

LESSON FOUR: Constructing Stories



IMAGE TEN: Cindy Sherman. American, born 1954. *Untitled Film Still #3*. 1977. Gelatin silver print, 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (18 x 24 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Peter Norton. © 2007 Cindy Sherman



IMAGE ELEVEN: Cindy Sherman. American, born 1954. *Untitled Film Still #54*. 1980. Gelatin silver print, 6 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 9 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (17.3 x 24 cm). Acquired through the generosity of Peter Norton. © 2007 Cindy Sherman



IMAGE TWELVE: Jeff Wall. Canadian, born 1946. *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*. 1999–2000, printed 2001. Silver dye bleach transparency (Ilfochrome); aluminum light box. Image: 5' 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8' 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (174 x 250.8 cm); light box: 6' 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 8' 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (193.7 x 269.9 x 26 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Photography Council Fund, Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel, and acquired through the generosity of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder and Carol and David Appel. © 2007 Jeff Wall

INTRODUCTION

Using a wide range of sources, photographers Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall construct their own sets, stories, and situations. While it refers to the history of photography, their work is not easily classified in any one specific tradition. Instead, these contemporary photographers employ provocative subjects and strategies, challenging expectations and expanding the understanding of the medium.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to the process and strategies of two contemporary photographers.
- Students will consider how these photographers incorporate cinematic and literary references.
- Students will consider how places pictured in these photographs may provide clues about the identity of their subjects.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to consider the different elements of a story. On the board or on paper, write a collective list of the key ingredients of a story.
- Ask your students to think about how the different elements considered by a movie director when filming a scene (set, lighting, staging, placement of the actors, and position of the camera, among others) help tell the story. Add these ideas to the class list of the elements of a story.
- Ask your students to visualize a favorite moment in a book. Are characters featured? Where and when does it take place? Ask them to write a description of what they remember. Give them the option of creating a sketch or a collage inspired by their visualization.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students the image of *Untitled Film Still #3*, by Cindy Sherman (Image Ten). Do not tell them the title right away. Ask them to discuss what might be going on in this photograph. Where is this person and what is she doing? How has the photographer implied that something is happening outside the frame or is about to happen?
- Ask your students to compare *Untitled Film Still #3* with *Untitled Film Still #54* (Image Eleven). Ask them to compare the subjects, settings, vantage points, and framing of the photographs.
- Divide your students into partners or small groups. Ask half the class to further develop the identity of the character in *Untitled Film Still #3* and the other half to focus on *Untitled Film Still #54*. Students should come up with the person's name, occupation, and a little bit of personal history. Ask them to account for what may have happened just before the scene in the photograph and what might happen afterward. As a class, reflect on the characters and stories that emerged.

Untitled Film Stills is a series of seventy photographs by Sherman featuring the artist pictured from different angles in a variety of costumes, make-up, poses, and settings. Sherman's costumes came from thrift stores, where she had been shopping for some time. Many of the interior film stills, such as *Untitled Film Still #3*, were taken in her apartment, using a tripod and a shutter release attached to a cable. Under her direction, friends photographed outdoor scenes such as *Untitled Film Still #54*.

- After sharing this information with your students, ask them how knowing that the same person is pictured in both photographs affects their interpretations. Why do they think the artist pictured herself rather than casting someone else in these roles? How does Sherman play with ideas of identity in these photographs?
- Invite your students to reflect on the titles of the photographs. Collectively define the meaning of *film still*. How do these photographs allude to cinema?

Sherman is inspired by her interest in cinema and her love of dressing up—a favorite activity in her childhood. Many of Sherman’s cinematic types seem familiar not only in their attire but also in how they are staged, **cropped**, and framed. Inspired by film directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and Michelangelo Antonioni, Sherman makes use of dramatic angles and the implication of unseen activities off camera. However, she does not try to recreate specific scenes, stills, or shots. Also, Sherman allows the body language and facial expression of her characters to remain ambiguous. She has written, “What I didn’t want were pictures showing strong emotions, which was rare to see; in film stills there’s a lot of overacting because they’re trying to sell the movie. The movie isn’t necessarily funny or happy, but in those publicity photos, if there’s one character, she’s smiling.”¹⁵ When it came to staging outdoor shots such as *Untitled Film Still #54*, Sherman emphasized the ambiguity of the narrative by being sure to create scenes “in-between the action.”¹⁶

As a class, collectively define the word *ambiguity*. How does the fact that the series is untitled and known only by numbers contribute to the ambiguous nature of the photographs? Ask your students how Sherman’s choices enabled them to come up with different stories about the characters’ identities and the scenes unfolding in *Untitled Film Still #3* and *Untitled Film Still #54*?

- Ask your students to look at the image of *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, by Jeff Wall (Image Twelve). Do not share the title right away. What can your students infer about this place? What can be gleaned about the subject and his interests? Is the time of day discernible? Why or why not? Given the styles, types of objects, and clothing, is the time period apparent? What questions does the photograph raise?
- Ask your students to write a monologue from the standpoint of the person they see in the room. Invite your students to share their creative writing with the class. What ideas emerged about this person and the place he inhabits?
- Share the work’s title with your students. Even without having read the 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, can they speculate how the title might relate to the photograph?

