

**Jeff Wall and the *Painter of Modern Life*: Modernity, Contemporary
Photography, and the Challenge of Postmodernism**

Stephanie Gibson

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ABSTRACT

Jeff Wall and the *Painter of Modern Life*: Modernity, Contemporary Photography, and the Challenge of Postmodernism

Stephanie Gibson

This thesis addresses Jeff Wall's contentious claim that he is a *painter of modern life*, a term coined by 19th century French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Jeff Wall's photographs, apparently a fusion of documentary image, historical *tableaux* and colourful advertisements, do fit Baudelaire's definition, especially in relation to the idea that the city is an exemplary site for aesthetic experience. And yet, Wall's characteristic cityscape, and his array of social types, are very different from the modernist model, while his very use of photography to "paint" the world around him is a key difference. The possibility of a contemporary artist fulfilling the conditions set forth by the 19th century poet also demands, therefore, an examination into postmodern art. Wall's work shows evidence of irony, a skeptical attitude towards historical narrative, and a typically postmodern reflexivity. It is how Jeff Wall's artwork stages a series of encounters between the Modern and the Contemporary, therefore, that does indeed confirm the artist's claim to have inherited Baudelaire's mandate.

TO MY MOTHER AND BROTHER
For their undeviating love and support

And

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER
Who, very early on, recognized my love of art.

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INTRODUCTION

It is possible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original.¹

- Walter Benjamin

This thesis concerns itself with a number of complex terms and issues in contemporary art, all of which crystallize in one way or another in the work of Canadian artist Jeff Wall (1946-). Wall's highly cinematic and detailed illuminated transparencies take to task the goals of 19th century modernist painting and also address the objectives of contemporary art practices.

Double Self-Portrait (Ill. 1) depicts a young Jeff Wall standing on the left-hand side of the frame with his arms crossed, looking guardedly at the camera. On the right side of the picture there is another image of the artist, this time standing with one arm cocked on his hip, the other holding onto the back of an egg-shaped chair. This hallucinatory image was created in 1979, before digital photography could have pasted these two figures together in the same frame. It was made with a double exposure, a technique that relies on knowledge and patience with respect to light, shadow and exposure time. The large Cibachrome picture is mounted in a lightbox, resembling a cross between a slide-illuminator found in a photographer's studio and the type of device used to light bus shelter advertisements. Jeff Wall would continue to make these bright, large-scale images for decades to come, exploiting the new technology of digital manipulation as it developed.

Double Self-Portrait, while a seemingly simple photographic exercise practiced by photography students, signals the beginning of a complex project that would propel Wall into many philosophical investigations about the nature of photography and art making. The picture, in a subtle way under the guise of an academic exercise, illustrates the mutability of the photographic medium. It is a critique of traditional photographic representation and introduces suspicion about the art object. Art in a modern context is often viewed in terms of the status of the original, of being a “one of.” This photograph shows the artist depicted twice, literally splitting the concept of an original and thus aligning itself with Pop artists such as Andy Warhol or Robert Rauschenberg and their concern with serial reproduction in art. There is also uneasiness in the “double-ness” of the picture - a sense of a futuristic cloning experiment, perhaps. At the centre of this representation lies the artist himself, as he has been positioned throughout most of art history.² Donald Kuspit sees this picture in relation to Expressionist portraiture, where artists painted themselves or their peers, in an attempt to capture a sense of the intensity of their emotion or inner feelings. Kuspit sees the double-ness of the picture as representing the male/female components of a person, where the ‘male’ stands stoic and cold, and the ‘female’ open, and circular, like the chair Wall stands next to.³ This introduces, perhaps, the psychoanalytic theories of Freud into the understanding of the psyche of the contemporary artist, or, gender related questions surrounding feminist discourse. *Double Self-Portrait*, in a number of ways, clarifies our current uncertainty about representation and art making. This picture also introduces the varied and complicated photographic project taken up by Wall at the end of the 1970s: a period not without importance. Conceptual art, at its height by this time, rejected many of the

structures that held modern art in place, and was itself under scrutiny when artists began questioning its anti-narrative nature.

Wall, born in 1946, is a Vancouver-born and based artist. He studied Fine Art at the University of British Columbia and received a Masters in Art History from the same school in 1970. In the early seventies he completed the coursework for a Ph.D. at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London. He has been a professor at a number of institutions in Canada and abroad, including the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the Düsseldorf arts academy. His body of work has a complex relationship to past art, such in the case of *Double Self-Portrait* and Expressionism. This association to art history culminates in the artist's assertion that he is a *Painter of Modern Life*, a term invented by Charles Baudelaire, a 19th century poet and critic. Wall writes, "Some of the problems set in motion in culture not only in the 1920s, but in the 1820s and even in the 1750s, are still being played out, are still unresolved, we are still engaged in them. I guess that's why, at a certain point, I felt that a return to the idea of *la peinture de la vie moderne* was legitimate."⁴

This thesis will examine closely some of Wall's key images (from a body of work that numbers over one hundred large-scale pieces) in order to draw out many of the complexities apparent in their construction and dissemination, and how his work fits into this interesting moment in the history of art. The crux of this examination will centre on some understanding about how a *contemporary* artist could (or would want to) fulfill conditions set for *modern* art by a *modern* art critic. Is it possible that Jeff Wall is a *painter of modern life*, and how does this reconcile itself with respect to contemporary

photography and this period that we now collectively (for the most part) refer to as postmodernity? As a result, while this essay will be a study of the pictures of Jeff Wall, it will also delve into the contentious debate about modernism and postmodernism and how these two terms work themselves out in art.

The period of modernity, generally (albeit arguably) referring to the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 and coinciding with the end of the Second World War, was characterized by the quest for the ideals of the Enlightenment; liberalism, social justice, democracy.⁵ The world previous to this was one of Kings and their Divine Right. Truth came now from something beyond human experience, and stations in life were predetermined, not individually manifested. This new belief in the autonomy of the individual manifested itself in the encouragement of lived experiences as opposed to classical diagrams, while science was privileged as a correct method of understanding of the world, of calculating nature in a mannered and thorough way. Encyclopedias were written (the first, in part by Denis Diderot) to understand our world fully, to log, catalogue and archive it. This era of scientific scholarship brought about great advancements in technology (not to mention the Industrial Revolution) contributing to a grand project of change, improvement, and growth. E. H. Gombrich reflects on the 19th century as a “permanent revolution.”⁶

What seems to be fundamental in the discussion of modernism is the idea of *change*. Modernity embraced change as a marker of advancement.⁷ Change, hopefully, is synonymous with progress, and as the world moves towards greater industrialization, better living conditions, richer art, literature and music, so too does it improve from a moral and ethical perspective. The Modernist project demonstrates how things are, and

also suggests how things *ought* to be.⁸ This change is apparent in the definition of Modern art, where Western art is generally interpreted by a series of ruptures from one avant-garde period to another. Each style or period can be interpreted as building on the last, as a way of furthering understanding with respect to the ‘nature’ of art.⁹ The utopian possibility evoked by modern art, and the slow process of reduction seen in painting, culminating with abstract and conceptual art, is about becoming more avant-garde—distancing the nature of art from what we believed the nature of art was. Clement Greenberg expressed this utopian vision of art when he wrote: “The most important function of the avant-garde was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence.”¹⁰ This tradition of descent gave a space for each subsequent avant-garde and its writings, art, manifestos and so on, each one with a utopian vision of how things ought to be, how to finally get things right. The first chapter of this thesis will demonstrate how Baudelaire is perfectly modern under these conditions.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is anti-foundational. As Craig Owens writes, the direction of postmodernist art is “no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency and lack of transcendence.”¹¹ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood see postmodernism as “not immediately a new form of the practice of art, but rather a critical redirection of tradition on the basis of a revised understanding of the immediate past.”¹² The results are often critiques of historical narratives, myths, and institutional structures. The concept of postmodernism was cultivated on the fertile soil of immense historical change. Some see the postmodern era beginning after the Second World War, when the modern world was

shocked and confounded with the vile acts of the Holocaust and war, all done by human hands, on the same continent that bred the likes of Rousseau, Diderot, and Goethe. If this was “modern,” it thus seemed that either modernism wasn’t working, or there was no truth to the project. Like no other time in history, there was a moral and cultural crisis. New views of truth, knowledge and meaning were coming into play. For example, in art, the distinction between high art and popular culture has been lost because of the uncertainty which now surrounds the prescribed criteria that judges the value of these two concepts. As a result, artistic practice is reoriented, the productive range of art is enlarged, and an inclusive approach to the use of culture and its objects is developed. Put plainly, “Postmodernism’s crisis is the crisis of confidence in the function of art and culture at the end of the twentieth century.”¹³ And it is from these shifts in culture that a shift in what we study has changed as well. In conjunction with the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, beginning in France, new questions were being raised with regards to civil rights, equality, feminist issues and so on. As a result, discourses on gender issues, sexual orientation, race, have permeated our politics, literature and art. How do we translate these complicated philosophical and theoretical concepts, such as truth, knowledge and meaning, into the visual arts? Do the same categories apply? Is postmodernism in art premised on postmodern philosophy, or is it something different? In fact, the bridge is difficult to build. In the introduction to the anthology *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, for example, editor Lawrence Cahoon refers to the latter as “something about the end of the twentieth century,”¹⁴ alluding to its indescribability. In fact, Cahoon writes that the many discourses and disciplines that fall under this umbrella of ‘postmodernism’ make up a dysfunctional, conflicting family, to the very

point, like in many families, some will not even call themselves by that name. How would we begin, for example, to distinguish relationships between Salman Rushdie, Robert Venturi, and John Cage?¹⁵ In the visual arts, what are the distinguishing features of artists like Daniel Buren, Suzy Lake and Melvin Charney? Distinguishing features are difficult to locate and postmodern art might best be described as a mix of literary and political theories as well as historical reconsiderations.

Jeff Wall's photographs display some characteristics that have been associated with what we call "modern" art, but also contain "postmodern" elements. In certain key ways, his work satisfies the criteria set out by Baudelaire for a *painter of modern life*. His work refers to Baudelaire specifically and to "the modern" in general, through a distinct imitation of artists such as Edouard Manet and Eugene Delacroix. Furthermore, Wall manipulates the photograph in his staged and constructed works, asking the viewer to reflect on the nature of photography itself. This is in line with modernism's dedication to formal qualities in art. The comparison of his work to 19th Century painting, in relation to Baudelaire, highlights the slow progression to self-reflexivity in modern art. Finally, it is not difficult to pick up on themes from Baudelaire's time in Wall's pictures. Wall depicts the city, social types and the artist himself in his pictures, recognizing the very conditions that Baudelaire called for in his *painter of modern life*.

Chapter One will specifically address the writings of Baudelaire and his description of the *painter of modern life*, employed first in an essay by the same name for the Paris Salon of 1845. I will clarify Baudelaire's uniqueness and show how his writings emerged at a decisive moment in history that changed the way we approach art and art historical discourse. I will then map some of Baudelaire's imperatives for a

painter of modern life, and illustrate these characteristics in some 19th century painters. Namely, I will look at the depiction of the city, social types and the conception of the artist in these paintings.

Chapter Two will test the proposition that Wall is a *painter of modern life* on several of his pictures. Wall's work mimics the subject matter of Baudelaire's heralded artists and depicts the city and its social types in a similar manner. But his pictures portray scenes of Vancouver rather than Paris, and *Gen-Xers* rather than courtesans, bringing Baudelaire's themes up-to-date with current social situations. I will demonstrate how indeed, there are modern elements to Wall's work, but also bring to light certain elements that seem to be distinctly *postmodern*.

The final chapter will attempt to arrive at some sort of a 'conclusion' regarding whether or not Wall is a *painter of modern life*, and whether or not this has repercussions on our understanding of his art today. Has the concept of *painter of modern life* perhaps exhausted its usefulness in talking about art today? Or, is the slipperiness of Wall's pictures just a manifestation of their contemporary nature? As a result, perhaps we will look back on Wall's work in the same manner we look back at Manet, Degas, or Courbet today, as being the expression of an artist of his time. After all, it is because of a postmodern perspective that modernism can be critically reassessed. As Lyotard writes, "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant."¹⁶

I will bring to light some issues with respect to Wall's work that go beyond the topic of Baudelaire's *painter of modern life*. His work fits in with the strategies and style of contemporary photographic practices, while remaining committed to the avant-garde

strategies of Conceptual art from the 1960s and 70s, as Conceptual art might be the corresponding link between “postmodern” theory and its application in art. Wall’s complex photographs serve as a petrie dish for the question of modern and postmodern art; this is what contemporary *modern* art might look like, if there is the potential to call it as such, and if the ideas of the modernist Baudelaire perhaps contained the first glimpses of postmodernism. With his allegiance to Baudelaire, and his equal relationship to postmodernism, Wall might be asking the same question that Jerry Zaslove posits in a 1990 exhibition catalogue for the artist. Zaslove writes:

If modernism is over, that is if we cannot produce grand pictures or images that convey collective situations, then we must change our relationship to art objects entirely, or we must face the issues of just what kind of civilization it is that changes the forms of reality, eliminates deeper engagements with civilizational processes, and also denies the validity of the sovereign subject who hungers for representations of reality.¹⁷

Philosopher Richard Rorty observes that, “these days, intellectuals divide up into those who think that something new and important called the ‘postmodern’ is happening, and those who, like Habermas, think we are (or should be) still plugging away at the familiar tasks set for us by the Enlightenment.”¹⁸ The process of distinguishing between the ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern,’ if Rorty is right, is further confused. Even the most unambiguous of the ‘postmodern’ thinkers (Lyotard for example) often remain committed to various liberal or ‘modern’ ideals (like democracy, for example).

Part of the postmodern “project” is to do away with modernist traditions, and to reject any claim to absolutism. Sabina Lovibond cautions against an absolute rejection of Enlightenment universals, for example. From a feminist perspective, she writes, “how can anyone ask me to say goodbye to ‘emancipatory metanarratives when my own

emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-or-miss affair?”¹⁹ Feminist goals of progress rely, Lovibond’s point insists, on the *universal* belief of *equality*, and that at the present time, we are in a world of *inequality*. Criticisms of universalisms that have come about from many postmodern thinkers (or proponents of what has come to be known as postmodernism), in a way, ‘let off-the-hook’ the ideals of the Enlightenment of optimistic progress and change. What is perhaps the balance between the two is a critical stance towards these principles, never making a claim to the universal, and along with this, a social optimism with regards to social hope and change. The process is equally unclear when one asks about art objects and art history. Regarding postmodern art, Lucy Soutter poses the doubt in another way. She writes: “A potential problem with postmodern metanarrative – is that it takes a trained eye to determine whether the art really is critical rather than celebratory of the status quo it represents.”²⁰ With critique “often assumed,” Soutter posits, what’s to say that the artist doesn’t grow lazy with the current ‘style’ of postmodern marginal ambiguity? This process is equally unclear when one asks about art objects and art history. The work of Jeff Wall, with obvious allegiances to both ‘periods,’ might remind us to be wary of any sweeping comments about the nature of modern or postmodern art.

In the end, Wall’s work remains committed to both modern and postmodern projects because of his directorial style. His narratives leave some semantic opening, but the control he exerts over his pictures denies the casual “anything-goes” aesthetic of some postmodern art. He remains guardedly ambiguous, strategically modern and tentatively postmodern.

One must ask, however, why we should address Wall's work on the Wall's terms, according to his declared goals and his reading of his own pictures? If Wall is the contemporary equivalent of Baudelaire's *painter of modern life*, and if his pictures illustrate the themes and ideas deemed important to the poet, so what? In fact, Wall's allegiance to Baudelaire might be less about the poet than about academic writing in general. Wall's work illustrates the impact of academic writing on the making of contemporary art and conversely, the inevitable recognition such practices produce when academic writing reinterprets them, this thesis being a case in point.

Wall's reconstruction of 19th century paintings in large-scale colour photographs reasserted an ongoing fascination with the medium of photography. Photography can make us consider socio-political issues and ask questions about the nature of representation. On a personal level, poignantly shown by Roland Barthes, the photograph can make us ponder the death of our loved ones. Photography's wonder reveals itself to me in an essay by Stanley Cavell who writes about the medium and its relation to reality. In response to the common motto about photography that "photographs always lie" Cavell counters, "to say that photographs lie implies that they might tell the truth; but the beauty of their nature is exactly to say nothing, neither to lie nor not to."²¹ I will not purport to uncover any truths in Jeff Wall's pictures. I would prefer, instead, to enter into a dialogue with this contemporary artist whose photographs have a simultaneous kinship to historical paintings, mass media and politics, and modern art, and see where the discussion takes us.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 71.
- ² I will make a note at this point that when I refer to "the artist," beyond the case of Wall and in a general sense, I will use the masculine form – he, himself, his, and so on. I do this not to disregard the standard academic sensibility to use the feminine 'form' but because, for the most part, the artists I use as examples throughout this thesis are men.
- ³ Donald Kuspit, "Looking up at Jeff Wall's Modern 'Appassionamento,'" *Artforum* 20 (March 1982), 56.
- ⁴ Jeff Wall, "Representation, Suspicions, and Critical Transparency: Interview with T.J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner," in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 112.
- ⁵ Modernity in France occurred at this time, and modern ideas would disseminate to the New World and beyond around the same period.
- ⁶ E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984), 377.
- ⁷ Jean-François Lyotard describes this period of apparent betterment in the following way: "This is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works towards a good ethico-political end – universal peace." in *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-xxiv.
- ⁸ This last point will really be the distinguishing feature between modernism and postmodernism. While postmodern thought and art made under its guise *might* employ an is/ought distinction, modern art, in its continuum of progress and improvement, inevitably does.
- ⁹ This of course, is only one reading of Modern Art. Many theorists contest this reading and argue that it privileges the formal nature of art as opposed to the social or political processes that contribute to the making of the work of art.
- ¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 531.
- ¹¹ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 1052.
- ¹² Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900-1990* (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 988.
- ¹³ Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), 30.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence Cahoon, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 1.
- ¹⁵ In contrast, it might be less difficult to locate cohesive tendencies in the work of Flaubert, Mies van der Rohe, and Wagner, if we take seriously the Modernist drive to self-reflexivity and formal progression.
- ¹⁶ Lyotard, 79.

¹⁷ Jerry Zaslove, "Faking Nature and Reading History: the Mindfulness Toward Reality in the Dialogical World of Jeff Wall's Pictures," in *Jeff Wall 1990*, ed. Gary Dufour (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1990), 66.

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, "Religion as a 'Conversation Stopper,'" in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Clays Ltd., 1999), 168.

¹⁹ Sabina Lovibond, "Feminism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 178 (Winter 1989), 12.

²⁰ Lucy Soutter, "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s," *Afterimage* 27 (January-February 2000), 11.

²¹ Stanley Cavell, "What Photography Calls Thinking," in *Raritan Reading*, ed. Richard Poirier (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 47.

CHAPTER ONE

**It must go further still: that soul must become its own
betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror
turn lamp.**

- William Butler Yeats

The primary purpose of this first chapter is an exposition of Baudelaire's writing, encompassing a reflection on his protagonist, the *painter of modern life*. This will enable a further analysis as to whether Jeff Wall's pictures meet these "modern" conditions. The shifting social dynamics of post-revolutionary France are vital to an understanding of Baudelaire's "modernité." His observations of the city of Paris and its people (including the artists and poets) were telling of the changes that unfolded at this time. Part of this discussion will highlight the fact that Baudelaire's contentions are just one viewpoint in a highly contentious period in history. To be sure, there are countless interpretations of the birth and growth of modernism. The birth of modernism has been said to correspond with the French Revolution in 1789, while the Liberal ideas of that event likewise correspond to philosophical writings that date back to several decades and further.¹ Yet Hannah Arendt's claim to modernity derives from Galileo. While she concedes that our understanding of modernism only truly materializes after the French Revolution, she problematizes: "Precisely when the immensity of the available space on earth was discovered, the famous shrinkage of the globe began, until eventually in our world (which, though the result of the modern age, is by no means identical with the modern age's world) each man is as much an inhabitant of the earth as he is an inhabitant of his country."² Arendt also recognized the seeds of Individualism and the modern subjectivities of humankind in this 16th century astronomer.

It is the period following the French Revolution that serves, in multiple facets, as a standard for the change that has forever altered our socio-political landscape. I will demonstrate how Baudelaire's observations about his society translated into a prescription for art making and, as well as a portrait of what Baudelaire considered the authentic *painter of modern life*. That is, Baudelaire's prescriptions for art and art making (can be seen to) emerge from his reflections on the social changes he was observing. I will try to situate Baudelaire's *painter of modern life* in this way, so that we may be in a position to assess the plausibility of Jeff Wall's assertion, having referred to himself and his work with this term.

Wall clarifies the historical significance of Baudelaire:

...when the concept of a painting of modern life emerged with particular crystal clarity in the nineteenth century, it changed the way the history of art could be seen. It was possible to rethink the modernity of the works of earlier artists...Manet's art could be seen as the last of the long tradition of Western figuration, and of course at the same time, as the beginning of avant-gardism.³

There was something distinctly unique in the ideas of Baudelaire, in line with the emerging social and political changes that were occurring that not only reinterpreted Baudelaire's present society, but as Wall points out, provided art historians with an entirely new set of tools to reassess the canon of art history, and even shuffling the cards of this canon in the process. The reader may recall the emphasis on a cultural rupture that took place –E. H. Gombrich's "permanent revolution."⁴ Among other things, artists became *Artists* (as opposed to hired craftspeople), art began to permeate every sector of society, and art no longer had the irresistible crutch of metaphysical aspirations. Baudelaire grew up in this world, witnessing what David Carrier clearly interprets as France's "transition from a quasi-feudal monarchy into a fully capitalist democracy."⁵

Charles Baudelaire was born in 1821, the son of a former cleric-turned-revolutionary; this mix of religious tradition and liberal revolutionary ideals would be a part of Baudelaire's writing for the length of his career.⁶

Within this tumultuous period, when the *ancien régime* was transforming into a *république*, Baudelaire began writing for the Paris Salon in 1845, and the era in which he participated in the Salon was its most lucrative and influential.⁷ Baudelaire's revolutionary spirit manifested itself in the Salon when he soon grew to reject the organized, structured format of art criticism. The Salon was academically rigorous about painting and highly concerned with the imitation of past art as a way of learning and improving on one's work. The academic school was heavily connected to the retaining of the hierarchy of genre painting, for example, where "history painting" was viewed as "higher" than portraiture, landscape and still-life, in that order. Baudelaire rejected this structure and opted instead to address fundamental questions about the nature of the world that was being painted. His writing in other areas also reflected this avant-garde spirit. His use of language, syntax and allegories diverged from the other poetry of his day. For example, he often employed everyday street language in his poems, or used 'tu' instead of 'vous'.⁸ Concerning the academic environment about which Baudelaire wrote, Timothy Raser highlights the shifting values in analyzing art:

While many of the Salon writers, a majority in fact, contented themselves with summary judgements of the 'quality' of the works displayed, there had been developing since 1719 a series of questions relating to the plastic arts, the answers to which by Baudelaire's time defined what could be called the 'philosophy' of art criticism: a set of presuppositions concerning the nature of the plastic arts and the statements that could be made about individual works.⁹

Baudelaire was foremost a poet, and as an art critic, he wrote poetically about painting. He extended his craft and his medium, rendering his art criticism an artistic statement in itself. Moving away from prescribed boundaries, he saw painting as more than the narrative within the frame, and rather the story surrounding the frame, the world of the artist and the world inside the artist. In this respect, we might be tempted to quote from a few lines of his poetry:

A frame defines a work of art,
However talented the hand,
As if a golden no man's land
Could set all artifice apart.¹⁰

Baudelaire emphasizes this new breadth by writing in the Salon of 1846: "...in the painter's soul there are just as many ideals as individuals, because a portrait is a model complicated by an artist."¹¹ He was attesting not only to different aesthetic interpretations of the world, but also to a subsequent number of readings by the subsequent number of viewers of the work. What is seen as the beginning of Baudelaire's process is the following: "Je résolus de m'informer du pourquoi, et de transformer ma volupté en connaissance."¹² He was thoroughly Romantic; he began with a passionate, emotional reaction, followed by reasoned questioning, and finally, germinated knowledge. Following such a subjective response, his readers could in turn place this emotion into a reasonable, intellectual framework. We can rightly consider this with regards to the history of modern art. Baudelaire's romantic move inwards derives from a rejection or inversion of the Platonic ideal of looking for truth "out there," in the Forms. Answers, for the Romantic, come from within us, and are thus subjected to individual interpretations.

This concept opened wide what we would be used to considering definitions of art in subsequent generations; art would speak of the artist, the times, of subjective responses, or of objective calculations. Art could be anything, or at least, rely on any number of external factors to make up its *art-ness*. Modern art embodied, for Baudelaire, more than just the text of the artwork itself, but encapsulated the paratext of the frame, the artist, and the viewer. This could be seen as the beginning of avant-garde art, art that led the charge for the consistently evolving countenance of art to follow.

This framework set the stage for Baudelaire's detailed illustration of a modern artist in his 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life."¹³ Baudelaire implored the artist to paint what surrounds him, the new modern city, and the various social types inhabiting it. This position encapsulated a shifting perspective of the artist himself, an artist as *flâneur*, and Baudelaire's ultimate hero of society. This fresh manner of analyzing the world around him prompted what Baudelaire viewed as essentially modern. And whether it was in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe or in the paintings of Constantin Guys, it is as though Baudelaire was trying to visualize and *illustrate* modernism. He understood the sense of change and alienation of the period, but could not grasp it in its entirety. He discovered modernism in the images of particular subjects instead. He wrote: "the perpetual correlation between what is called the 'soul' and what is called the 'body' explains quite clearly how everything that is 'material,' or in other words an emanation of the 'spiritual,' mirrors, and will always mirror, the spiritual reality of which it derives."¹⁴ The depiction of the city, the emphasis on social types, and finally, the artist's relationship to his world act as symbols (or *mirrors*) for modernism.

Baudelaire's reading and interpretation of art was by no means systematic. Walter Benjamin, for instance, positioned Baudelaire's theoretical writings, on modern art specifically, to be his weakest.¹⁵ Baudelaire wrote about the mythic historical paintings of Delacroix and the quick urban sketches of a virtually unknown artist, Constantin Guys. He relied upon the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, Victor Hugo, and Balzac. He combined romance and a systematized essentialism. Consequently, it is sometimes difficult to come up with a clear and straightforward reading of Baudelaire's analysis of the *painter of modern life*. But hypothesizing, I conceive that it is this discrepancy in writing that embeds Baudelaire in his time. He experienced in his thought process and in his writing the philosophical changes that emerged during this time.

THE CITY

And proud of my artistic eye
I relished what my mind had done
Spellbound by the monotony
Of all the metal, water, stone...¹⁶

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed an incredible topographical change in the arrangement of the city of Paris. The Haussmannization of Paris, which began in 1859, was dedicated primarily (but not conclusively) to avoid civil war or as Walter Benjamin quotes the contemporaries of the time, for "strategic beautification."¹⁷ Baron Haussmann's Paris was one of grand boulevards, department stores, national monuments, parks, and arcades that displayed the bourgeois wares of this new capitalist city. The change was so drastic that Balzac lamented in *Les Petits Bourgeois*, "the old Paris is passing, following the kings who have passed."¹⁸ Similarly, Baudelaire writes (in one of his prose poems):

Though Paris change, of my nostalgia nought
Has stirred! New Mansions, scaffolding, hewn blocks
Old Suburbs – all's to allegory wrought,
For my found memories are more firm than rocks.¹⁹

The wide streets were erected to dissuade future revolts, of the kind that had taken place during the Paris Commune; the boulevards opened up the city, making all elements visible and transparent. The citizens of Paris would no longer be able to build barricades in dark alleyways, the idea went, but could be watched and monitored.

