Rodchenko's photographs in a way that revealed the ambitious assumptions underlying this kind of photography:

Here we have the building from below, obliquely. It recedes, shrinks in perspective. Here it is falling, disintegrating, crushed under the weight of its own walls. Here again, as it violently shoots downwards with all its nine [sic] balconies, which get gradually smaller because they have been photographed from above. This is a new way of seeing, to mankind a new and hitherto unknown possibility to see objects in their exact perspectives, which overthrow every notion of proportion and relation. [This new vision] sharpens a perceptive capacity grown blunt and dulled by the habitual view of things (static, always from the same standpoint).³⁶⁴

Rodchenko's views on the revolutionary potential of extreme perspectives in photography were published in *Novy Lef* in 1928. In his letter, which comprised an essay titled "The Paths of Modern Photography," Rodchenko decried traditional journalistic photography: "Behind this dangerous stereotype lies the biased, conventional routine that educates man's visual perception, the one-sided approach that distorts the process of visual reason."³⁶⁵ He repeatedly disavowed the "belly-button" view of traditional Albertian one-point perspective, which "gives you just the sweet kind of blob that you see reproduced on all the postcards ad nauseam.... Why

³⁶³See, for example, Plates 2 through 18, each titled *House on Myasnicka-Street*, 1925, and Plate 116, *Courtyard on Myasnicka-Street*, 1928, in Alexander Lavrentjev, *Rodchenko Photography*, trans. John William Gabriel (New York: Rizzoli, 1982). Leah Anne Dickerman described the concept of the radical oblique in "The Radical Oblique: Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye," *Documents* 12 (Spring 1998): 22-34. See, also, Dickerman, "Aleksandr Rodchenko's Camera-Eye: Lef Vision and the Production of Revolutionary Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1997).

³⁶⁴ Lavrentjev, 13, quoting N. N. Aseev, "From the Eighth Floor. A New Way of Seeing the World," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, No. 182, August 2, 1928.

³⁶⁵ Alexander Rodchenko, "The Paths of Modern Photography," trans. John E. Bowlt, in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989) 256-63, 257. This essay was previously published in *Novy Lef*, no. 9 (1928): 31-39.

bother to look at a factory if you only observe it from afar and from the middle viewpoint, instead of examining everything in detail—from inside, from above down, and from below up?”³⁶⁶

The aim of restructuring vision by means of technology was explored in film by Dziga Vertov and theorized by *Lef* writer Ossip Brik. In a 1926 essay Brik briefly recounted the developing task of the camera, which he stated was “to see and record what the human eye normally does not see.”³⁶⁷ For example:

The camera can function independently, can see in ways that man is not accustomed to—can suggest new points of view and demonstrate how to look at things differently.... This is the kind of experiment that Comrade Rodchenko undertook when he photographed a Moscow house from an unusual viewpoint. The results proved extremely interesting: that familiar object (the house) suddenly turned into a never-before seen structure, a fire escape became a monstrous object, balconies were transformed into a tower of exotic architecture.³⁶⁸

The notion of retraining human vision by making the familiar seem strange, *ostranenie*, and making what is easy seem difficult, *zatrudnenie*, were both ideas of Viktor Shklovsky, who, as indicated, believed that disrupting cognitive habits was the purpose of art.³⁶⁹ By forcing the viewer to perform work in order to grasp what he perceives, the duration of perception is extended and the viewer becomes aware of the process he is engaged in. The oblique angles of Rodchenko’s photographs were intended to disorient the viewer by forcing a discrepancy between the viewer’s normal point of view and the view of the camera, thus requiring an effort to reconcile

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 259. The “belly-button” view refers to the kind of camera that one would hold at the waist while looking down into the view-finder.

³⁶⁷ Ossip Brik, “What the Eye Does Not See,” in Phillips, 219.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 220.

³⁶⁹ Dickerman, “The Radical Oblique,” 31.

the conflict by mentally realigning the picture or the body.³⁷⁰ The re-educated viewer would presumably be better prepared to participate effectively in the modern world he inhabited.

The power of the diagonal, in particular, has been examined in its role within the utopic aims of El Lissitzky, Theo Van Doesburg and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to create a new vision, a “New Man,” and, ultimately a new society following the upheavals of World War I, the Russian Revolution and ensuing civil war.³⁷¹ In a desire to counteract bourgeois capitalism’s perceived alienating effects on man and society, and imbued with the marvels of science, technology and the machine, these artists believed that society could be reconstructed through production of the right forms of art. Using science as a paradigm, and embracing a “mechanical aesthetics,” they aimed for a universal visual literacy that could be achieved particularly through photography and geometric abstraction.³⁷² According to Steven Mansbach,

In their desire to create a symbolic form to represent the dynamism of the emerging epoch in man’s evolution towards freedom and integration, the artists fastened upon the diagonal....Used pictorially, the diagonal was felt to be able to engender in the spectator a psychological sensation of movement; when the right angle is ‘placed diagonally, then it has a dynamic effect (agitation).³⁷³

Moreover, in Van Doesburg’s space-time theory that he called “Elementarism,” which Mansbach characterizes as “a philosophy of the diagonal in art,” the notions of

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 32. “The power of the oblique to force a conscious repositioning, rather than allow an easy identification...constituted for Rodchenko and Lef writers the *revolutionary* potential of the new perspective. Ibid., 33. See, also, Peter Galassi, “Rodchenko and Photography’s Revolution,” in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman and Peter Galassi (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 101-37.

³⁷¹ Steven A. Mansbach, *Visions of Totality: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Theo Van Doesburg, and El Lissitzky* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980). See, also, S. A. Mansbach, “Science as Artistic Paradigm: A 1920s Utopian Vision,” *The Structurist*, no. 21-22 (1981-1982): 33-39.

³⁷² Mansbach, *Visions of Totality*, 36-40.

³⁷³ Ibid., 45.

matter, motion and time could be combined in a manner considered consonant with then-current scientific theories.³⁷⁴ For all three of the artists examined, the goal of constructivist art was to make the viewer an active participant and not merely a passive observer. Art could “lead to an active participation in workshops and plays, symposiums, and political discussions. This would create the stimuli for a rejuvenation of creative citizenship, spontaneity, and an understanding of the needs of the community.”³⁷⁵

The concept that art could and should educate modern humans for the task of withstanding the shocks of existence in an era of rapid technical and social transformation is, of course, strikingly similar to the montage-based theory of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin with respect to the goals of epic theater. Brecht’s term for “making strange” was *Verfremden*, by which he meant an alienation effect. As discussed earlier, Brecht hoped to produce such an effect through ruptures in the progress of his plays. The exchange of ideas between Moscow and Berlin was rampant during the 1920s.

