

JEFF WALL RETROSPECTIVE AT MoMA SURVEYS THREE DECADES OF INNOVATION

Exhibition Includes Five Recent Photographs on View for the First Time in North America

Jeff Wall

February 25–May 14, 2007

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 20, 2007—Jeff Wall (Canadian, b. 1946) is widely recognized as one of the most adventurous and inventive artists of his generation. Since 1978, he has worked principally with large color photographs presented as transparencies in light boxes. His distinctive pictorial universe ranges from gritty realism to elaborate fantasy, drawing upon an unusually broad range of sources that include nineteenth-century painting, Conceptual art, narrative cinema, and modernist photography. The major retrospective *Jeff Wall* comprises 40 works that span Wall's career from 1978 to the present. It presents a robust assembly of ambitious and celebrated pictures, including *Picture for Women* (1979), *Mimic* (1982), *The Storyteller* (1986), *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993), *Restoration* (1993), and *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* (1999–2000). Five recent pictures will be shown for the first time in North America, including a large multi-figure composition titled *In front of a nightclub* (2006). Organized jointly by The Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition is co-curated by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator of Photography, MoMA, and Neal Benezra, Director, SFMOMA. It will be on view in MoMA's Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery on the sixth floor from February 25 through May 14, 2007, after which it will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (June 30–September 23, 2007) and conclude its tour at SFMOMA (October 27, 2007–January 27, 2008).

"Jeff Wall is a risk-taker, and his best and most original works often arise from his wildest risks," says Mr. Galassi. "The vividness of his light boxes lends unity to his work, but his best photographs are as diverse as the many and varied images and ideas upon which they draw. The opportunity to bring together major pictures spanning three decades is thus especially rewarding in Wall's case."

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he still lives and works, Jeff Wall began painting and drawing seriously as a teenager. He studied art history at the University of British Columbia, where he earned a Master's degree in 1970 with a thesis on Dada in Berlin. Vancouver was at this time rapidly becoming a vibrant artistic center, and by the late 1960s Wall's own work

was closely attuned to the most recent developments in Minimal and Conceptual art. In 1970, his *Landscape Manual* (1969–70), a 56-page black-and-white pamphlet of photographs and text, was exhibited at MoMA in *Information*, the influential survey of Conceptual art curated by Kynaston McShine, now Chief Curator at Large, The Museum of Modern Art.

However, Wall was dissatisfied with his work. He moved to London to study toward a doctorate in art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and he soon stopped making art altogether. During his three years in London, he read widely in philosophy, the history and criticism of art and film, and the growing field of critical theory. He saw many films, and by the time he returned to Vancouver in the spring of 1973, he had decided to commit himself to filmmaking. Although he admired experimental cinema, his touchstone was postwar Neorealism in the broadest sense—films that used conventional narrative structures to deal imaginatively with everyday life.

Wall started teaching art and art history in 1974, and in 1976 he was appointed Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver. None of his filmmaking projects had come to fruition, and he was eager to begin making art again. He had become close to the American artist Dan Graham and, like Graham, felt that the Conceptual movement had reached an impasse. (His 1982 essay, “Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel,” expresses this outlook; it appears in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, published by MoMA on the occasion of the exhibition.)

In the wake of the Conceptual crisis, Wall aimed to rebuild the rebellious spirit of modernism from the ground up. The distinctiveness of his art ever since has derived largely from the intensity with which he felt that mandate, his willingness to devote considerable resources of time and energy to entirely untested prospects, and his wide-ranging passion for and curiosity about images and ideas. The key initial elements were certain aspects of cinema and painting, brought together in an unusual photographic medium.

Wall began working in the SFU studios, where, like a filmmaker, he could build sets, control lighting, rehearse actors, and otherwise create an entirely fictional image. He adopted the term “cinematography” to summarize his approach, which he felt could greatly enrich the potential of still photography. Another key ingredient of Wall’s new aesthetic was his sense that post-Renaissance painting could serve as a vital resource for contemporary art. On his first visit to the Museo del Prado in Madrid in the summer of 1977, he was deeply affected by the work of Diego Velázquez, Francisco de Goya, and others, and in his own art he sought to emulate the commanding physical presence and pictorial power of Western painting’s grand theater of human figures in action.

In Wall’s view, color photography—then widely regarded as vulgar and commercial—was an ideal medium, in part because it distanced his work from the contemporaneous revival of figure painting that he regarded as a betrayal of avant-garde principles. Backlit transparencies had become common in advertising, and at first Wall embraced the commercial association as essential to the socially critical dimension of his art.

The initial phase of Wall's light-box work is represented in the exhibition by *The Destroyed Room* (1978), *Picture for Women* (1979), and *Double Self-Portrait* (1979). The first two works allude to famous nineteenth-century French paintings by Eugène Delacroix and Édouard Manet, respectively, and were initially conceived to address the circumstance of women under capitalism. But the pictures' pictorial sources, as well as their critical goals, have been thoroughly transformed through a complex admixture of Conceptual strategies and political and theoretical concerns.