The changing nature of the city also prompted (according to the writers of the time as well as subsequent historians), a feeling of disassociation. The city was becoming increasingly one of visual excess, full of arcades, commodities, and people. There was a myriad of visual and even physical stimulation, as people surrounded one another like never before.²⁰ Georg Simmel, as cited by Walter Benjamin, writes, “...there is something characteristic of the sociology of the big city. Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear.”²¹ And in the midst of the newly found commodity culture, Benjamin describes the city in a following way:

Paris, a “looking-glass city,” dazzled the crowd, but at the same time deceived it. The City of Light, it erased night’s darkness – first with gas lanterns, then with electricity, then neon lights – in the space of a century. The City of Mirrors – in which the crowd itself became a spectacle – it reflected the image of people as consumers rather than producers, keeping the class relations of production virtually invisible on the looking glass’ other side.²²

But amidst what Benjamin describes as a “phantasmagoria,” Baudelaire describes his artist as at ease amid the deception of the crowd.²³ The *painter of modern life* does not retreat from this vision of illusions, but rather:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home, to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.²⁴

The *painter of modern life* needs to be swallowed up by this life, swept up by the flow of the crowd. Subsequently, the artist is to paint what surrounds him. Baudelaire clarifies this with the question - “What would you think if you had commissioned an artist to paint the portrait of a thoroughbred, famed in the annals of the turf, and he then proceeded to confine his researches to the Museums and contented himself with a study of the horse in the galleries of the past, in Van Dyck, Borgognone, and Van der Meulen?”²⁵ The artist must be embedded in the ebb and flow of the crowd; he must be ‘at one’ with the crowd in a physical way, in order to capture what Baudelaire regards as the essence of modern life. The *painter of modern life* cannot paint at such a distance; he must be a part of the world that he paints.

Baudelaire was impressed by the artist who painted in the streets, sketching quickly and in abundance to render what he called a “sketch of manners.” He writes:

For the sketch of manners, the depiction of bourgeois life and the pageant of fashion, the technical means that is the most expeditious and the least costly will obviously be the best. The more beauty that the artist can put into it, the more valuable will be his work; but in trivial life, in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist.²⁶

These quick sketches were meant to highlight the details of current fashions, the gait of pedestrians, and the architecture in the city. The best sketches, in tandem, achieved a

certain spirit or mood of the city, capturing what was essentially modern about the characters in the pictures. It was Baudelaire's view that an honest picture needed to be taken up close, on the streets. Interestingly, Baudelaire's paradigm is such that later in his essay he heralds the painters of the past who paid great heed to careful composition, and who built up their canvases in a measured and calculated way. The *painter of modern life* was, after all, to leave the streets and go back to his studio where he would once again behave like the classical artists who preceded him. Even with his commitment to overturning certain conventions in the art world, Baudelaire was not entirely iconoclastic.

There is a psychological element to being in a crowd: you are nameless in a sea of people, and there might arise the claustrophobic anxiety of residing in a space where nobody knows you. In the crowd, you are dispensable, unnecessary, and relegated in importance only to the space that your body takes up. This sense of isolating namelessness is illustrated in Gustave Caillebotte's *Rue de Paris* (1877) (Ill. 2). The painting depicts a rainy day on a typical concourse in Paris. Men and women walk in almost complete anonymity, shielded by the oversized "top hats" of canvas umbrellas. Each person walks in a different direction, seemingly performing the same task, hurrying home for afternoon tea perhaps, and functioning within the solitary confinement of their own personal space. The public space of the city seems to have been sectioned off for propriety's sake, giving each man his space to roam. Haussmann allowed us to openly observe the other class, the other race and the other sex, but there is no real interaction. In many ways, modernism saw the private life played out in public (consider cafés, terraces and arcades). Yet despite this, there is not much evidence of human interaction.

This is probably most clearly illustrated in Caillebotte's *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876) (Ill. 3), which highlights two figures in the foreground, one male and one female. They walk in tandem, along the bridge's sidewalk. But the perspective is one that disassociates the figures – are they walking alongside one another, or is one a step behind? Are they companions or strangers? The nature of the city and the crowd has rendered such questions pertinent. Baudelaire writes:

O swarming city, city rich in dreams,
Where ghosts clutch passers-by in broadest day!
Here the mysteries abound like sap which streams
Through the crammed veins in this colossus clay.²⁷

In actuality, Baudelaire writes little prose or poetry specifically about the city, but rather references it in a more subtle way, as he does in the above passage. Baudelaire's crowd is not so much a mass of people, but also a mass of souls, or ghosts, and the crowd itself is one unified element. Or as Benjamin aptly states, "they do not stand for classes or any sort of collective; rather, they are nothing but the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street."²⁸ The crowd's "soul" reminds us of Baudelaire's modernity- one of Romantic associations with self-creation and subjectivity.

SOCIAL TYPES

Paris was literally opened up and made visible by the civic planning of Baron Haussmann. Before this transformation in the layout of the city, different social classes did not interact to the same extent, and without it, social types would have had less importance to Baudelaire's Paris and to his conception of modernism. Quarters in Paris evolved to be well sectioned off according to profession, social classes and economic status. A bird's eye view of Paris at that time looked like the inside of a honeycomb;

small quarters further divided and subdivided into even smaller sections by lanes and alleys. It would have been rare for cobblers to interact with merchants, or for beggars to walk beside bourgeois women. Baudelaire's fascination with social types, therefore, is due in part to the 'newness' of such categories.²⁹ Like never before, the differences between the citizens of Paris were evident and demonstrable on the streets. We recognize such diversity in Georges Seurat's famous painting *Un Dimanche après-midi à l'île de La Grande Jatte* (1884-86) (Ill. 4) – an amalgamation of the types of Paris: a sailor, an upper-class woman, children, and musicians. There was not only this new visibility of social types, but the concept of individuality emerged as well. The republic of France provided the necessary space (and legislation) where the individual carried significant importance. There was no longer (in principle) a hierarchy in society after the dissolution of the Divine Rights of Kings. Understandably, writers and artists like Baudelaire were attempting to come to terms with this new system.³⁰ How would it take shape? After the violence and turbulence of the past century, how would a peaceful and productive society function and what would its citizens look like? The nature of the individual was being 'worked out', as was the interpretation of these new social types.³¹ The repercussions were more often than not the germination and/or perpetuation of stereotypes and racist dogma. Coupled with such perpetuation was the background of naturalism and the prevalence of science and scientific study. Social types were "analyzed" by methods involving the arbitrary measurement of facial features to determine class, intelligence, propensity to crime, and so forth. Physiognomy, the study of internal character from external appearances, was prevalent at this time, as was the so-called science of

phrenology, which charted head size and shape to determine character, illness, and so forth.³²

The emerging visibility of social types, as well as a newly invigorated propensity to scientific study, spurred and encouraged such a method. This “science” would encourage racial profiling, and an attempt to categorize people’s morality based on facial features, ear shape, and brow shape. Such study only perpetuated racial stereotypes that had existed, in the case of the Jews most notably, for centuries already. Artists mimicked this in many ways, often magnifying preexisting prejudices. A common social ‘type’ painted by Edgar Degas was the Jew, a community of people that prior to Haussmannization, cohabited in a rather segregated section of society, relegated to one area of the city. *A la Bourse* (1878-9) (Ill. 5) depicts two Jewish financiers, huddled together amongst a sea of other stockbrokers.³³ The monotone painting is prevalently black: there is repetition in the black of their overcoats, their stately black top hats and the black shadows that encircle the background. One man whispers in the ear of the man in front of him - passing along trade secrets conceivably? One man’s hands are not visible—pick-pocketing perhaps? We are encouraged by the mood of the painting to conjure up such sinister conclusions.

As Linda Nochlin has pointed out, when coupled with Degas’ involvement in the Dreyfus Affair, the viewer is aware of the anti-Semitic undertones of this painting.³⁴ In the case of each of the figures, the profile of the men is highlighted. The main figures sport prominently curved noses which are only further accentuated by the mimicked curve of their top hats. The men in the background have identical profiles. This painting is of city life, life on the streets of Paris in its different manifestations, clearly

demarcating a particular social type, the stockbroker. But it is also a prejudicial picture, exploiting particular racial characteristics and illustrating them with negative connotations. These Jews appear mysterious, secretive, and conniving. This stereotypical depiction of a particular social type might clarify T.J. Clark's interpretation of Degas's view of the city as a theatrical makeup of characters, each contributing in one form or another to the spectacle of life. He writes:

The modern city, Degas thought, would produce "characters"; it would therefore be subject to sharp, ironical notation and equally fine physiognomical encoding. What this confidence amounted to ... was a kind of nostalgia for times when identities had been stamped on a man's skin; and this at a moment when the mapping of the psyche around the polarities of "inside" and "outside" was being displaced by quite other topographies.³⁵

Artists exaggerated the social types they saw around them (no doubt in the same manner as Baudelaire did in his essay). This might be a forgivable tendency considering the highly demarcated social positions that existed before the liberal revolution. Yet, the ramifications of stereotyping affected the understanding of modernism. The result was the flattening of people, of rendering a human being into a character, participating in the grander project of the City or of Modernity. They become allegorical entities: we need only think of Edouard Manet's famous *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (Ill. 6) to witness this. The central focus of the painting is the barmaid, an alert, stoic figure. She is a woman of contradiction, looking at once proud and ashamed, alert and emotionally distant. The disassociation seen in her comportment alerts to her unwillingness to participate in the futile bourgeois world that is presented to her.³⁶ Contextualized within the tumultuous time of post-revolutionary France and the advent of the bourgeois, this disaffected figure might represent the dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment project as a whole; the

promise in the Liberal Revolution that people were equal under the law, that there were rights for each person. Karl Marx, for one, was extremely cynical about the fulfillment of this program. He wrote about the aristocracy of birth being replaced by an aristocracy of wealth, about the dreams of the Enlightenment not yet being realized. Manet embodies this kind of skepticism. We see disappointment in the barmaid's eyes; a sense of apathy. She sees that nothing has changed, and her station in life is the culmination of modernity, despite her attempts to "make herself up", to "mask" what she might be. She plays the game, the role; she is swept up in it, even drowning in it. Is she a barmaid, or a courtesan, or an actress? Regardless, she appears to be what Baudelaire sees all women as, "a creature, for show, an object of public pleasure.... In truth, they exist very much more for the pleasure of the observer than for their own."³⁷ In the same way, painted flatly against a mirrored background, Manet's barmaid illustrates, among other things, the flat hollowness of the society of the time. She is as Linda Nochlin describes, an "anonymous yet concrete figure trapped between the world of tangible things and that of impalpable reflections, existing only as a way station between life and art."³⁸ Modern issues of alienation, class, and the autonomy of the individual are visible here, clarifying Wall's contention that "Baudelaire was right when he said that the most fascinating element is the commonplace."³⁹ To depict social types in painting reveals the changing dynamics of the city, but also clarifies our propensity for stereotype and prejudice. Depicting social types in painting was certainly crucial for Baudelaire, but it is the ambiguity that they produce that allows them to carry "modern" elements.

A NOTE ON COSTUME AND MAKE-UP

Further to the ambiguity of social types in the modern city, according to Baudelaire, is the masquerade of costume and makeup, of which the poet dedicates a section to in his essay. In the previous examples of social types, there is the element of masquerade: of dressing up to appear to be one type or another, or of being cast as a particular character by ongoing stereotypes and prejudices. Make-up and costume firstly act as a masquerade for 'reality.' Baudelaire finds nobility, however, in masking your natural appearance:

...all the actions and desires of the purely natural man: you will find nothing but frightfulness. Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. Crime, of which the human animal has learned the taste in his mother's womb, is natural by origin. Virtue, on the other hand, is artificial, supernatural, since at all times and in all places gods and prophets have been needed to teach it to animalized humanity, man being powerless to discover it by himself. Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art...I am thus led to regard external finery as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul.⁴⁰

To improve yourself with clothing and makeup is to demonstrate (or suggest or imply) that you are capable of significantly altering or controlling the base desires of your natural, animal instincts. As Baudelaire explicates, while society and philosophy teach us to take care of our parents when they get old, our basest instincts "would have us slaughter them."⁴¹ Using makeup, this line of thought goes, demonstrates our ability to move beyond such barbarism. We are able to take what is given to us by God, or so it goes, and improve it, idealize it. Baudelaire writes: "fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste of the ideal which floats on the surface of the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a

sublime deformation of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her reformation.”⁴² Fashion and cosmetics signify the best of humanity in this respect. We are able to take what nature has afforded to us (rosy cheeks, long hair) and elaborate on these elements. We are able to master our appearance and exploit it to its finest as “the rouge which sets fire to the cheek-bone only goes to increase the brightness of the pupil and adds to the face of a beautiful woman the mysterious passion of the priestess.”⁴³

According to Baudelaire, “evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art,” and likewise, “everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation.”⁴⁴ Baudelaire, therefore, concludes that the beauty that we create in art, costume, cosmetics or external finery is a testament to reason and to a subsequent nobility. This implication of our personal mastery of our look, our body, replaces, in one way or another, the primacy of God to do this. We can reconstruct ourselves; we are our own makers, a truly modern notion. William Blake highlights the importance of constructing his own order of belief, asserting, “I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man’s,”⁴⁵ while around the same period, Kant is seeking the conditions of the *possibility* of knowledge. Baudelaire’s systematic understanding of the world is evidentially in line with the philosophical thought of his time.

T.J. Clark writes about the idiosyncratic nature of fashion and presentation, distinctive in each social ‘type’, and how it acts as a mask to *hide* class. If one is fashionably dressed and sensible, one can appear to be of any class type, a virtual freedom from a class-conscious society. Manet’s barmaid masquerades herself as a bourgeois woman, putting on her costume and participating in the spectacle around her.⁴⁶ Manet’s picture reminds us of the construction of the artwork, beginning with the

construction of characters disguised as “bourgeois” or “middle-class”, “artists” or “prostitutes”, all acting in what has become the play of modernism. The trickery of the masquerade reminds us of the ambiguity of this historical period. The absolute of God and metaphysical ideals has vanished, replaced with a disassociation and an ambiguity to what is real.

THE HERO OF MODERNITY

The reader has (hopefully) followed me as I highlighted the illustrative aspects of Baudelaire’s writings pertaining to social types, their fashions, and the urban crowd in which they are a part of. But I will conclude with the most important feature of Baudelaire’s modernity, that of the artist.

Baudelaire had disdain for the common understanding of what an artist was during the middle of the 19th century. He characterizes a type of artist who is little more than a hired tradesman, in similar fashion to a cobbler, a baker or a seamstress. He was as ignorant as someone with a single trade, only able to complete the allotted tasks assigned to him, and could not use any of his own proper imagination. Baudelaire said that these artists were “no more than highly skilled animals, pure artisans, village intellects, cottage brains.”⁴⁷ Under such conditions, the *painter of modern life* must be more than just a skilled craftsman, by indulging a particular curiosity about the world that summons imagination and imaginative pictures. This person, who can drink up the sights of the world and interpret them in a creative way, is more than just an artist-as-craftsman, but a *man of the world*. Baudelaire goes on to describe this man of the world in a manner that might resemble his own station in life. He writes, “I might perhaps call him a dandy,

and I should have several good reasons for that; for the world 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world..."⁴⁸. The dandy has a blasé attitude about the world around him, soaking it all in as though it was his nourishment, and then being entirely ambivalent to its direction. The dandy, in fact, might not be an artist (although in this essay Baudelaire suggests that the painter Constantin Guys is one), but rather has perfected the *art of living*.

By stretching the meaning of the word 'artist,' Baudelaire for the first time recognizes the changing nature of art making, and subsequently, what could be defined as art. It seems a thoroughly modern notion that art could go beyond the realm of the canvas and that the direct experiences of the artist could and would be reflected in their eventual product. With this changing definition of the artist – that which demarcates him no longer as 'simply' a tradesperson – there appears to be higher qualities attributed to the artist. The artist, the creator, takes on metaphysical qualities, that is, has a somehow greater knowledge and understanding of the world around him by means of his creative abilities. He has somehow been able to provide an essential insight into the times, and is therefore viewed as heroic. Like the Romantics before him, Baudelaire wanted to poeticize culture. He defended the idea that society's most significant and noteworthy exemplar should be the artist (taken in a broad and far-reaching sense) as opposed to the clergy, monarchy, or some other "birthright" type.⁴⁹

While Baudelaire defines 19th century experience in relation to this confusion, disassociation, and amazement, he then highlights the hero of this life, the artist. If modernism is the subjective move inward to self-understanding and self-criticism, the artist is the master of such a venture. "Few men are gifted with the capacity of seeing;" he

writes, “there are fewer still who possess the power of expression.”⁵⁰ The artist exemplifies the inward spirit we had come to herald at this time in philosophical thought. This is why, even today, we look to our artists, actors, and writers for guidance and help in matters of morals. Charles Taylor illustrates this well in *The Malaise of Modernity*. He makes a logical association between the selfhood of modernism and the artist. Both require and abide by creative principles, just as the artist is a creator, so too can the modern self conceive her own identity. As a result:

Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artist becomes in some way the paradigm case of the human being, as agent of original self-definition. Since about 1800, there has been a tendency to heroize the artist, to see in his or her life the essence of the human condition, and to venerate him or her as a seer, the creator of cultural values.⁵¹

Understandably, such an implication alters the perception of art. Art is no longer an imitation of nature (just as we are no longer “of God’s image”) but a new creation. Or as Baudelaire writes, “the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator.”⁵²

It is a commonplace idea among the Romantics as Taylor writes, that “the artist is an exceptional being, open to a rare vision; the poet is a person of exceptional sensibility.”⁵³ Baudelaire recognizes this poetic presence in many other social types in the city. The dandy is a type written about at great length by Baudelaire, and his hero seems always to be one who is relegated to the margins: the rag-picker, the artist, and the lesbian, as well as the dandy.⁵⁴ Benjamin points out; “to [Baudelaire] social ostracism was inseparable from the heroic nature of this passion.”⁵⁵ And the artist, in Baudelaire’s mind, is different from the rest of society. While the modern artist is entrenched in his

world, he also stands to the side of society with the perspective to critique the world while living within it. Baudelaire writes:

Observer, philosopher, *flâneur* – call him what you will; but whatever words you use in trying to define this kind of artist, you will certainly be led to bestow upon him some adjective which you could not apply to the painter of eternal, or at least more last things, of heroic or religious subjects.⁵⁶

We can consider Courbet's *L'Atelier du Peintre: Allégorie réelle* (1855) (Ill. 7) as an illustration of this. The artist is positioned in the centre of the canvas, surrounded by, amongst others, Baudelaire himself. He is at the centre of his universe. Linda Nochlin considers the following about this painting:

Courbet's painting is "avant-garde" if we understand the expression, in terms of its etymological derivation, as implying a union of the socially and the artistically progressive. Far from being an abstract treatise on the latest social ideas, it is a concrete emblem of what the making of art and the nature of society are to the Realist artist....they are not traditional, juiceless abstractions like Truth or Immortality, nor are they generalized platitudes like the Spirit of Electricity or the Nike of the Telegraph; it is, on the contrary, their concreteness which gives them credibility and conviction as tropes in a 'real allegory,' as Courbet subtitled the work, and which in addition, ties them indissolubly to a particular moment in history.⁵⁷

In relation to contemporary painting, and what will shortly lead us to a discussion of Jeff Wall, Baudelaire's hero is not entirely self-sustaining and valiant. In fact, he is deceptive and skeptical. Benjamin writes, "Baudelaire found nothing to like about his time...and he was unable to deceive himself about it....Because he did not have any convictions, he assumed ever new forms himself. *Flâneur*, apache, dandy and rag-picker were so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he acts heroes."⁵⁸ The zenith of modernism is duplicitous and fraudulent. And so what is this to mean in the making of modern art? The subject matter has changed, as has the treatment of the medium. Classical

composition and scale has been altered as well, leaving room for a critic like Baudelaire to prescribe solutions.

Finally, this is why Baudelaire's entire essay is so prescriptive. The artist, if we recall Taylor's view, is believed to be in the position to tell us what *ought* to be. There is a certain way that things ought to be done and a particular set of rules and conditions that make up a *painter of modern life*. The reason there is a title *painter of modern life*, the very reason Baudelaire reflected on certain traits and characteristics that the artist of his time should embody, was precisely due to the fact that Baudelaire, much like Nietzsche and other Romantics, looked to the artist as the moral exemplar; he was reflective of an *authentic being*. Such a prescription is entirely modern. But despite such instructions, Baudelaire does not have a foolproof *system* for making modern art. Walter Benjamin begins his interpretation of Baudelaire by pointing out the contradictions in his work, some of which may be playful, ironic, mysterious and surprising. For example, as Benjamin writes, "Around 1850 he proclaimed that art could not be separated from utility; and years thereafter he championed *l'art pour l'art*."⁵⁹ And of course, we must remember that Baudelaire's *painter of modern life* was then unknown artist, Constantin Guys,⁶⁰ while most writers would contend that his theories are best suited to the work of Edouard Manet. What might best sum up the confusion over Baudelaire's writing is a quote from 1895 by the critic, poet and playwright Jules Lemaître, cited in Benjamin:

One confronts a work full of artifice and intentional contradictions... Even as he gives the crassest descriptions of the bleakest details of reality, he indulges in a spiritualism which greatly distracts us from the immediate impression that things make upon us... Baudelaire regards a woman as a slave or animal, but he renders her the same homage as he does to the Holy Virgin... He curses "progress", he loathes the industry of the century, and yet he enjoys the special flavour which this industry has

given today's life... I believe the specifically Baudelairean is the constant combination of the two opposite modes of reaction...⁶¹.

The contradictions in Baudelaire's work identify the cultural standpoint from where the poet was writing. Baudelaire's ideas rest within a time that was coming to terms with modernity. Perhaps these contradictions will be mitigated to a certain extent when we look at Jeff Wall, and his interpretation of this 19th century poet. If Baudelaire's figure of the *painter of modern life* has appeared to us in his historical context, it is to a discussion of Jeff Wall, and his ability to satisfy the criteria for this characterization that we now turn.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ The Age of Enlightenment saw such liberal documents as, but not exclusively, "The Social Contract" (1762) by Jean Jacques Rousseau and "The Spirit of Laws" (1748) by Charles Montesquieu. The precursors to the Enlightenment can be traced back further to the 17th century René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Thomas Locke, among others.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1959), 227.

³ Jeff Wall, "Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency, Interview with T.J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner," in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002): 112-24, 124.

⁴ E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984), 377.

⁵ David Carrier, *High Art: Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1996), 1.

⁶ Hal Foster recognizes this contradiction as being fundamental to the understanding of Baudelaire's status within the avant-garde. He writes: "Baudelaire was not only a dandy who reviled democracy; he was also a republican who celebrated it. And this political ambivalence has made him an object of identification for (petit-bourgeois) avant-gardists ever since – along with his great ability to turn this ambivalence into poetic art and critical intelligence." in "The Art of Cynical Reason," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996): 99-124, 121.

⁷ Timothy Raser writes that Baudelaire's lifetime corresponded with the most influential period for the annual Salon. Before the French Revolution the Salon was rather insular, and after 1870, it became too inclusive, too large and as a result, overly conservative. This discussion as well as an account of the history of the Salon in France can be found in Raser, *A Poetics of Art Criticism: the Case of Baudelaire*, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, no. 234 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 74+.

⁸ For a further discussion on the unique and clandestine manner of Baudelaire's poetry, see the introduction to Carol Clark, *Charles Baudelaire: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

⁹ Raser, 76.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, "Comme un beau cadre ajoute à la peinture/ Bien qu'elle soit d'un pinceau très vanté/ Je ne sais quoi d'étrange et d'enchanté/ En l'isolant de l'immense nature..." "the Frame," in *Complete Poems* trans. Walter Martin, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 101. A note to the reader: this thesis employs a number of different translations for Baudelaire's poetry because of the author's preferences for different texts and translations.

¹¹ Jonathan Mayne, introduction to "The Painter of Modern Life," in *"The Painter of Modern Life" and Other Essays*, by Charles Baudelaire, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, x.

¹³ "La peintre de la vie moderne" was first published in *Le Figaro*, November 26, 28 and December 3, 1863.

¹⁴ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *"The Painter of Modern Life" and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), 14.

¹⁵ Benjamin writes that "In Baudelaire's view of modernism, the theory of modern art is the weakest point," citing the poet's thematic analysis of modernism as stronger than his theoretical study, which seemed to rely too heavily on Edgar Allan Poe. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 82.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, "Et, peintre fier de mon génie, Je savourais dans mon tableau/ L'enivrante monotonie/ Du métal, du marbre et de l'eau." Charles Baudelaire, "Rêve Parisien: A Constatin Guys," in *Complete Poems*, trans. Walter Martin (New York: Routledge, 2002), 262-3.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 175.

¹⁸ A. Morizet, *Du vieux Paris au Paris moderne: Haussmann et ses prédécesseurs*, 201, cited in T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 32.

¹⁹ Charles Baudelaire, "Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville/ Change plus vite, hélas! Que le coeur d'un mortel)..." "The Swan: to Victor Hugo," in *The Complete Poems of Baudelaire*, trans. Dr. Philip Higson and Elliot R. Ashe, (Chester, England: Limouse Museum Publications, 1992), 94.

²⁰ Due, in part, to the mass of migration from the country side to the city, discussed at length in Robert Hubert, "City vs. Country," *Artforum* 8 (February 1970): 44-55.

²¹ Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, 4th ed. Berlin, 1958, 486, cited in Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 38. The popular physiologies, *feuilletons*, that illustrated the city and its environs offered descriptions of people in a casual, harmless way. As Benjamin writes, "such a view of one's fellow man was so remote from experience that there were bound to be uncommonly weighty motives from it.", 37.

²² Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), 81.

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- ²³ This term refers to “a magic-lantern show of optical illusions” that constantly mutate and change, and also references Marx’s use of the work to describe the deceiving appearances of commodities in “fetishes” in a marketplace. Cited in: Buck-Morss, 81.
- ²⁴ Baudelaire, “*The Painter of Modern Life*”, 9.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 15.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 4.
- ²⁷ Charles Baudelaire, “The Seven Old Men,” in *The Complete Poems of Baudelaire*, trans. Dr. Philip Higonson and Elliot R. Ashe (Chester, England: Limouse Museum Publications, 1992), 95.
- ²⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire,” *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 119-120.
- ²⁹ Another hypothesis is that Baudelaire was particularly concerned with social types because he himself was poor and as they say, *déclassé*, most of his adult life.
- ³⁰ Other Romantics like Victor Hugo, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Proust and Balzac were asking similar questions about this changing world. This thesis does not have the space to elaborate on writers such as these, but to be sure, they were a part of the community from which Baudelaire stems and have also influenced current scholarship today.
- ³¹ Walter Benjamin describes the pocket-sized paperback books called *physiologies* that were popular in the early 1840s. These books offered descriptions about the social types that one might see on the streets, a *feuilleton* “who’s who” to people-watching. In Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire,” *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 35.
- ³² The relationship between this science and art from the 19th century is elaborated on in Anthea Cullen’s book, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). A primary figure in the science of facial features to characterize intelligence is Austrian anatomist Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1826).
- ³³ We are meant to know that they are Jewish because of the so-called “Jewish” traits outlined by scientists: high cheekbones, thick black hair, low foreheads and large noses.
- ³⁴ Details about Degas’ relationship to the Dreyfus Affair can be found in Linda Nochlin, “Degas and the Dreyfus Affair: A Portrait of the Artist as an Anti-Semite,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989): 25-50.
- ³⁵ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 255.
- ³⁶ There has been an overwhelming amount of scholarship executed about this painting, attesting to the importance of this female figure in art history. Some of this writing, for example, can be found in Bradford R. Collins, ed., *12 View’s of Manet’s Bar* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ³⁷ Baudelaire, “*The Painter of Modern Life*”, 35-36.
- ³⁸ Linda Nochlin, “The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France 1830-1880,” in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989): 1-17, 17.