Stephen Bann has chronicled some of the connections between the respective groups of artists and theorists in the two cities, and their sojourns back and forth. In his discussion of the ideology of Russian Constructivism that emerged in 1920 in Moscow among the *Lef* group, he contrasted what he termed “international constructivism” that followed in Germany, spurred by the Congress of International Progressive Artists held in Dusseldorf in May 1922, and the exhibition of modern Russian art that took place at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin in that same year

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 49.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 52, quoting Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “A Proposal,” (from *Vision in Motion*), rpt. in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Moholy-Nagy* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 194.

propagated by artists such as Theo Van Doesburg, Hans Richter and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.³⁷⁶ Steven Mansbach has discussed in detail the issues of politics and propaganda motivating that first exhibition of Russian art (*Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*), including more than 1,000 works, held in the fall of 1922 and directed not only to Germans, but, also, to the sizable Russian émigré population in Berlin at the time.³⁷⁷

Margarita Tupitsyn has discussed similarities between Rodchenko's and Brecht's respective models of art. Asserting that by the late 1920s critics had begun to criticize Rodchenko for appearing to follow Formalism, which was associated with trends in Western art, she defended him:

Rodchenko's model echoed Brechtian aesthetics, which claimed that "The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive...attitude toward...the material world; and the 'realistic' work of art is therefore one that encourages and disseminates this attitude, yet not merely in a flat or mimetic way or along the lines of imitation alone."³⁷⁸

³⁷⁶ Stephen Bann, Introduction to *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Viking Press, 1974), xxv-xliv. "Whereas the Russian artist could identify himself with the struggle of the proletariat through 'intellectual-material production,' the European...was forced to concentrate his attention upon the sheer problem of communication, across existing barriers of nationality and profession....[W]e must take into account the related fact that if Russian constructivism was obeying a political and social imperative, international constructivism was obeying an aesthetic imperative." Ibid., xxxii-xxxiii; xxxv-xxxvi.

³⁷⁷ S.A. Mansbach, "The 'First Russian Art Exhibition' or the Politics of Presentation and Propaganda," *Artistic Exchange(Kunstlerischer Austausch): Proceedings of the Twenty-eighth International Congress of the History of Art (Internationalen Kongresses fur Kunstgeschichte) Held in Berlin 15-20 July, 1992*, ed. Thomas W. Gaehtgens (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), 307-20. Manfredo Tafuri has also described the "exceptional concentration of Russian intellectuals in Berlin" during the early 1920s, including, for example, Shklovsky, Brik and artists El Lissitzky and Wassily Kandinsky. Manfredo Tafuri, "U.S.S.R.-Berlin, 1922: From Populism to 'Constructivist International,'" in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 119-48.

³⁷⁸ Margarita Tupitsyn, "Fragmentation versus Totality: The Politics of (De)framing," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 486, citing Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 2: 141.

Stanley Mitchell, too, has connected Brecht to Viktor Shklovsky's ideas.³⁷⁹

According to Mitchell, the terms *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* have the same meaning. Shklovsky's Formalist and Marxist theories and Brecht's Marxist ideas, both based on an aesthetics of shock, were designed to combat the alienation of consciousness thought to be the product of capitalism. According to Mitchell,

Russian Formalism came into being during the first world war and on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution; some of its personalities...were Bolsheviks. Brecht developed his theory of alienation on the eve of the fascist counter-revolution as a means to shock people out of a passive-fatalistic acceptance of authoritarian and manipulative politics. If, in the general European context, we draw a line back from Brecht and forward from Shklovsky, we shall find a meeting-point. In the 1920s the Russian Formalists joined forces with the left Futurists to produce the magazine and forum of *LEF* and *Novy Lef*, edited by Mayakovsky. Brecht's "epic theatre" drew inspiration from Piscator, Meyerhold and Eisenstein. The various theories and practices of montage, functional theatre, documentary may all be brought under the head of *making strange*. Russian Formalism was politicized.³⁸⁰

I would not want to put too fine a point on this discussion of the connections between Shklovsky and Brecht, because they are extremely complex and have been given varied interpretations.³⁸¹ The thinking of both theorists evolved during tumultuous political and social conditions under different regimes, and to construct a definitive explication of their convergences and differences is not a purpose of this study. The point is that the idea that art could be constructed or formulated to instruct its audience and, ultimately, to change society, was common to avant-garde theorists in both post-revolutionary Russia and Weimar Germany, and

³⁷⁹ Stanley Mitchell, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: Some Preliminary Remarks towards a History of the Politicisation of Russian Formalism," *Screen* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1974): 74-81. Simon Watney has also discussed the influence of the theory of *ostranenie* on both German Dada and Bertolt Brecht. Simon Watney, "Making Strange: The Shattered Mirror," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 161-66.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁸¹ See, for example, Ben Brewster, "From Shklovsky to Brecht: A Reply," *Screen* 15, no.2 (Summer 1974): 82-99, in which the author disputed a number of Stanley Mitchell's assertions.

their theories, whether Kantian, formalist, futurist or materialist, were circulating in both Berlin and Moscow.

In Wall's diagonal compositions, then, one sees the evocation of a theory of perception designed to challenge the viewer to puzzle over the image, evidenced, for example, in the constructivist photography of Rodchenko. Although Wall apparently has not discussed the use of the oblique angle as an instructive device in the way that he has discussed *gestus*, in these aptly-titled documentary photographs the vertiginous angles clearly utilize the radical oblique.³⁸² There are two significant differences between Wall's work and Rodchenko's, however. First, the angles in Wall's photographs are not nearly as acute as those in Rodchenko's, which appear in many cases to be approximately 90 degrees. In the diagonal compositions, the angles appear to be closer to 45 degrees, rendering the images less vertiginous and easier to decipher.

Second, in contrast to the photographs of those who used the vertical approach in the 1920s and 1930s, including Rodchenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, as another example,³⁸³ the subjects of Wall's documentary transparencies are not simply ugly, dirty, scarred objects and corners, but they enter the arena of the abject. The

³⁸²Briony Fer quotes Wall as having told her, however, that "you cannot use a diagonal as *Diagonal Composition* does without connoting a certain type of abstract constructivist vocabulary." Fer, *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁸³Moholy-Nagy was Hungarian and immigrated to Germany, where he taught from 1923 to 1928 at the Bauhaus. He was a participant in what Stephen Bann described as international constructivism. Tafuri described Moholy-Nagy as having an ambiguous political position, along with a belief in a technological utopia embodied in the machine as a "prime requisite of social transformation." Tafuri, 142-43. See, also, Mansbach, *Visions of Totality*. In "The Armed Vision Disarmed: Radical Formalism from Weapon to Style," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 73, Abigail Solomon-Godeau traced the dissemination of the revolutionary practices of Russian Formalism—"an optical analogue to revolution"—to a more theoretical and abstract practice at the Bauhaus under Moholy-Nagy: "Moholy's championship of photography...had finally more to do with the widespread intoxication with all things technological than it did with a politically instrumental notion of photographic practice."

earlier twentieth-century photographers, who were enthralled with the model of science, the clean lines of the universal language of geometry, and the possibilities of the technical apparatus of the camera to “see what the human eye normally does not see” and to hone the viewer’s perception and political orientation, focused their lenses on marvels of modernism, such as architecture, machinery and the products of industry. Rodchenko’s photographs of the apartment house in which he lived, featuring its balconies, fire escape and modernist design, as well as his pictures of the grilles of new cars, circular metal printing plates and other industrial objects, sang the praises of the new Soviet Union. Moholy-Nagy’s well-known photograph taken at a radically oblique angle from the top of the Berlin Radio Tower was an homage to modern communications technology and to the tower itself. At the same time, the versatility of the camera was a demonstration of Rodchenko’s 1934 essay “Photography-Art:”

