



# 3.

Jeff Wall:  
The Staging of the Gaze



## Conceptual Art in Images

The young Canadian artist Jeff Wall looked through the keyhole of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* at the same time as the Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto, who was around the same age.<sup>110</sup> The work was known to only a few people when the two of them visited the Duchamp retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the winter of 1973–74. As viewers of the retrospective, they felt compelled to an act of violence that, in the literal sense, reopened their eyes to the supposedly outdated question of perspective. Along with a handling of perspective that returned the question of images to the gaze, it was now that gaze that found itself in crisis, even though there were images there. Both artists were still seeking to define their work at the time, so that the encounter with Duchamp can be seen as a kind of initiation.

Jeff Wall had a difficult time with conceptual art's emphasis on text. Duchamp had been a conceptual artist *avant la lettre*, and conceptual artists invoke him with a true missionary zeal; unlike their texts, however, the significance of Duchamp's texts was strategic. They all referred to the ambivalent and disturbing visibility of his works (mere objects or enigmatic installations), which lured viewers into the trap of their own gaze. In Duchamp's work, photography still played a subordinate role. Now it offered itself as a venue for an alternative conceptual art. It was the medium of choice for directing the gaze at images of a new kind: images that were constructed and openly revealed

their character as pictures. They were photographs that invited one to "see through" them.

In interviews Jeff Wall likes to tell the story of the origins of his crisis with conceptual art, which, like many of his generation, he too had pursued in the 1960s. In his case, the crisis was triggered by the fashionable prohibition against painting, to which he had no desire to submit. Conceptual art placed a taboo on everything that resembled a painting. Wall also resisted the cliché that figurative painting should be declared the enemy of high modernism. The "hard-nosed [...] reductivism" of the 1960s, as he experienced it in Canada, could not be the last word. Nor was it the point to accuse in retrospect every figurative approach of being naive without ever questioning one's own approach. He wanted to do away with that prejudice in his art. But he was not yet ready to do so. Rather, he set out to get a degree in art history first, and wrote a thesis on Manet at the Courtauld Institute in London.<sup>111</sup>

Subsequently, in 1975, Wall began teaching in Vancouver, which for a time led him to writing a number of texts. In 1977, however, he decided to concentrate exclusively on his work as an artist, dedicating himself entirely to photography. But, as he put it in an interview, he wanted it to be "cinematographic." Therein lies a conscious contradiction, since the photograph is, as Sugimoto repeatedly emphasizes, the opposite of moving images.<sup>112</sup> In fact, for a while Wall considered making films. Now, however, he made a surprising about-face. Only beyond



the opposition of photograph and film could he find a new way to make images. Art history offered a paradoxical orientation to that end in old paintings. The point was to develop a contemporary concept of the image—specifically, one that openly revealed how it was constructed, just as the old masters, the virtuosos of perspective, had done. In the process, traveling to Manet exhibitions became a passion of his.

### *Duchamp's Keyhole and Perspective*

Jeff Wall referred to Duchamp, however, and not to figurative paintings, when he exhibited *Destroyed Room* (FIG. 49), a work he lists as number one in his oeuvre at a gallery in Vancouver in 1979. What Duchamp had left behind as his legacy after his death became the point of departure for Wall's work. Like the other works from this period, this photograph shows the studio the artist had rented in Vancouver. Although they are photographs, they incorporate the traditional site of the artist—the painter's studio—like a quotation and thus underscore their character as art. At the same time, they evoke another site of art: the space of a public exhibition. Not only are they created for an exhibition; in the way they reveal their motif, they carry their character as exhibition or as exhibited photograph as a kind of program within. There is also a touch of polemics against the

texts of conceptual art in the fact that they are staged for a frontally positioned viewer. The catalog Wall published for this early exhibition at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1979 has a title that reflects this turn: "To the Spectator."

At a time conceptual artists were still criticizing the art gallery, Wall chose the walls of an exhibition space as the site of his art. That represented a rejection not only of the book page, with its definitions of art, but also of the photo book, which at the time was enjoying a boom as an alternative to exhibitions. His strategy in the catalog went so far as to work with comparative illustrations, many of which were old master paintings (FIG. 48). The "dialectic between depth and flatness" of the space shown, whether he hides it or not, was part of his concept of photography, as he says in the same catalog.<sup>113</sup> There are precise instructions for the sequence in which the works in the gallery should be viewed. The image returns programmatically in his art. It is, however, only apparently the depiction of reality that one expects of photography. Instead, the concept behind Wall's photographs has passed through Duchamp's teaching. The subversive variety of perspective was his method of choice.

The heavy old wooden door from Duchamp's work in Philadelphia offered a keyhole with a quasi-forbidden perspective for voyeurs, who were at once exposed and disappointed by it. Duchamp's installation could, moreover, only be disseminated in photographs that reproduced the view through the keyhole and yet do not capture it,



since the real effect entailed bending over and also being curious about the scene behind the door. Photographs present Duchamp's work, a replica of a three-dimensional world, as a landscape with a pornographic motif, without showing that this landscape is set up in a space that is not only closed but also locked. This assemblage, which represents a special case in Duchamp's oeuvre, becomes the rule in Wall's work. He does not, however, construct a work that he then photographs, but rather invents the motif for a photograph in this way. That is an important step. The concept of his works does not exist before and outside of the photograph, which becomes the sole site of his art. The setup disappears forever in the photographs, and is even increasingly dissimulated by them. With his materials and actors, Wall stages the photograph itself. The staging transforms into the image that remains. And the image is lit not with Duchamp's illuminating gas but from behind in a light box as if it were in daylight.

The difference becomes even clearer if we consult the instructions for assembling *Étant donnés* that Duchamp left behind in order to ensure he could control its setup even when he could no longer do it himself. In addition to the components and objects, there were notes and photographs in his *Manual of Instructions*—a ring binder that Anne d'Harnoncourt published in facsimile in 1987, nearly twenty years later, when the contractually established waiting period for its publication had elapsed (FIG. 46).<sup>114</sup> Duchamp had spoken of an "approximation démontable"—that is, an approximation of his work that

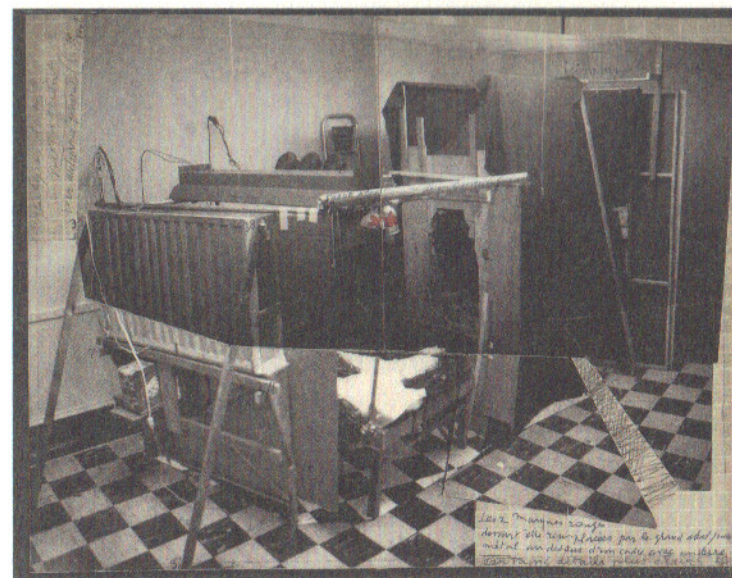


FIG. 46 MARCEL DUCHAMP:  
*Manual of Instructions*, detail, 1987

could be disassembled. Fifteen steps were necessary to set up the work according to plan.