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- ³⁹ Robert Enright, "The Consolation of Plausibility: An Interview with Jeff Wall," *Border Crossings* 19, no. 1 (2000): 51.
- ⁴⁰ Baudelaire, "*The Painter of Modern Life*", 32.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, 32.
- ⁴² Ibid, 32-33.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 34.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 32.
- ⁴⁵ William Blake, "Jerusalem," in *William Blake: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 651.
- ⁴⁶ This deception would continue in art, culminating with Duchamp's urinal "masquerading" as art, calling into question what art is, and what it means to produce it.
- ⁴⁷ Baudelaire, "*The Painter of Modern Life*", 7.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 9.
- ⁴⁹ This type of poeticized emphasis can be seen as an extension of the broader liberal shifts that had been occurring throughout Europe. This shift is most notably exemplified by the idea that all individuals are, to some large extent, equal and sovereign. –John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, in a different way, Nietzsche.
- ⁵⁰ Baudelaire, "*The Painter of Modern Life*", 12.
- ⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1991), 62.
- ⁵² Baudelaire, "*The Painter of Modern Life*", 12.
- ⁵³ Taylor, 423.
- ⁵⁴ An interesting study of Baudelaire's writing on lesbians can be found in Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 90+. Benjamin points out that Baudelaire isn't so much interested in lesbians in a political, moral way or erotic way, but for their 'type-ness,' affirming the poet's interest in the citizens of the city for the role they play in the larger fabric of the modern experience.
- ⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 93.
- ⁵⁶ Baudelaire, "*The Painter of Modern Life*", 4.
- ⁵⁷ Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France 1830-1880," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989): 1-17, 12.
- ⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 97.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁶⁰ An compelling explanation of Baudelaire's choice in *Guys* can be found in Raser, where he writes the following: "I believe that Baudelaire made this choice as a provocation, an effort to unsettle received notions of beauty, and first among them, the notion that beauty is recognized. To choose a recognized artist, or even a to-be-recognized artist, would only confirm some readers of their error. Choosing *Guys*, by contrast, Baudelaire left generations of readers asking uneasy questions of the type just mentioned, and searching for a notion of beauty based not on authority but on play.", 155-56.

⁶¹ Jules Lemaître, *Les contemporains*, Paris, 1895, 29, cited in Benjamin, "The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 94.

CHAPTER TWO

Scratch a photograph and find a painting.

– Janet Malcolm, *Diana and Nikon*

The previous chapter offered an analysis of Charles Baudelaire in light of his *painter of modern life*. Baudelaire's modern prose and poetry provides us with a glimpse into the transformation of Paris in the mid-1800s. By highlighting three tentative conditions for the fulfillment a *painter of modern life* regarding subject matter, it provides a starting point for an analysis of the work of Jeff Wall, and to consider whether the title *painter of modern life* could plausibly be associated with his photographs. I will reveal how Wall's photographs fulfill Baudelaire's requirements for a *painter of modern life* with respect to these conditions - most notably, in the subject matter and themes developed by the artist. I will also demonstrate how Wall's work satisfies the requirements for Modern Art itself, that is, modern art as we understand it in a Greenbergian sense, as largely self-reflexive and committed to its own medium.¹ Wall's manipulation of the photograph, and subsequent self-reflexivity, is a significant aspect of his project to be a *painter of modern life*. Wall's photographic strategy supplements Baudelaire's mission to illustrate modernism. Michael Fried comments on the seminal writings of T. J. Clark, when he writes, "in [Clark's] working definition of modernism in the *Painter of Modern Life*, that visual experience is equated with a loss of certainty about the very act of representation."² This study will then provoke an analysis of *why* Wall would call himself a *painter of modern life* in Chapter Three. Is he simply committed to the history of avant-garde art, and does he see himself aligned with it

today? Or is he being ironic, ultimately recognizing the uselessness of this term to talk about art today?

POSITIONING THE ARGUMENT

Chapter One highlighted, one should recall, the significance of the artist's subject matter in distinguishing himself as a *painter of modern life*. Baudelaire emphasizes the city, social types, and the hero of the individual as appropriate subject matter for this new art. Subsequently, Wall's body of work is comprised of many pictures that reflect a similar subject matter. Wall has depicted the city in a number of different ways over the past twenty years, in works such as *The Bridge* (1980), *A Villager from Aricaköyü Arriving in Mahmutbey – Istanbul, September, 1997* (1997), *Man with a Rifle* (2000), and *Untitled (Night)* (2001). His depiction of social types is equally diverse in works like *Movie Audience* (1979), *Woman and her Doctor* (1980-81), *Citizen* (1996), and *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Preface* (1999-2001). But before I commence my analysis of Wall's work, it must be asked, is it subject matter alone that can qualify an artist to call himself a *painter of modern life*? Can a contemporary artist who paints his stockbroker neighbor, new immigrants or rich white men be labeled a *painter of modern life* due solely to the depiction of social types? Popular advertising often highlights different ethnicities and social 'types' in an effort to display what we describe in Canada as "multiculturalism." We would not usually call such an advertiser a *painter of modern life*. Similarly, topographers or landscape photographers are not *painters of modern life* only because they capture cityscapes in their pictures. Taking our cue from Baudelaire and the abundance of poetry and prose he produced, inspired by the world around him,

we can imagine the *painter of modern life* as someone who is a key participant in his environment. He is an observer and has a critical awareness of his world and time. Constantine Guys made quick sketches on the street; Georges Seurat portrayed an obsessive understanding of different social types in his huge paintings. And Edouard Manet's depiction of a woman's gaze could capture the feeling of an entire era. As observers, these artists recognized the contingency of their moment in the world. An artist painting his neighbor, while indeed painting what we might recognize as a social type, does not necessarily do so critically. There is no apparent link between the artist and the world around him. He does not paint his "types" with their contingency to the rest of the world in mind; there is no insight into these "types" and their relationship to society. Similarly, our contemporary visual culture that illustrates city scenes, fashions and styles of 21st century life are not necessarily reflections of the attitudes of a Baudelairian *painter of modern life*. In short, an artist may not satisfy the conditions required for the Baudelairian prescription of a *painter of modern life* merely by having produced work that parallels (in some broad way) the subject matter that Baudelaire himself typically exalted. Having done simply *that* is not nearly enough. A Baudelairian *painter of modern life* must *represent* his time; he must do with art what G.W.F. Hegel insisted philosophers must do in writing. Namely, "hold their time in thought"³ (or art, in the case of Baudelaire). Of course, having revealed that a painter's subject matter represents a necessary but insufficient condition for a *painter of modern life* should not lead one to conclude that questions that arise about subject matter are altogether insignificant. To be sure, especially for Jeff Wall, this cluster of questions is of paramount importance.

Looking at subject matter provides us with a key to Wall's objectives. By mimicking Baudelaire's paradigm, we see how Wall attempts to resurrect 19th century painting (or critical features of it) in the present day. Furthermore, he is trying to show that aspects of 19th century art are still viable and relevant today. That is, some 'postmodern' theorists notwithstanding, Wall believes that the central concerns of Baudelaire, and the 19th century art he so helped to define, remain, in many key ways, pertinent to our present concerns. This idea can be inferred from the following passage.

Wall says,

The idea of the 'painting of modern life,' which I've liked very much for many years, seemed to me just the most open, flexible, and rich notion of what artistic aims might be like, meaning that Baudelaire was asking or calling for artists to pay close attention to the everyday and the *now* (my emphasis)... The painting of modern life would be experimental, a clash between the very ancient standards of art and the immediate experiences that people were having in the modern world. I feel that that was the most durable, rich orientation, but the great thing about it is that it doesn't exclude any other view. It doesn't stand in contradiction to abstraction or any other experimental forms. It is part of them, and is always in some kind of dialogue with them, and also with other things that are happening, inside and outside art.⁴

WALL AND ART HISTORY

Before beginning his photographic art practice in the mid- 1970s, Wall was a student of art history and a witness to a subtle shift in the study of 19th century art around that time. Writers like T.J. Clark, Michael Fried, and Thomas Crow were exploring and reinterpreting 19th century French painting from an increasingly sociopolitical perspective. Clark, like Wall a graduate of the Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London, reinterprets art history through the lenses of social context and the economic conditions of production.

Much art historical research prior to this period focused on the formal interests in art and privileged iconographic study. An Impressionist painting, for example, might have been analyzed with respect to the manner in which the artist was using paint. This was conceived of as a way of rejecting past, more finished painting techniques of the Paris Salon, so that impressionist painting changed the optics of the canvas through corrugation, layering of paint, and so forth. This analysis would then contribute to reveal a deeper meaning in the work and could thus lead to a greater understanding about the culture from which it was created. The calculation of the objects or motifs in a work of art could help relay the underlying principles of a culture, nation or peoples; the signs of a painting held *clues* to the world in which the painting was created. For example, in the work of Erwin Panofsky, a 20th century iconographer, “the heart of [his] contribution to art history is his recognition that a single element in a single work can reveal the larger image of a culture.”⁵ To be sure, studies of this kind were and still are significant, but T.J. Clark and others want to reinterpret the role and position of the history of art and prove that it can be fruitful for the understanding of broader social and political conditions. In the process, it is important not to discard what Clark describes as the “roll-call of names” in the history of the profession (among them, Panofsky, Warburg, Wölfflin, Gombrich), but rather to enlarge this rich history of scholarship to include discussion of class, conditions of production, economic systems of art dissemination, and so on.⁶ This shift would hinder the analysis of art that merely places it into the “Spirit-of-the-Age”, as though it contains some metaphysical secret, but would rather privilege the social facts that influence the artist and his work. (This line of thought would eventually

lead to the postmodern concept that the self is culturally constructed as opposed to metaphysically realized).

Returning to my example of Impressionist painting, the social historian would ask a series of questions to gauge the social environment and political impetus that urges the artist to create what he does. What were the conditions under which an artist painted, for example? What were his tools, his resources, and his agency in the creation of his work? And above all, as Eric Fernie says about Clark, “ideology should in fact be central to our interests: we should study the way in which social classes use works of art to maintain their position; style should be analyzed as if it were an expression of an ideology in visible form.”⁷ Such questions would translate into an analysis of the picture itself, where we might recognize that the depiction of a sunrise in a harbor involves subject matter as well as the pointillist technique. The setting of the periphery of the city at the water’s edge could signal strong political changes or allegorical shifts in power, and perhaps in addition, a changing role for the artist himself at this time. The Impressionists’ interest in the urban environment and the middle to lower-class people who inhabited it gestured a shift in emphasis, which illustrated the immense social and political transformations that emerged in Paris in the middle of the 19th century. Paul Wood clarifies this as a shift in focus from “text” to “context.” He writes, “the social history of art mounted a critique on modernism’s exclusive focus on the visual *effects* of the work of art itself, emphasizing instead the constellation of social *causes* out of which it was made.”⁸ As a result of such a shift in perspective when analyzing a work of art, an art historian could turn to a variety of resources to inform such a study. If the politics and

the people of Paris influenced an artist, so too could the literature, photography, and poetry of the time.

It is from this perspective that academics like Clark approached the writings of Baudelaire as a means to interpret 19th century painting. Wall uses Baudelaire as well, among others, to map out the importance of this past art, perhaps reflecting on our continued difficulty in thinking and talking about art today. The academic environment within which Wall was inculcated was one where Walter Benjamin's work also played a resounding, if not defining role.⁹ Benjamin, in his text *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* interprets Baudelaire's writing on modernity, stating the points of significance and contention (the final thesis seems to clarify his work from a Marxist perspective). The combination of these writers and scholars had a defining impact on the type of art Wall would produce. Thomas Crow asserts eloquently:

What seems to have mattered most for [Wall's] return to practice – and his proposing grounds for a non-trivial return to figuration – was the changed value that social historians were beginning to give to subject matter in the French painting of the immediately preceding period, from Courbet to Post-Impressionism. It was, in particular, this newer research into French modern-life painting that was exposing a sharp and unsustainable divide in the intellectual assumptions of the discipline – and was thus creating the turmoil in question.¹⁰

Wall's work, therefore, fits into a larger intellectual movement. His interpretation of Baudelaire has considerations not only for his own art making, but selective Baudelairian themes played central and decisive roles in the academic environment within which Wall was initiated.

THE CITY

Baudelaire's first requirement for a *painter of modern life* was that he paints what surrounds him, and in Baudelaire's time, this meant the newly shaped city of Paris. In his effort to restore this grand pictorial tradition, Wall too chooses the common scenes that envelop him, illustrating what Bernd Reiss aptly describes as "arenas of social interaction."¹¹ While Wall addresses the terms and conditions of Baudelaire's *painter of modern life*, he jointly invokes further elements of modernism, namely the tendency towards self-criticism in modern art that culminates with the writings of Clement Greenberg. A layered work such as *(Untitled) Overpass* (2001) (Ill. 8) addresses these two differing interpretations of modernism and highlights the link between them. Wall's use of photography in *Overpass* not only expands on Baudelaire's own reflections about modern art production, but also serves to clarify the grander initiative of the "modern" turn as it pertains to art making. Before I delve into an analysis of this specific work, some further notes on 20th century modernism are required.

Clement Greenberg's 1965 essay, "Modernist Painting", outlines the tendency towards self-criticism in modern art, in all mediums, including literature and philosophy. This is to stress the specificity of the medium in which the artist works, to examine what is specific to their art. For Greenberg, "the essence of Modernism lies... in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."¹² This need to solidify the methods of a discipline appears to arise from a similar modern philosophical project of thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. Questions about the problems they set out to conquer, the questions of "who am I" and "what is beyond this world?",

were put to task, ultimately, as Greenberg suggests with regards to Kant, “to criticize the means itself of criticism.”¹³ The realization arose that these were fruitless quests; answers could not be discovered within the logic of reason. If we could not talk about the “world out there” (after all, much current philosophical reasoning had discarded the notion of the metaphysical), therefore, the best we could do was examine the system of philosophy, “criticizing from the inside.”¹⁴ This line of inquiry permeated the world of the visual arts, as philosophical thought tends to do. Art was no longer seen as aura-filled, god-breathed creations, but objects created by people that could perhaps give us some insight into life or to our place in the world. The fear, of course, was that art would follow a similar route that religion had taken after the Enlightenment, that of only being useful for personal reasons and no longer be consequential as part of a collective, philosophical inquiry. Religion became appealing for the relief or joy it brought to one person, but was not useful in any honest discussion about the world or the nature of the world. Could the same happen to art? If it was no longer a transcendent product, created for the gods, with this slow reductionism, would art have anything left to contribute? What would happen if art depicted a story that had already been told? One that need not rely on anything visual? Would art become redundant? The result for Greenberg, to put it plainly, was to deduce essential visual characteristics about painting (predominantly, but not exclusively, this was flatness) in order to justify its presence, or “entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.” The most successful art for Greenberg (among others) was the non-objective painting of Barnett Newman or Jackson Pollock.

Wall addresses this supposed “need” to prove painting (or any given medium) to be good in and of itself. Wall’s reflexive tendencies with regards to the photograph seem

to mimic the same essentialist quest of non-objective painters. He exaggerates the candid quality of photography by *performing it* in the picture itself, for example. Wall also mocks the “clarity” that photography apparently provides by making his pictures hyper-clear – enlarged to nearly life-size and illuminated from behind, rendering the image the “spectacle” that Wall recognizes in the world. Wall’s interest in the continuing traditions of art making is evident not only in the referencing of past painters and their critics, but also in his engagement with the theoretical thought process that veined the entire Modernist project. He continues to be self-reflexive, by imitating past art, on the nature of his medium and where photography sits within this tradition of art history.

Untitled (Overpass)

The scene is an urban area or its periphery. Four figures walk purposefully across a bridge carrying various forms of luggage. The setting appears to be close to an airport terminal or a bus station on the edge of town. *Untitled (Overpass)* demonstrates the aesthetic strength of the photograph: the quickness of execution makes it appear to be in the documentary-style. The image also resembles a snapshot or a wasted picture at the end of a roll. Either way, it shows the immediate, ephemeral quality of the photograph. And yet, it is a completely staged work, obsessive to the last detail, from the ominous clouds in the sky and the cast shadows they produce across the pavement, to the specific strides taken by the travelers across the bridge. This apparently candid picture took time to make – hiring actors, composing and testing the correct location and perspective and so on. Wall, because of the staging, is *not* what Baudelaire calls for in the sense of a “painter of the passing moment.”¹⁵ We should remember from the first chapter, the

tension that emerges in Baudelaire with respect to the artist's technical process. This tension can be highlighted by recalling that Baudelaire calls on his *painter of modern life* to be at once a "painter of the passing moment" while also having gained a technical or procedural mastery (as the pre-moderns did) of his craft. I contend that Wall not only recognizes this discrepancy in Baudelaire, but that he is able to emulate both these aspects in a single image.

In *Overpass*, Wall entices us to see this photograph as a casual encounter and an entirely harmonious work – a *tableau* reminiscent of classical art committed to the highest standard of art making: unity.¹⁶ The artist's mastery in this image is such that while the photograph appears to contradict Baudelaire's call for a "painter of the passing moment," in actuality, if we were to examine the pictures that the poet heralded, they too had elements of staging. Degas's dancers were as staged as these pedestrians are. The reclining figures in Manet's *Olympia* and *Déjeuner* were posed; sketched, painted, and repainted in the same manner as comparable figures would have been in earlier Salons.¹⁷ Wall recognizes this contradiction in Baudelaire's writing - that the artist is to be at once an artist of imagination, employing a "sketch of manners", but must also pay heed to the formal language by which art is always engaged.

Wall employs photography, a most 'candid' medium that suggests the ephemeral. But as he has pointed out on several occasions, the digital photograph, in its technological sophistication, has the same procedural elements as a salon painting. Just as the 19th century artist composed, aligned, posed, and cropped his paintings, so too does Wall manipulate his photographs. Whereas Wall was obliged to construct his set and hire actors, through digital technology he is now able to build up the composition, much in the

way that classical artists had done.¹⁸ With regard to the construction of *The Storyteller* from 1986, for example, Wall speaks about asking one of his actors to wear a red jacket, “because, you know, it’s often nice to have a little point of red in a composition, it draws the eye to a sort of salient point.”¹⁹ We can readily imagine Vermeer, Constable or even Van Gogh thinking the same. Wall’s overt indebtedness to many of the great painters of the past is exposed by Hans Dickel when he writes, “in his digitally produced transparencies, Wall combines the benefits of photography (objectivity, reality, mechanics) with those of painting (subjectivity, unreality, freedom).”²⁰ Wall’s work, however, cannot be exhaustively described as a homage to or celebration of certain historical paintings and painters. To be sure, Wall’s images compel us to consider a cluster of questions that arise about photography’s inherent realism, and by contrast, painting’s inherent subjectivity.

Wall’s pictures ask us to question their authenticity. He effectively calls into doubt the common intuition that the photograph is an accurate or faithful recorder of reality. That is, to the extent that one considers a photograph to be inextricably linked to real events (as opposed to the imaginary or emotional emphasis that has often been a consideration of painting), Wall forces us to reconsider the very essence we had, perhaps falsely, attributed to the photograph. In short, Wall circumvents the assumption that the photograph is the best, most realistic way of representing the world, ultimately breaking down its essentialist mythology. In *Overpass*, there is a deliberate covering up of information. We can’t see the faces of the characters. The bridge, metaphorically used to span two divides, denies us visual access to the cityscape or any other land around it. This strategy can be witnessed repeatedly in Wall’s pictures. Works that are impressive

in their size, clarity and sharpness do not provide greater access to the subject matter,²¹ asserting Wall's contention that "there is something in every picture, no matter how well structured the picture is, that escapes being shown."²² Moreover, by staging the work, in an often grotesque or humorous way, Wall challenges our intuition about what the photograph is. The underlying theme is the following: there is nothing *to* get right (strictly speaking), no comprehensive or final stage in the quest for perfect representation, but rather a series of narratives to be offered and interpreted in order that we can perhaps shed light on our experience. This is the philosophical or theoretical basis for what some demarcate as *postmodern* thought. That these postmodern repercussions reveal themselves in a work that professes such an allegiance to Baudelaire and the *painter of modern life* demonstrates the complex and overlapping project of the artist.

OVERPASS AND THE CITY

I wish to elaborate on the possibility of further postmodern-ness in Wall's photographs by examining the *particular* subject matter of his pictures. The characters in the scene walk hurriedly across the bridge. The background includes an unsightly air duct, concrete walls and a chain-link fence. The subject matter of this picture refers back to Baudelaire's writing, and to particular works of art which explore the nature of a modern city. Wall's city, however, is not the same as Baudelaire's. He does not depict Paris, that which has been memorialized in books, poems, and paintings, but he instead shows us an incident of Vancouver, a young city with its own set of contemporary problems and concerns.

19th century painters captured what has been termed the “spectacle” of modernity, the visual exhibition of people as they parade around Paris, displaying their costumes, make-up, as well as their roles in society.²³ This term is probably best exemplified in the cobblestoned world of Caillebotte’s *Pont de l’Europe* and *Rainy Day*. The stage is the streets of Paris, and the players walk, talk and act according to their social types. The spectacle, as far as Wall’s pedestrians in *Overpass* are concerned, has ended, and there is an exodus from this play. This is perhaps, although not conclusively, a portrayal of the pluralism and supposed multiculturalism of Canada, and of Wall’s native city, Vancouver. This anxious picture of people leaving en masse replaces the utopic vision of a country of diversity. Are they packing up and leaving, unhappy with the multi-cultural experiment of Canada?

The city of Paris, with its steel constructions, grand boulevards and consumer-ridden crowds became symbolic for the feeling, mood and atmosphere of modernity. As Thomas Crow writes, “the complex physical and social geography of Paris was exploited as a master code for grasping the seemingly opaque or incongruous iconographic choices made by the avant-garde that clustered in the city from the 1850s to the 1880s.”²⁴ In the 20th century and today, artists like Wall have found more meaning or a clearer “code” for our day in what Madeleine Gryn Szejn and others have described as “second” cities.²⁵ Cities like Tijuana, Istanbul, and Vancouver have seen the majority of their growth as cities in the latter half of the 20th century and have a structure and mechanisms different than the grand capitals of the 19th century. They are “where the forces of late capitalism are most crudely dramatized.”²⁶ There are no monuments or obvious spectacles in Wall’s depiction of Vancouver. There are not the grand train stations, the wide boulevards or

the fantastic arcades. Rather, there are peripheral areas, suburbs and non-dramatic perspectives. Wall shows us neglected construction sites, grimy back alleys and congested waterfronts. He brings the issues down the ground level, forcing us to see the 'global village' from a closer perspective.²⁷

Vancouver might be exemplary of a late 20th century city just as Paris was for the 19th. Vancouver is relatively young and witness to the influences of an intense capitalist culture. It is comprised of much new architecture and the city has changed a considerable amount in the last few decades (in comparison to the older and more established Canadian urban centres of Montreal and Toronto). Vancouver (and subsequently the province of British Columbia) must contend with many of the 21st century realities of an ex-colonial country. There is a large immigrant population in Vancouver, exemplifying what John Berger observes (not specifically to this city) as being constitutive of our contemporary experience. He writes, "never before our time have so many people been uprooted. Emigration, forced or chosen, across national frontiers or from the village to the metropolis, is the quintessential experience of our time."²⁸ Largely from the Pacific Rim, but also coming from elsewhere, Vancouver's immigrant population must somehow gel with the strong British influence of the region. Also, the booming lumber market of the great forests of the province conflict with the land-rights issues faced by British Columbia's First Nations population. The above mentioned *Storyteller* is one such image that can be interpreted in relation to Native land claims. The photograph depicts a group of people communing on the periphery of the city, the underpass of a highway. As the group of First Nations people sit hedged-in within this leftover green-space, we can imagine the figures from *Untitled (Overpass)* rushing by above them. This is a 'residual

space,' or as Chevrier writes, a space that survives "by being neglected by those with the power to transform it."²⁹ There is a group of three encircled around a small fire, with one woman gesturing to the others. She is probably forced to yell over the noises of the highway, and we get a sense of urgency in her gestures, as though this is a story that must be told.

Vancouver is a combination of sea and mountains, environmental activists and Olympic organizers. There are many dualities present when one considers (as best as one can) the *nature* of Vancouver. As art practices move increasingly away from old capitals to new peripheral places, Vancouver stands as a symbol of the edge of things (and literally, the edge of the continent).³⁰ While it is his 'hometown,' Wall resists the urge to "paint" his city in pastoral terms, as containing something ephemeral or mystical because it is his land of origin. As he said to Jean-François Chevrier, "if you pay great attention to your origins you begin to fall into something that's not good for picture-making."³¹ For Wall, talking about place requires a critical distance and if you rely heavily on biography and personal experience, something becomes lost in translation.³² This is certainly seen in the point of view he takes in his photographs. We saw in *Overpass* how we were shut off from the drama of the scene; it metaphorically turned its back on us. The feasibility of a critical distance is tested in the sweeping panoramic image of *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery* (1987) (Ill. 9). This picture tests the possibility of an unmitigated objectivity. The genre of landscape painting would seem to lend itself to such neutrality and Wall keeps a critical distance, never allowing the viewer to fully enter the scene. About landscape pictures, Wall states the following: "In making a landscape we must withdraw a certain distance – far enough to detach ourselves from

the immediate presence of other people (figures), but not so far as to lose the ability to distinguish them as agents in a social space.”³³ The result is how Denise Oeksijczuk describes the objective of contemporary landscape art: “to represent the complex of processes and relationships that take place on the land in a way that dispels the illusion of a nature outside history.”³⁴ The horror invoked by Jewish cemeteries at the end of the twentieth century (awakening memories of World War Two and the Holocaust) is projected away from us and we are kept, visually and emotionally, at a great distance. The cemetery recedes to the pastoral, and becomes depoliticized, perhaps in the same way that we have attempted to anesthetize Holocaust studies, employing techniques of archiving, listing of events, etc. Ideas of genocide, nationalism, and our own mortality are hidden within the sprawl of the green lawn and the beautiful background setting. Such a distance allows for several things to occur. Firstly, it provides an image that mimics the *tableaux* of art history – large-scale genre paintings that include copious detail and narrative elements. *The Holocaust Memorial* also reminds us, with its somber subject matter that was the result of one of the most disturbing and changing events in modern time, of the contingency of history. Wall’s picture entrenches the viewer firmly in the tradition of art making, but also the history of the modern society under which those traditions flourished. And unlike documentary photography, which has a tradition of creating empathy and understanding for its subjects, in Wall’s pictures, our positions as viewers is much more ambiguous. In the case of *The Holocaust Memorial*, it is as though Wall is recognizing that there are some experiences that cannot be captured on film. There may not ever be enough visual information, for example, to depict what happened during the Holocaust.

A critical (and physical) distance is evident in Wall's cityscapes. I would also like to make evident another aspect of the depiction of the city that is important to the understanding of Baudelaire's romantic interpretation of Paris. Baudelaire's city has a pulse that, like Walt Whitman's poetry about New York City, commands and moves to the heartbeat of its inhabitants.³⁵ Benjamin cites a dedication written by Baudelaire to the editor-in-chief of *La Presse* as an example of this:

Who among us has not dreamt, in moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, supple and staccato enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and the sudden leaps of consciousness. This obsessive ideal is above all a child of the experience of giant cities, of the intersecting of their myriad relations.³⁶

There is an organic and fluid element to the city for these Romantics. The city beats to the pulse of those who walk their streets and those who once did. This romantic sense is evident in some of Wall's work. Wall focuses on the fringes of Vancouver - the underpasses, work sites, and back alleys, observing the back lots and the side streets of the city. He behaves as Susan Sontag describes the *flâneur*, "[He] is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations - an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life that the photographer 'apprehends,' as a detective apprehends a criminal."³⁷ In many of his pictures, he recognizes the metamorphosis of his city, the way it slowly evolves in an economic and geographic sense. *(Untitled) Dawn* (2001) (Ill. 10) is an illustrative example of this theme. It features a forgotten street corner near the edge of an industrial area of Vancouver. This is Wall's interpretation of the pastoral and his view of the idealization of nature. The fantastic element of Wall's work might best be illustrated with a quote from Baudelaire. In describing his *painter of modern life*, Baudelaire writes, "the external world is reborn

upon his paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator.”³⁸

The Romanticism in pictures like *Dawn*, that remind us of Wall’s commitment to Modernism, are tinged with irony when we consider the medium of photography. The tool of the camera apparently compromises the romantic gestures, the narratives that privilege the imagination and the emotions of the artist/viewer. Baudelaire was dubious of the new medium because of its scientific origins. Crude and cold scientificity, one should note, stood in contrast with the inward, Romantic turn that is paradigmatic of Baudelaire. “All good and true draftsmen draw from the image imprinted on their brains, and not from nature,”³⁹ he wrote, so that an artist who employed photography could not be appreciated as a true *painter of modern life*. The scientific tool of the camera, to Baudelaire, relied too heavily on nature and its real depiction. This was not conducive to artistic production. The scientific and technical nature of the photograph contradicts Baudelaire’s notion of the primacy of the intangible imagination in art.