Contradictions in perspective. Contrasts in light. Contrasts in forms.
Views impossible to realize with drawing and painting.
Foreshortenings grossly deforming objects, a harsh handling of matter.
Entirely new, never before seen moments in human, animal or
machine movements.³⁸⁴

Abject subjects

Jeff Wall’s images in the diagonal documentary mode are not hymns to contemporary society or its technology: they emphasize unaesthetic images and evidence no vision that could possibly be labeled “utopic.” *Peas and Sauce* (1999) [fig. III-12] and *Rainfilled Suitcase* (2001) [fig. III-13] are, respectively, vertiginous

³⁸⁴ Alexander Rodchenko, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), np., citing German Karginov, *Rodchenko* (Paris: Editions du Chene, 1977). See, also, Victor Margolin, “The Politics of Form: Rodchenko and Moholy-Nagy 1922-1929,” in *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 123-63.

views of a mostly-eaten meal in a discarded, bent aluminum container, and a watery topless suitcase overflowing with personal possessions and surrounded by trash.

Each was photographed in the alley behind Wall's studio.³⁸⁵

It must be emphasized that a color image of a partly-eaten meal taken from a bird's-eye view was not original to Wall. Forming an important part of the immediate historical background to Wall's mature work were color documentary images taken by Stephen Shore and William Eggleston during their respective road trips through parts of the United States from the late 1960s through the 1970s, some of which were exhibited in New York during the 1970s.³⁸⁶ In addition, there were similar Polaroid photographs taken by Walker Evans in the last stage of his career.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵ Wall claims to have come upon the object in *Peas and Sauce* in the alley behind his studio. Conversation with the author at exhibition opening, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, April 16, 2004.

³⁸⁶ Wall apparently has not acknowledged in writing the influence of any of these bodies of work, and in a conversation with Shore moderated by Michael Fried at the Baltimore Museum of Art on March 7, 2007, he expressed no particular interest in Shore's work or the motivations underlying it.

³⁸⁷ Photographing in color when serious "art" photography was always black-and-white, Shore first showed his color photographs in an exhibition titled "American Surfaces," at the Light Gallery in New York in 1972. The collection included numerous images of plates of food either just served on a lunch counter or table, or partly eaten. In all cases, they were unappetizing. A selection of 312 of the photographs constituting *American Surfaces* was exhibited at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in 2005. See Bob Nikas, *American Surfaces: Stephen Shore*, exh. cat. (New York: Phaidon, 2005). See, also, Eggleston's first work in color in *William Eggleston: Los Alamos*, exh. cat., ed., Thomas Weski, intro., Walter Hopps (Zurich: Scalo, in collaboration with Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2003), that includes untitled and undated color images from a body of work made on the road between 1966 and 1974. Having once remarked that "color photography is vulgar," Walker Evans, at the end of his career, took more than 2,600 color photographs with a Polaroid SX-70, including close-up view of the remains of a partly-eaten pie [*Pie*], 1973-74, from an oblique, downward perspective. Mia Fineman, "'The Eye Is an Inveterate Collector': The Late Work," in Maria Morris Hambourg, Jeff L. Rosenheim, Douglas Eklund and Mia Fineman, *Walker Evans*, exh. cat., (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 131-39; Plate 156. There are other images, particularly by Eggleston, that find striking counterparts in Wall's documentary oeuvre. It is hard to know the degree to which striking similarities of subject matter and perspective should be compared, when the subjects are found in everyday contemporary culture. But compare, for example, Wall's *Just Washed* (1997), a small image of a hand holding out a stained, but presumably just-washed, white cloth over an open washing machine, with Eggleston's untitled image of a worn white sweater laid out to dry on a towel on top of a washing machine. Another example is William Eggleston's *Black Bayou Plantation, near Glendora, Mississippi*, an image of spilled white plastic bottles in a patch of dirt, which could be a model for Wall's *Bad Goods*, although Eggleston's photograph lacks a human presence. The Eggleston images appear, respectively, in *William Eggleston: Los Alamos*, 163; and in John Szarkowski, *William Eggleston's Guide*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), np. The images are undated, but were part of "an essay of

Given Wall's extraordinary knowledge of the history of photographic imagery, it can be assumed that he was familiar with some or all of these bodies of work.

For Wall, staining is a repeated motif, beginning with the unidentifiable stains on the formica countertops of the first two diagonal compositions and the rust at the bottom of the bucket in *Diagonal Composition no. 3*. Other examples are *Man in Street* (1995) [fig. III-14], *Just Washed* (1997) [fig. III-15], *Rainfilled Suitcase* (2001), *Bloodstained Garment* (2003) [fig. III-16], and *A Wall in a Former Bakery* (2003) [fig. III-17]. The stains on the formica were caused by humans engaged in the act of cleaning very dirty things, as indicated by the sink and the soap in *Diagonal Composition*. The bloodstained garment found on the sidewalk and the face and coat of *Man in Street* were stained by a bodily fluid, and the personal and usually private contents of a suitcase are engulfed in and stained by rainwater. The stains on the wall and ceiling of the bakery could have been caused by heat or flame, but look suspiciously like blood or another fluid that has seeped through the plaster. Moreover, the fragments of the bakery's wall and ceiling are shown at close range in a vertiginous upward view.³⁸⁸

375 pictures completed in 1971." Szarkowski, 10. The exhibition included 75 of Eggleston's dye-transfer prints. Jonathan Green, *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 187.

³⁸⁸ It is impossible not to mention here a striking comparison to William Eggleston's untitled, 13 x 19 1/8 inch image of a corner showing a portion of a ceiling and parts of the two walls that meet it, taken from a low-angled, but close-up perspective. The ceiling and walls are blood-red, undoubtedly intensified by Eggleston's dye-transfer printing process that permits the manipulation of color. This work was part of a portfolio titled "William Eggleston: 14 Color Photographs," included in Renato Danese, *14 American Photographers* (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Art, 1974), np. The only objects visible in the Eggleston work are a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling and fragments of three pictorial images on the wall, cut off by the cropping of the photograph. In Wall's bakery image, one can see a portion of a fluorescent ceiling light fixture in the upper left corner and part of a wall light fixture on the lower right edge of the picture. The color in Wall's work is a pale and uneven stain, whereas Eggleston's color is luridly intense and unnaturally even.