The photographs in the *Manual* depict not the finished work but rather how it was produced. They show the stage machinery—to borrow a term from the theater—that is no longer visible in the work. Duchamp even left an instruction in the ring binder explaining how to take "good color photographs" of his work, which looked so different in photographs from the impression on site. In the aforementioned catalog for Jeff Wall's early exhibition, the reference *Destroyed Room* makes to *Étant donnés* is quite



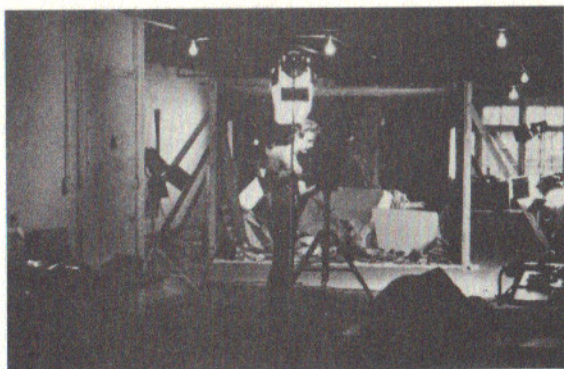


FIG. 47 Production still  
from *The Destroyed Room*, 1978

explicit, since it shows not only Duchamp's work for comparison but also a photograph of Wall's own work being set up (FIG. 48).

### "Destruction" on a Stage

Even without such help, *Destroyed Room* (FIG. 49), which was produced in 1978, is recognizably a reaction to the construction manual for *Étant donnés*, which the artist had once asked to see when visiting the 1973 Duchamp exhibition.<sup>115</sup> But the superficial similarity conceals an elementary difference, by means of which the photograph announces itself as a new conceptual art. The chaotic still life was set up in the rented studio in Vancouver to simulate the traces of a violent break-in in the intimate sphere

of a woman, who is represented only by her clothing. It is the stage for an act of violence without the presence of perpetrator and victim and hence the view of a different time, the time of the viewer. The viewer never sees the scene of the crime, only a photograph of it. Whereas the stage in a theater is built for an action that is to take place, Jeff Wall builds a stage (and a place) for a photograph.

The act on whose traces our gaze is focused never took place. There are no traces of an act, much as the photograph no longer is the oft-discussed "trace" of reality. So-called "indexicality" becomes the stylistic means of a pure staging. The three visible walls of the room recall the perspective schema, but its view is destroyed because it is randomly filled with arbitrary furniture and belongings. It is not the room that is "destroyed" but rather the perspective view of it. The disorder is just as controlled as the perspective arrangement of the visual space has been. Rather, it is its reversal.

Jeff Wall introduced a new type of photograph with this work. The color transparency, originally a unique object, was unusual not only for its format, which was remarkably large even for its time (159 × 234 cm), but also for the way it was presented as exhibition art. It was placed behind the street-front window of a gallery in Vancouver in such a way that it could only be seen from the street. It was thus a "display window" in the literal sense, which has been the central theme of classical perspective since time immemorial. In the meantime, however, this idea has been assimilated by advertising and store window displays as an



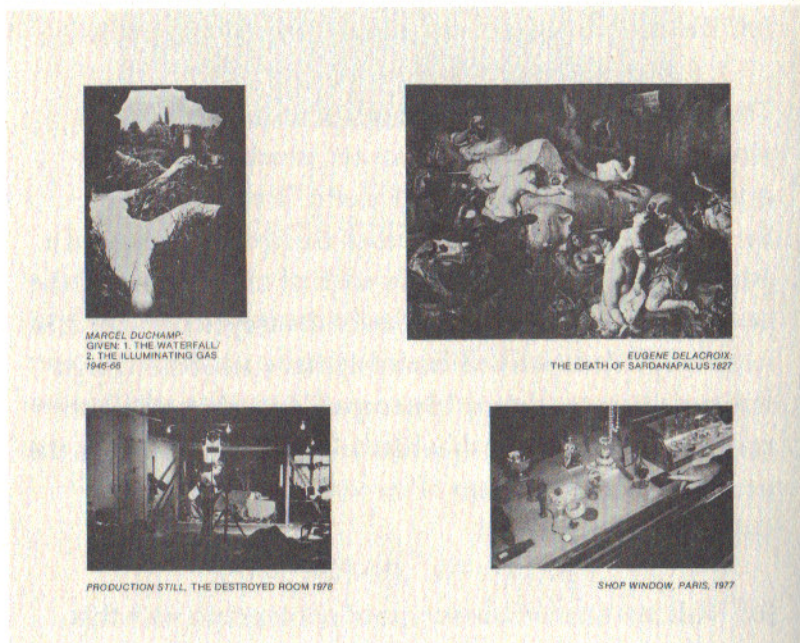


FIG. 48 Left-hand page of catalog (facing *The Destroyed Room*), from: *Jeff Wall*, exh. cat. Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979



FIG. 49 *The Destroyed Room*, 1978



invitation to purchase something. When Wall exhibited the work a year later in a gallery in nearby Victoria, he had it built into the wall. The light box became the solution to the problem.

In the catalog produced for the exhibition in Victoria, as mentioned earlier, the artist instructed the "spectator" how to understand the works.<sup>116</sup> Art is always there to be looked at. But here the looking at is negotiated with the public, so to speak, as was always Duchamp's strategy. In his text Wall speaks of artificial lighting as a contemporary form of perception. The technical reproduction of natural light, he says, was an old problem for industry. "The more the ideology of the 'natural' is pursued, the more theatrical the conditions must become." Television images are backlit as well, after all, and their fluorescent light brightens the room into which it is radiated. The artist wanted to find an equivalent form in photography, since in the exhibition his photographs are also "switched on." Moreover, he had shown such slides "for years in art history lectures," which meant reproducing old art using a modern form of perception. Now it is no longer the small slides of the time or reproductions of other works, but his own works in the format of exhibition art, in the old format of salon painting.