But Wall draws a link between the romance of 19th century painting and the scientific components of contemporary photography. *Dawn*, for example, took approximately twenty-eight different images to make the finished digital picture. Despite its simplicity, it is a technically astute and creatively complex image. The result is a hybrid of the different technological and philosophical ideas that have permeated art making from the beginning of modernism to today. As clarified in an exhibition catalogue describing Wall’s work: “the elevation of the scenes of the down-side of urban capitalist life to the most sophisticated photographic reproduction technology available is an immense overstatement similar to the radicality in Baroque art of deeming low-life

subject matter worthy of pigmented linseed oil.”⁴⁰ In his seemingly simple landscape or cityscape pictures, Wall is capable of bringing to light all our memories of past art and the tradition of the genre. His pictures remind us of the heritage in which his work is embedded, but also asks the viewer to re-evaluate this tradition and reinterpret it in contemporary terms.

SOCIAL TYPES

The 19th century witnessed the culmination and continual exaggeration of stereotypes in popular culture. The reader will remember from the first chapter, the discussion of Degas’s *A La Bourse* and its racist undertones. And Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte* with its caricature of Parisian social types, caught up in an indulgent commodity culture, one that T.J. Clark describes “where even recreation is a matter of striking a pose.”⁴¹ Wall exaggerates this tradition in his own depiction of social types; ultimately breaking down some of the simplistic readings we allot to the characters of modernity. Firstly, he recognizes the confusion in defining social types, and often portrays them in such a way as to disorient the viewer about their meaning, or place in society. This interpretation is different than the often caricatured and exaggerated types of the 19th century. His depiction, particularly of poor or dispossessed people, also aligns his work with the Realist tradition and the political goals and leanings of early documentary photography at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Vancouver, Wall addresses the residual exploitative effects of capitalism and the discrepancies of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in pictures such as *Outburst* (Ill. 11), *Mimic* (1982), *Bad Goods* (1984) and *Diatribes* (1985). Further, by depicting immigrant

cultures, Wall breaks down some of the common or stereotypical rhetoric commonly associated with these minority groups. *Outburst* is a sensational scene in a textile factory with a group of Asian women sewing in unison. The man in the center of the picture, seemingly the boss or the manager, is yelling at one of the workers, his arm flexed and raised in an angry fist, ironically reminiscent of images of an uprising proletariat from the late 19th and early 20th century. This is a sobering side to the idealized social ideal of industrialization and the workers movement. The standard narrative of the powerful controlling the powerless, the story of colonial narratives and racial hierarchies is confused by the fact that all the characters in the picture are Asian. A picture like this does not leave space for conventional stereotypes. Wall treats the distinctively modern theme of social types in a cinematic, slick and plastic way, much like these themes are presented in popular media, but then denies the viewer the simplistic reading we are normally afforded. But as Norman Bryson writes, “the clarity with which we read his image is the product not of social forces but rather of the close control exercised by the photographer over the visual field.”⁴² To do this, Wall must draw the viewer in, to provide the ‘bait’ of something recognizable – which in this case is largely the light box’s affiliation to media advertising. This is because, “for the characters in Wall’s work to be as recognizable and believable as they are, also requires the viewer to understand and recognize the differences and similarities between him or herself and the characters portrayed.”⁴³ This ultimately breaks down the rhetoric that surrounds multi-cultural societies and their representation. Jed Perl argues that this image is rendered little more than a “politically correct cartoon,” but I would say that the ambiguity coupled with the stylized dramatics adds to the disassociation we might feel when looking at pictures of

the dispossessed and powerless.⁴⁴ Instead of providing a binary opposition of positive and negative functions, images like *Outburst* demonstrate what Homi Bhabha describes as the “*processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.”⁴⁵ Wall makes the image “cartoonish,” as if to emphasize its construction, as well as socially realistic, illustrating the very genuine power struggles that exist within any number of communities.

The ‘cartoon-ish’ nature of the picture might remind us of the stereotypical depiction of different races we see in the popular media. A Government of Canada website, for example, might show the smiling faces of a white person, a black person, and an Asian person. Each one “equally” represented; each one content in the role they play in our “multicultural” society. *Outburst* is a ‘slice of life’ of the garment district of Vancouver. The viewer is afforded the same narrative that we might get from Degas’ *La Bourse* – a peek into the private world of urban trade. In *Outburst*, however, the stereotypes are more complicated. Who is in the position of power here? The tension between the boss and the worker illustrates the irrationality of depicting “types” in any universal, essential way. By providing more space for interpretation with less finitude on the “type-ness” of the characters, Wall is able to guarantee what Stuart Hall calls for with respect to stereotyping, an “infinite postponement of meaning.”⁴⁶ Yet sceptically, despite this reshuffling of stereotypes, the sheer aggression of the boss and the utter fear of the worker (not to mention her neighbour’s absolute disregard), leaves one wondering whether or not there has been any progress made at all.

A contemporary take on 19th century social types is *Tattoos and Shadows* from 2000 (Ill. 12). This work has obvious references to Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*

from 1863. In Manet's traditional pastoral setting a woman sits, nestled between two gentlemen, both immaculately dressed for an afternoon in the park. What would be a normal, banal image is disrupted by the fact that this woman is nude and provides no reasonable narrative. The nude is a fragment of the scene, devoid of context, and is separated from the background of the painting.⁴⁷ The spilled fruit beside her on the picnic blanket symbolizes traditional sexuality, yet the woman herself does not appear eroticized, but rather uninterested and aloof. She seems to sit apart from the canvas entirely, as though she were a cutout and the painting a collage. The viewer is asked to review art history to adequately reconstruct the nude's rightful place within it. Linda Nochlin writes, "the goal of the artistic avant-garde, from Courbet to the Surrealists, has been to intervene in the domain of real life by changing the language of art so as to turn passive spectators into active interlocutors."⁴⁸ She interprets *Le Déjeuner* with the popular turn of phrase used by Manet, a *blague*, an inside joke of some kind:

...with Manet's brother, brother-in-law-to-be, and favorite model, Victorine, staring blandly out of the decor of Giorgione's venerated pastoral idyll, their elegant contemporary costume – or lack of it – making a mockery of the 'timeless' Raphaellesque composition, must have seemed as full of protest and constituted as destructive a vicious a gesture as that of Marcel Duchamp when he painted a mustache on the Mona Lisa."⁴⁹

Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe imitates the size and scale of classical historical works, and is self-referentially aware of its past. *Tattoos and Shadows* appears to do the same thing, reverting back to reference *Le Déjeuner*.

The scene is a suburban backyard, a tranquil setting of shady birch trees, the proverbial picket fences, and a lush green lawn. It is an oasis amongst the identical houses we see in the background. It is the tattooed redhead on the left-hand side that

most closely resembles Manet's subject. She sits on the grass in the same pose as the nude woman in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.⁵⁰ With over-processed hair, an ill-fitting dress and a smattering of garish tattoos up her forearms, this woman is the antithesis of Manet's nude. She 'matches' her surroundings, with speckles of sunshine covering her face and the rest of the picture and seems more at ease than Manet's woman, who sits metaphorically on the edge of her space, separated by an elaborate painting treatment. But rather than being a simple pastiche of Manet that brings *Le Déjeuner* "up to date" with contemporary details, many more considerations that speak to the nature of art making today arise from this picture. These important commonalities, however, should not lead one to assume that Wall is merely mimicking or reconstructing well-known scenes or images from various paintings of the past. Indeed, his motivation is subtler. As I suggested earlier, a central and recurring theme that informs most, if not all, of Wall's photographs revolves around the idea that the hopes and dreams of the modern period, aspirations that are quite recognizable in the art of that time, are by no means irrelevant. To put all of this another way, Wall remains committed, at least to some degree, to the dominant themes of modernity in art. This is a project (taken in a broad and far-reaching sense) that has not yet outlived its utility. Wall states the following: "All my pictures are based on 19th-century art: Untrue. All my pictures are based on the idea that 19th-century art is not over: True."⁵¹ Wall recognizes and illustrates the inherent link between art making today and that that was done centuries ago. He states, "you can ponder the end of art, or what art is, and after you've pondered for a couple of generations, you'll come to the conclusion that art is pretty much what it always was."⁵² He sees that he is attempting to accomplish the same things that an artist like Manet was doing more than a century

ago. Having said that, we should make this link with some caution, because the strategies of Manet are not the same as Wall's. Manet's imitation of past art, although avant-garde for its time in relation to the *type* of art imitation (from popular culture) is decidedly modern. Manet understood that looking at his pictures in some way meant thinking about the Salon paintings that had been painted a year before him, and a century before him. While Wall's imitation of Manet considers these ideas, his reference to art history has decidedly more *postmodern* repercussions. Wall might have a similar strategy as Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and others who appropriate and reproduce earlier images in their art. Craig Owens writes: "the manipulations to which these artists subject such images work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning."⁵³ In crude terms, the pre-modern artist painted history, while the modern artist focused on *his place* in history. The postmodern artist, it seems, makes art while recognizing *the contingency* of his place in history.

As in Manet's paintings or perhaps more accurately in Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, *Tattoos and Shadows* consists of social types that make up this particular community. There is the Odalisque-like woman, an Asian girl, and a more withdrawn figure on the right side of the picture. That the characters in this image consist primarily of *Generation X-ers*,⁵⁴ the often-disenfranchised demographic who followed the baby-boom generation, might serve to illustrate what some observers contend is a prevailing apathy or sense of disinterest often associated with this much-talked-about demographic. Yet in this suburban outdoor oasis there is literature, youth and perhaps an inkling of hope. And unlike the "refuge-space"⁵⁵ occupied by the people in *The Storyteller*, a picture illustrating native-Canadians relegated to the edges of city under an overpass, the

characters in *Tattoos and Shadows* reside in a space of power, the established middle-class suburb. We see more hope for these people than for the storyteller on the edge of town, who recounts her tales with urgency and insistence. These Gen-X-ers have the luxury of leisure.

COSTUME AND MAKE-UP

In Chapter One, further to the discussion of social types, I discuss how Baudelaire regards make-up and ornamentation as a way of overcoming or ‘improving on’ nature. He sees nature in some way as depraved, and our improvement on it reflects our sophistication and intelligence. He is, like Nietzsche, emphasizing *man’s* ability to “overcome” his natural circumstances. Make-up and costume act as masks in one sense – covering up the natural or the ‘true’ nature of a person. It is liberating, freeing people from their delegated social place. Artifice also demonstrates the artist’s palette and control—the paint on a person’s face, and also the manipulation of paint on the canvas to emphasize the artist and his vision.

A Baudelairian notion of artifice is most certainly present in Wall’s work. In *Tattoos and Shadows*, the young people might look apathetic but they do have an agency over their bodies, visibly transforming themselves with tattoos, creating new “types.” In an ironic turn, however, Wall utilizes his medium to make clear his artifice (the artificial that we usually like to hide). In *The Vampire’s Picnic* (1991) (Ill. 13), for example, a range of social types are made grotesque through theatrical make-up, prosthetics and extreme staging and lighting. As Baudelaire tries to “overcome” the natural and nature with make-up and costume, Wall overcomes or skirts the conventional functions of

photography (realism, truth telling) with the use of costuming, staging, posing and digital manipulation. He uses his medium in a slick, cinematic way, overcoming what should be a scientific function. Photography's utility, as demonstrated earlier, was ostensibly for documenting the world, not to be theatrical.⁵⁶ Similarly, Manet wanted to break down the barriers of salon painting and the appropriate function of the artist. Here is the tension between the Romantic artist and the technically astute one. Baudelaire calls for both: he wants his *painter of modern life* to be at once imaginative and almost deified in this spectacular trait, and then precise, accurate and detail-oriented, committed to the 'reality' he sees around him.

Wall's illustration of different classes and ethnicities carries a range of references to the "style" of his own chosen medium: photography. Wall's depiction of the poor, dispossessed and powerless reminds us of the documentary photography tradition at the beginning and middle of the twentieth century. In "The Uneasy Sublime," Roger Seamon makes many interesting links between Wall's project and this history. But where this was done in the documentary tradition, most famously with Roy Stryker and the Farm Securities Administration, to garnish support for these people, Wall's work only serves to alienate the viewer.⁵⁷ The complicated and multi-layered narrative of *The Storyteller* (due in part to the highly descriptive picture) makes it difficult to understand at first reading. One doesn't leave *The Storyteller*, for example, with more empathy for First Nations people, but rather with a sense that you know even less about the subject than you did to begin with.⁵⁸ And so, even as Wall depicts people in dire straits, what matters most is his own engagement with the project at hand. We become more interested in the medium of the image, the staging, and cropping and digital reproduction,

and ultimately, “the photographer now asserts his own ambitions, and act of legitimation and a defiance of liberal guilt.”⁵⁹ So it is argued that he is not showing *their* plight, but in fact *his* plight, as a middle-class white male, having to come to terms with their existence and the society that relegates them to it. Considering that Wall is committed to examining the formal qualities of photography, there is further disconcertment in this type of representation. Michael Newman writes about this dilemma: “that these types sit together uneasily suggests the difficult questions that arise when functionalist representations – pictures meant to reveal people’s suffering – become art for the disinterested formalist gaze.”⁶⁰ Wall is at once able to clarify the limitations of the formalist pattern of modern art and the inherent gaps in documentary photography. He takes an apparently “democratic” medium, one that is accessible to any layman in the form of snapshot photography and complicates its use, illustrating the internal structures about photography that have the ability to provide such distance. Susan Sontag addresses this distance in the following way: “Poverty is no more surreal than wealth; a body clad in filthy rags is not more surreal than a principessa dressed for a ball or a pristine nude. What is surreal is the distance imposed, and bridged, by the photograph: the social distance and the distance of time.”⁶¹

ABUNDANCE AND THE DOCUMENTARY TRADITION

Unlike royalty and wealthy landowners who had been deemed the only sort of subject worthy of portraiture, Baudelaire saw the face of modernism in people like the rag-picker, the “apache,” the disenfranchised and powerless people.⁶² He wrote:

The majority of the writers who have concerned themselves with really modern subjects have contented themselves with the certified, official

subjects, with our victories and our political heroism. They do this reluctantly and only because the government orders them and pays them for it. And yet there are subjects from private life which are heroic in quite another way. The spectacle of elegant life and of the thousands of irregular existences led in the basements of a big city by criminals and kept women – the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and the *Moniteur* demonstrate that we need only open our eyes to recognize our heroism.⁶³

Baudelaire, it would be fair to say, posits what Charles Taylor has referred to as the “affirmation of ordinary life.”⁶⁴ In this way, as in others, Baudelaire’s unambiguous modernity shines through. What is perhaps most noteworthy here, is Baudelaire’s insistence that the place formerly held by nobility or royalty should now be held by the ordinary citizen. Among the ordinary citizens of Baudelaire’s Paris (indeed, a rather new and *modern* addition) is the figure of the rag-picker.

The ironically titled *Abundance* (1985) (Ill. 14) directly reflects Baudelaire’s various writings on rag-pickers in the city. The dregs of society that lived amongst the refuse of the city of production symbolize a new element to the Paris following two revolutions. As Benjamin points out, “when the new industrial processes had given refuse a certain value, ragpickers appeared in the cities in larger numbers.”⁶⁵ As the steel constructions and the vaulting glass atriums represent what was modern about Paris, the residual effect of this massive growth in the city manifested itself in the humble character of the rag-picker. He became an integral part of the economics of the city, and perhaps served also as an allegory to the senseless commodification prevalent in some consumer societies.

Abundance shows a woman dressed in several layers of clothing, posing for the photographer in a regal position, left leg outstretched in a dancer-like pose. She raises her skirts to expose her calf, her pinky finger extended like that of a bourgeois woman

enjoying a cup of tea.⁶⁶ She stands in front of a huge cardboard box with a sign marked “free.” Another woman is hunched over the box in the background, digging around in the carton for the dignity and grace assumed by the first woman, who has already collected her wares. The romantic glow of warm light that bathes the scene is somewhat disturbing. It is reminiscent of a classical portrait picture such as those by Gainsborough or Rembrandt; with subtle colour shifts as well as dramatic chiaroscuro effects.

Replacing the passive subject matter of a family posing for a court artist is a depressing scene of elderly women searching for clothing to keep themselves warm. The rag-picker, particularly in the form of an old woman, is the embarrassment of an enlightened society and represents its failure to protect its own. This picture denotes what Roger Seaman describes as a “documentary spectacle,”⁶⁷ a hybrid of the tradition of documentary photography which typically captures (or so the common intuition goes) the realities of life for the poor and the dispossessed, combined with the performance of classical painting and the passivity of *l’art pour l’art*. Not only has 19th painting influenced Wall, but he also recognizes his debt to the more recent history of photography, in particular the documentary tradition.

The romantic idea that the artist represented some kind of moral or spiritual exemplar, is an idea that can be seen as paralleled in the very way that Jeff Wall creates his photographs, and, more specifically, the intense control he deploys over their making. The parallel can be explicated in the following way: just as various Romantics emphasized the importance of creation, and viewed, in turn, the artist as the acme of the creative spirit, so too can we see in Wall a fulfillment or a “living up to” this Romantic ideal. We note in Wall, perhaps as some of these Romantics may have recommended, a

sweeping and total control of all facets and stages of the creative process; all such facets and stages are, for Wall, systematically and meticulously premeditated and structured. All of this points to an interpretation of Wall's pictures that sees them as having fulfilled, at least in some respects, the normative recommendations that were made about artists by various modern Romantics (not least among them, Baudelaire). Wall uses a wide variety of strategies to gain overwhelming control over his "canvas." He heavily references art from the past; he poses, stages and manipulates his subject matter, while also recognizing the theoretical questions that his pictures help pose vis-à-vis the nature of photography and its place in a long tradition of art making. All of this should lead one to conclude that the artist himself (at least given the romantic ideal shared by Baudelaire and Wall) comes to represent a social type of his own. As will be explored in the proceeding and final chapter, this type of romantic gesture may be more problematic than one may *prima facie* be inclined to believe.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

¹ Greenberg's most well known essay on the subject is "Modernist Painting", first published in *Art & Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1965): 193-20, in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998): 754-760.

² Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 15.

³ This is paraphrasing Hegel and his commonly quoted dictum from G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

⁴ David Shapiro, "A Conversation with Jeff Wall," *Museo* 3 (Spring 2000), 2.

⁵ Chris Murray, ed., *Key Writers on Art: the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 226.

⁶ T.J. Clark, "The Conditions of Artistic Creation, 1974" in *Art History and Its Methods: a Critical Anthology* ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 249.

⁷ Eric Fernie, introduction to "The Conditions of Artistic Creation, 1974" in *Art History and Its Methods: a Critical Anthology*, ed. Eric Fernie (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 246.

⁸ As a result, these historians would have a profound affect on the Conceptual Art of the 60s and 70s. Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 52.

⁹ Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a German literary and cultural critic who wrote about, among other things, the urban experience of 20th century modernism and the influence of technology and commercialism on our lives.

¹⁰ Thomas Crow, "Profane Illuminations: the Social History of Jeff Wall," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 153.

¹¹ Bernd Reiss, "Constructing an Apparent Reality: Settings, Gazes, Paraphrases," in *Jeff Wall: figures and places*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel 2001), 186.

¹² Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", 755.

¹³ Ibid, 754.

¹⁴ Ibid, 755.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *"The Painter of Modern Life" and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), 5.

¹⁶ Wall writes about the importance of unity throughout art history in the following passage: "Estrangement experienced in the experience of the picture has become our orthodox form of cultural lucidity. Cultural lucidity is, in Manet's example, rooted in a historical process in which the ancient concept of the harmony and unity of the body and its space is destroyed by society and reconstituted by the artist in a 'ruined' state, an emblematic state in which its historically negated or outmoded character and meaning become perceptible." Wall, "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet," in *Jeff Wall* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 87.

¹⁷ And of course, in the case of *Olympia*, mimicked off of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' famous painting *La Grande Odalisque* (1814).

¹⁸ Thomas Crow, "Profane Illuminations: Social History and the Art of Jeff Wall" *Art Forum* 31 (February 1993), 68.

¹⁹ Jean-François Chevrier, "A Painter of Modern Life: an interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier," in *Jeff Wall: figures and places*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel 2001), 178.

²⁰ Hans Dickel, "Image Technology and the Pictorial Image: Media Images versus Art Images," *ibid*, 145.

²¹ This seems to be a comprehensive theme in Wall's work, the use of walls, dividers and enclosures in his pictures. Works like *Doorpusher* (1984) *Sunken Area* (1996), and *Polishing* (1998), whether in an indoor or outdoor space convey a sense of confinement.

²² Briony Fer, "The Space of Anxiety," in *Jeff Wall* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1995), 24.

²³ T.J. Clark synthesizes the term "spectacle" that was developed in the mid-1960s. He writes: "The concept of spectacle is thus an attempt...to bring into theoretical order a diverse set of symptoms which are normally treated, by bourgeois sociology or conventional Leftism, as anecdotal trappings affixed somewhat lightly to the old economic order..." *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 9.

²⁴ Thomas Crow, "Profane Illuminations: the Social History of Jeff Wall," *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 154.

²⁵ Madeleine Gryn Szejn, *About Place: Recent Art of the Americas* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1995).

²⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷ A further discussion on this idea of the elimination of perceptible distance can be seen in Hans Dickel, "Image Technology and the Pictorial Image: Media Images versus Art Images," in *Jeff Wall: figures and places*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel 2001): 142-149.

²⁸ John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), 55.

²⁹ Chevrier, 177.

³⁰ Wall has several pictures set in and around Vancouver that highlight this theme: these pictures include, among others, *The Pine on the Corner* (1990), *The Old Prison* (1987), *The Bridge* (1980) and *Coastal Motifs* (1989), showing locations where industry collides with nature and man seems to come 'face to face' with the sea.

³¹ Chevrier, 168.

³² Wall does clarify this, however, in an interview with Chevrier, "Obviously it's impossible to make a photograph that doesn't have any autobiographical character since that taking of the photo is part of your biography. I want to avoid, or reduce, this aspect." In "A Painter of Modern Life: an interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier," in *Jeff Wall: figures and places*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel 2001), 169.

³³ Jeff Wall, "About Making Landscapes," in *Jeff Wall* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 144.

³⁴ Denise Oeksijczuk, *Lost Illusions: Recent Landscape Art* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1991), 7.

³⁵ Walt Whitman (1819-1892) is an American poet who was writing at the same time as Baudelaire. While they would not have known each other their work has similarities with respect to subject matter and writing style. From "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" Whitman writes, "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me! On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose, And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose." Walt Whitman, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 189-90.

³⁶ Charles Baudelaire, cited in Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 119.

³⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 55-56.

³⁸ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in "*The Painter of Modern Life*" and *Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), 12.

³⁹ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁰ Elke Town, *Subjects & subject matter: Shelagh Alexander, Barbara Kruger, John Massey, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Jeff Wall: an exhibition* (London: London Regional Art Gallery, 1985), 17.

⁴¹ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 264.

⁴² Norman Bryson, "Enlightenment Boxes: Jeff Wall," *Art and Text* 56 (February-April 1997), 60.

⁴³ Town, 17.

⁴⁴ Jed Perl, "Impersonal Enchantment," *The New Republic* 216 no. 17 (April 28, 1997), 33.

⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 67.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 50.

⁴⁷ We might be reminded of Manet's *Fifer* (1866) where there is the clearly demarcated gray-brown background reminiscent of a photographer's studio that stands apart from the figure. Michael Fried sees Manet as a representative of a particular generation of painters. He writes, "...having directly preceded the Impressionists, a large group of painters that would alter the nature of art making forever, Manet could be seen in the role of the first truly radical simplifier," Fried, *Manet's Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

⁴⁸ Linda Nochlin, "The Rhetoric of Realism: Courbet and the Origins of the Avant-Garde," in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, ed. Thomas Crow, Brian Lukacher, Linda Nochlin and Francis K. Pohl, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994): 206-24, 220.

⁴⁹ Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France 1830-1880," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989): 1-17, 14.

⁵⁰ This same pose is seen again in Wall's *The Storyteller* (1986), as well as in *Vampire's picnic* (1991)

⁵¹ Julie L. Belcove, "The Great Wall," *W.* (October 2002), 320.

⁵² *Ibid*, 347.

⁵³ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 1054.

⁵⁴ This reference is apt to Wall's hometown, where this 1990s term was coined by Vancouver author Douglas Copeland in his book by the same name.

⁵⁵ Chevrier, 177.

⁵⁶ There was a counter-tendency to this that goes back most strikingly to the work of British artist Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), who dressed up her servants and others as biblical heroines, Renaissance ladies and noble Madonnas. She would then photograph her subjects, creating highly theatrical photographic *tableaux*.

⁵⁷ Further information can be found in James Curtis, *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA photography reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). An excellent analysis of the propagandistic elements of the FSA photographs can be found in Leah Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda and Dreams: Photographing the 1930s in the USSR and the US* (Washington D.C.: Stemmler Publishers, 1999).

⁵⁸ Roger Seamon, "The Uneasy Sublime," *Parachute* 66 (April-June 1992): 11-19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

⁶⁰ Michael Newman, "Jeff Wall's Pictures: Knowledge and Enchantment," *Flash Art* 181 (March-April 1995), 78.

⁶¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 58.

⁶² Robert Herbert writes that “as 1848 approached, there was an increasing significance given to genre and popular subjects which could be associated with that new hero, the common man.” in his “City vs. Country: the Rural Image in French Painting from Millet to Gauguin,” *Artforum* 8 (February 1970), 45.

⁶³ Cited in Benjamin, 78.

⁶⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), see especially Chapter Two called “The Self in Moral Space”, 26-52.

⁶⁵ Benjamin, 19.

⁶⁶ This pose also resembles Jacques-Louis David’s portrait, *Napoleon in His Study* (1812) where he stands in full military regalia, his hand in his vest, and his calves exposed. Is Wall presenting us with the antithesis of the figure of Napoleon?

⁶⁷ Seamon, 12.

CHAPTER THREE

You know exactly what I think about photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable.¹

- Marcel Duchamp

I use that term [postmodern] with reluctance, since to talk of the postmodern is to be immediately embroiled in an endless, overly familiar debate on the precise nature of the present, an exercise which tends more and more to resemble a nervous patient with little medical knowledge attempting to diagnose his own illness.²

- Geoffrey James

The illuminated transparency, *Odradek, Toboritska 8, Prague, 18th July, 1994* (Ill. 15), dramatizes a dismal interior of dark shadows and bright areas of colour. A young girl walks down a dark stairwell on the right side of the frame. An uneasy, grim light bathes the set, casting deep shadows. The visual weight of the young girl is balanced on the other side of the picture by a public water fountain in poor condition. A melancholic mood is conveyed; the girl appears to be walking slowing down the stairs with no real urgency. Her vivid green pants and patterned jean jacket look brand-new and isolate her from the peeling walls and cracked tile that surround her. With her painted toes and school bag over her shoulder, she is the freshest part of the picture. Her youth and mobility juxtaposed against the sombre and still backdrop make us hopeful for her excursion. The picture was first manifested on the day of its title, in the middle of July 1994, only a few years after the demise of the Soviet Union and one year after Czechoslovakia split to become two independent states. The experiment of Eastern Bloc communism had failed, and the Western capitalist mode had prevailed. It could be envisioned that the girl has dusted off the remnants of the dark decaying world around

her and is ready to venture outside into the sunlight, into a more vibrant future.

Examining this picture ten years after it was created, however, the viewer sees what I ascertain the artist recognized then, the idea that hope is not always easy to conjure up and a more promising future is never guaranteed. The collapse of one system and the implementation of another do not secure everlasting prosperity and peace. Like the wobbly handrail in the picture (that the girl does not trust to hold on to), capitalism stands on shaky ground in post-communist states such as the Czech Republic.

Another significant presence in *Odradek* is the grimy water fountain on the left-hand side of the picture. The shape, size and age of the object might remind the viewer of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (Ill. 16), his most memorable 'art work', which upon its anonymous entrance into a sculpture exhibition in New York in 1917, changed the face and reception of art forever.³ Duchamp's urinal and other similar readymades split the task of art and aesthetics, implying that the two need not be construed as inseparable. The artist no longer needed to be the producer of objects, but could rather be a producer of ideas (sometimes about objects). In this way, art no longer needed to be identified with the visual in order to be art, a revolutionary concept that transformed the manner artists performed, exhibited and talked about their work. Language, for example, became a large element of art making, replacing the visual characteristics of art in favour of more cognitive or conceptual concerns. *Odradek, Toboritska 8, Prague, 18th July, 1994*, therefore, with its depiction of a young girl potentially shedding the baggage of a communist regime, and similarly with its reference to Duchamp, an artist who "sheds" the seminal conventions of Modern art, shows us in one picture, moments when everything changed. In one picture, then, Wall references two very different world-

transforming moments, the moment when communism fell in Europe and the very different moment when, with Duchamp, the seeds of conceptual art were sown.