In the images described in the foregoing paragraphs, Wall has invoked the idea of the abject, focusing on garbage and stained materials that are normally thrown away and, hopefully, not seen. The notion of the abject emerged in art practice within Surrealism during the 1920s and 1930s, and has been associated with Bataille and the concept of the *informe*. Jeff Wall has expressed his interest in some of the photographic work of the artist Wols.³⁸⁹

Although better known as an *informel* painter after World War II, Wols created a body of photographic work between 1932 and 1941 that has been exhibited several times since the late 1970s.³⁹⁰ Wols's photographs depict many subjects, including portraits, self-portraits and fashion, but many are objects that suggest or are, in fact, abject subjects. Typically photographed from a vertical, oblique angle, Wols's subjects include raw chicken and rabbit parts, a partly-eaten meal, sausages, beans, stains on pavements, and a cleaning bucket filled with water and a rag. In his short piece on Wols, Wall wrote,

Wols has been a big influence on me. By the late 1980s his work helped me change direction, inspiring me to get more involved with the fundamental aspects of photography, and, to some extent, to move away from what I was interested in earlier—the connections between cinema and photography, and between painting and photography.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Wall discussed his interest in Wols with Roy Arden in Roy Arden and Jeff Wall, "La Photographie d'art: Expression parfaite du reportage/ 'The Dignity of the Photograph,'" *Art Press*, no. 251 (November 1999): 16-25. Referring to the scratches on Wols's images, Wall said, "Wols seems to have had a unique kind of confidence. His pictures seem so unprotected. That's where the scratches come in, I think. He totally brushed off the whole 'official' element, the official, public side of art." p. 20. See, also, Jeff Wall, "Wols (Wolfgang Otto Shulze), *Untitled (Apple and Pear)*, ca. 1940-41," in Mary Haus, "Struck by Lightning: Photographers talk about images that amazed them, inspired them and taught them a lesson," *Art News* 104, no. 2 (February 2005): 117.

³⁹⁰ See Laszlo Glozer, *WOLS Photographie*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978); Ewald Rathke and Sylvia Rathke-Kohl, *Wols: Bilder Aquarelle Zeichnungen Photographien Druckgraphik*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Kunsthau Zurich; Düsseldorf: Kunstsammlung Nordheim-Westfalen, 1989); and Christine Mehring, *Wols Photographs*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, MA: Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1999). Wols's vintage prints are black-and-white and of small scale, typically approximately 24 x 18 cm. Mehring, 12. They are typically untitled and undated.

³⁹¹ Wall, "Wols."

It is not difficult to discern the influence. In 1990, Wall began to make some documentary photographs, and his first two works in that mode were *Some Beans* (fig. III-18) and *An Octopus* (fig. III-19). Those works form a pair, in that they were taken in the same ugly basement location from the same viewpoint, with the beans on the left of two wooden tables, and the octopus on the right one (the opposite table is empty in each picture). Although the subject of each work is potentially edible, neither is appetizing. The beans are hard and dried, and the octopus appears to be dead and decaying.³⁹² Wol's photograph *Untitled (Beans)* (ca. 1938-39) [fig. III-20] shows some string beans on a wooden surface, and the dimpled surface of the beans coupled with the black-and-white shadowing gives them the appearance of something that might be, or have been, alive. Wols's *Untitled (Rolled Cheese)* (ca. 1938-39) [fig. III-21] evokes the same sensation, as the three rolled objects have been described as larvae, or as something "swelling and bursting," and they lack any

³⁹² Wall said that the octopus was "frozen and thawing." Wall, *Artist's Talk*, lecture given by the artist at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 26, 2007. The still life image of this unusual sea creature—one that is not typically encountered—has an effect on the viewer that could be compared to that of the ray in Chardin's well-known canvas titled *The Ray* (1725-6). Chardin's painting is said to have been greatly admired by those who copied or wrote about it, including Diderot. The ray, too, is an unusual and rather shocking sea animal, especially when gutted and hung from a hook as shown in Chardin's painting, where it appears to be staring out at the viewer: "The gutted ray dominates the composition, a hideous, bloodstained fish with a human face, 'a terrifying face', to quote Raymone Queneau (and Rene Demoris). 'The object is disgusting [degoutant]', Diderot comments. Diderot was the first person to question the contradictions in the painting, its 'secret': how to 'salvage objects of disgust through sheer talent', how to make beautiful things usually held to be ugly; or, to quote Proust, how to transform a 'strange monster' into the 'nave of a polychrome cathedral'." Pierre Rosenberg, ed., *Chardin*, trans. Caroline Beamish, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux; London: Royal Academy of Arts; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 118. Although the octopus in Wall's photograph is not staring at the viewer, the incongruous placement of this "strange monster" is reminiscent of the "disgusting" ray. It seems fair to make this comparison, given Wall's obvious invocation of Chardin's *The Draughtsman* (ca. 1734) in Wall's *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992). The Chardin painting is reproduced in Rosenberg, 199. The desiccated, fragmented specimen of a human arm from which Adrian Walker is drawing is another strange, perhaps uncanny, object.

context that would help identify them.³⁹³ Both are disgusting. Moreover, one of Wols's images of a dead chicken, *Untitled (Chicken Biting Its Leg)*, (ca. 1938-39) [fig. III-22], an arrangement that Wols must have manipulated, is as abject as Wall's dead, red, and probably malodorous octopus.³⁹⁴

As described above, Wall began his diagonal compositions in 1993.

Diagonal Composition no. 3 could be a reprisal of Wols's *Untitled (Bucket)* (ca.1938-39) [fig. III-23], a closely-cropped cleaning bucket filled with water with a twisted rag floating within it, although Wall's rag is a rag mop, and his bucket contains rusty water. The scale and perspective of Wall's diagonal compositions, I would argue, are indebted to Wols not only because of some obvious similarities, but particularly because Wall noted those aspects of Wols's photographs:

Wols shows, with these very simple little pictures, how photography gets results that Arp or Picasso could get in collage or construction. It is simple, modest in scale, yet as grand as a mural.³⁹⁵

³⁹³ Mehring, 22.

³⁹⁴ Wall's documentary work is described as follows: "The term 'documentary' applies to those photographs in which the artist selects the place and time of taking the picture but without intervening in the site or situation in any way." Vischer, Introduction to JWCR, 11n11. The beans and the octopus on the two tables were obviously placed there by Wall, as confirmed by his statement about the octopus.

³⁹⁵ Wall, "Wols." Briony Fer contrasted Wall's *An Octopus* and *Some Beans* with Wols's still life pictures of discarded or dead matter, saying that "Wols exacerbated a relation between pleasure and unpleasure: there is often an almost exquisite precision in the way an object of revulsion, like a carcass, is placed in a picture." On the other hand, she saw Wall as more interested in "disturbing the pictorial field the object inhabits" than with picturing disturbing objects. Fer, *Ibid.*, 26. Peter Galassi, also, has compared Wall and Wols, and, as Fer, sees the objects in still life images as formal devices rather than as subjects: "In *Some Beans* and *An Octopus*, the caustic torque of Wols's eccentric still lifes...have been absorbed into a purely aesthetic realm...while indispensable, the octopus and the beans are not so much protagonists as excuses for an adventure in picture-making." Galassi, 48. In this passage, Galassi was comparing the two photographs also with some of Walker Evans's, thus compounding the emphasis on formal considerations. In my view, these writers have missed the impact of the objects on themselves.

Wall's smaller documentary transparencies, including the three diagonal compositions, *Peas and Sauce*, *Rainfilled Suitcase* and *A Wall in a Former Bakery* are also grand in their illuminated splendor.