Wall sets great store on the fact that his work "depends on discovering the specific conditions of photography implied by the things I'm interested in, the specific theatricality of them, from the position of the camera. Everything begins from the position of the camera," and his

sets "are built out to its [the camera's] established frame." The plate cameras he uses "impose rigid terms on what can be successfully posed in front of them." Their immobility corresponds to the conditions of painting. The models of painting to which he referred were so important to the artist that in catalogs or handouts for the exhibition he would didactically allude to them. A reference to the orientalizing palette of Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* in the Louvre should be seen in this context (FIG. 48). The Romantic history painting is based on an action that has become fiction in Wall's photography. No great historical event can take place in the studio in which he works.<sup>117</sup> Wall reequipped his studio to make it the venue for a photograph that does not record an action but merely simulates one. Thus he achieves a staging that gets by without action. His photographic technique uses, as painting once did, images that are posed from the outset, placed before the gaze and created only for the gaze. In that process, perspective is a means of stage direction that reinforces the optics of the camera that came after it. It is not a depiction of reality but rather a "show," even if this occurs only in the photograph and adds narrative to the photograph.

This early work contains a contradiction between a still life and a violent scene. It can be regarded in both ways. Because it is a photograph, it seems to document a violent scene that provides evidence of an attempted rape of the occupant of the room or a brutal search of its inventory. As Arthur Danto has shown, however, its documentary aspect lies in its being merely a photograph, which we expect to be a document of reality, not in its actually



documenting reality.<sup>118</sup> The room illustrated was never occupied but was, to say it again, merely set up to be photographed. The conflict is not only between photography and motif—that is, in a false reference of image to fact—but also between a setup and its opposite—that is, a built disorder. Jeff Wall provides us with a piece of evidence here that unmasks the entire view as a stage set: namely, the view through the open door, where we see the supports that hold up this stage set. Wall had rented a studio in Vancouver for this purpose. The room is—to stick to our theme of perspective—a peep show of the sort so often used in the history of art to train perspective vision, even though peep shows of this kind never existed in reality. The gaze breaks off from what it is gazing at and returns to itself. The demonstration merely proves once again how easily our gaze is deceived, because it usually blindly trusts a photograph.

### *Manet's Work-Crisis*

While studying at the Courtauld Institute in London, Jeff Wall was so captivated by Édouard Manet's late painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (FIG. 50) in its collection that one of his early works, *Picture for Women* (FIG. 52) of 1979, translates Manet's concept into a photograph, under new circumstances and with a different motif. In the catalog to the exhibition of that year, which we have already mentioned several times, Manet's painting is

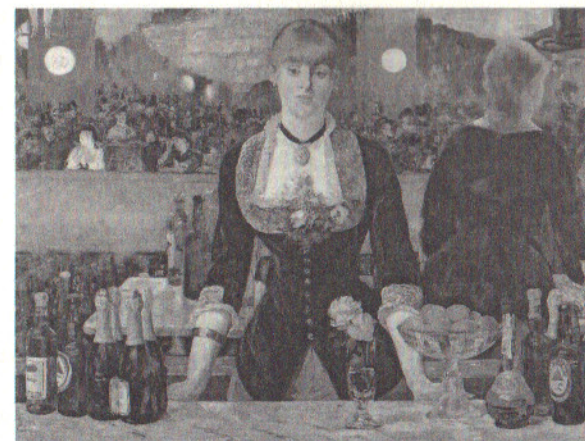


FIG. 50 EDOUARD MANET:  
*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882

illustrated, together with *Las Meninas* by Velázquez and a portrait by Richard Avedon, opposite *Picture for Women* (FIG. 52). The catalog text comments: "In Manet's painting, a barmaid gazes out of the frame, observed by a shadowy male figure. The whole scene appears to be reflected in the mirror behind the bar, creating a complex web of viewpoints. Wall borrows the internal structure of the painting, and motifs such as the light bulbs that give it a spatial depth. The figures are similarly reflected in a mirror, and the woman has the absorbed gaze and posture of Manet's barmaid, while the man is the artist himself. Though issues like the male gaze, particularly the power relation between male artist and female model ... are implicit in Manet's painting, Wall updates the theme by positioning the cameras at the center of the work."<sup>119</sup>



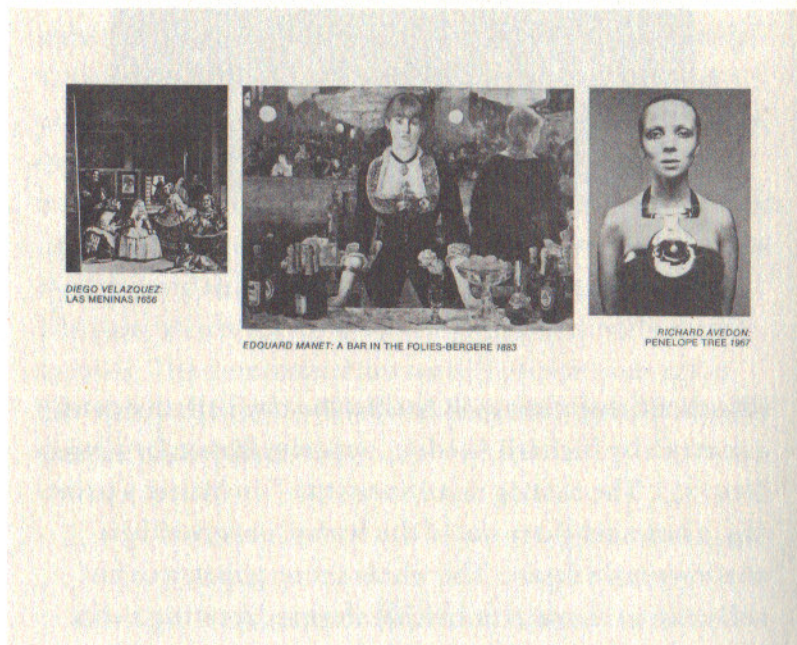


FIG. 51 Left-hand page of catalog (facing *Picture for Women*), from: *Jeff Wall*, exh. cat., Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1979

Jeff Wall could not get the "painter of modern life," as Baudelaire calls him, out of his mind.<sup>120</sup> Manet's painting is, in its own way, more cinematic than any other of the painter's works. Manet captures "modern life" in a mirror in which the images are constantly changing. A mirror reflects the world in constantly new ways in images with a "maximum of speed"<sup>121</sup> and is thus the opposite of a painting or photograph. Just as Manet saw the painting, Wall now saw the photograph at a turning point, even before digital technology had been developed. He used the crisis of photography as an occasion to "expose" its visual concept and to subject it to a "functional transformation" in the Brechtian sense.

These terms are found in a text on Manet that Jeff Wall wrote in 1984 at the invitation of Thierry de Duve for a conference in Toronto.<sup>122</sup> It is a text about the end of perspective and its "mechanism," which has become useless now that its old geometric order can no longer symbolize human alienation. Already in the nineteenth century, perspective's synthesis of human beings and world was "broken." During the "crisis" of that period, the painted unity of the perspective turned out to be an illusion or, in the Marxist sense, an ideology. The result was a "culture of montage and snapshot" that produced a "radical antithesis" to perspective. In his painting, Manet had already recognized an "extinct visual concept" and exposed the painting to be a salon corpse. Wall was formulating his own program here while wearing a Manet mask. In his own case, staging was a strategy to cancel out the camera's perspective.