The final chapter of this thesis will highlight the elements of Wall's work that, like Duchamp's urinal, show us the possibility of a change in perception about the nature of art and art making. Chapter Two provided telling links between Wall's photographic project and Baudelaire's essay "The Painter of Modern Life." This chapter will introduce another possible 'allegiance' in Wall's richly layered work: that is, his relationship to conceptual art and some of its puzzles.

ESSENTIALIZING BAUDELAIRE

An important question that needs to be addressed in this chapter is: If Wall is indeed a *painter of modern life* in Baudelaire's terms, what does this reveal about the status of the contemporary artist? We might be able to recognize the similarities in subject matter between Wall and certain 19th century French painters. We might even be able to see how Wall's work fits into the modernist trajectory of art history, the trajectory that foregrounds the self-referential qualities of art. But does the idea of a *painter of modern life* not change between centuries? Is the work of Jeff Wall not extremely different than the art of Manet, Seurat or Degas? Wall might be depicting his time, but has "our time" not changed immensely since the 19th century? And so, has the nature or the definition of a *painter of modern life* not changed as well? Might it be possible, that even if Wall has fulfilled certain conditions tantamount to Baudelaire's *painter of modern life*, the relevance of the term has exhausted itself for our present context? Is the *painter of modern life* not a concept that we take for granted now, something that "goes without

saying”? By this I mean that the greatest legacy of Baudelaire’s essay is that it positioned the artist in an altogether new way. Baudelaire took the artist out of the academy where he was painting historical scenes and biblical allegories. He embedded him in the centre of Paris, in the middle of the crowd, to paint what was around him and to bestow on the canvas the spirit of Modernity. Wall points out the following:

Baudelaire recognized that, with the rise of the everyday, of the actual lived life of individuals, everything of significance would have to be expressed in terms of that actual moment-to-moment lived experience, and that that experience would be capable of absorbing and reinventing all the previous forms in which significant art had been imagined—religious, mythic, rationalistic, and so on. Everything would be found somewhere ‘in the street,’ where the angel’s halo had fallen.⁴

Baudelaire placed the artist at the centre of culture and held up the imagination and emotions of the artist as the index to modernity. Similarly, and perhaps even as a result, we still associate this with artists today. We often privilege the opinions and stories of artists, above those of the advertiser, or politician (or any other public figure), for example. One strain of thought considers artistic production as an authentic beacon of our time and its concerns. In fact, a mute imitator of academic paintings might not be in our contemporary calculations a ‘real’ artist. I am not claiming that every contemporary artist works in the same manner as Jeff Wall – consciously aware of the influence of Baudelaire and the romantic tradition on his work. I am not even saying that all artists today literally depict the world around them or the everyday, the city, or social types. Yet, Baudelaire’s essay legitimized or made it possible for an artist to ensconce himself in his world and to recognize the poetry of the everyday, “scenting in every nook chance rhymes to claim/ Stumbling on words as though on cobbled ways/ And blundering into verses sought for days.”⁵ Baudelaire’s essay and much of his poetry, in turn, changed the

way we recognize an artist. An artist after Baudelaire (and many other modern romantics) is someone who comments, in an aesthetic way, on the world and society around them. So when I claim that it “goes without saying” that Wall or other artists today are *painters of modern life*, I am implying that in the 21st century we have been *afforded* the opportunity to paint, photograph, sculpt or write about whatever we want under a large-scale artistic umbrella. We take for granted that the artist *can be* a social critic, or a commentator on society. To be sure, there are many artists today who work in a more passive way, working in a manner that is stylish, trendy, or by imitating the traditions of the past, perhaps not offering “anything new” to the discussion of art. But I am talking about the artists who will be remembered and noted in 10 or 20 or 200 years from now, because they captured the ethos of their era. The artist today who does *not* comment meaningfully upon his time in art will not likely be remembered in history in any significant way. The art that we remember and look back on with interest is art that spoke of the politics, the social conditions, or the structure of the society from which it sprung. The art that we remember might also be that which turns to itself for subject matter. Even if its importance was not recognized during its time, the art that we look back on today did one or many of these things. Walter Benjamin writes “the history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.”⁶ It is not a coincidence, for example, that the paintings of workers by Courbet correspond historically with the writings of Marx and Engels or the British Utilitarians. Or that Surrealists like Salvador Dali were influenced by and responded to the psychoanalysis and philosophical studies of Sigmund Freud, which were significant at the beginning of

the 20th century. After all, the discourse of art history is one that places art *in its time*. In retrospect, all artists who will be remembered will have satisfied Baudelaire's call to be aware of their environment.

The definition of an artist changed in many respects after Baudelaire, and this seems to be the primary reason that Wall references the poet. Yet, the particular circumstances of Baudelaire's Paris, those circumstances that breathed life into the *painter of modern life*, that enabled the *painter of modern life* to be a viable entity and an important concept for its time, do not seem as pertinent today. In short, we and Baudelaire inhabit significantly different worlds. We certainly understand the artist to be entrenched in his society, to be someone who understands its *zeitgeist*. But we no longer require that any *normative conditions* be placed on the artist. We no longer expect a critic (like Baudelaire), to verbalize and pen the necessary conditions of what it takes to *be* a modern (or contemporary) artist. Our common understanding today is that we should not place conditions on the artist, because he is a 'free spirit' (for lack of a better description). In our common language today, we no longer wish for a list of necessary conditions that would make for an artist. If a critic or art historian in the contemporary art world conjured up a list of *conditions* that the "authentic" or "real" artist needed to fulfill, we would likely view such a list with incredulity and suspicion. The skeptical times we live in would make such conditions ridiculous. Yet, in Baudelaire's time, these conditions were ripe for discussion and very appropriate.⁷

It is clear that Baudelaire was not a rationalist, but he still had not fully shed the Enlightenment (or Modernist) notion that there are enabling conditions of possibility to be sought for creative endeavours. To be sure, he put his emphasis on subjectivity,

inwardness and creation, rather than objectivity, outwardness and discovery. Kant had sought to place “philosophy on the secure path to science,” a far different conception than Baudelaire’s romantic poetry.⁸ But Baudelaire has not shed the Enlightenment assumption that certain conditions are not only locatable but can offer foundationalist-styled insights into human experience. The very idea of “conditions of possibility” is indisputably an enlightenment-rationalism line of inquiry (it is what Kant proposed with transcendental philosophy - the uncovering of conditions of possibility for various concepts).⁹ An example of this assumption in Baudelaire can be discerned by reflecting on his discussion about beauty. He writes:

This is in fact an excellent opportunity to establish a *rational* and *historical* [my emphasis] theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of an unique and absolute beauty; to show that beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition, although the impression that it produces is single – for the fact that it is difficult to discern the variable elements of beauty with the unity of the impression invalidates in no way the necessity of variety in its composition.¹⁰

A passage such as this points to Baudelaire’s belief in inherent essences and shows the prescriptive nature of his writing. Baudelaire’s essay is sympathetic to Kant because of the force with which he asserts his judgements. Kant thought we could answer the questions, “what is beauty?” or “what is the sublime?” with a rational and transcendental investigation. If we assumed that “Beauty” had an essence, then, this line of thought goes, we could discern the conditions without which beauty (or our sensitivity to it) would be impossible. If we did find those conditions without whose satisfaction beauty would be impossible, we would have located the essence or (the conditions of possibility) of beauty. Baudelaire does something similar. Of course, he is not a rationalist like Kant because his argumentative style and prose do not function like

transcendental arguments, nor does he rely on reason alone. But there is a common denominator between Kant and Baudelaire: they both assume (whether implicitly or explicitly) that there are essences to be located. Baudelaire writes about the “nature” of the artist, for example, as a spiritual awareness and curiosity about the world.¹¹ He subsequently describes an “ideal execution,” and the *best* way to make art, this as he simultaneously heralds the charismatic imagination of each individual artist.¹² Further, Baudelaire “warns” against other things when he writes: “Woe to him who studies the antique for anything else but pure art, logic and general method! By steeping himself too thoroughly in it, he will lose all memory of the present; he will renounce the rights and privileges offered by circumstance – for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations.”¹³ All of these examples contribute to Baudelaire’s conception of an essence to the *painter of modern life*.

Baudelaire is close to moralistic in his description of the modern artist. The modern artist is almost divine in his ability to transcend the natural conditions of his world to be one who is “beyond” the rest of the world. While he distrusts nature and privileges the individual and his own proper creativity, Baudelaire seems, in his style of writing and his language, to offer up a replacement to God and organized religion that were being cast aside (to a certain degree) following the revolutionary upheavals of the era. Baudelaire’s ideal artist, for example, has “a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of the entire moral mechanism of this world.”¹⁴ Rather than cast aside the debate about what an authentic artist *should* be, as we postmoderns have done, Baudelaire replaces one essentialist account with another, albeit very different, but equally essentialist one, infusing spirituality and deism into the abilities of the Romantic

artist. In simple terms, the Beauty and the Spirituality that were bestowed on us by a higher being could now be recognized in the spiritual creations of the artist. Timothy Raser puts it well when he writes:

While in his theory, Baudelaire tends to elaborate the characteristic freedoms and ambition of aesthetic judgement, in his description, he speaks a language of system and determinism. Where theory speaks of universal assent, description speaks of individual preference; where the former advocates freedom from purpose, the latter acknowledges ultimate aims; where disinterest is proposed, desire emerges, and where newness is sought, one discovers what one already knew.¹⁵

Paradoxically then, Baudelaire maintains an idealistic but somewhat prescriptive understanding of art and the artist. One of the greatest characteristics of the Modern period, or the Romantic period, is the manifestation of art as a type of 'epiphany', bringing us into what Charles Taylor describes as "the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals."¹⁶ It is completely modern to think of art as a completion or answer to something and it is a characteristic of avant-garde movements to provide a kind of formula for that epiphany. We have become extremely dubious about such predetermined "conditions of possibility" and more generally about foundationalist conceptions. Today we realize that any conditions that can be ascertained are themselves no more immune to scrutiny than are the assumptions they seek to find a basis for. In short and to sum up, while Baudelaire's reflections can still elucidate and inform a number of research areas, we have grown suspicious of the intellectual position from which Baudelaire begins his study. Ultimately, there is dissatisfaction not about the

specifics of the account of Baudelaire's *painter of modern life*, but about the *kind* of account it is.

Wall takes Baudelaire's modern, romantic tradition and puts it to the test against contemporary ideas, immersing his work in the so-called debate between modernism and postmodernism. It must be noted that Wall himself discounts the term "postmodern" because of its implication that modernism itself is "over" in favour of something else. He prefers the term "critical modernism."¹⁷ This specificity in terminology suggests that Wall is dubious about the polar distinctions often afforded to the terms "modern" and "postmodern." He is committed to liberalism (taken in a large and broad-reaching sense). He is also committed to narrative in art, art that can tell new stories and revisit past narratives. Art can also be self-reflexive. In this way, Wall is modern. What Wall seems opposed to is a final and conclusive 'theory' that can encompass the true and enduring and meaningful *nature* of art. This is the "critical" aspect of Wall's "critical modernism." He takes stereotypes that might have evolved under an essentialist guise, and confuses them, or, for example, his strategy is often to highlight the anti-essential nature of photographs. He blurs the line between premeditated intentionality and the capturing of a decisive moment with photography, thereby affirming that photography (or the photograph) has no necessary, enduring, or essential characteristics. This feature of ambiguity is to be detected especially at work in the case of *(Untitled) Overpass*, but to be sure, a considerable number of Wall's other pictures also correspond to this idea. Wall's reliance on the term "critical modernism" suggests that the *painter of modern life* is but one important element to his photographic project. It suggests only a guarded

allegiance to modernism in art and that there is more at stake in his work than a reinterpretation of Baudelaire.

THE LIMITATIONS OF MODERN ART

Wall, it seems, is attempting to draw more telling links between the conceptual and theoretical concerns of the past few decades and the art from Baudelaire's time. This strategy discounts in many ways the narrative of modern art that highlights the historical avant-garde's concern for breaking free from previous traditions, a radicalism that culminates with Clement Greenberg's argument for non-objective painting. Wall's work seems to account for the establishment of links that reach back, conform to, twist, turn and find similarities in new and interesting ways. An example of this is the pertinent link that Wall makes between his narrative work and the Conceptual art of late 20th century art.

One strategy of modern painting was to affirm art and its production by reducing its elements to the very minimum – paint. An absence of narrative, literary structure and physical dimension allowed painting to be autonomous from literature or sculpture respectively. As such, we could preserve the notion of “painting,” as Clement Greenberg writes, “by demonstrating that the kind of experience they [paintings] provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.”¹⁸ The painting would no longer be under the gun to stand for something greater than it was; it could serve as a symbol for the thoughts and feelings of the artist alone, and on a public level, could be appreciated as such. This autonomy, it was argued, entrenched the artwork into its area of competency and essentialized its value for its ‘purity.’ The

objective had been to turn away from a shared language or narrative and to instead herald a private, subjective language, a language that privileged emotion and feelings. This strategy of achieving some sort of purity is certainly premised on shaky ground. It suggests that painting is 'better' if it is stripped of political and social referents. Most strikingly, abstract art, in attempting to free itself from literary elements ironically infuses itself with language and text at its point of reception. Paul Wood points out that abstract art often came linked with a philosophical script or treatise explaining its intent. Theory and manifestos superseded much of this work, and as Wood writes, "the spectator is, so to speak, positioned by theory before being freed to feel."¹⁹ An abstract painting, it was thought, would be free of societal influence (or the influence of art history's canon of biblical narratives and historical stories) so that the viewer's response would be one of unmitigated emotion and feeling, something that was recognized (wrongly) as both entirely subjective, but also *universally* experienced. Under the conditions set by modern artists, painting needed to be flat and free of pictorial narrative, and so strict conditions were imposed regarding what art *could* or *should* be. John Roberts interprets this crisis in an interrogation into the bogus claims of Modernism. He writes, "Modernism's claims to self-knowledge were shown to hide the symptoms of the repressive personality. Modernism's disinclination, or resistance, to examine what it understood as value and quality meant that the new art was continually forced to test its ambitions against what it perceived as arbitrary and authoritarian criteria."²⁰ Conceptualism, the art movement that began in approximately 1965 questioned the claims of what art could be (just as modern art had done in its own way).²¹ Some artists at this time saw the inevitable power structure that was erected due to an art style/theory that relied so heavily on avant-garde

theory. The restrictions or rules placed on painting had culminated in an art world that put too much agency into the hands of theorists or, by proxy (in the case of Clement Greenberg, most famously), the art dealer. It was he who understood the theory behind the work of Rothko, for example, who could control our alleged “subjective response” to the piece. The academic elite controlled the reception and dissemination of the ideas behind this art.

To put this point in a general way, art that was supposedly more available to subjective consideration actually carried considerable ‘roadblocks’ to its dissemination and understanding. By the mid-60s, Wood writes, “modernist art was, at least according to the rhetorical noise surrounding it, the acme of purified self-reference.”²² Modern art was caught up in the dealer-system as well as a systematic organization based around medium.²³ This climate fostered artists who were relegated to the strict confines of their given medium: painters, sculptors, with nowhere to go in between. Part of the rejection that manifested itself within this period was the realization that an artist need not relegate himself to just one category, to be a painter or a sculptor, or even a dancer. Opening wide the definition of what an ‘artist’ could be encouraged the making of art that might cross the lines between painting, sculpture, music or dance and various other media. In response to the pervading power structures of the ‘art world,’ artists began thinking about art’s relationship to these different institutional structures – the museum, art schools, and art exhibitions.²⁴

CONCEPTUAL ART

Conceptual art appeared to shake the tree of convention that had first developed in the understanding and dissemination of modern art. The Conceptual movement developed a critical stance towards many of the key assumptions about modern art, and more specifically, called into question the supposed supremacy or authority of modernist painting. If art, for the moderns, was concerned primarily with medium and materiality, then the Conceptual artists would make art that was *dematerialized*. This dematerialization manifested itself, among other things, in new and unique implementations of photography and the photograph. My discussion of Conceptual art, therefore, is caught up in the shift and development of photography in art and will culminate with Jeff Wall's use of both the theoretical associations of Conceptualism and the medium of photography.

American artist Robert Barry experimented with gas as a way to think about the nature and the possibilities of sculpture. *Inert Gas Series* (1969) (Ill. 17) consisted of a helium gas tank that was dispelled into the atmosphere. The process was documented photographically. An ensuing discussion could be addressed with regards to space, mass and materiality, elements important to modern sculptors. With this work Barry compels us to re-examine these elements. In this way, the "artwork" was not as much about the object of art but about the ideas that make up the production of that object. Works like *Inert Gas Series* led us to ask what could be defined as art, what the role of the artist was in art making, and how we should display art. If art no longer had visual characteristics and materiality, how could it be disseminated, bought, sold, or critiqued? The entire construct of the art making process was brought into question.

A main tenet of this conceptual movement was centred on artistic anti-representationalism. The challenge was to show that art and the concept of representation are not intrinsically or necessarily intertwined. Ian Wallace describes the impetus of the conceptual artist as “isolating art from what art might *look like* to [understand] art as a pure practice in itself.”²⁵ Experiments in conceptual art included using ephemeral materials, or relying on language or mathematical-based systems to make statements about the nature of art. Robert Smithson describes his journey from New York City to the suburbs in his work entitled *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) (Ill. 18), a mixture of images and text that details, among other things, waiting for the bus at the Port Authority Building, the articles he reads in the art section of the *Times*, and a chain hotel that travels through his line of sight out the window. Smithson writes, “the landscape was no landscape,” but “a kind of self-destroyed postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur.”²⁶ A work such as this demonstrates how the *process* of art making can be emphasized while de-emphasizing the actual object of art. Documenting this process in a relatively amateurish way, with a snapshot, points to the vital importance of photography to the Conceptual movement.²⁷

Conceptual artists were interested in construing and using photography as an instrument of documentation. They were also keen, accordingly, to de-emphasize the photograph’s “artistic” capacities. Generally, their view of photography was utilitarian. Photography became the trace, the leftover, some tangible proof of a distant act. Smithson’s remote earthwork projects emphasize this point. With the *Spiral Jetty* (1970) (Ill. 19), the remnants were the photographs documenting its construction and its evolution. The photographs became a type of paratext to the ‘real thing,’ used as an

explanatory tool, no longer claiming to 'tell the whole truth,' but rather acting as an accessory or a collaborator to the larger art project. Under these circumstances, photographs were no longer judged commensurately with painting; they were no longer entrenched in the debate about their status as art. An artist like Robert Barry or Robert Smithson used the photograph for what it was good for: to document a moment in time (often from an distant place) as a means of transference to an accessible location where the event could be viewed. In many ways, the use of photography by Conceptual artists took art down from its modern, subjective and isolated pedestal. Art, as per the Conceptualists, could and should be amateurish, so that the privileged status of the artist (which we saw in Baudelaire and interpreted by Taylor as being an omniscient seer of some sort) is cut off at the knees. Art could also be mass-produced and copied with photography, again dispelling the idea of the masterpiece in Western art. Art could be located in city centres *and* in the suburbs, it could be put into museums and taken out, and could concern itself with ideas more so than with final objects.²⁸

A fitting example of the metamorphosis of art that occurred with Conceptualism can be found in the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an artist who currently is the artist-in-residence at the New York Department of Sanitation. Ukeles composed the *Maintenance Art Manifesto* in 1973 (Ill. 20), which consisted of a series of performances at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. She documented herself washing the floors of the museum, cleaning display cases and doing general maintenance in the offices, honouring the labour that takes place in a museum. The work stands as a feminist critique of the way we see domestic labour, and the work traditionally done by women, showing it as somehow less important than trade-labour, a predominantly male-

dominated arena. In a museum setting that has its own set of patriarchal traditions, a woman artist scrubbing its floors is a stinging critique to the supposed “progress” we have made with modern art. She is scrubbing the dirt away from the marble floors of the museum, or construed politically, she is attempting to take away some of the stains of the tradition of art history. Her work physically intervenes in a public institution that provides the vehicle for the dissemination of art.²⁹ Ukeles pays no heed to the great marble sculptures above her and is more concerned with the marble floor below. Her performance art seems to be literally and figuratively ambivalent with regard to the canon of art.

The strategy of Ukeles and other performance artists at the time was to de-objectify the artwork, to make art that was momentary and dematerialized, in part so that art could not be absorbed into the commodified art market that had been so powerful during the 1960s. In addition to this de-commodification, Conceptual art like Ukeles’ also sought to critique the institutions of art and exemplified an anti-establishment ethos. The crux of Conceptualism in the 60s and 70s was (most of the time at any rate) twofold: on the one hand, Conceptualism sought to challenge the emphasis that had been placed on purity and medium by the late-modernists; on the other hand, a sustained critique of the commercial art world was also central to this movement.

I want to suggest that in addition to having referenced 19th century French painting, as the previous chapters elucidated, Wall’s photographic project is one that takes as central many of the concerns that engaged conceptual artists like Ukeles and Smithson (among many others, to be sure). Wall shows us a picture of similar subject matter to that of Ukeles in his *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation*,

Barcelona (1999) (Ill. 21).³⁰ Both show the socio-historical role of the museum, thereby commenting on or critiquing the world of art. A maintenance worker squeegees the tall windows of this perfectly proportioned piece of architecture. As the sun rises behind him, the man, who appears to be Semitic or of Middle Eastern descent, gets the house ready for the mill of tourists who will stream through the space to see the immaculately unified nature of this work. The rich red and orange tones and the texture of the stone walls provide a romantic feeling. The furniture, the outdoor sculpture, the structural walls and the decorative ones, all contribute to create a perfectly unified space. The one element that does not seem to “fit” in this space is the maintenance worker. Like Ukeles, he himself is a stain in this perfect room and perhaps a reminder too of the social ills of this society.³¹ His dirty rags sully the white leather Barcelona chairs, some of which he has left skewed after flipping up the black carpet underneath. In Mies van der Rohe’s house, a house that Modernism built, one could say, this man represents a flaw in the perfectly proportioned space. Like Ukeles’ maintenance projects, Wall’s picture brings to the forefront the bone structure or anatomy of these immaculate modern institutions that we have come to covet. *Morning Cleaning* “behaves” or “acts out” key tenets of Conceptual Art, with its social critique of cultural institutions as well as the use of photography as a seemingly documentary tool.

It is worth returning to an early work of Wall’s in the context of Conceptual Art to show not only the conceptual *intention* of his work but also the close *origination* or affiliation to this type of art. His earliest illuminated transparency, *The Destroyed Room* (1978) (Ill. 22), depicts a violently demolished bedroom with broken furniture, a ripped mattress, clothes and shoes strewn about. The walls of the room are destroyed as well

and reveal the planks of wood that hold up the prefabricated supports in the background. We come to the realization that the violence and passion of the picture that culminates with such destruction comes about only after a careful construction of the set, the props, and so on. The room was erected to be destroyed. This is an example of what Roger Seamon describe as “self-cancelling gestures” in Wall’s work which heighten the anxiety and precariousness of these very violent pictures.³² It is a work that mimics the conceptual project of art that involves process – that is, art that makes up its art-ness with a particular procedure. Keith Arnatt’s *Self-Burial* (1969) (Ill. 23), for example, consists of nine black and white photographs of the artist standing in a field. In each ensuing image, the artist becomes increasingly entrenched in the ground. He is standing in a hole up to his knees, and then to his waist, until finally he is no longer visible and has completely disappeared underground.³³ This work is concerned with the objectives of many Conceptual artists – dematerialization, decomodification and anti-elitism in art. Wall uses a similar technique for *Destroyed Room*, only in his case, he reconstructs that which he has destroyed, or rather, he constructs (a room), only to destroy it, only to reconstruct it into a unified art object with the final photograph. Wall does not wish to “get to the heart of the matter,” with regards to photography, nor does he wish to uncover the intrinsic crux of the medium. Rather, Wall plays with it, experimenting with “what photography *can be*.” He introduces different elements to the photograph that might not have been previously considered. In the case of *The Destroyed Room*, photography shows an impulse towards narrative and performance. Yet Wall’s work is different than Arnatt’s photography series. Ian Wallace points out; Wall “presented narrativity within the single unified picture space of classical painting and cinema, rather than in the serial

or sequential shift of imagery typical of the period.”³⁴ Wall infuses his work with the conceptual elements while maintaining his commitment to historic *tableaux*. Moreover, pieces like *The Storyteller*, *Stereo*, and *The Guitarist* introduces the idea of hearing and sound, a sense that is normally equated to more cognitive art forms like music or even performance art.³⁵ The man featured in *Stereo* (1980) (Ill. 24), with his earphones on, posed and exposed in the same way as Manet’s *Olympia*, is in a world of his own. His disinterested gaze does not confront us and his flaccid penis reminds us that this picture is not about sex and potency (or, at least, not the explicitly affected and often violent sexuality we see in contemporary pornography). The man’s glazed-over eyes suggest that there is a dimension to the picture we are not privileged to see. There is more going on in his head than the passively sexual scene we are presented with in the photograph. The text “Stereo” next to the picture adds a textual component to the piece and serves as a reaction to the autonomous art object proposed by early modernists. Art is not made in a vacuum nor is it read as such. Images and text, layouts, all of which help to further inform the work, surround it, literally and figuratively. Wall’s photographs reach out in one way or another (physically bathing light onto its viewers like a Dan Flavin sculpture), to project the feeling that there is more at stake than just the traditional act of snapping a picture. The photograph is wrapped up in visual space (with the sculptural component of the transparency), in history, and in literary concepts. Wall provides a valid art form that can still address the ideas of Conceptual art even with the introduction of subject matter and literary allusions.

The mood that is evoked from Wall’s work is reminiscent, one would be on solid ground to say, of the grand tradition of Western painting. His luminous framed light

boxes and their dramatic size exemplifies the type of art that is typically museum-bound. That he is able to illustrate the chief concerns of the Conceptual artist while maintaining the technical mastery typically associated with the moderns before him, demonstrates what I take to be one of Wall's primary objectives. Namely, a certain dissatisfaction with Conceptual art of the past and a tempered optimism about what it can become.

Part of the impulse of Conceptualism (that is, the impulse to de-representationalize works of art) can be seen to have emerged from a growing dissatisfaction with the then-steady commodification of the 'art world.' If what specific pieces of art "were about" was so opaque and incomprehensible to the lay public, perhaps a certain purification of art, (that is a non-commercialization) could be re-achieved. Part of the authenticity sought by Conceptual artists required that art would be political, "of the people," and illustrative of its day. In short, "genuine" art would have to be both socially realistic (its moral or political component) and it would have to be conceptual and inaccessible to warn against its commodification. There is a tension that emerges here, because either art is accessible, and therefore public, or inaccessible and esoteric and available only to small groups of knowing insiders. Unfortunately, Conceptual art's radical impulses were eventually absorbed into the existing market structure the very same way that painting, photography and sculpture had been so absorbed. Conceptual art, in one way or another, found its way into the museum and became as commodified as the art that came before it. From this history of anti-representation and the mutated 'role' of the photograph, Wall shows us that the tension between representation and social realism, exemplified so explicitly in conceptual art of the 1970s, is premised on a false dichotomy. Art can be both figurative and politically relevant. Art can be self-reflexive;

it can ask difficult questions about itself, while conveying a strong political or social set of recommendations. By re-igniting the narrative component in art making that had been lost to a considerable extent with the more theoretical art of past decades, Wall reminds us that art can do any number of things. It can tell stories, interpret ideas and texts; be political or not political. It can also be a narrative while maintaining a conceptual stance. Ultimately, art can speak for its time, impart the *geist* of its age in any number of ways, and need not be considered “appropriated” or “tainted” by being a part of the world in which it was constructed. Wall resurrects narrative and representation in his pictures, and brings photography back to its pre-conceptual role, as a vehicle to tell stories. Wall’s pictures impress on us that the important political considerations of Conceptual art can be infused and addressed in art that is cinematic, narrative-based and closer to painting than anything else.