The importance of Wall's evocation of Wols does not lie solely in the emulation of particular images, evidencing, again, Wall's concern with modernist art history, but in its connection to a body of work that compounds the alienation effects of Brecht and Rodchenko by adding the aspect of the abject. Wall's stated interest in Wols sounds as if he were mostly concerned with formal qualities, yet the unappetizing subjects that link the two artists serve Wall's purpose in creating disgust, if not horror, in the viewer who is lured by his desire to see.³⁹⁶

The Abject and the Informe

The subject of abjection in art in the late twentieth century seems to stem, at least to an important degree, from the surrealist writings and images published by Georges Bataille from 1929 to 1930 in the journal *Documents* and the *Critical Dictionary*. Bataille's concept was the *informe*, or the formless, which was part of a complex philosophy aimed at denigrating classifications and systems of all sorts.³⁹⁷ It was an anti-humanist strategy designed to undermine the concept of order,

³⁹⁶ Wall mentioned the "roughness" of Wols's technique in the treatment of his prints, resulting in their having "a slightly worn quality." Wall, "Wols." See, also, Roy Arden and Jeff Wall, with respect to Wall's interest in Wols's scratched surfaces.

³⁹⁷ Bataille's definition of "formless" was as follows: "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus, *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." Georges Bataille, ed., *Encyclopaedia Acephalica, Comprising the Critical Dictionary and Related Texts*, trans. Iain White (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 51-52.

and, generally, “to bring things down in the world.” It involved far more than the depiction of unsavory images.

The abject, on the other hand, has been revived as an issue in art more recently.³⁹⁸ For example, group exhibitions held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1992 and 1993, respectively, centered on the concept of the abject in contemporary art and are emblematic of the interest in this issue among certain artists and curators at that time.³⁹⁹ Moreover, the concepts of the *informe* and the abject have sometimes been conflated in the postmodern period to mean the disturbing and the disgusting, particularly in association with the female body, bodily fluids, left-over food and dirt.

Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have explored the *informe* and the abject, beginning with a published conversation in 1994 in which they and four colleagues focused on the distinctions between the two terms.⁴⁰⁰ Fundamentally, they regard the *informe* is regarded as a process, and the abject a subject. The discussants agreed that the purpose of the *informe* is to perform a task that debases or

³⁹⁸ Work of Cindy Sherman that has been considered abject could include the “centerfolds,” first shown in 1981. See Phillips, *Cindy Sherman: Centerfolds*. The twelve color images, each 24 by 48 inches, are each taken from an oblique, downward angle of a reclining Sherman in a picture closely cropped and including such disturbing objects as wet hair, a blanket, crumpled paper and a soiled T-shirt. Andy Grundberg wrote that Sherman’s horizontal positions, five on the floor and three in bed, in addition to a theme of “diffuse yet pervasive anxiety,” counter the allure of the high-contrast color photographs. Andy Grundberg, “Cindy Sherman: A Playful and Political Post-Modernist,” in *Cindy Sherman: Centerfolds*, 43-47. See, also, her “vomit pictures” of the late 1980s and her “sex pictures” of the early 1990s: Amelia Jones, “Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman,” in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 33-53. See, also, Hal Foster, “The Real Thing,” in *Cindy Sherman*, exh. cat., ed. Karel Schampers and Talitha Schoon (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beunigen, 1996), 70-95, for a discussion of the “disgust pictures,” including vomit pictures and sex pictures.

³⁹⁹ Jesus Fuenmayor, Kate Haug and Frazer Ward, *Dirt & Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992); and Craig Houser, Leslie C. Jones and Simon Taylor, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993).

⁴⁰⁰ “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject,” *October* 67 (Winter 1994): 3-21. The other participants were Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Dennis Hollier and Helen Molesworth.

transgresses, and it is therefore linked to a performative gesture. Benjamin Buchloh's example of an *informe* act is spitting in soup. Moreover, in a discussion of Warhol's take on Pollock's drip technique, Bois concluded that Warhol's oxidation paintings, made by having friends urinate on copper-coated canvases placed on the floor, could be considered *informe*:

The reading Warhol makes of Pollock...is a *debasing* one, contrary to the classically formalist reading of Pollock that has long been standard. The task is structured by the historical situation. For Warhol...it was necessary to read Pollock in ways that directly contradicted the sublimatory reading that engendered someone like Morris Louis.⁴⁰¹

According to Krauss, "The word [*informe*] coins the notion of a job, a process; it is not merely a way to characterize bodily substances so that the formerly disprivileged becomes the privileged—as is the case now with art that invokes 'abjection.'"⁴⁰²

Julia Kristeva's 1980 work, translated into English in 1982, has been the touchstone for discussions of abjection in the postmodern period. Kristeva produced a complex psychoanalytic, anthropological, religious and literary investigation of the notion of abjection in which substances such as urine, blood, sperm and excrement are considered abject.⁴⁰³ Kristeva has spoken, particularly, of food as abject in certain circumstances, with "food loathing...perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection." There is particular repulsion toward

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁰² Ibid. 4.

⁴⁰³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 53.

“food remainders:” “Remainders are residues of something but especially of someone. They pollute on account of incompleteness.”⁴⁰⁴

In the 1993 exhibition of abject art at the Whitney Museum of American Art, abject art was defined as “a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality. This work also includes abject subject matter—that which is often deemed inappropriate by a conservative dominant culture.”⁴⁰⁵ Noting that the concept of abjection had emerged as “a central theoretical impulse of 1990s art,” the authors cited Julia Kristeva for the notion of the blurring of boundaries between self and other, and Georges Bataille for the notion of “base materialism,” which challenges “established categories of social taboos through an investigation of degraded elements.”⁴⁰⁶

Placing the concept of abjection within the discourse of art since the early eighties, Simon Taylor discussed abject art as contestatory in its rhetoric of “contamination” and its “defilement” of the white cube of the gallery.⁴⁰⁷ Moreover,

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 75-76. Kristeva wove a complex web around the theories of Bataille, Freud, Lacan, Mary Douglas and a variety of others, that involves Freudian theories of psychic development and ways in which certain religions have sacralized abject substances. It would seem that Kristeva distilled the notion of the abject from Bataille’s surrealist, operational concept to the late twentieth century in a way that has resulted, perhaps too simplistically, in the distillation of his ideas to bodily fluids and other so-called disgusting substances that are now referred to simply as “abject.” In the conversation referred to above, there was general agreement that within contemporary art the distinction between subject and function, or abject and *informe*, had been blurred by Kristeva in what they regarded as her recuperation of waste, filth and bodily fluids as abject. Rosalind Krauss made this argument with respect to reception of Cindy Sherman’s “bulimia” pictures of the late 1980s, particularly that of Laura Mulvey, who she sees as having contributed to the theorization of the abject as “composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily disgust: of blood, of excreta, of mucous membranes.” Rosalind Krauss, “The Destiny of the *Informe*,” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 235-252.

⁴⁰⁵ Houser, Jones, Taylor and Jack Ben-Levi, Introduction to *Abject Art*, 7.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid. For a more thorough investigation of Bataille’s concept of the *informe*, its categories of horizontality, base materialism, pulse and entropy, and connections to particular bodies of twentieth-century art, see Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*.