Wall refers to his inspiration for this photograph as an “accident of reading.”¹⁷ The photograph is based on Ellison’s prologue, but details have been drawn from other parts of the book and from Wall’s imagination. Wall, like Sherman, was originally a painter and is very influenced by cinema. He refers to his method of photography as “cinematography,” and like a cinematic production his work is partially dependent on collaboration. Wall’s photography involves a paid cast and assistants and, in the case of *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, a painstakingly constructed set. A large-format camera with a telephoto lens creates the high resolution and detailed quality of Wall’s large prints. This photograph, like most of Wall’s work, has been printed on a transparency and mounted in a steel-framed light box. Wall’s images are strikingly large in scale and are illuminated from behind by fluorescent lights. The artist was inspired to experiment with this technique after seeing light-box advertisements in the late 1970s.

15. Cindy Sherman, *The Untitled Film Stills* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art), 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 9.

17. Jeff Wall, interview by Peter Galassi, in *Jeff Wall*, by Peter Galassi (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 157.

This photograph has been very carefully constructed. Ask your students to consider the significance of Wall's decisions. Why might Wall have chosen to capture the scene from this particular vantage point? How is the man's pose important? What is the effect of some light bulbs being on while others are not? Ask your students to consider why the large scale of Wall's work might be important.

In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist speaks about how he is stealing energy from the Metropolitan Electric Company, illuminating himself and his home in the basement of an apartment building in New York City:

Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. . . . Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.

In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I've already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don't know. Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I'll solve the problem. . . . Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison, and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a "thinker-tinker."¹⁸

- **After they have read the excerpted text, ask your students to consider parallels between the character in the photograph, Wall, and Ellison. How is the story's protagonist, like the writer and photographer, also an artist? How does Wall, like Ellison and his character, use light to set a scene and tell a story? Ask your students to look up the origin and meaning of the word *photograph*, as coined by Sir John Herschel in 1839. How does this origin relate to Wall's work?**

In Wall's view, familiarity with Ellison's novel is not necessary to appreciate this photograph. Nor should the photograph necessarily prompt someone to read the book. Wall hopes that viewers will be inspired to create their own stories. By appreciating the picture, Wall says, someone "can be thought of as having written his or her own novel. The viewer's experience and associations will do that. These unwritten novels are a form in which the experience of art is carried over into everyday life."¹⁹

- **Ask students to consider what Wall might mean in speaking about the experience of art in everyday life.**

Although they became aware of one another later in their careers, Sherman and Wall began experimenting independently with staging photographs in the late 1970s. Ask your students to summarize similarities and differences between the process, subject matter, format, and presentation undertaken by Wall and Sherman in these photographs. How do both photographers invite the viewer to create their own stories and associations?

18. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) (New York: Random House, 1982), 5–6.

19. Jeff Wall, interview by Peter Galassi, 157.

ACTIVITIES

Hitchcock's Women

Sherman's Untitled Film Stills provide a critical look at how women are pictured in film. Writing about sources of inspiration for the series, Sherman speaks about the influence of Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window*. The film primarily takes place in the New York City apartment of L. B. Jefferies (Jimmy Stewart), a photographer who is using a wheelchair while his broken leg heals. Stuck in his apartment, he spends his summer spying on his neighbors, and while doing so he witnesses a murder, or so he believes. Screen selections or the complete movie for your class. Then ask your students to answer the following questions about the film: How does Hitchcock create suspense? What are some notable views and angles? What is the role of Jefferies's camera? How is this a movie about looking? What type of character is Lisa Carol Fremont (Grace Kelly), and how does she compare with Stella (Thelma Ritter)? What are some of Jefferies's nicknames for his female neighbors?

A Story in Stills

Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* reveals how a story can be told through photographs. Screen the short film for your class, then ask students to summarize what happened. Do they think Marker's use of stills was more effective in telling the story than live-action film? Why or why not?

The Art of Reenactment

In constructing their pictures, Sherman and Wall use reenactment in different ways. Using what he calls "near documentary," Wall plays with the tradition of street photography (discussed in Lesson Two of this guide) by directing and photographing models to reenact actions he witnessed on the street. Assign your students the task of keeping an eye out for an interesting action on the street or in another public space. Ask them to write a brief description of the moment and why it was memorable. Back in the classroom, divide your students into groups of three or four. In their groups, each student should take turns directing their classmates to reenact the gesture or action he or she witnessed. If cameras (such as digital or disposable ones) are available, have the students document the reenactments. Groups may present the photographs to one another or to the entire class. What can be inferred about the reenacted poses and/or the photographs? Ask your students to reflect on the experience of witnessing, remembering, reenacting, and directing. For more inspiration, send your students to look at Wall's "near documentary" works, such as *Mimic*, *Doorpusher*, and *Milk*, on the Web site for the exhibition *Jeff Wall*, at www.moma.org/exhibitions/2007/jeffwall.