Wall saw the loss of the harmony of perspectival space as the result of a modern capitalist age. He referred to Manet's conflict with the Salon. Manet's *Bar* lives on in Wall's *Picture for Women* like a secret quotation. In the view of Thierry de Duve, Wall "made the invisibility of the picture plane in photography visible. His achievement is to have literally captured the image in a mirror."<sup>123</sup> In Manet's work, the mirror behind the bar forms the background of the painting, while Wall brings it forward and equates it with the image.

For Manet, only a mirror could capture modern life, which pulsed in the nightlife of the bar. But a painting is no mirror, and its rigid surface cannot depict the movement that is constantly changing in the mirror and disappears again as quickly as it came. Manet was aware of this discrepancy. That's why he modified his static painting with two tricks. The Parisian public immediately and loudly criticized him for the "false" reflection of the barmaid's back, which is shifted to one side, and for the reflection of a second person who could not even be captured in the mirror in such a position. Obviously it was Manet's intention to open up his painting, if only metaphorically, to a moving flux of images, as if it were a real mirror, which, as we all know, captures many images continuously. Thus he shifted the static character of a painting's gaze to the fleeting glance, even if the viewer can only react to this in his or her imagination. Manet's painting thus reflects the proverbial acceleration of the modern gaze, which the old medium of the easel painting can only simulate. Not the painting but our gaze is thus

set in motion cinematically, even though the corresponding film technology would only be invented ten years later.

### *The Camera in the Mirror*

In *Picture for Women*,<sup>124</sup> as previously in *Destroyed Room*, perspective contradicts itself, but it does so in a way that is not evident as a visual trap on first glance. We seem to be standing in the center of the room—which reproduces a classroom in Vancouver—since all of the vanishing lines and lines of sight of the ceiling and floor converge on our location (FIG. 52). We are separated from the photographed room by a bright parapet. It repeats the so-called "aesthetic boundary" of a painting that keeps the viewer at a distance. A young woman turns to us; she is so brightly lit that it seems as if the light from the viewer's space were falling on her. A camera on a tall tripod in the center of the image reinforces the impression of perspective. It seems to hold us spellbound at that point in the photograph where we must stand if we want to see perspectivaly. The situation, in the literal sense, has its logic, since the camera's lens is famously the last bastion of the perspectival image.

When we look closer, however, we lose faith in our perception. Neither the gaze of the woman nor the gaze of the photographer operating the camera's shutter release is







looking out of the photograph; rather, they are directed at a mirror that is placed invisibly in front of our view. But only when we notice that the writing on the camera is inverted do we understand that everything we see is reflected in a mirror. But it is a mirror photographed by the camera. We have overlooked it precisely because we occupy its position as viewers of the photograph. The camera is not even pointed at us, since it was placed in front of a mirror. The mirror and the camera, which focus their blind gazes on each other, leave no room at all for our presence. The woman's gaze is searching the mirror for the camera she knows is taking her picture. The photographer is likewise looking for the woman only in the mirror. The gazes of the artist and the model meet at a vanishing point located in the mirror. The camera records mirror images that the photograph denies. The woman and the photographer look into the mirror, where they cannot see each other directly.

The work consists of two large transparencies whose joining seam runs through the reflected camera lens. This division alone reveals the visual unity to be a construct. Classical perspective obtained the unity of the image from the vanishing point. In the modern era, the same role was assigned to the camera lens, since there optical perspective and geometric perspective coincide. The lens stood, as Wall underlined in his commentary in 1981, for the "unified focal point" of the perspectival view.<sup>125</sup> The seam of the image that runs through the camera lens, which is photographing itself, offers us a "metaphoric key," since in the photograph it separates precisely the surface of the

camera eye that produces the unity of the image in the first place.

In the work under discussion, the unity of the image is also divided in the sense that the mirror interrupts the gaze between the painter and the model, which has such a long history in painting. The photographer does not look at his model directly, does not even point his camera at the woman, but photographs her image in the mirror. "Mechanisms of the erotic" run "across the web of signification," as the above-mentioned commentary has it. That does not just refer to the hide-and-seek of two gazes that initiates a relationship between the painter and the model. Rather, it is also about a visual concept that is "based simultaneously on unification and division." Thus Jeff Wall lures the viewer into a labyrinth in which the view of the photograph gets lost in a sequence of visual rays and partial views. The erotic aspect of the desire of the gaze leads a viewer who is excluded from the gazes in the image back to him- or herself. Wall goes about this in a way that both cites and perverts the studio situation found in the history of painting. The camera steps between the painter and the model like a third figure. Many photographers have "put themselves in the picture" using a mirror. But Wall ironically removes himself from the space in front of the mirror and leaves it to the camera instead in an allegorical gesture. The camera is directed straight at the mirror opposite, while he steps aside and operates the shutter release.



Entirely new questions arise as a result. If we trust appearances, the artist is still waiting for the moment he wants to take the picture. The interplay of gaze and hand permits no other conclusion. But that brings a temporal aspect into play that cancels out the result, so to speak, since we are already seeing the photograph that is supposed to result from the act of photographing. That shifts the point of releasing the shutter from the future to the past. We see an image *product* that illustrates the process of image *production*. It pictures the set that was built for that production. At the same time, between the photographer's searching *look* and the camera's mechanical *click*, a conspiracy results in which neither the look nor the click retains the upper hand. In the end, Wall confounds even the different ways the camera and the mirror use time. The photochemical process produces images of the past, whereas a mirror can only produce an image of the viewer's present. The *mirror image*, with its brief duration, becomes the *mirrored image* produced by the camera.

Mirrors have long been a topos of the photographic self-portrait. We recognize from the mirror that the photographer put him- or herself in the picture.<sup>126</sup> In her self-portrait from 1929, Lotte Jacobi shared her place in front of the mirror with the camera (FIG. 53).<sup>127</sup> Two very different gazes compete with each other: the mechanical one of the camera and her own, which critically looks for the right detail and the right light. With the rubber bulb of the shutter release in her hand, the artist is using a kind of umbilical cord to direct the scene and capture her



FIG. 53 LOTTE JACOBI:  
*Self-Portrait with Camera*, 1929

own gaze. In this work, she is more gaze than face. The camera lens appears like an empty mirror in the dark, while the photographer's face is exposed to the light. With her active gaze, she is searching for the image she wants to shoot.