POSTMODERNISM

It is here that we may add that in addition to being exemplary of modern art, in accordance with Baudelaire’s understanding of the term, Wall also encapsulates a number of postmodern elements in his pictures. Here I will pause to make a few remarks about just what I take the term “postmodern” signify. From the Second World War to the present day, many thinkers have approached philosophy’s perennial questions from a *postmodern* perspective, where a different understanding of history, periods, relationships, and their understanding are underscored. Postmodernism can be taken to be pillared on, albeit crudely and very controversially, new conceptions of truth, knowledge, and meaning that stand in sharp contrast with the absolutist or universal

accounts which were bequeathed to us from early Modern thought, and to them, from the ancient Greeks. Many postmodernists feel that truth does not connote an enduring, static and unchanging referent. These thinkers will usually agree, with Nietzsche, that the concept of truth (like all concepts) are very human constructs. Construing the concept of truth this way will no longer compel intellectuals to search for immutable, enduring facts about the universe. They will concede that what was made can be unmade, and consequently, that the future is for the most part open.³⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, a French philosopher, defines “postmodern” as “incredulity towards metanarratives.”³⁷ We no longer have something to be “Enlightened” by, in any essential, final manner, but we can gain understanding about different ideas and peoples by employing such discourses as post-colonial theory, gender issues, gay-lesbian theory and so on, gaining understanding where and when we find it. There is no longer one story to be told (metanarratives) but rather a melange of ideas and perspectives that allow for perhaps a better conception of where we all stand in the world micro-narratives.

POSTMODERNISM IN ART

The philosophical ideas of postmodernism translate into art in a number of (often non-categorical) ways. Postmodern art is difficult to define, although the effects of postmodern art seem to surround particular strategies, namely, to highlight, subvert, contradict or undermine that which we began by upholding. Postmodern art’s common strategies include irony, contradiction, collage, appropriation and duplicity.³⁸ It is to make clear (or, duplicitously, unclear) the fabricated structures that are in place that build up the narratives of power and culture. Linda Hutcheon describes postmodern art in the

following way: “It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said.”³⁹ This is not to suggest that postmodernism in art is an “anything goes” system of representation, but that with a rejection of the “grand narratives” of modernism, there is room for different discourses, which as Hutcheon points out, “signal the inescapability of political contexts in which [artists] speak and work.”⁴⁰ The result is a wide variety of possible strategies and outcomes for the making of art, and particularly, the use of photography in a contemporary context.

The medium of photography sits in an awkward divide between modernism and postmodernism. Hutcheon posits the following about the position of both fiction and photography: “These are two forms whose histories are firmly rooted in realist representation but which, since their reinterpretation in modernist formalist terms, are now in a position to confront both their documentary and formal impulses...where documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody.”⁴¹ The camera will always provide a degree of realism, if not in an unequivocal way, at least in the scientific manner of translating light and shadow onto film. Contemporary tactics of imitation, self-reflection and parody allow for a combination of the formal realist quality of photography to intertwine with these postmodern imperatives.

WALL AND CONTEMPORARY POSTMODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

Wall’s approach can be compared to the work of various artists who also use photography in critical ways. The following discussion about a number of artists is meant to highlight the diverse ways in which photography has been used in the past few decades.

American artist Barbara Kruger combines appropriated photographs and text in her billboard-like artworks. Her pictures are often aggressive images depicting violence or repression, usually with an underlying current of sexism or other power struggles. In a picture like *Your Comfort is My Silence* (1981) (Ill. 25), Kruger addresses her audience directly with the use of first and second person pronouns, clarifying and stressing the conventional use of photo-advertising to be authoritative and commanding. The text does not necessarily correspond to the image in any direct way, confusing the narrative and subsequently, the 'understood' power structures in advertising and art making.

In a different vein, French artist Christian Boltanski uses personal or found photographs to create (often full-room) archival installations. His work combines fact and fiction, old family photo albums as well as anonymous obituaries, newspaper clippings and found photographs. The result is an investigation into society's use of photography to understand memory and to recreate history, often in an archival, bureaucratic way. Roger Seamon clarifies the use of history and memory in postmodern photography in the following manner: "modernist artists, like scientists and social engineers, had a notion that they were transforming and transcending their inheritance. Modernist formalism could be thought of as revolutionary precisely because content (history) was denied. In contrast, postmodernism immerses itself in history."⁴²

Still further, Canadian artist Lynn Cohen documents familiar interior spaces such as corridors, waiting rooms, and office spaces. These are not remote, new locations, but rather settings from our everyday life, jarring to see in such a stark, cold and somehow unrecognizable way. In a picture such as *Biology Building, State University of New York, Postdam* (1983) (Ill. 26) we feel a need to penetrate the interior, to gain access, but there

is always a distance - there is always something denied. Cohen's pictures leave behind the spectacle of modernity written about by Baudelaire, who illustrates a haunting estrangement felt in a busy, product-filled world with the description of workshops, chimneys and spires in mass repetition. The grandeur associated with Modernity (that of the divine or the Romantic; of sheer profundity) has been replaced with a confused suspicion. French anthropologist Marc Augé writes about Baudelaire as having "found material for reflection in the world's concrete space."⁴³ But what is the iconography of our day, of postmodernism? What is to replace the steel and glass icons of modernity? What will stand in for the boardwalks and boulevards heralded by Baudelaire? It will be these empty vistas, locations that deny heralding.

These three artists by no means sum up photographic practices today, but merely provide a glimpse into the variety of styles and strategies that exist, and offer insight as to how Wall's work functions amongst his peers. Hal Foster writes, "Postmodernist art is allegorical not only in its stress on ruinous spaces (as in ephemeral installations) and fragmentary images (as in appropriations from art history and mass media alike) but, more importantly, in its impulse to upset stylistic norms, to redefine conceptual categories, to challenge the modernist ideal of symbolic totality – in short, in its impulse to exploit the gap between signifier and signified."⁴⁴ The dismantling of images, of appropriating text or of plumbing the archives seem to be common strategies of postmodern photographers. Such methods come due in part from the legacy of Conceptual art. As Brandon Taylor writes, Conceptual art showed us that "the photograph is inexorably a construction and never a neutral sign."⁴⁵

Reading Wall's pictures today can and inevitably will be approached in ways that are characteristically postmodern. Namely, political discourses of language, documentation, feminism and so on; all of which reflect an overall scepticism of the universality of the modernist project. Conceptual art, like the aforementioned areas of discourse, remains sceptical about the paradigmatic assumptions of modern art, a scepticism that Wall picks up on in many of his pictures. Wall's work, however, with his combination of painting, photography and the conceptual sensitivity that make up his project, reminds us that Conceptual art, perhaps, may have been too rigid or absolute concerning questions about what art could or should be. Perhaps, in short, the Conceptualists shouldn't have been so quick to discard the value of narrative and representation.

In a manner that was surely inspired by Conceptualism, Wall's use of photography is designed to raise questions about photography itself. He provides a series of tricks in his photographs to make them appear more factual than they actually are, thereby playing on the history of photography and its supposed documentary or realistic status. This should not lead us, however, to assume that Wall is positing any claim about what photography *must* be. In postmodern fashion, he is open to a variety of constructs and understandings about the medium, none of which are intrinsic or essential. This impulse is explained by Wall:

for a long time the chief struggle in photography was against photography's documentary, factual claim. Now, while I don't reject the legitimacy of that claim, I nevertheless don't believe it alone gives a sufficient definition of photography and what photography can be. It seemed to me that the only way to work through this was to make photographs that somehow suspended the factual claim while simultaneously continuing to create certain illusions of factuality.⁴⁶

In a manner that is quite different, then, from Baudelaire's prescriptive message, Wall is persistent in reminding us not to attempt to pin down what the photograph *must* be. On the one hand, he construes photography as akin to painting (with its emphasis on built up composition and construction). On the other hand, Wall has shown a continual treatment of various ideas that arise from the documentary photographic tradition. Even more, Wall entertains, as by now perhaps the reader will have noted, many of the central ideas with which Conceptual artists have been consumed. All of this ambiguity in Wall's work reminds us to be wary or cautious about essences or "deep truths" in photography. It is senseless to even ask what photography *is*, for it can be a whole number of different things. Like the Conceptual artist's use of the medium, the photograph can be for documentation, but the photograph can also be recognized as part of a cultural archive, as an object of memory. Further, Wall calls our attention to photography's transformative possibilities (exemplified in his treatment of digital photography) whereby his photographs become spectacularly cinematic and allegorical. The overriding theme of Wall's project is to emphasize the point that there are no limits to the medium.

I would like to end this chapter by focusing on one last picture, one that in many ways "sums up" all of the themes I have discussed in relation to Wall's project; 19th century art, modernism and postmodern concerns. *A Hunting Scene* (Ill. 27) was created in 1994. The setting is autumn; a grey-blue sky overhead suggests a coming frost and the surrounding brush is dried out and dying from a summer of heat. In the background, the trees have all lost their leaves. The image depicts a wide stretch of land between a parking lot and a housing compound. The half aluminium siding, half brick exteriors of the houses and their low sloping roofs are characteristic of suburban architecture.⁴⁷ This

place could be Burnaby, B.C., Oakville, Ontario or Beaconsfield, Quebec. The location is not restricted to Canada either; in fact it could any part of suburban America. Surrounding the houses is a neglected area of land. Past the power lines behind the homes, the land is full of pits of dirt and clumps of overgrown grass. It is littered with construction debris, crooked two-by-fours and remnants of the aluminium siding from the houses beyond. The area is a virtual no-man's-land of uselessness. It is not a location of leisure like that we saw in *Tattoos & Shadows*. It is not a significant space like the pristine manicured lawns that surely flank suburban homes. Similarly, the space is not believably an oasis of nature - it is not an untouched forest or even a cultivated farmer's field. The space rejects these standard 'uses' of nature. As in pictures such as *The Storyteller* and *An Encounter in the Calle Valentin Gomez Farias, Tijuana* (1991), which depicts a Mexican shanty town constructed from dirt, rocks and refuse, Wall demystifies the idealized concept of 'nature.'⁴⁸ Instead, he provides us with these 'in-between' spaces that function neither as the peaceful oasis we see in Manet's landscapes nor as the charted vistas of contemporary western cities. The remnant of space in *A Hunting Scene* provides the possibility for any number of occurrences to take place here. It is not suburban nor is it rural; is suburbia growing at such a rate that we cannot distinguish between urban and rural, and our behaviour cannot alter accordingly? Perhaps it is this delusion about location that allows for the violent scene that is taking place in this picture.

Two men enter the picture from the left-hand side of the frame. One rushes into the brush with purpose and speed. The other follows closely behind with determined resolve. They are both carrying rifles. The purpose with which these two men proceed

relays a sense of impending danger and violence. This is indeed a “hunting scene” as the title suggests, but the question is what are the men hunting for? The scene is so primal, but so close to a suburban community, that we can’t imagine they are hunting for wild animals. There isn’t enough brush for animals to live and survive here. Is their hunting expedition something much more sinister? If we recall the use of photography in North America at the beginning of the 20th century, the camera was used to document the hardships of poor and dispossessed people. Images were disseminated to the suburbs through publications like *Life* magazine, in part, to garner support for government social programs. Is *A Hunting Scene* the culmination – is it time for the middle-class to “pay up”?

Brokered expertly by the cardinal photographic rule of thirds, the top two thirds of the picture is taken up by the expansive sky. The ominous clouds foreshadow the activity in the scene and provide the same dramatics that we might expect from a Géricault painting. The picture has the size and sensationalism of the Romantics with whom Wall holds such an allegiance.⁴⁹ We are reminded of Wall’s commitment to the re-interpretation of past art, and in this case, it is perhaps the work of Vincent Van Gogh or Manet that Wall is referencing. These artists, and others from their time, while interested in the imagery and function of the modern city, often painted scenes on the city’s edge, perhaps recognizing what T.J. Clark writes about with respect to art:

Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favorite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.⁵⁰

A Hunting Scene, with its intense theatricality and grandeur rests somewhere between the documentary tradition and “fine art” photography, categories that are contested and brought under scrutiny in postmodern discourse. These limiting categories demonstrated the limitations imposed by modernism that resulted in restricted “palettes” from which an artist could work. This manner of art making taken up by Wall is in some ways an inheritance from Conceptual artists like Robert Smithson, who preferred a layered approach of photography, experience, text and storytelling, reaching beyond prescribed arenas of art making and using the landscape as a subject.⁵¹ The characters in *A Hunting Scene* look as though they could be searching for one of Smithson’s suburban earthworks. That Wall’s pictures are able to evoke references to both modern Impressionist painting and more current Conceptual art practices attests to their complicated and discerning style.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

¹ Cited in Scott McQuire, *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*, (London: Sage Productions, 1998), 11.

² Geoffrey James, Introduction to, *Thirteen Essays on Photography*, ed. Martha Langford, (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), xii.

³ In 1917, under the pseudonym Richard Mutt, Duchamp submitted a urinal into the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York City. In response to the outrage this “readymade” caused, Duchamp wrote the following: “Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view created a new thought for that object.” Marcel Duchamp, “The Richard Mutt Case,” in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 248.

⁴ Jean-François Chevrier, “A Painter of Modern Life: an Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier” *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places, selected works from 1978-2000*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 176.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime, Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés/ Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés,” “Le Soleil,” in *The Complete Poems of Baudelaire*, trans. Dr. Philip Higonson and Elliot R. Ashe (Chester, England: Limouse Museum Publications, 1992), 90.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 71.

⁷ The ripeness of these conditions can be understood better by recalling that the new world of Paris, Europe and America was completely different than what it had been before the revolutions. Monarchies were replaced with liberal democracies, a political experiment that was still in the process of being ironed out. Feudalism and serfdom were crumbling and with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, travel and migration took place more than it ever had in the history of Europe and people interacted with different classes, types, and races like never before. Social propriety and customs and lineage and societal structure in general were all up for grabs, and we needed the romantic poet to offer suggestions about how this new world would and could operate.

⁸ See introduction to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Everyman's Library, 2001), 29-45.

⁹ Timothy Raser details a link between Baudelaire's art criticism and Kantian critiques of Beauty, pointing out, however, that Baudelaire likely never read Kant, but might have been influenced by others (namely Poe and Benjamin Constant) who had. In *A Poetics of Art Criticism: the case of Baudelaire*, North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, no. 234 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 79-82.

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *"The Painter of Modern Life" and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), 3.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 7.

¹² *Ibid*, 17.

¹³ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

¹⁵ Raser, 188.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 419.

¹⁷ Judith Mastai, ed., *An Evening Forum at the Vancouver Art Gallery with Terry Atkinson, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and Lawrence Werner, February 1990* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1992), 41.

¹⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1998), 755.

¹⁹ Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art* (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 13.

²⁰ John Roberts, ed., "Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual Art," in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain: 1966-1976* (London: Camerawork, 1997): 7-45, 11.

²¹ The term "conceptual art" materialized in the writing of American artist Sol Le Witt, who published his "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" in 1967, but the origin of this art "form" can be traced back to the Fluxus group in New York as early as 1961. See Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*, (New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2002), 7-8.

²² Wood, 27.

²³ The systematized categorizing of artists around their medium emphasized Modernism's reliance on the purpose or role and 'essential' qualities of medium. This was most striking in the work of abstract expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning or Mark Rothko.

²⁴ This point pertaining to power structures obviously comes from the writing of Michel Foucault who wrote extensively on the subject. This thesis does not and will not address the complexities of the subject, only to say that Conceptual art came about at the time when the writings of Foucault and other French theorists were paramount. Consequently, the mechanisms of power in the art world are of primary importance to Conceptual artists.

²⁵ Judith Mastai, ed., *An Evening Forum at the Vancouver Art Gallery with Terry Atkinson, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and Lawrence Werner, February 1990* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1992), 10.

²⁶ Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 68-74, 72.

²⁷ With regards to photography, the mass-produced, amateur snapshot photography was a way to take art making out of the conventional academic formula of 'one artist/one medium'. Art need no longer be wrapped up in any structured guild system that requires specialization or training – photographs can be taken by anyone, about anything. Using photography was an anti-elitist strategy for Conceptual artists. If a work of performance art is photographically documented (thereby guaranteeing that the photograph is the only lasting record of the work), a cluster of questions concerning the authentic art object and the author (the performer or photographic documentor) are raised.

²⁸ I don't think that this idea is so far off from Baudelaire's writings. John Roberts points that Wall's defence of the idea of the *painter of modern life* is "to retain a historical connection to the ideal of a non-bourgeois audience for art," for example. See, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 187.

²⁹ The art of Montreal artist Sorel Cohen is similar to Ukeles' performance work. Cohen performs daily household tasks to illustrate the ritual and reverence found in such repetition. In series of photography, cyanotypes or video we see the artist making her bed for one week, as in "Le rite matinal" (1977). Both artists use their bodies to investigate daily tasks and to subvert their functions as mere "maintenance."

³⁰ Wall has several pictures that have cleaning and maintenance work as subject matter. Among them include *Polishing* (1998), *Volunteer* (1996) and *Just Washed* (1997).

³¹ There is a considerable amount of prejudice in Spain against North Africans, particularly Moroccans, because of the illegal migration and crime that seems to be prevalent within this group.

³² Roger Seamon, "The Uneasy Sublime," *Parachute* 66 (April-June 1992), 13.

³³ This sequence of photographs was transmitted on a television station in Germany, one a day from October 11-18, 1969, interrupting the scheduled programming.

³⁴ Ian Wallace, "Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver," in *13 Essays on Photography*, ed. Martha Langford (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), 99.

³⁵ Wall discusses the concept of cognition and how it relates to both Adorno and Hegel's conception of art appreciation in Mastai, ed., 39.

³⁶ Academic feminism takes its cue from this line of thought. If the "patriarchy" that we live in refers back to nothing philosophically deep, biological, or *in the nature of things*, then, or so the feminist story usually goes, we can eschew our patriarchal society in favour of one where gender equality was much more frequent.

³⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii.

³⁸ Hal Foster offers another tactic when he cites Buchloh and Barthes and their interest in mythology in art. A postmodern artist might, according to Foster, “break apart the mythical sign, to reinscribe it in a critical montage, and then to circulate this artificial myth in turn: this is a strategy not only of much subcultural style but also of much appropriation art that flourished in the late 1970s and early 1980s,” in “The Passion of the Sign,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996): 71-98, 93. We might recognize this method taking place in Wall’s work as he revisits such iconic works of art as *Olympia* and *Déjeuner sur L’Herbe*, recognizing the legend and tradition of their creation and dissemination yet calling into question, among other things, their status as unique works of art, or as concise markers of culture.

³⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 7.

⁴² Roger Seamon, “Uneasy in Eden: Jeff Wall and the Vancouver Syndrome,” in *Vancouver: representing the postmodern city*, ed. Paul Delany (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994), 245.

⁴³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Translated by John Howe, (London: Verso, 1995), 94.

⁴⁴ Hal Foster, “The Passion of the Sign,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 86.

⁴⁵ Brandon Taylor, *Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1995), 131.

⁴⁶ Jeff Wall, “Photography and Strategies of the Avant-Garde: Jeff Wall in Conversation with Boris Groys,” in *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places, selected works from 1978-2000*, Rolf Lauter, ed. (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 139.

⁴⁷ Since 1969 and his first conceptual photographic project *Landscape Manual*, Wall has shown what Ian Wallace has described as the “defeatured zones” of the suburbs, roadways, empty lots and abandoned landfills. Ian Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” in *13 Essays on Photography*, ed. Martha Langford (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), 97.

⁴⁸ *The Crooked Path* (1991), another of Wall’s work that depicts this in-between space, could be the setting directly facing *A Hunting Scene*. A well-worn path snakes through a patch of dry grass towards a factory in the background. Despite this commitment to industry and modern technology, the path symbolizes an anarchical response to the bounty of such technology. Instead, an indelible mark is left on the environment with the treads of countless people marching through this otherwise useless space.

⁴⁹ Can the passion of the romantic co-exist within the critical voice of modern art, the technical efficiency of making art about art itself? Donald Kuspit clarifies this paradox in relation to Wall’s work, when he writes, “Typical modernist Romantic that Wall is, scepticism about romantic passion is part of his romanticism. Like Baudelaire, unless he can understand the logic of passion, and so reduce it to a technique – make it rational and artificial – Wall has no interest in it.” cited in “Looking up at Jeff Wall’s Modern ‘Appassionamento’,” *Artforum* 20 (March 1982), 56.

⁵⁰ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 12.

⁵¹ Hal Foster interprets this as transforming the “siting of art,” where theoretical developments questioned what art could be, who could make it, and where we could see it. These developments followed “from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites for art, from Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996): 171-203, 184. This change of position in art making is illustrated in *A Hunting Scene*. The aggressive way in which the hunters move across the picture might stand as an allegory to the confusion we might have towards what art is, as we do not know how to properly navigate it in its new manifestation. The irony of postmodern art, however, is that it cannot rest on these new sites in any a more meaningful way than the sites of modern art. To do so would be to replace one essentialized version of art making with another.

CONCLUSION

'Postmodernism,' whatever else it means, signifies the inability to believe that history has a 'narratable' structure....Baudelaire developed a kind of writing whose real implications and full value are, as yet, unknown. Today, again as in 1848, 'Il est vrai que la grande tradition s'est perdue, et que la nouvelle n'est pas faite.'¹

- David Carrier

It sometimes strikes me that an image from the past becomes spontaneously open and possible again the moment I see it.... By the way, that's why I don't believe there is 'old art' as opposed to 'new art'; if I'm experiencing something now, really experiencing it, it is 'now' for me, it's new art again, for me. That's an opening in history, an opening in time, brought about just by experience.²

- Jeff Wall

Wall has stated that: "I think that Modernism as it is commonly construed overemphasizes the rupture, the break with the past. The emphasis on discontinuity has become so orthodox and routine that I prefer to concentrate on the opposite phenomenon. It's just as significant historically."³ This thesis has concerned itself with Jeff Wall's commitment to modernism, which overlaps with his more tentative engagement with postmodernism.⁴

Wall's allegiance to the writings of Charles Baudelaire and his recipe for a *painter of modern life* was the catalyst for this investigation. I have shown that on certain occasions Wall fulfills his own claim to be a Baudelairian *painter of modern life*. In important respects, Wall satisfies Baudelaire's position of being a "man of the world," or, "a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses."⁵ He is immersed in his social environment, and carefully reconstructs this in his pictures. Wall recognizes the continuing significance of the city as it is used to address certain modern ideas, for example. He illustrates the growth of cities and the ways in

which this growth affects human socialization and interaction. Just as these themes were prevalent in the 19th century, Wall shows how these very same ideas, particularly the continued growth of peripheral suburban areas, exemplify the issues and concerns of late-20th century capitalism. Wall's Vancouver, a city that has seen tremendous growth and change in the last few decades, replaces, or can be seen as a contemporary parallel to, Baudelaire's Paris. In both cases the artists recognize how these cities are emblematic of their times.

Wall also makes clear his allegiance to 19th century painting with the prevalence of social types in his illuminated transparencies. There are pictures of children, the elderly, new immigrants, rednecks, prostitutes and housewives. Like the moderns before him, Wall exhibits a fascination with different types, their physical appearance and their assumed roles in society. He is hyperbolic in his treatment of social types, highlighting, for example, a pastoral-like innocence of the middle-class in *Tattoos & Shadows*. He complicates the relationships within a relatively closed community in *Outburst*, making explicit important considerations with regards to stereotypes. Wall shows the most variety of 'types' in *Vampire's Picnic*, grotesquely showing the differences between people through the use of costume and make-up. Naturally, Wall's reference to types takes into consideration the damage done by typecasting people in society. The contemporary ramifications of relegating people to one-dimensional social types are racism, sexism and prejudice. Pictures like *Mimic* (1982) literally makes clear Wall's own mimicking of types, and how this evolves into *stereotypes*. Concurrently, Wall's choice of subject matter corresponds with the modern ideals of the middle of the 19th

century and the liberal notion of the primacy of the individual and how the depiction of the individual (or Baudelaire's "hero") has shifted over time.

Finally, Wall's photographs allude to the formal concerns held by both Baudelaire and the artists he wrote about. His pictures in many ways reflect the modern tendency to be self-reflexive. Wall's photographs, in a very convincing way, are often prevalently *about* photography, even as he mimics the painter's method of constructing images. The artist's touch is infinitely visible in the technically astute images, with staging, propping, allegorical functions and historical references. He complicates Baudelaire's interest in medium with the use of photography, an artistic tool that in contemporary life has bled into popular advertising and consumerism (something that the medium of painting seems to have resisted). And so Wall's *painter of modern life*, being a photographer, has a whole other cluster of considerations to take into account.

Wall has relied on Modernism and modern art to help him make art, but we must keep in mind the almost limitless distinctions regarding what Modern art is: this thesis has touched on how modernism has been defined, for instance, by Clement Greenberg, T.J. Clark and to some degree, Linda Nochlin. Another author, George Bataille, sees modernism in a more complex way. He pushes aside the formal certainties of modernism, countering the binary logic of form versus content in favour of a more slippery definition of modern art. His term *Informe* [formless] "is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down [déclasser] in the world."⁶ Neither a theme nor a quality, this term allows for a declassification counter to the highly organized reading of modern art from the standpoint of medium. Such an alteration can change the way we look back on art from the 19th century and perhaps the

way we look at art today. As Yves-Alain Bois writes in *Formless: A User's Guide*, this operation serves to “redeal modernism’s cards – not to bury it and conduct the manic mourning to which a certain type of ‘postmodernism’ has devoted itself for many years now, but to see to it that the unity of moderns, as constituted through the opposition of formalism and iconology, will be fissured from within and that certain works will no longer be read as they were before.”⁷ I offer the example of Bataille in this conclusion to suggest that the reading of modernism in Wall that I have presented in this thesis is by no means exhaustive.

Considering the medium of photography, we can recognize the postmodern concerns in Wall’s work, particularly the influence of Conceptual art on his pictures. Yet in a way that contrasts with the use to which various conceptual artists put photography, Wall uses a sophisticated strategy of digital photography, staging and post-production, of scale and cost that far exceed that of conceptual art. This in fact could generate a conceptualist-styled criticism of Wall’s work as being somehow elitist and inaccessible (just the sort of thing Conceptualism wished to move beyond). The size and cost of Wall’s work is too immense for the average artist and seems to imply a privileged access to expensive reproductive technologies. In addition to the cost and scale of Wall’s work, another type of inaccessibility reveals itself. To understand the *full meaning* of Wall’s work one requires a strong art historical and theoretical vocabulary. The artistically innocent lay-person, one would imagine, would lack the requisite background and knowledge for a full appreciation of Wall’s motives. This inaccessibility (due to the cost and scale as well as the educational sophistication required) might lead some critics to the conclusion that Wall’s work is irretrievably elitist. As Terry Myers puts this point, “this

subtle sense of repression feeds into my main concern that the work now seems to be *mirroring* – rather than *resisting* – the hegemony of dominant culture.”⁸

Wall’s work is inevitably both modern and postmodern, even though postmodern seems to imply “after modern,” as though the events and circumstances that take place during this period are no longer modern. This attitude has been critiqued, however, since many writers or artists considered to be ‘postmodern’ do continue to reference modern ideas, and still ascribe to the liberal ideas of that period. Similarly, the events that take place during the modern period are not necessarily modern simply because of their place in history. Wall’s work is difficult to clarify, to fit into a perfect slot of an ‘ism.’ Perhaps in one hundred years we will look back at Wall’s pictures and clarify how he fit into the greater scope of art history. But for now, I contend that this resistance to categorization is one of the work’s virtues, while it is important to continue questioning the modern-postmodern opposition that Wall’s entire work seems to foreground. As Richard Rorty writes, “the most that an original figure can hope to do is to recontextualize his/her predecessors,” asking for a “conversational sequence,” rather than a “radical rupture.”⁹ Wall re-deploys many of the tools of modern art in a precise, critical way, providing a space to counteract what has been criticized as being a *grand narrative* to art history. The fact that Wall’s work goes *further* than Baudelaire’s program, that is, to introduce strategies that are decidedly postmodern, could arguably further secure Wall’s position as a *painter of modern life*. After all, Wall lives and works in the 21st century, a time that has its own set of politics and philosophical puzzles. If Wall’s work bears evidence of new and different concerns related to the philosophy of his era, is this not just what Baudelaire called for from his *painter of modern life*? In the end however, we might be

left wondering the same thing that Michael Fried queried in regards to Manet, when he writes, “what does it mean to characterize Manet in the 1860s (unlike other members of that generation) as a modernist painter? Indeed does it still make sense to describe him in those terms? I think it does, but no longer on the basis of a single, comprehensive definition of modernism *tout court*.”¹⁰ The obvious influence of art history on Wall’s work, and his deliberate imitation of 19th century painting, sustains a cycle of reinterpretation by art critics and historians. Wall’s homage to Baudelaire has put his work at the forefront of critical art practices, and he as much as any other contemporary artist can lay claim to the title of *painter of modern life*.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

¹ David Carrier, *High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1996), 22. The Baudelaire citation is taken from Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* ed. Claude Pichois vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 493.