⁴⁰⁷ Simon Taylor, “The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art,” in *Abject Art*, 59-83.

its emergence during the 1980s involved opposition not only to the theoretically neutral gallery, but to the turn of United States politics in a more conservative direction during that decade. For purposes of this study, Taylor's discussion of Cindy Sherman's post-1983 photographs is similar to the argument made here with regard to Wall's alluring photographic transparencies: "Sherman's large-scale color photographs are beautiful and seductive from afar; as we approach them, phantasmatic tableaux of hysterical women, zombies, and monsters appear in scenes awash with repugnant details of bodily fluids and deformed anatomies."⁴⁰⁸ Taylor termed Sherman's strategy one of "abrupt defamiliarization...which does not accommodate passive, desirous contemplation."

With regard to Wall, peas and sauce and an octopus (food remainders, or rotting food), blood-stained garments (bodily fluid), and a wall in a former bakery that could be blood-stained, are not only seductive, but abject. The same is true of the dirty mop, the rusty water and the stained surfaces and dirty soap of the diagonal compositions. They are subjects and substances that rob scopical pleasure from the viewer of Wall's lighted images, once truly seen. These works create a sense of defamiliarization, or alienation in Brecht's terminology, although not with the same degree of shock, perhaps, as Sherman's vomit images. The better term might be disillusionment.

Dirt and Washing

In Wall's diagonal compositions, there is a focus on dirt. Sinks, which are sites for cleansing, work best if they are clean. Wall's sinks, including the areas around them, are stained beyond redemption. Years of use have rendered them

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 62.

permanently scarred, irrespective of any effort to clean them, thus rendering the sinks at least partly dysfunctional. Even the soap is dirty, and the filthy mop in *Diagonal Composition no. 3* could not possibly clean a floor. Dirt and stains are objects of base materialism in Bataille's lexicon and have figured in the more recent discourse of the abject. Anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote of the cultural relativity of dirt in her 1966 book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, which was a source for Kristeva, as well as for more recent authors exploring the concepts of dirt and defilement in postmodern art.⁴⁰⁹

In the 1992 Whitney Museum exhibition titled "Dirt & Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine," dirt was the subject of the show, including its association with femininity and the "socially 'low'"; its relation to the concept of the abject in contemporary art; and its appearances in work described as "hybrids," in which materials are displaced from familiar contexts. Relying heavily on Bataille, Douglas and Kristeva, Frazer Ward described abjection as "the subject's convulsed response to filth," and examined the use of abjection as material in the work of Andres Serrano and Cindy Sherman, among others.⁴¹⁰

The appearance of Wall's first diagonal composition in 1993, then, coincided with a significant focus on abjection in art, including the 1993 discussion among art historians referred to above, the Whitney exhibitions in 1992 and 1993, and the exhibition of the *informe* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1996, for which

⁴⁰⁹ Taylor, 79, quoting Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 9: "What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa. The idiom of pollution lends to itself a complex algebra which takes into account the variables in each context." Taylor was speaking of the art of David Hammons, which is culturally oppositional: "Dirt reflects the everyday environment and offers itself as a critique of antiseptic polish and anality (authoritarianism)." p. 79.

⁴¹⁰ Frazer Ward, "Foreign and Familiar Bodies," in *Dirt & Domesticity*, 8-37.

Formless: A User's Guide was the catalogue.⁴¹¹ Wall has not participated in the written discourse on the abject, and its foundations in Bataille's version of Surrealism and Kristiva's psychoanalytic theory probably would not interest him. Moreover, as has been demonstrated, Wall has incorporated trash, discarded food and discarded food wrappers in his art from the beginning. Yet, there are correspondences between the dirt and trash in Wall's work and abjection in other artists' work, beginning with Cindy Sherman in early 1980s. Abjection is a significant element of the milieu in which Wall has been operating.

A counterpart to Wall's images of dirty, stained and scarred surfaces is a group of works that depict washing and cleaning. They include *Swept* (1995) [fig. III-24]; *Housekeeping* (1996) [fig. III-25]; *Volunteer* (1996) [fig. III-26]; *Just Washed* (1997) [fig. III-15]; and *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999) [fig. III-27]. Wall has said of these images,

... over the past few years I've made a number of pictures on or somehow related to the theme of cleaning or washing or of housework. *There is much to say about dirt and washing.* It is an opposition like 'the raw and the cooked'. I like things to be clean and neat...But I also like dirty sinks, the soggy abandoned clothes I see in the alley behind my studio...rusted dried pools of liquid and all the other picturesque things so akin to the spirit of photography.⁴¹² (Emphasis added.)

The common thread among these works is the idea that one just cannot get things clean, despite repeated efforts. *Just Washed*, ironically, shows an arm holding a

⁴¹¹ The French version was *l'Informe: mode d'emploi*, exh. cat. (Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996).

⁴¹² Wall, "A note about cleaning," JWCR 393. The statement, made in 2000, was followed by a comment about the cleaners at the Mies van der Rohe Foundation with whom Wall interacted in producing *Morning Cleaning*. He listed the works set forth above, except for *Diagonal Composition no. 3*, but acknowledged that there are "maybe some others." The building being cleaned in *Morning Cleaning* is a reconstructed example of high modernism in the Weimar period, a building designed as a pavilion for an international exhibition, and, as such, constitutes another of Wall's references to early twentieth-century modernism.

white cloth with black stains that could not be washed out, over a washing machine. *Housekeeping*, *Volunteer* and *Morning Cleaning* refer to daily efforts to clean everyday spaces that, of course, just get dirty again. *Volunteer* depicts a worker mopping the floor in what might be a daycare center, using the bucket seen later in *Diagonal Composition no. 3*. The dirty rag mop and the “volunteer’s” laconic pose create doubt that this space could ever be clean. *Housekeeping*, depicting a housekeeper walking out the door of a just-cleaned hotel room, suggests that the cleaning that is performed in a hotel room produces only an illusion for the next guest that the room has not recently been occupied. And *Swept* shows that no matter how hard one sweeps, the space still looks dirty.

The cleaning images would suggest that one has to accept the fact that routine and repeated cleaning can only go so far. There will always be dirty spaces, from basement corners to idealized architectural pavilions, which contain and reveal “the dirt and ugliness with which we have to live.” When one thinks about the activities depicted in works about cleaning, one concludes that this is one more weapon in Jeff Wall’s arsenal of tactics of aesthetic disillusionment.

Blind Windows

Three images titled *Blind Window* (all 2000) [figs. III-28, III-29 and III-30, respectively] block vision altogether. Each shows a window, apparently in a basement, that is boarded up, totally occluded, or blacked out and partly covered with cobwebs. The first two appear to be in the basement studio in which pictures such as *Some Beans*, *An Octopus* and *Swept* were taken. *Swept*, also, includes two boarded-up windows. The windows in *Blind Window no. 1* and *Blind Window no.2* are not

only boarded up, but have wooden boards nailed across them, adding to the sense of being enclosed, even imprisoned. *Blind Window no. 3* shows the outside of a basement window, through which one cannot see because of the angle of the view and the fact that the glass appears black. All three images were taken from a relatively close vantage point, placing the viewer in a confined, almost claustrophobic space. If a window is supposed to be an opening to the world, Wall has completely frustrated that possibility. In effect, these works show the viewer nothing. I would argue that they may be the most forceful images within Wall's multi-faceted demonstration of disillusionment, or the disruption of vision and scopis pleasure. Emanating from lightboxes, the first two blind windows are large in scale, 109 by 133 cm, and 134 by 170.5 cm, respectively. Yet the occluded views and neutral colors—brown wood and gray walls—offer limited aesthetic pleasure.