The self-portrait by Florence Henri that Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold published in *foto-auge* in 1929 also features a mirror as the photographer's attribute (FIG. 54).<sup>128</sup> In addition to the mechanical reflection, it opens up a subjective level of reflection that lies in self-observation and returns to the photographer, like the author





FIG. 54 FLORENCE HENRI:  
*Self-Portrait with Mirror*, 1928

of a text, the right to her image. In Florence Henri's photograph, we see the photographer only in the mirror, but the mirror has taken up a place in the middle of a private environment that is photographed directly without a mirror. The gaze into the mirror, as in early painted self-portraits, comes to signify the presence of an observer—in this case the presence of the photographer. In his self-portrait from 1928, Werner Rhode chose a mask to introduce a distance between his photographed face and his presence as a stage director.<sup>129</sup>

In Jeff Wall's case, however, we do not see the mirror, if only because it fills the entire work. Because the camera usurps our gaze in front of the mirror, it replaces the autonomy of the gaze with the automatism of optics. In this early work, the perspectival view we instinctively relate to ourselves becomes an illusion. A mirror would reflect our own view back at us. A camera would, if we were standing in front of it, capture us in the image. We are—though not in the Lacanian sense—the blind spot in a photograph that holds our gaze captive. It requires a critical reflection on what we see—or rather, don't see—in order to see through the *trompe l'œil* that lies in this polyphonic reflection of mirror and camera. Only on closer inspection do we get behind this planned staging. Only in the reflexive gaze of a subject can we enlighten ourselves about the illusion in such a show. If our gaze reflects on the visual traps in Jeff Wall's picture puzzle, then we reconquer our space that the camera in the image is claiming.

In *Picture for Women*, the camera lens is reflected by a mirror, while for its part it creates images of the mirror. Like a *mise en abyme*, it sums up the spectacle of the gaze without recognizing the perspective view as the only option. Thus Wall brings the photograph back to the state of a mirror, much like Manet did with the painting. But he is not looking back at the history of media. Rather, all layers of time and boundaries between media become permeable as soon as the human gaze gets involved. We are accustomed to looking into a mirror, just as we have learned to look into a camera, but in Jeff Wall's work these



two gazes fade into one another, to borrow a term from photography, in such a way that they cancel each other out. We do not perceive our faces in the mirror in this work. Rather, Jeff Wall puts our fallible gaze, with its desire, into the picture without offering it a foothold in perspective.

### *The Double Self-Portrait*

The artist's presence in *Picture for Women* raises questions that are not answered by his role in operating the camera, however obvious it might be. It is a symbolic presence by which he signifies that his gaze controls the image before he operates the camera. In the normal case, a camera regulates the relationship between the gaze and the motif. But here the motif—a classroom with two visitors—did not already exist but had to be carefully arranged. The artist is a stage director who guides our gaze with his gaze. As such, he returns again as himself in *Double Self-Portrait*, which was taken that same winter in 1979 in that same studio in Vancouver. It is the counterpart to *Picture for Women* and shares its format as well (FIG. 52).<sup>130</sup> Both works have the character of models or demonstrations that the artist later abandoned. But again and again they invite us to turn back to them in order to understand the program with which Jeff Wall set to work at the time.

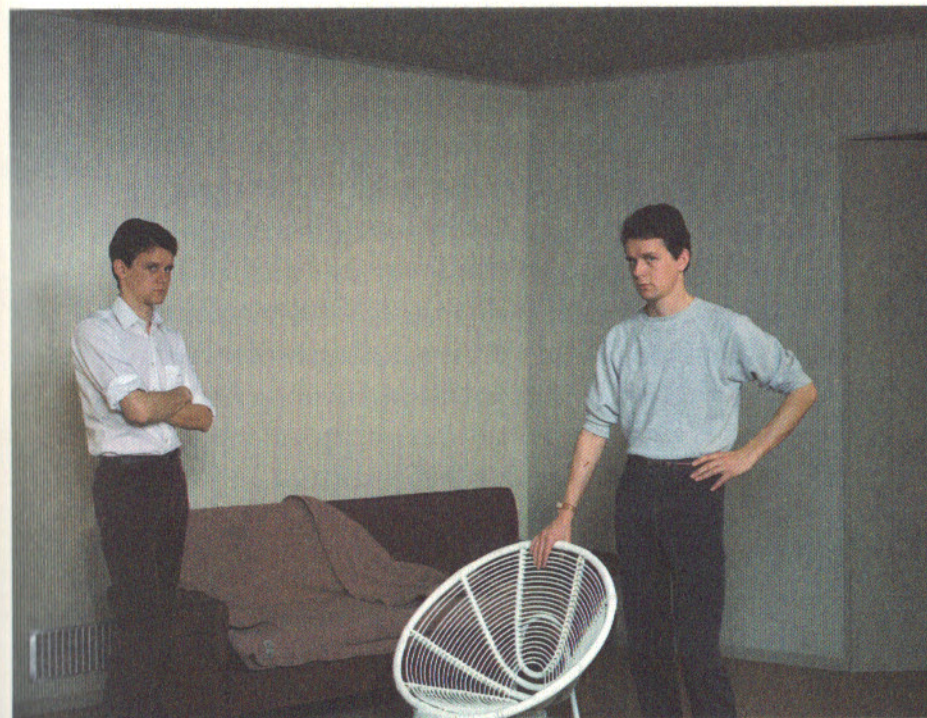


FIG. 55 *Double Self-Portrait*, 1979



The double self-portrait reinforces the seam that runs through the center of the other work, between the two transparencies. The two halves of the image offer different views, even though they are presented as a single image. Because we see the same person twice, the unity of space our perspective view expects of an image is violated. Despite the differences in clothing, the identity of the person is unmistakable. The gaze directed at the image and at the camera is not a gaze in a situation of action but the gaze of the artist as author. Except that the camera is not within our field of vision but rather was set up invisibly on the same spot where we stand to observe the image. Just as Wall adopts two different viewpoints, the camera has taken two different pictures that were only subsequently assembled into one synthetic photograph.

The unity of space is exploded by two different views of the same room, which, like *The Destroyed Room*, confronts us with a backdrop. The empty armchair makes us aware of the gap that results in the composition, as if the artist wanted to offer us a place that we cannot occupy. In this study of perspective, the center remains empty, and the vanishing point at which both gazes are directed is a fiction. It is a photo session in a studio. But we could never see in reality what the photo shows us because it has been photographed twice. The visible corner of the room distracts us from the invisible seam where the two transparencies meet. As in *Picture for Women*, it is a single print that invites comparison to a painting. Like it too, it is a pseudoperspective that exposes the perspective mechanism of our gaze better

than a real one would. The visibility of photography—one could also speak of its transparency—turns out to be more a desire of our gaze than an effect of the photograph.