² “A Painter of Modern Life: an Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-Francois Chevrier” *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places, selected works from 1978-2000*, ed. Rolf Lauter (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 172.

³ Jeff Wall, “Restoration: Interview with Martin Schwander, 1994” in *Jeff Wall* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), 133.

⁴ The reader will remember that Wall does not like the term “postmodernism” prefers “critical modernism,” in Judith Mastai, ed., *An Evening Forum at the Vancouver Art Gallery with Terry Atkinson, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace and Lawrence Werner, February 1990* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1992).

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *“The Painter of Modern Life” and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London, Phaidon Press, 1964), 7.

⁶ Yves-Alain Bois, “The Use Value of ‘Formless,’” in Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 18.

⁷ Bois, 21.

⁸ Terry R. Myers, “Up Against Jeff Wall,” *New Art Examiner* 23 (October 1995), 23.

⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers, vol. 2: Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

¹⁰ Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 402-3.

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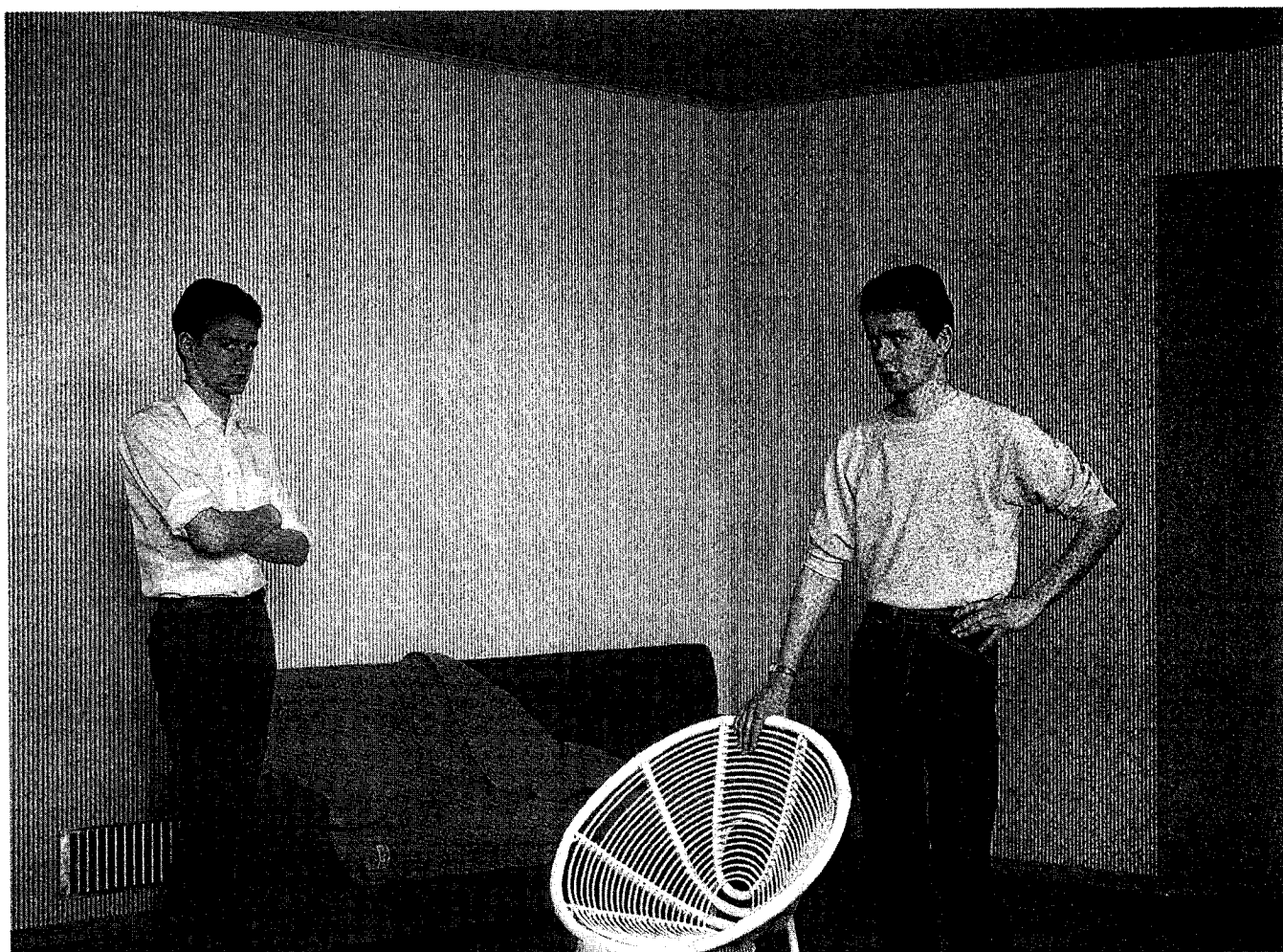
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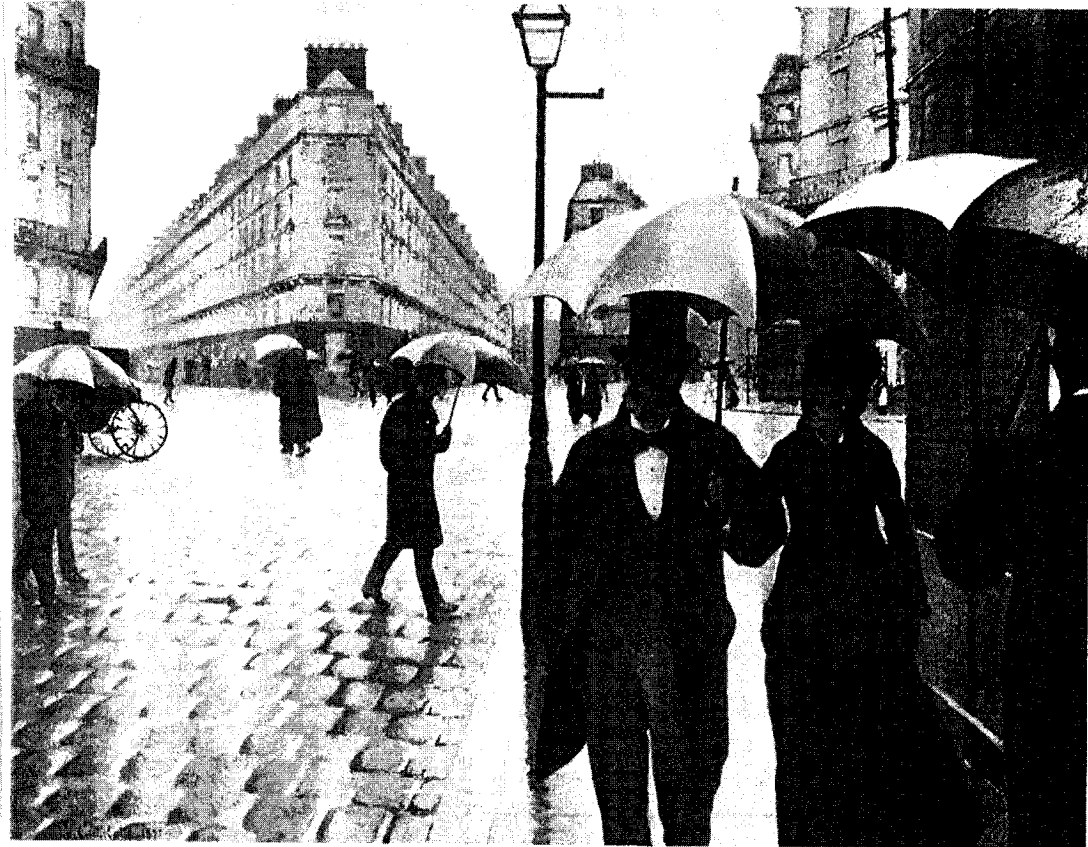
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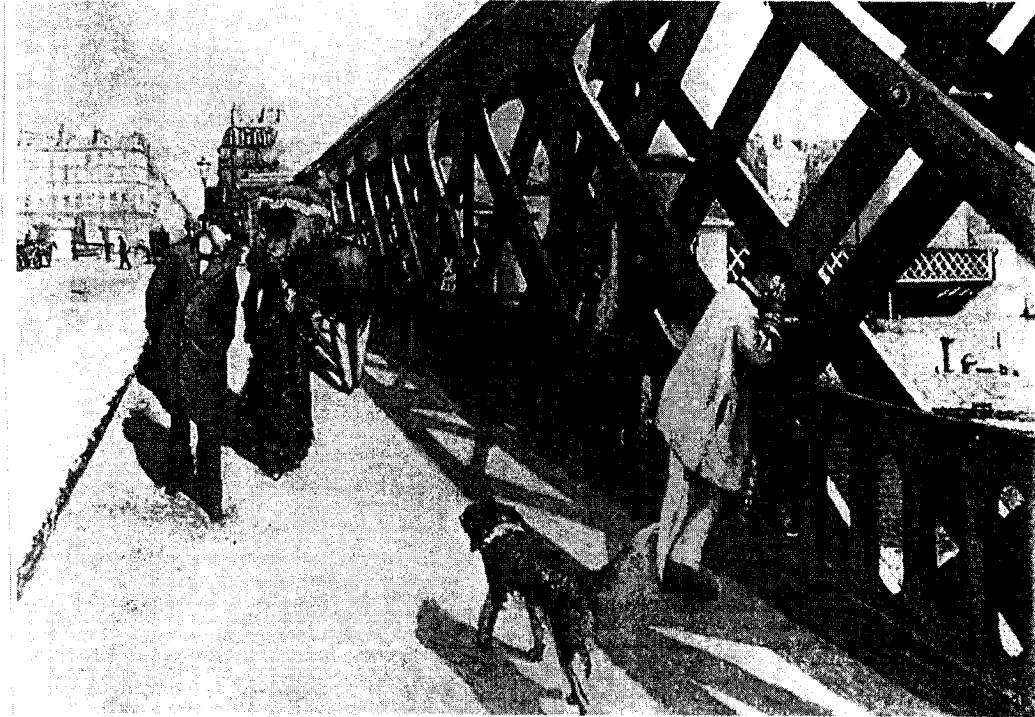
ILLUSTRATIONS



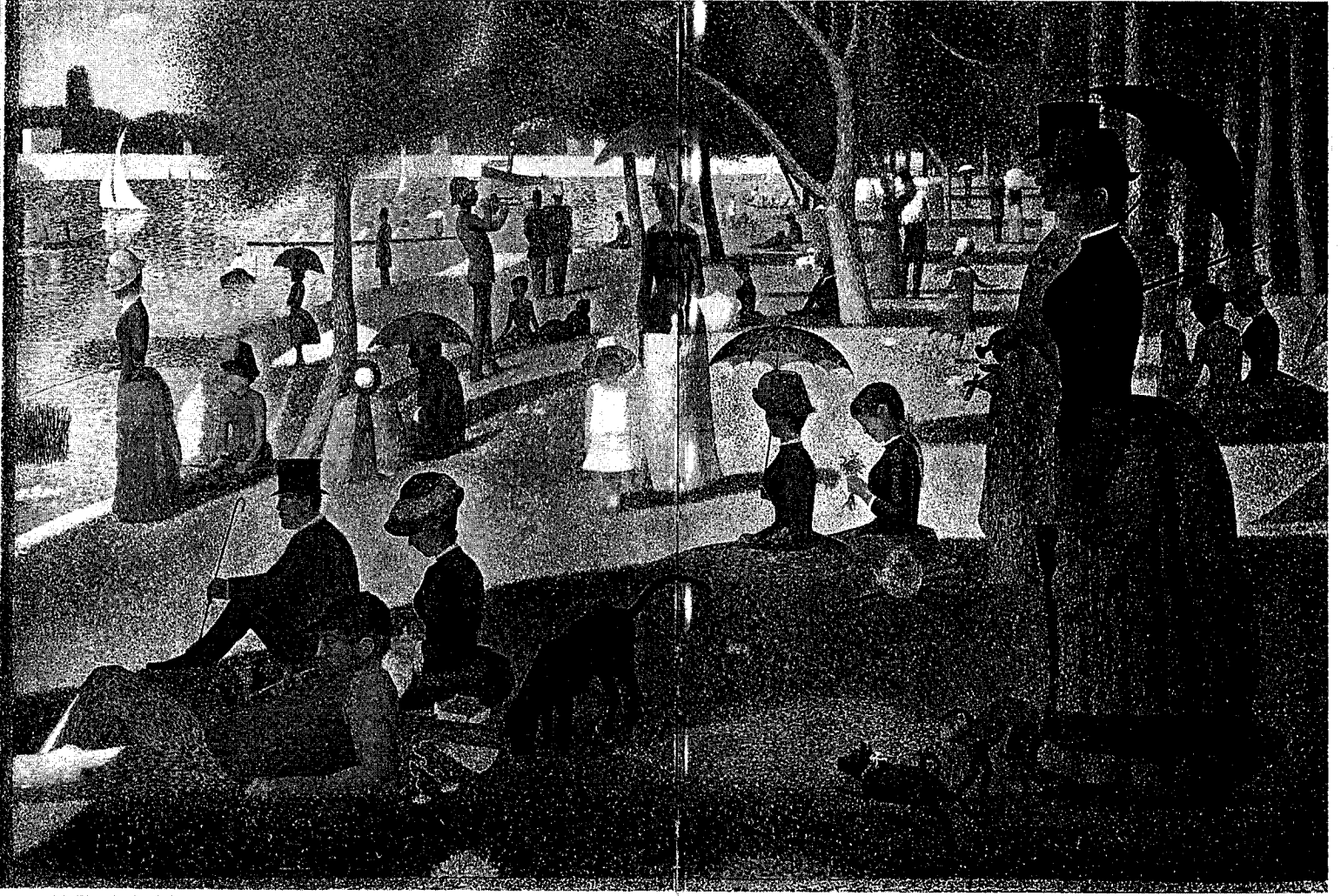
1. Jeff Wall, *Double Self-Portrait*, 1979, Transparency in lightbox, 172 x 229 cm, Private Collection.



2. Gustave Caillebotte, *Rue de Paris*, 1877, Oil on canvas, 212.2 x 276.2 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.



3. Gustave Caillebotte, *Le Pont de l'Europe*, 1876, Oil on Canvas, 124.8 x 180.7 cm, Petit Palais, Geneva.



4. Georges Seurat, *Un Dimanche après-midi à l'île de La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86, oil on canvas, 207 x 308 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.



5. Edgar Degas, *A la Bourse*, 1878-9, Oil on canvas, 100 x 82 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



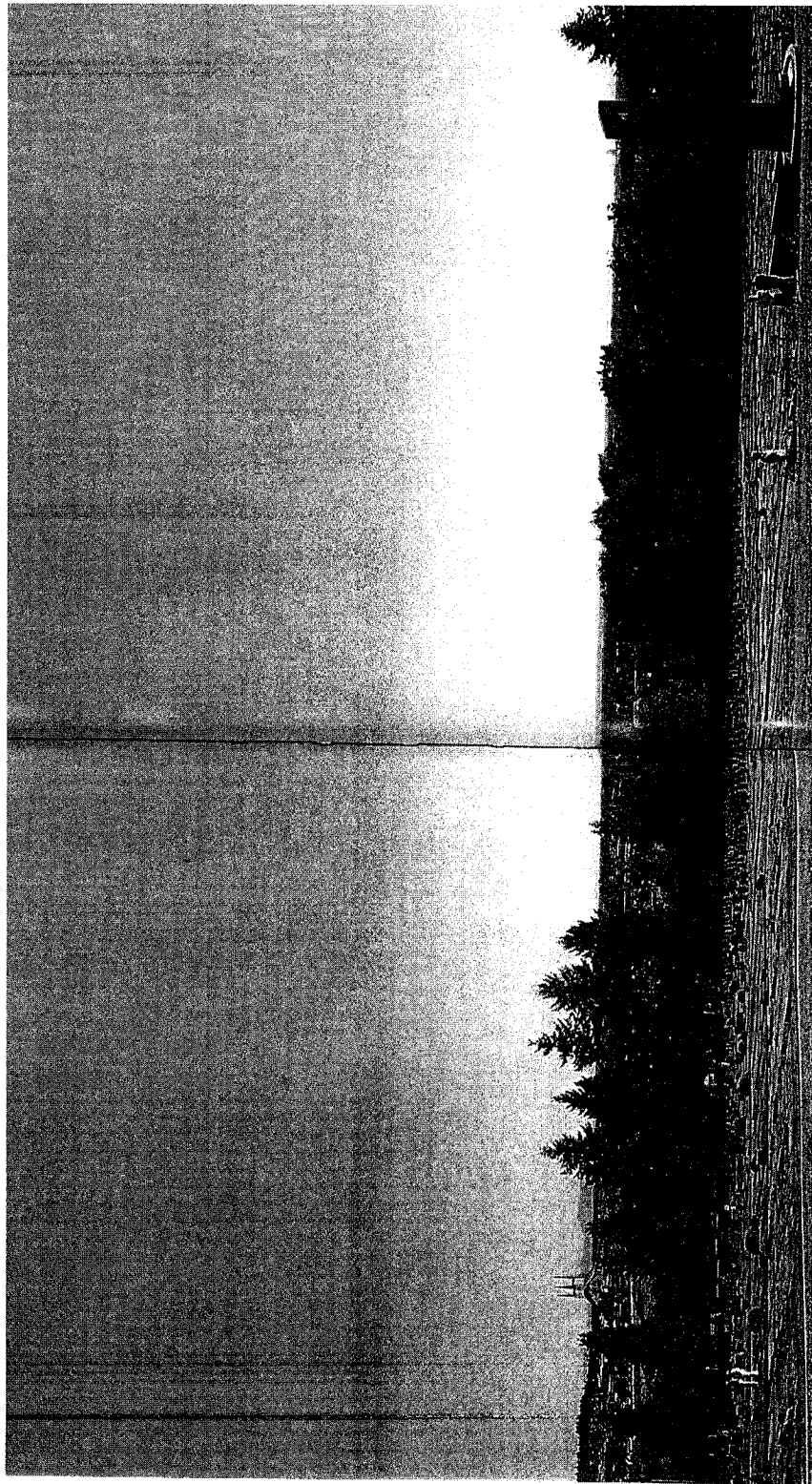
6. Edouard Manet, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1882, Oil on canvas, 96 x 130 cm, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.



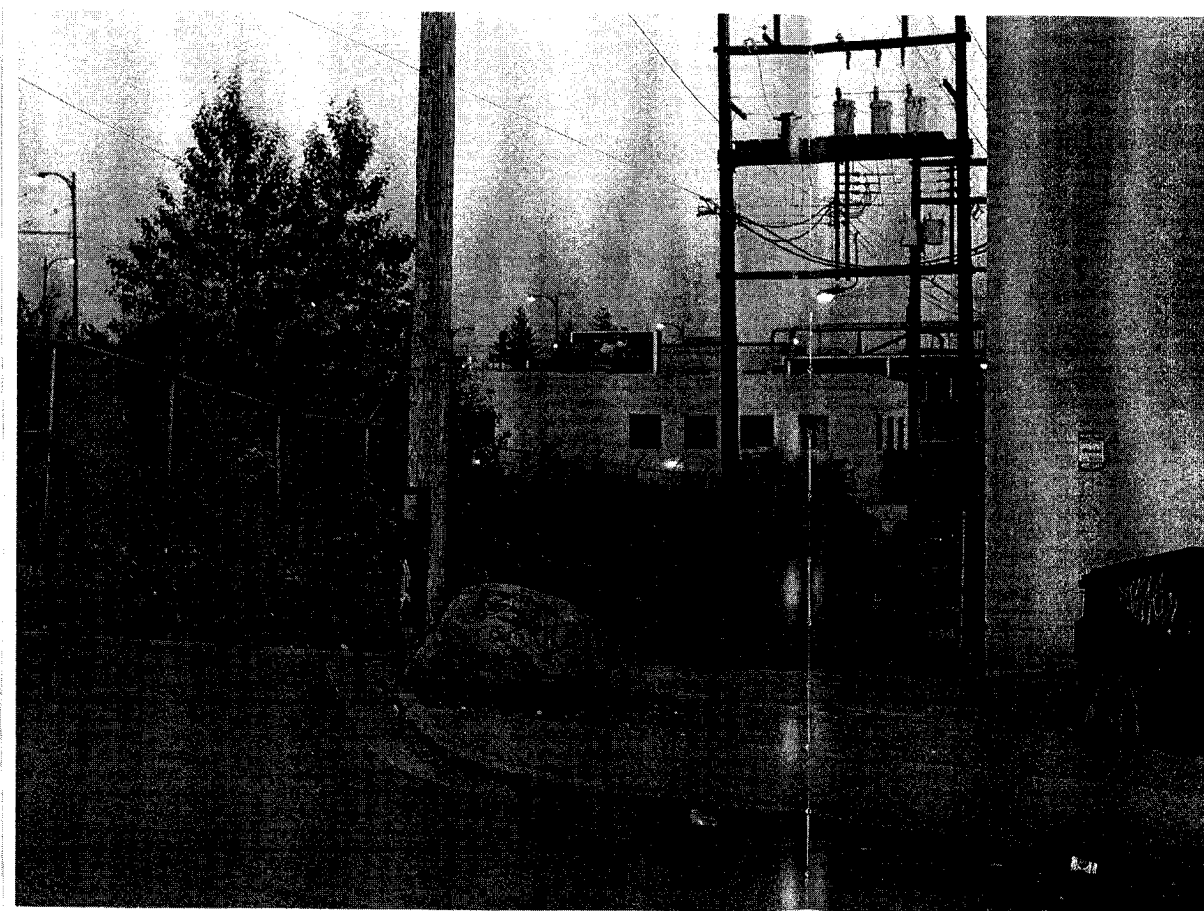
7. Gustave Courbet, *L'Atelier du Deintre: Allégorie réelle*, 1855, Oil on canvas, 361 x 598 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



8. Jeff Wall, *(Untitled) Overpass*, 2001, Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 290 cm, Private Collection.



9. Jeff Wall, *The Holocaust Memorial in the Jewish Cemetery*, 1987, Transparency in lightbox, 119 x 216 cm, Private Collection.



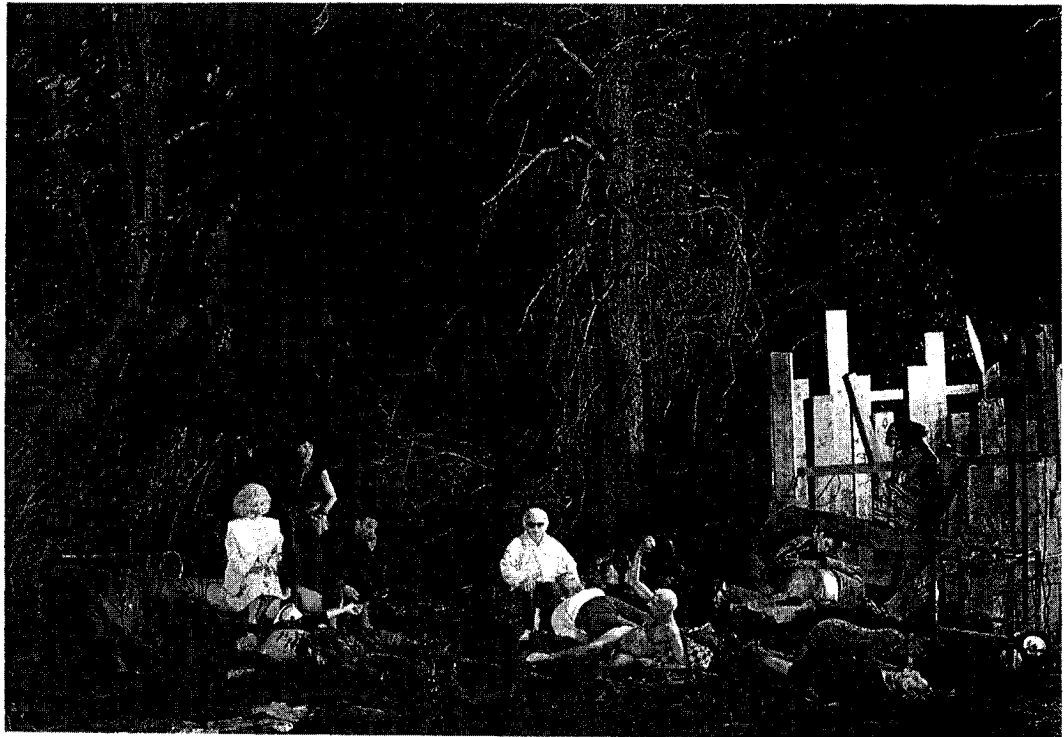
10. Jeff Wall, *Untitled (Dawn)*, 2001, Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 290 cm, Private Collection.



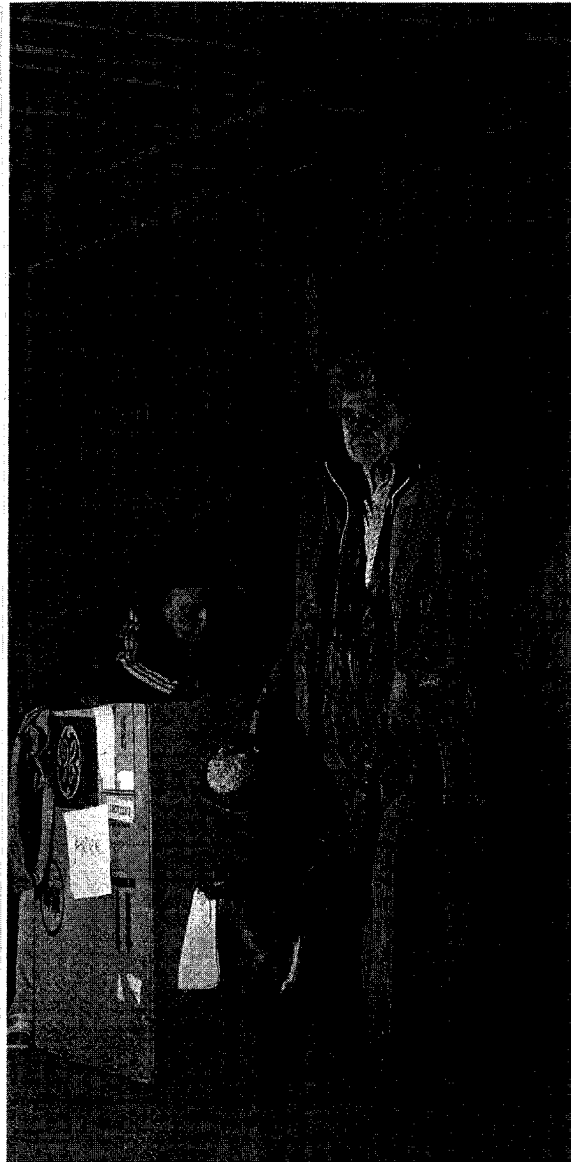
11. Jeff Wall, *Outburst*, 1989, Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 312 cm, Private Collection.