Wall's Disillusionment

Jeff Wall's spectacular transparencies are pictures of everyday contemporary life that, at first glance, appear readily intelligible. As has been shown, however, there are myriad ways in which these images challenge the viewer by defying easy understanding. Wall has utilized theories of the early twentieth century to prolong viewing and promote contemplation. They include the use of exaggerated gestures, in a manner reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater; the placement of human figures who seem to occupy the margins of society in locations and situations that question the distribution of wealth in this late-capitalist era of abundance and waste; the use of oblique perspectives combined with abject subjects; the depiction of dirty corners and blind windows which cannot be made clean; and the inclusion of

visual obstructions by means of physical objects such as transmission wires and tree branches. In his work of the early 1980s, in particular, Wall has drawn on well-known paintings of early modernism in formulating his pictures, thus adding a layer of art history that some viewers can take into account in their efforts at interpretation. In those references to paintings, and in references to early twentieth-century radical photographic techniques in some works of the 1990s, Wall has created complex works of art that arrest viewers who are willing and able to take the time to try to understand them. In using the methods described in this chapter, often in combination, Wall has attracted spectators to his luminous works, only to disrupt their viewing pleasure by making them work to apprehend the many possible embedded meanings.

Forest Pictures

There is one case in which one might compare the thwarted legibility of images, by Wall and Richter, respectively, leading one to wonder if Wall had in mind Richter's *Lovers in the Forest* (1966) [fig. III-31]. Richter's work, in shades of gray, shows two persons in the winter woods, partly hidden by trees trunks and branches, and obscured by his signature blur. Wall's black-and-white silver gelatin print *Forest* (2001) [fig. III-32] shows a wooded winter scene, in which two figures walk to the left heading out of the picture. They leave behind some possessions near a small fire in the center of the image. The unusual aspect of this picture for Wall is that the figures are very much obscured by the leafless trees of the forest, so that they are barely noticeable. They are not mentioned in the title, and, perhaps most important is the fact that this image is one of Wall's relatively few black-and-white gelatin silver

prints, which he has produced only since 1996. The shades of gray link this image even more closely to Richter's. Since this is one of Wall's cinematographic works, meaning it is one which he constructed using performers, it bears the full weight of his intentions. This is not to claim that Wall has returned to his earlier practice of reconstructing images from art history, but only to remark that in this case he has found still another way to disrupt visual pleasure in the viewing of his art.

Transparency and Opacity in Gerhard Richter's Scopic Disruptions

In addition to *Forest*, Jeff Wall's blind windows can be considered a useful transition to Gerhard Richter's several means of disrupting scopic pleasure in his paintings. In addition to his photopaintings, discussed in Chapter Two in connection with the concept of medium, in which Richter has employed the "blur" to efface the clarity of the image and to distance painted works from the photographs from which they were derived, Richter has produced three bodies of work since the late 1960s that renounce image altogether, and, in two of those, he has relinquished color as well. The abstract paintings, which typically, but not always, involved color, were discussed earlier in connection with their technique. The works in which Richter has relinquished both image and color are his gray paintings and his mirror works, some of which are enameled glass. According to Reinhard Spieler, between 1962 and 1993, just under half of Richter's paintings lacked color.⁴¹³ Richter began his gray monochromes in 1968. Although facture in the gray paintings varies

⁴¹³ Reinhard Spieler, ed., Preface to *Ohne Farbe Without Color* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 10.

considerably, they create distance and alienation in the viewer, and require a more intellectual response than those that include images or color.⁴¹⁴

Richter relates the color gray to both the process and desired effect of his painting, which, as demonstrated earlier, is integrally related to photography:

It is possible that my preference for gray derives from photography, that this has something to do with the cause, but in the case of the finished painting it has nothing more to do with the photograph, it is only painting.

Gray. It really has no message, it doesn't stimulate feelings or associations and is actually neither visible nor invisible. Being so inconspicuous makes it so suitable for transmitting, for illustrating—and in an almost illusionist way, similar to that of a photograph. And, more than any other color, it is perfect for the illustration of “nothing.”⁴¹⁵

Luc Lang has described perceptively the way in which Richter's gray pictures are connected to the gray of photography:

But Richter does not only mix black and white paint below a monochrome gray threshold, he also paints paintings that are “all gray...reminding us of Kodak's 8” x 10” neutral gray card that is used to check exposure meters or to take light readings for scenes particularly difficult to photograph. The change in perception provoked by changing scale and enlarging Kodak's card to 200 x 150 cm or 300 to 150 cm...would by no means justify Richter's monochrome production if the monochromes did not also provide the opportunity to explore the immediate vicinity of medium gray, and, above all, to experiment with the phenomenon of light absorption and reflection, unlike Kodak's famous gray card whose sole purpose is to reflect exactly eighteen per cent of the light it receives....So Richter sets out to mix and combine brilliance and matteness, to take every liberty in experimentation and manifest in paint all the nuances of expression possible within the parameters of photography's extremely normative and technically limited optical vocabulary.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Variations in facture can be seen, for example, in *Gray Streak* (1968) and *Unpainting (Gray)* (1972), each 200 by 200 cm.

⁴¹⁵ Gerhard Richter, quoted in Spieler, 51, citing, respectively, a film portrait by Victoria von Flemming on NDR German Television, 1987; and a letter from Richter to Edy de Wilde, February 23, 1975.

⁴¹⁶ Luc Lang, “The Photographer's Hand: Phenomenology in Politics,” in *Gerhard Richter* (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1995), 42.

The illustration of nothing in the gray monochromes is, perhaps, the limit of the disruption of scopical pleasure in looking at a painting. This is not to say that Richter's handling of gray painting in his myriad ways does not produce interesting aesthetic effects, but, clearly, the artist wished to paint and to *say* nothing.

One could connect certain of the gray paintings to Wall's blind windows. Consider, for example, Richter's series of curtain pictures produced in 1964 and 1965. *Curtain III (bright)* (1965) [fig. III-33] is a picture of a curtain, hanging in folds and rendered in a blurred spectrum of light to dark grays.⁴¹⁷ The opacity of *Curtain III* is two-fold: the depicted fabric itself is opaque and completely fills the canvas, and the notion of a curtain is congruent with that of a blind window: one's expectations of seeing through a window are frustrated. Thus, Richter and Wall have, in different ways, completely obscured the view and thwarted the viewer who assumes that there is a window behind the curtain or a view through a window. Richter has also painted some images of windows in which the view is occluded: *Barred Window (Fenstergitter)* (1968) in which the shadows of the bars between the panes show through the surface bars, within a very shallow space; and *Shadow Painting*, also 1968 [fig. III-34], a similar but smaller image.