In *Picture for Women*, the image is divided between the mirror (in front) and the room (in back); in the double self-portrait, however, it is divided between the left and right sides of the image. It contradicts the perspectival unity that a single vanishing point guarantees. The artist discusses this in a text from 1981.<sup>131</sup> The split, he says here, produces a structure based simultaneously on unification and division. Wall is thinking in this case of “the mechanisms of the erotic,” yet the erotic is inherent in the mechanisms of the gaze anyway. The



FIG. 56 Stereo: view of installation, Los Angeles, 1997



doubling of the gaze, like the doubling of our eyes, is taken up in the winter of 1980, in a work whose metaphor is already named in its title. *Stereo* shows a naked man (the artist?), who is, as we say, "listening to the stereo." Originally, the work was exhibited as a diptych, together with an illuminated panel with the word "stereo" (FIG. 56).<sup>132</sup> The allusion of the acoustic stereo (two ears) to a kind of visual stereo (two eyes) is an obvious one, if only because early stereoscopy offered a technique for creating a three-dimensional image using both eyes. With that we return to Duchamp's *Hand Stereoscopy* (FIG. 6), which has, of course, undergone an unexpected transformation in Jeff Wall's work.

The small work Wall exhibited in 1995 under the title *Man in Street* (FIG. 57) seems like a finger exercise on the theme of the dual or bipolar image.<sup>133</sup> Except that here there are two separate images in a shared frame that communicate with each other on several levels. We see the same man on the street twice, even on the same

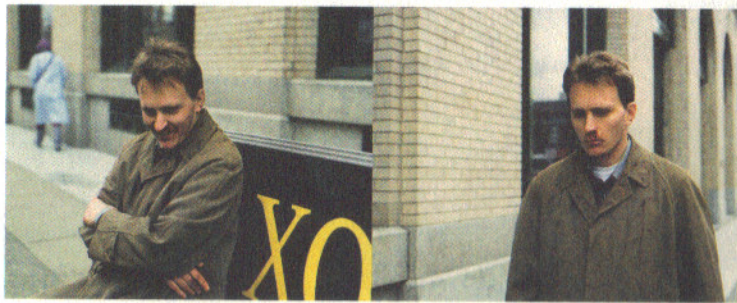


FIG. 57 *Man in Street*, 1995

street. The vanishing lines of the two views lead up to two opposite vanishing points, in keeping with a well-known scheme from baroque perspective. But between the gaze of the man and that of the perspective in which we see him on the street, rifts result that undercut any perspectival scheme. In fact, the gazes cannot be seen at all, since they are directed inward, and hence their correspondence is based on mere appearance. That is also true of the impression that the one man is waiting for the other. It is the same man, but he does not belong to the same picture.

### *Movie Audience*

The woman in front of the mirror (*Picture for Women*) and the *Double Self-Portrait* are both works in which the gaze plays a critical role. But what role? Obviously, the woman, like the doubled artist, is looking out of the picture. In both photographs, however, this gaze is not meant for us, the viewers. Rather, the eye contact with us is interrupted by the construction of the image. In other words, the images lead our gaze astray. There is an obstacle lying between us and the image, even if we do not notice it at first. The photographs do not depict what they seem to show and what we expect from a photograph; rather, they are the result of a calculated staging. They look very realistic, but this first impression is deceptive. Between the image and the motif in the image, there is a barrier that our gaze



has to overcome if it wants to get into the picture. It could also be described as a built-in interference between the image and our gaze.

The lighting also plays a trick on us in Jeff Wall's work. The light in the light box is more powerful than the light with which the photograph was taken, and so a third, anonymous light source—in addition to the photographic light and the light in which we are standing—is switched on. The light in the light box belongs neither to the image nor to the viewer. Its origin in the neon advertisement on the street is suggested in another work by Jeff Wall from the same year. The installation *Movie Audience* (1979) deviates from the norms of an exhibition already in its picture formats (FIG. 58).<sup>134</sup> The work consists of three framed photographs, which are hung differently in every exhibition, just as ads can be posted differently in every environment. The three parts refer to one another in such a way that none of them is an autonomous work. Rather, seven different individual portraits are mounted to form two couples and a family with a child. But both the couples and the family are arbitrarily combined and have no contact with one another. Instead, they are looking in unison in the same direction. The resulting impression is of an anonymous mass that always appears in excerpts.

In this installation, our distance from the gazes in the image and the light in the image is even greater than in *Picture for Women* and *Double Self-Portrait*. If we can believe the title, all of these people are looking at a movie screen.

The photographs are, of course, produced in the studio and merely simulate the light of a cinema. But the statement is clear. The anonymous, technical light is not just coming from the light box but also belongs to the photographic staging of the picture. In the series *Young Workers*, which predates *Movie Audience*, the gazes of the people depicted are similarly attracted by a technical light. In the latter case, however, the dark background alludes to a darkened cinema. The light in the photograph is the light of a film projection that we cannot see. And the light behind the photograph is from the light box, since the transparency is lit by an external source.

It is a strange coincidence that Sugimoto was producing images of empty cinemas (FIGS. 25–27) at the same time Jeff Wall was taking photographs of a movie audience (FIG. 58) that simulate the empty gaze at the film in the picture. It was a paradoxical idea to reproduce the anonymous faces from the darkness of a movie theater using a view from below similar to the one moviegoers have of the screen in a cinema. The perspective reveals a double illusion, since in both cases it is directed at something that is not there but nevertheless arouses a desire to see it. The sharply upward angle of vision, which suggests perspective, contributes to this. We are looking at the moviegoers from the same angle that they look up at the film over the rows of seats. In both cases, the gaze is depersonalized. It is aimed at images produced by a camera: cinematic images in one case and photographic images of viewers in the other. But in the three-way installation of anonymous portraits—which is itself a contradiction in terms—the





FIG. 58 *Movie Audience, 1979*



cinematic gaze is taking possession of their faces, while the cinematic image that they are looking at remains imaginary. So the gaze falls back on itself.

Film—the quintessential modern visual medium—is deliberately deconstructed by both artists. In Sugimoto's work, the cinematic images dissolve in the spotlight of the projector; in Wall's work, the images dissolve in the collective gaze of the audience, in a passive, staring gaze that is leveled out by the cinematic illusion. Wall transforms the *exhibition situation* of his work into a *cinema situation*, even though we are not in the cinema. The three-part installation with seven viewers offers a second-hand cinema situation, but it is one we would never experience in the cinema, since in the darkness of a screening we look in the same direction, not at the other viewers. The *cinema perspective* is a fictional perspective and is based here on a double fiction, since Wall's photographs were not taken in a cinema. The artist deprives us of the privileged view of art that we adopt as individuals in an exhibition where we go from work to work at our own discretion. Instead, he places before our eyes a mass audience in fixed seats allowing its view to be guided automatically by the mechanical sequence of images in the film. We are dealing with a *second-hand perspective*, since it is others who are sitting in a cinema with stiff necks. It is an alien perspective reflected in our gaze.