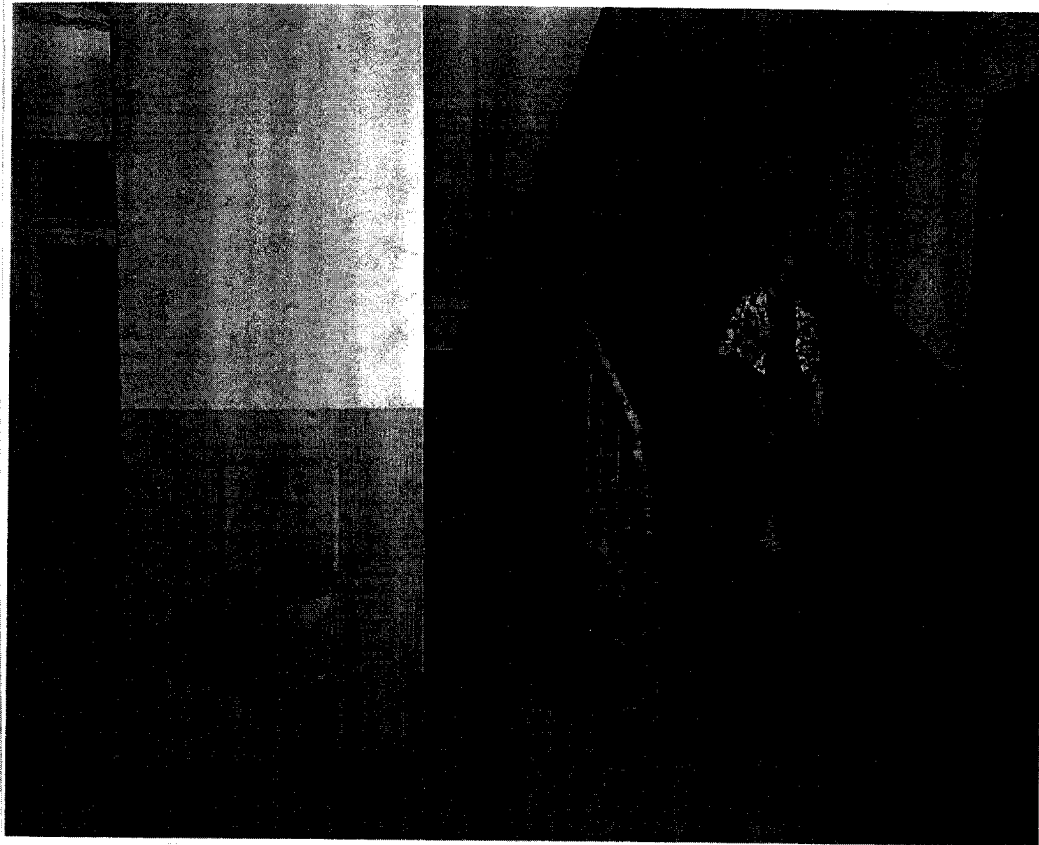
12. Jeff Wall, *Tattoos & Shadows*, 2000, Transparency in lightbox, 195.5 x 255 cm, Private Collection.



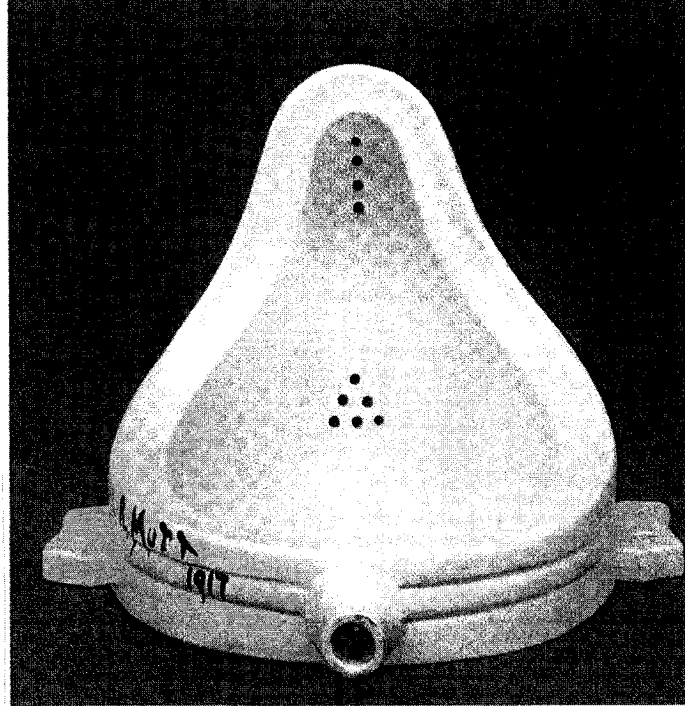
13. Jeff Wall, *The Vampire's Picnic*, 1991, Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 335 cm, National Gallery of Canada.



14. Jeff Wall, *Abundance*, 1985, Transparency in lightbox, 223 x 122 cm, Private Collection.



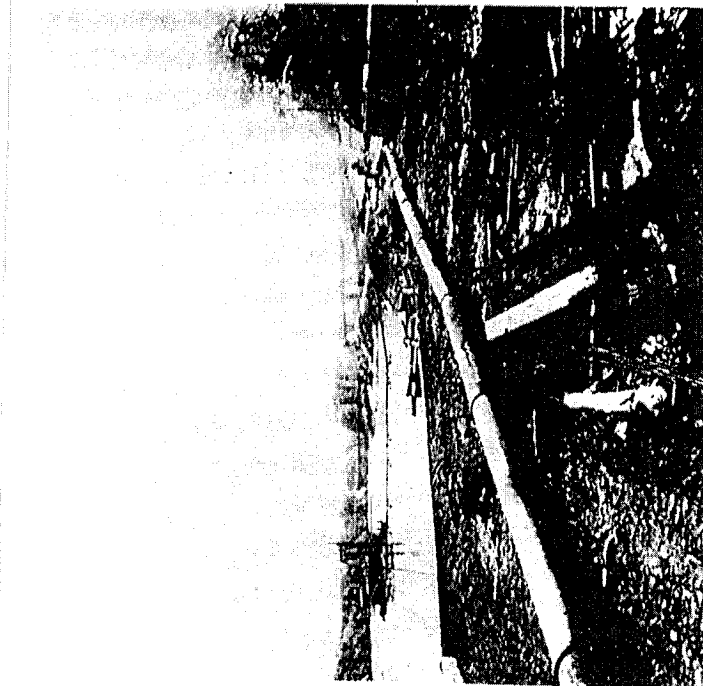
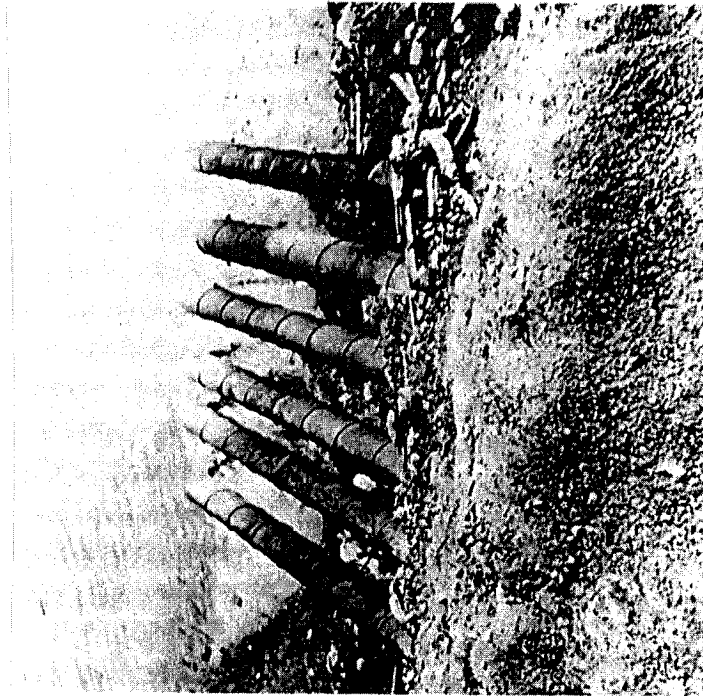
15. Jeff Wall, *Odradek, Toboritska 8, Prague, 18th July, 1994*, 1994, Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 289 cm, Private Collection.



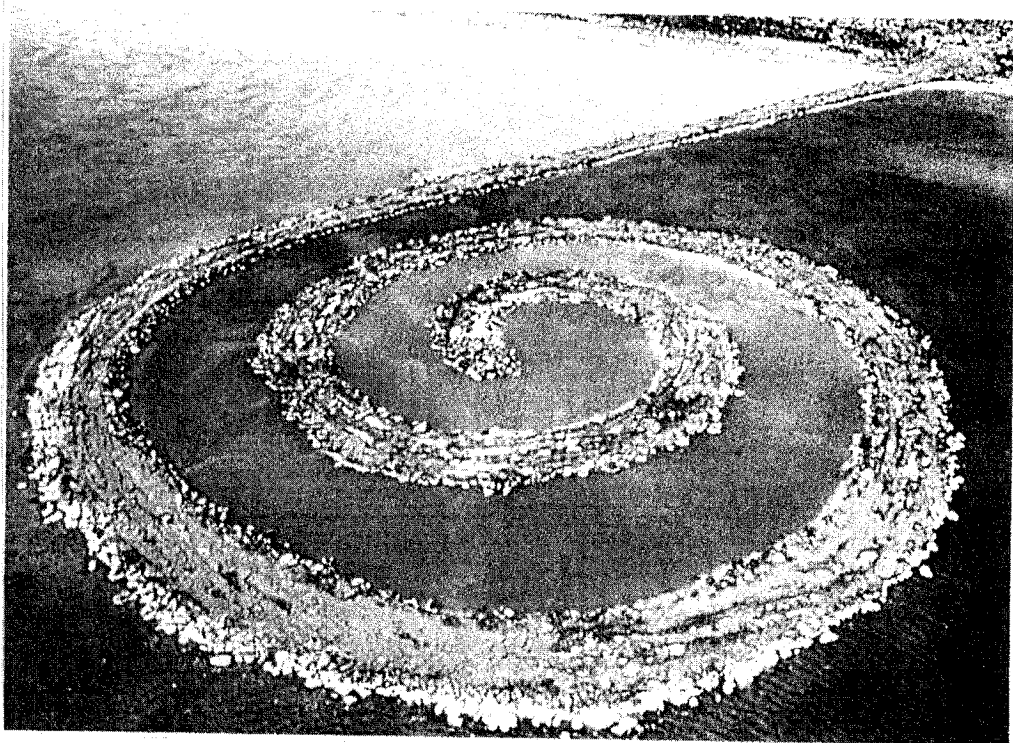
16. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 (original lost), Readymade: porcelain urinal, Height 60 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



17. Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series*, 1969, Colour Photograph



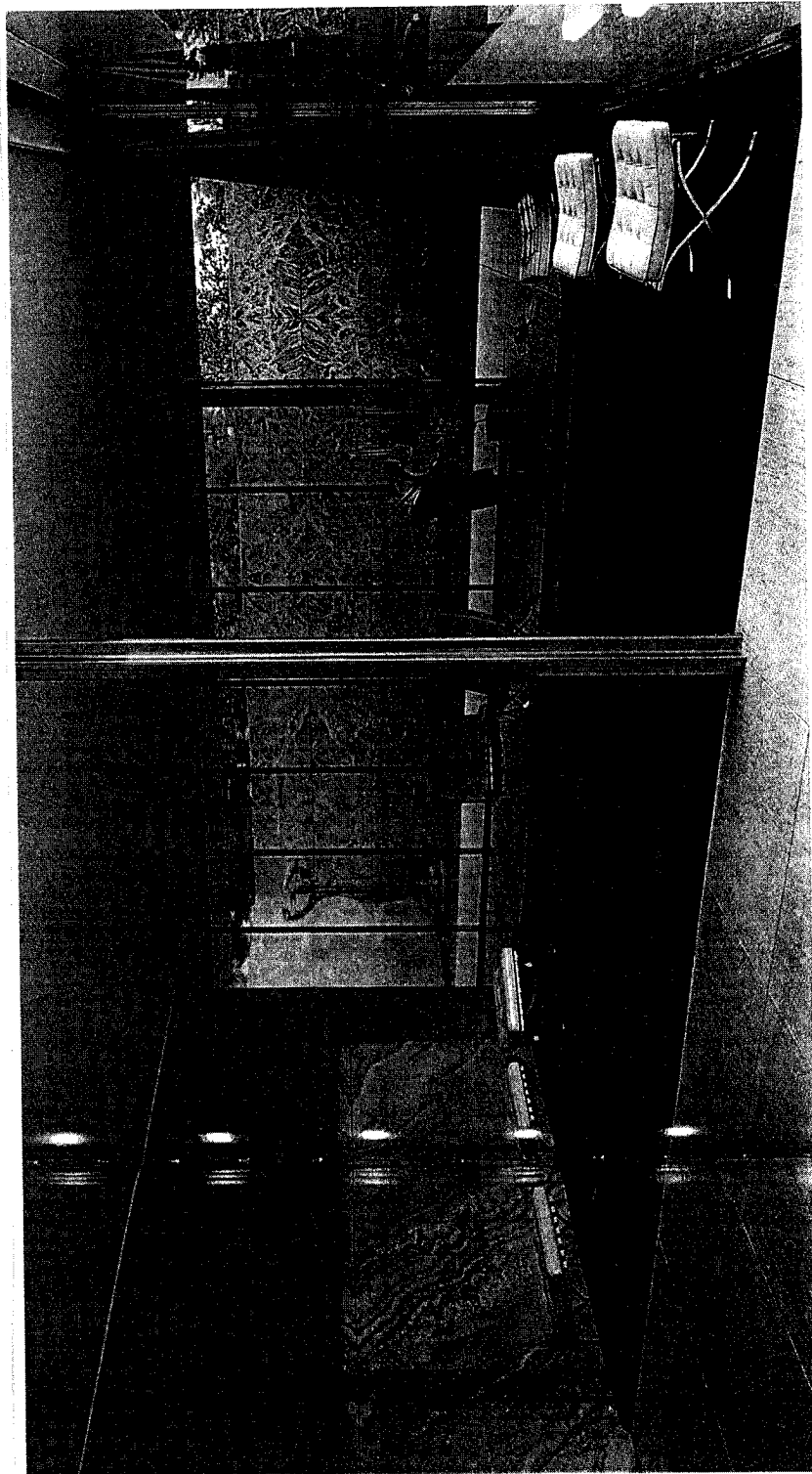
18. Robert Smithson, the Great Pipes Monument (left) and the Fountain Monument (right) part of *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*, 1967, Black and White Photographs, Museet For Samtiskunst, Norway.



19. Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, April 1970, Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah.



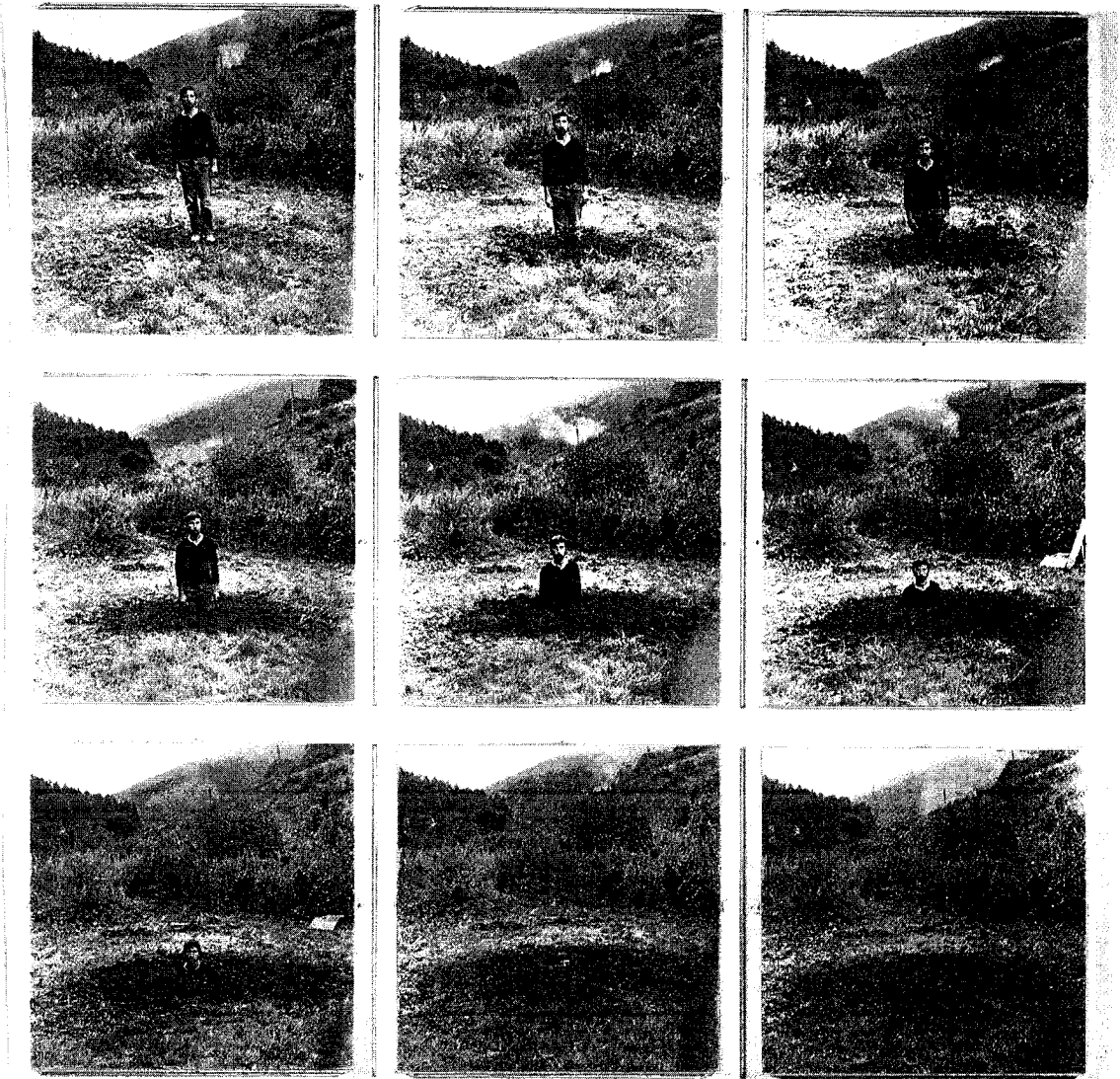
20. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Maintenance Art Manifesto*, 1973-74, performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, part of *Maintenance Art Performance Series*.



21. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, *Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999, Transparency in lightbox, 187 x 351 cm, Private Collection.

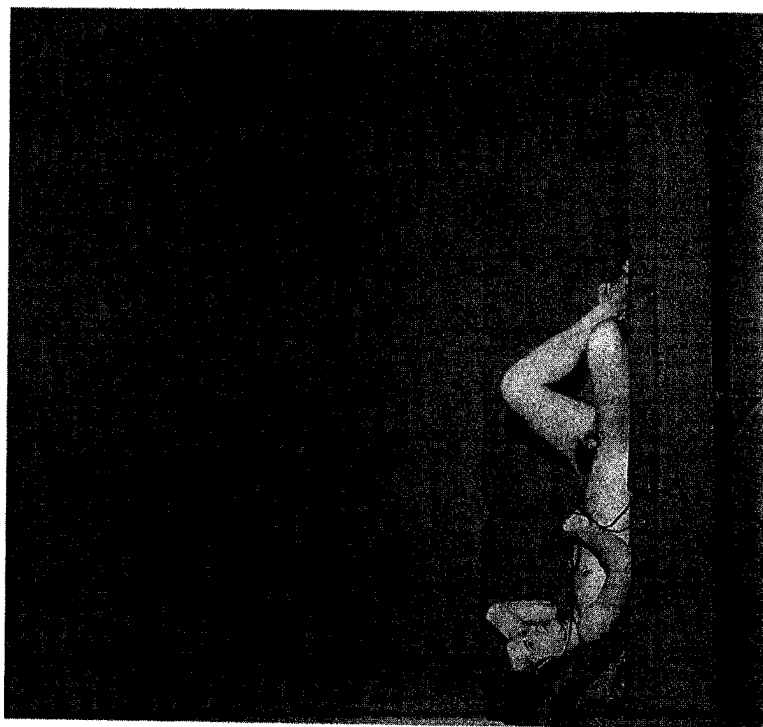


22. Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, Transparency in lightbox, 159 x 234 cm, National Gallery of Canada.



23. Keith Arnatt, *Self-Burial*, 1969, Black and White Photograph.

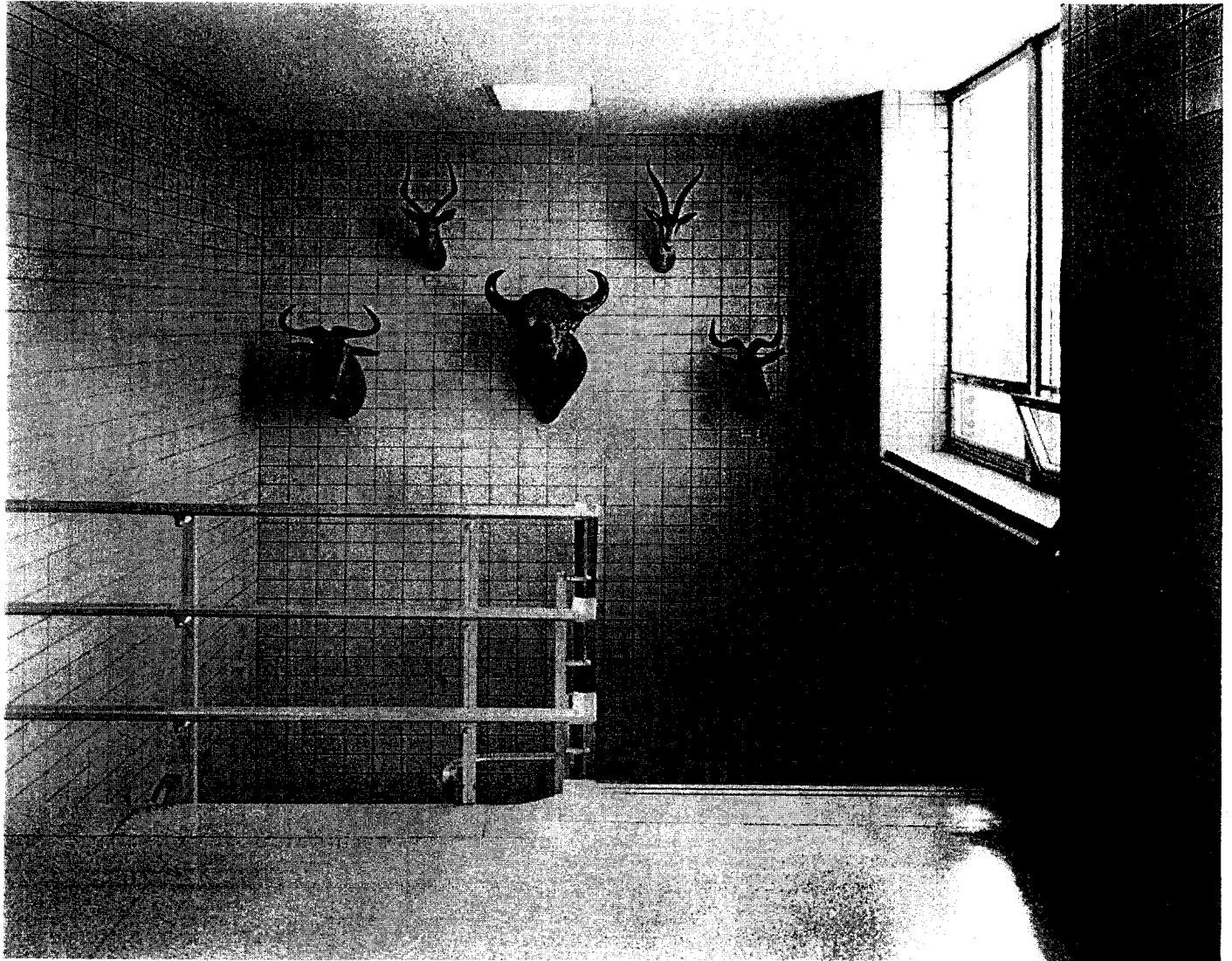
STEREO



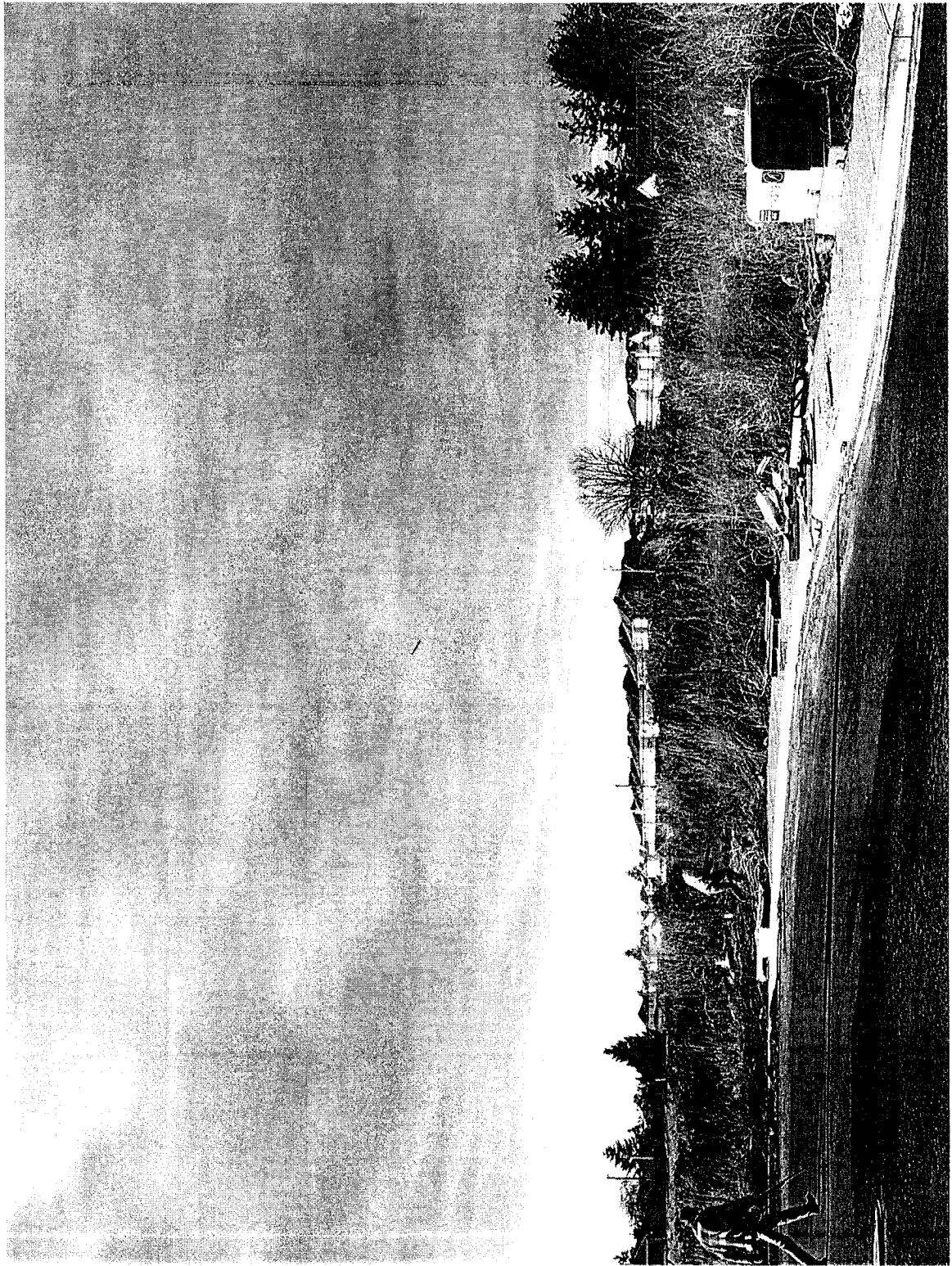
24. Jeff Wall, *Stereo*, 1980, Transparencies in lightboxes, Diptych, 213 x 213 cm each, National Gallery of Canada.



25. Barbara Kruger, *Your Comfort is My Silence*, 1981, Photograph with added text, 142 x 101 cm, Thomas Ammann, Zurich.



26. Lynn Cohen, *Biology Building, State University of New York, Postdam, 1983*, Private Collection.



27. Jeff Wall, *A Hunting Scene*, 1994, Transparency in lightbox, 167 x 237 cm, Private Collection.