Given the textures and painterly facture of Richter's gray paintings, perhaps his mirrors say even less. In 1965, Richter designed his first sculptural mirror work, *Four Panes of Glass* (1967) [fig. III-35]. This was the first of a series of glass panel works that have been variously produced. This work consists of four clear panes of glass mounted in free-standing joined metal frames, each 190 by 100

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 49. This painting measures 200 by 195 cm., somewhat larger than Wall's blind windows.

cm, thus roughly corresponding to the standing human body.⁴¹⁸ In this first glass work, the viewer looks through the clear panes of glass to whatever is behind them, as if they were windows. They can only frame what is on the other side. Through the 1990s, Richter produced monochrome glass panels that darkly reflect the space around them by combining glass with oil paint. *Gray Mirror* (1992) [fig. III-36] is a four-panel work, with each panel measuring 300 by 100 cm.

Perhaps Richter's most vaunted installation of painted mirror pieces was designed for the opening of Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin, a work titled *Eight Gray* (2001) [fig. III-37]. In the original installation, four gray mirrored pieces were placed on facing walls in a long gallery, so that they each reflected the surrounding space, including their own reflections in the works across the room. Richter insisted that the windows in the gallery facing the Unter den Linden be opened so that the street scene could become a part of the works.⁴¹⁹ The glass panels "are mounted on metal frames with fastenings that can be loosened, allowing the artist or the curator [and by implication, the spectator] to manipulate the angles of the panels by tilting them slightly, reorienting their reflections."⁴²⁰ Thus, there is no necessary fixed image reflected in the panels.

Clearly, Wall's and Richter's approaches to the denial or frustration of visual pleasure are quite different. Wall's transparencies are extraordinarily clear, colorful images of recognizable objects and scenes, whereas Richter's photopaintings

⁴¹⁸ Doris Krystof, "Visual Speculations: Mirrors and Glass in the Work of Gerhard Richter," in Speiler, 83, figure 4.

⁴¹⁹ Krystof, 85. See, also, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Eight Gray*: Between *Vorschein* and *Glanz*," in *Gerhard Richter: Eight Gray*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2002), 14-28. A second installation of gray mirrors, *Six Gray Mirrors* (2003), was produced for the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, New York. Spieler, 10.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

renounce color, limit detail and blur the image so that the viewer is perplexed in working to discern what is actually shown. The veracity that comes with making a painting look like a blurred photograph is undermined not only by the blur, but, also, by the details that Richter has eliminated from the original model.

Perhaps the limit case of Gerhard Richter's disruption of scopic pleasure is his *128 Details from a Picture* (1978) [one detail, fig. III-38]. Richter's statement describes the process of the making of this work:

In the summer of 1978, I took photographs of the surface of an oil sketch on canvas (78 x 52 cm, 1978—it had been previously exhibited in my exhibition *Pictures* at the *Anna Leonowen's Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design*.) The photographs were taken from various sides, from various angles, various distances and under different light conditions.

The resulting 128 photographs were organized in two versions: one, the sequential order that is presented here under the covers of a book, and a second version which is presented pictorially in grid-form (*128 details from a picture*, 1978, 127 x 400 cm, photographs on board, framed, Collection Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld).⁴²¹

In this case, Richter photographed his own painting, as described, and presented it in a grid format from which it cannot be reconstructed. The viewer of the photographic grid might assume that if he only could rearrange the parts, he could discover an intelligible painting. But, of course, the painting was abstract. This work may be Richter's ultimate disruption of scopic pleasure; it reverses his typical process by deconstructing a painting by means of photography.

⁴²¹ Gerhard Richter, "Author's Note," in *128 Fotos von Einem Bild 1978* (Cologne: Walther König, 1998), np. This book presents each photographic fragment of the painting on a separate page, so that only one fragment can be viewed at a time. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Richter had taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1977 at the invitation of Benjamin Buchloh. Thus, the fragmentation and deconstruction of the painting may have been influenced by that experience. The work was previously published as *One Hundred Twenty-eight Details of a Picture*, The Nova Scotia Pamphlets 2 (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980).

SUMMARY STATEMENT

This study is intended as a theoretical analysis of the discourse surrounding the emergence of large-scale, color photography around 1980, through an examination of the art praxes of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter. As North American and West German art shifted away from Conceptual Art, which had dominated advanced art practice since the mid-1960s, and in which deskilled, amateurish black-and-white photographs combined with text predominated, there developed a vociferous discourse concerning the art that was taking its place. Large-scale, colorful, figurative paintings and photographs began to dominate international art exhibitions and to make their way into galleries and museums.

The most strident aspect of the discourse emanated from a group of fundamentally Marxist critics and academicians who viewed the perceived turn to more aesthetic art forms as a dangerous and undesirable capitulation to the political hegemony of the newly-elected conservative administration in the United States, and to a burgeoning and increasingly international art market fueled by improving economic conditions. Thus, their criticism of figurative and pictorial art looked less than carefully at the art and the stated positions of the artists, and judged what they saw as radically retrogressive.

As a way of illuminating the discourse, this study has examined the complex, multivalenced art practices of two major artists of the late-twentieth century: the photography of Jeff Wall and the painting of Gerhard Richter. It has done so by mining the criticism in order to elucidate the limits of art-historical writing that emanates from a rigid theoretical position and fails to carefully consider the art.

Moreover, because both Wall and Richter are highly intellectual artists who have contributed many writings and public statements to the discourse, their writings and statements have been given considerable weight. Their voices are invoked here as full participants. Consequently, this study constitutes an account of the positions of the most important protagonists in the art-historical discourse of the period from the late 1970s through the 1980s in North America and West Germany.

As stated in the Introduction, and as evidenced throughout this study, there is no precise beginning, nor is there an end to the discussion of which this discourse forms a part. There exists a historical narrative, or, more accurately, numerous historical narratives, of Modernism and of what has succeeded it if Modernism indeed has ended. As suggested by parentheses in the title of this study, and as illustrated by Jeff Wall's many allusions to iconic works of art throughout the history of Modernism, Wall does not perceive a break between Modernism and Postmodernism. Richter's work also reflects facets of the rich history of Western art.

In sum, this study considers a rather short period in a long history that reaches back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. As evidenced by the concerns of some dominant voices in the discourse of that brief period, it engages particularly with theories of the early twentieth century. As a chapter in a longer narrative, this study elucidates the terms with which certain ambitious art of the late 1970s and the 1980s was discussed in light of the social, cultural and political conditions in, and cultural interchanges between, West Germany and North America. There can be no conclusion. The terms will shift as the conditions and the art change, but the discussion will continue.

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I list here only the writings that have been of use in the writing of this dissertation. This bibliography is by no means a complete record of all the works and sources I have consulted. It indicates the substance and range of reading upon which I have formed my ideas, and I intend it to serve as a convenience for those who wish to pursue the study of the subjects of this dissertation. It is divided into three parts: Art and Photography: History and Theory; Jeff Wall; and Gerhard Richter.

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