The catchphrase "anonymous mass" occurs in a text by the artist from 1984, which argues sociologically in the style of the neo-Marxism of the time. In that text, Wall

describes the installation *Movie Audience* as an attempt to reproduce the alienated gaze in the age of the masses.<sup>135</sup> Both the members of the audience and the "fragmented figures" on the screen "become a fragment of society" that can only experience itself as an audience. The cinema offers the audience a substitute for something that has since become a utopia. The bodies enlarged on the screen are in fact only the image of what they can no longer be in society: the "image of a last vestige." In the installation, they appear in monumental photographs—hence utopian. The anonymous image in Wall's oeuvre paradoxically shows "the image of the mass as subject of history." The word "perspective" does not occur in this text. But *Movie Audience* raises the question of whether there can be a perspective for the masses if perspective always refers on principle to the individual gaze. Ultimately we have to ask ourselves whether we as viewers of the installation still differ from the viewers in the cinema whose gaze has become a collective one.



## *The Invisible Man*

Visibility is a theme that runs like a thread through Jeff Wall's oeuvre. It is the specific visibility of the stage set up for performance that a stage director needs, just as a writer needs a narrator. We encounter this visibility in painting and later in film, where it is based on construction: in painting, by means of design and execution; in film, by means of editing and projection. Photography is being submitted here to a similar process of construction. Although the camera can reproduce the world mechanically, it is employed by Wall contrary to its use, so to speak. The specific feature of his principle lies in working with the old analog technology, before the change-over to digital. He does not employ a new photographic technique, but instead "edits" the motif that seems to depict our everyday world in front of the camera, just as we would edit images in Photoshop. That is why his principle did not change when he began to use digital technology.

Jeff Wall stages visibility in his studio rather than seeking it in the world. Given the importance of visibility, it is astonishing that a work from 2000 refers to a novel whose hero is an "invisible man" (FIG. 59).<sup>136</sup> It is Ralph Ellison's famous novel *Invisible Man*, which hit like a bombshell in 1952, because its theme was the invisibility of blacks in United States society. Why did Wall refer to a novel that in its day was a manifesto but can no longer be one today? The subject matter led some interpreters of

Wall's work to judge it according to the subject matter of the novel. They criticized the artist because, in their view, he did not do justice to the novel's political concerns and, moreover, made the invisible narrator of the novel visible in the photograph.<sup>137</sup> In response, it must be said that the narrator of the novel makes the invisible man visible by means of his text, while Wall does so by means of the setup of his photograph. The invisible man *has* to be made visible since he is not visible on his own. The scenographic way this is done is a key to the artist's entire oeuvre.

But first the elaborate title of Wall's work demands a closer look: *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*. It is already unusual enough that a photograph would allude to a novel, something we know only from films, which retell the narrative of a novel in cinematic images. Thus it sounds like a film title when a work is said to be "after" a novel (*After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison*). But in fact the title limits the reference to the prologue of the novel. Thus we have to search the prologue for a motif to explain the choice of theme. The artist made the search easier for us by citing this passage in a commentary on his work: "Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. [...] Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well."<sup>138</sup> Hence the hero of the novel has provided his "warm hole" with 1,369 lightbulbs, which turn it into a "bright spot," since "light confirms my reality." Because he is invisible to others, the invisible man has placed himself in the light by making his underground house as bright as day.







In Wall's photograph, the countless lightbulbs, a quotation from the novel, contradict the powerful light of the ordinary light box, so that they function as a metaphor for the invisibility that is hidden in the visibility of the lighting. They illuminate the subterranean room that the invisible man has set up for himself, unlike the light for exposing the photograph and unlike the light box. The light from the lightbulbs, only some of which are switched on, stands for the "darkness of lightness" mentioned in the novel. It is dark because the protagonist does not in fact make himself visible. The lightbulbs lead our gaze through the chaotic space, much like a spotlight with adjustable focus does on a stage. The futility of the lightbulbs is a metaphor for the protagonist's effort to shed light on himself, even though he cannot see himself. Wall

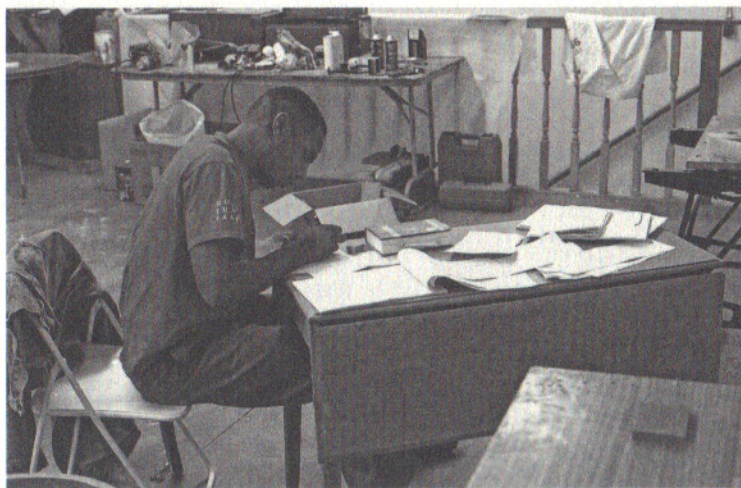


FIG. 60 Production photograph  
for *After "Invisible Man"*

uses two forms of stage direction: the self-staging of the invisible man by means of the lightbulbs and, by means of the double light of the photographic lighting and the exhibition form in the light box, the staging of a narrator who offers us insight into an intimate space but without us being present or noticed by the occupant.

The double directing of the lighting is repeated in the contradictory view of the furnished "hole," which is not expecting another's gaze and is nonetheless furnished entirely for our gaze. The chaos the occupant has created in his house is in truth an artificially created chaos in which the artist had his hand as a stage director. He set up the "hole" in his studio as a stage set with countless props, on which the lighting falls with precise calculation. The stage set is not intended for a performance, however, but rather for a photograph in which the place exists only as an image. We are supposed to believe all this has been assembled by the occupant of the "hole": "The room has been furnished and even cluttered with his possessions, some found, some fabricated," as Wall's commentary on the work indicates. It is an ersatz world in which the invisible man has made his home. As the commentary continues, "like Ellison," the occupant "took if not seven years at least some considerable time to write his book," just as it took the artist a lot of time to produce the photograph.

The production photographs show the occupant in the act of writing that will make him a narrator (FIG. 60). In other works by the artist as well, such as *Eviction Struggle*



(1988/2004), there are similar photographs that look like rehearsals for a shot in the film. In the Parisian exhibition *Passages de l'image*, such test shots were shown on various monitors.<sup>139</sup> Jeff Wall decided in the final version to abandon the act of writing and the retelling of the story. The occupant, who is sitting oblivious on his bed with his back to us, has interrupted his writing, as we can see from the pages of text scattered all over the room. He is the real director of the intimate disorder and as such the artist's doppelgänger. Whereas he creates an ersatz presence in the world in his book, Jeff Wall has created an artificial world in which he commandingly determines the composition of the gaze.

This paradoxical stage set of invisibility is dominated by a special form of perspective. Perspective has always been a staging of the gaze. Here, however, it forces us into a kind of voyeurism, as we force our way unbidden into this private space. It repeats, *mutatis mutandis*, the keyhole situation into which Duchamp forces us with the wooden door of *Étant donné*s, but Wall does it without a keyhole or a door (pls. 11–14). Perspective does not serve our view of the world but presents the world as a show for the gaze, in which it appears, as it were, in a mask. The literary texts Wall used for three works<sup>140</sup> can be understood as directions for discovering an artificial world in the photograph that the author has invented. Using a perspective that Duchamp had exposed as fiction, Wall outwits our expectations for the camera's mechanism for reproduction.

- <sup>110</sup> The primary reference work used was Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef, *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné, 1978–2004*, exh. cat., Schaulager, Basel (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005). See also Thierry de Duve et al., *Jeff Wall*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 2002); *Jeff Wall: Photographs*, exh. cat., Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (Cologne: König, 2003); Michael Newman, *Jeff Wall: Works and Collected Writings* (Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2007). See above all the issue dedicated to Jeff Wall of the *Oxford Art Journal*, January 30, 2007. On the writings, see *Jeff Wall, Szenarien im Bildraum der Wirklichkeit: Essays und Interviews*, ed. Gregor Stemmerich, Fundus-Bücher 142 (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1997).
- <sup>111</sup> On such biographical questions, see the interview by Arielle Péleuc in *Pressplay: Contemporary Artists in Conversation* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 633ff., and the one by John Roberts, in *Oxford Journal*, (see note 110), 153–67.
- <sup>112</sup> Interview by Arielle Péleuc (see note 111), 633.
- <sup>113</sup> Jeff Wall, quoted in David Campany, "A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom: Jeff Wall's Picture for Women," *Oxford Art Journal* (see note 110), 7–25, esp. 13–14.
- <sup>114</sup> Anne d'Harnoncourt, ed., *Manual of Instructions for Marcel Duchamp: Étant donné*s: 1. *La chute d'eau*, 2. *Le gaz d'éclairage* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987).
- <sup>115</sup> Newman, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 24–25, and Michael Newman, "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp," *Oxford Journal* (see note 110): 83–100, and Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 274–75 (no. 1): Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (159 × 234 cm), unique object.
- <sup>116</sup> Jeff Wall, "To the Spectator," in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 437–38.
- <sup>117</sup> Achim Hochdörfer, "Betrachtung einer Unordnung," in *Jeff Wall: Photographs* (see note 110), 36ff., and Kristin Marek,



- "Bildmedien der Geschichte—Geschichte der Bildmedien," in Inge Hinterwaldner et al., eds., *Topologien der Bilder* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008), 59ff.
- <sup>118</sup> Arthur Danto, "Symbolic Expression and the Self," in idem. *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992), 64ff.
- <sup>119</sup> See note 112.
- <sup>120</sup> Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece* (see note 8), 172–76; Bradford R. Collins, ed., *Twelve Views of Manet's Bar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 286ff. With reference to Jeff Wall, see Thierry de Duve, "The Mainstream and the Crooked Path," in idem. *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 21ff.
- <sup>121</sup> Michelangelo Pistoletto, in *Michelangelo Pistoletto*, trans. Michael Benis and Paul Hammond, exh. cat., *Museu d'Art Contemporani* (Barcelona: Actar, 2000), 208–9.
- <sup>122</sup> Jeff Wall, "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," *Parachute*, no. 35 (Summer 1984): 5–7, esp. 7.
- <sup>123</sup> See note 105.
- <sup>124</sup> De Duve, "The Mainstream and the Crooked Path" (see note 110), 21ff., and Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 277ff. (cat. no. 3; 163 x 229 cm), Paris, Centre Pompidou: unique object. See also Hans Dickel, "Im Licht der Bilder: Der Platz des Betrachters im Werk von Jeff Wall," in Wolfgang Kemp, ed., *Zeitgenössische Kunst und ihre Betrachter, Jahresring 43* (Cologne: Oktagon, 1996), 69ff.; Newman, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 34ff., and especially Company, "A Theoretical Diagram in an Empty Classroom" (see note 113).
- <sup>125</sup> Jeff Wall, "Picture for Women," Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 278–79.
- <sup>126</sup> Erika Billeter, ed., *Das Selbstportrait im Zeitalter der Photographie*, exh. cat. Württembergischer Kunstverein (Berlin: Akademie

- der Künste, 1985); Wolfgang Drechsler, ed., *Porträts aus der Sammlung*, exh. cat., Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (Vienna: C. Brandstätter, 2004), 42–43. (Florence Henri) and 44–45 (Herbert Bayer); Janos Frecot, "Self-Portraits" in Monika Faber and Janos Frecot, eds., *Portraits of an Age: Photography in Germany and Austria, 1900–1938*, trans. Kathleen Knaus, Camilla R. Nielsen and Mark Wilch, exh. cat. Neue Galerie, New York (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2005), 140–55; Lars Stamm, "Der fotografische Blick in den Spiegel," in Hinterwaldner, *Topologien der Bilder* (see note 117), 79ff.
- <sup>127</sup> Frecot, "Self-Portraits" (see note 126), 141.
- <sup>128</sup> Drechsler, *Porträts aus der Sammlung* (see note 126), 42.
- <sup>129</sup> Frecot, "Self-Portraits" (see note 126), 150.
- <sup>130</sup> Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 283 (cat. no. 5) and fig. on p. 43, and Newman, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 44ff. (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto: 172 x 229 cm).
- <sup>131</sup> Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, illustrated in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 277–79 (cat. no. 3).
- <sup>132</sup> Jeff Wall, *Stereo*, illustrated in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 284 (cat. no. 6) and fig. on pp. 44–45 in two-part form (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa: 213 x 213 cm each).
- <sup>133</sup> Jeff Wall, *Man in Street*, illustrated in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 359 (cat. no. 60) and fig. on pp. 150–51.
- <sup>134</sup> Jeff Wall, *Movie Audience*, illustrated in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 280–82 (cat. no. 4), and Newman, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 24ff.
- <sup>135</sup> Jeff Wall, "A Note on *Movie Audience*," in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 280–82.
- <sup>136</sup> Jeff Wall, "After *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison: The Prologue," in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 400–401 (cat. no. 92); Newman, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 228ff., and Régis Michel,



"White Negro: Jeff Wall's Uncle Tom; On the Obscenity of Photopantomime," *Oxford Art Journal*, (see note 110), 55–68, esp. 57ff.

- <sup>137</sup> Michel, "White Negro" (see note 136).
- <sup>138</sup> Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 401.
- <sup>139</sup> Catherine David et al., *Passages de l'image*, exh., cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1990), 182–85, with a text by Louis Marin.
- <sup>140</sup> *After "Spring Snow" by Yukio Mishima, chapter 34, 2005 and Odradek, Táboritká 8, Prague, 18 July 1994*, in Vischer and Naef, *Jeff Wall* (see note 110), 108 (cat. no. 54).