The first photographs that Wall made outdoors, in 1980, were three panoramic landscapes—assertions that his art would not be limited to studio fictions. These straightforward views, like most of Wall's subsequent landscapes, belong to a long photographic tradition of examining man's presence in the land. The genre is represented in the exhibition by *Steves Farm, Steveston* (1980), *The Old Prison* (1987), and *Coastal Motifs* (1989).

Wall also left the studio to make such works as *Mimic* (1982) and *Milk* (1984), both of which were inspired by incidents that he had observed on the street. He hired non-professional actors and restaged these incidents for the tripod-bound, large-format camera that he needed in order to produce images adequately rich in detail for his large transparencies. This way of working, combined with a focus on people at the margins of society, has shaped a central vein of Wall's art ever since. He summarized the program as "the painting of modern life," a phrase associated with the work of Manet and derived from a celebrated essay by Charles Baudelaire, titled "The Painter of Modern Life." In *Milk*, the liquid explosion caused by the man's abrupt gesture, set against the bleak geometry of the contemporary city, makes a vivid image of distress. As in Baudelaire's prose poems, the gritty reality of the street is transformed into a striking emblem of contemporary experience.

In the late 1980s, Wall developed his modern-life imagery in two major pictures that step back to take in a broad view and incorporate a larger cast of characters: *The Storyteller* (1986) and *An Eviction* (1988; revised 2004). The former describes a gathering of indigent descendents of Canada's first peoples on the embankment of a highway overpass. Wall took the picture's theme and its title from an essay by Walter Benjamin that held up the premodern figure of the storyteller as an embodiment of (in Wall's words) "the memory of values excluded by capitalist progress." Although the artist has since questioned the socially progressive spirit of the picture, his many photographs that describe the marginal and dispossessed (*Overpass*, 2001) or acknowledge racial and ethnic diversity (*Trần Đức Văn* [1988/2003] and *Tattoos and Shadows* [2000]) have achieved a sustained quality of genuine attention, unmarred by condescension or sentimentality.

In the early 1990s, Wall's art developed in sharply divergent directions. One path led to fantastic and even bizarre scenes, often created with the help of digital montage. The artist had observed the growing sophistication of digitally altered imagery, and when the tools reached the level required by his large photographs, he began to make use of them. Among the earliest works

in which he did so is *Dead Troops Talk* (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (1992), in which slaughtered soldiers who have mysteriously awakened respond to their deaths in different ways. More than 13 feet wide, the picture invests the grandeur of Napoleonic history painting and cinematic epics of war with a highly particular fantasy.

The following year, Wall digitally composed another, equally ambitious picture, but of a very different kind. *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai) (1993) transposes a scene from a nineteenth-century Japanese print into to a cranberry bog outside Vancouver. Fascinated by the challenge of recreating the print's striking visual impression of an invisible natural force, Wall surrendered to and was rewarded by the ungovernable magic of picture-making.

The light-hearted *A Sudden Gust of Wind* could hardly be more different from *Dead Troops Talk*—or from the other new branch of imagery that Wall had recently initiated. For at the same time that he was testing the limits of fantasy, Wall was also exploring the modern photographic traditions that he had at first challenged. *Some Beans* and *An Octopus* (both 1990) and subsequent figureless pictures made both in- and outdoors embrace photography's fundamental capacity to transform raw fact into pictorial poetry.

In 1993—the same year he made *A Sudden Gust of Wind*—Wall also made *Restoration*, a tour-de-force of photographic description that adopts a narrow panoramic form as if in emulation of its subject: a vast, walk-in panorama painted in the late nineteenth century, which in the early 1990s was in the first stages of being restored. From a position near the edge of the circular interior, the picture takes in a sweep of 180 degrees to revel in the interplay between surface and depth, and between painterly and photographic description.

In 1996, Wall deepened his rapprochement with photographic tradition by beginning to work in black and white. Most of his pictures in that medium have been drawn from everyday life, including all four of the monochrome works that are presented together in a single gallery in the exhibition. The most significant new note here is the gloom and murk of darkness, luxuriously rendered in *Night* (2001).

If many contemporary photographers regard black-and-white imagery as hopelessly antiquated, artists in general might agree that illustrations of novels have been definitively relegated to the past. Wall's explorations of the latter domain consequently exemplify his distinctive ability to marshal the neglected past in the service of an uncharted future. The exhibition includes two such pictures. One makes gloriously visible the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, composing the novel itself in an underground lair illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs. The other is a small, seductive image (printed in 2005), drawn from Yukio Mishima's novel *Spring Snow*.

The exhibition's sequence of galleries includes two large rooms. The first is devoted to four large works that are presented together for the first time: *The Storyteller*, *An Eviction*, *A Sudden Gust of Wind*, and *Restoration*. The second large space features recent works that return

to the gritty realities of *Mimic* and *Milk*, but with a pictorial suppleness that was not available to Wall twenty years earlier. The stylistic evolution is especially striking in the most recent work in the exhibition, *In front of a nightclub*.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is organized by The Museum of Modern Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The New York presentation of the exhibition is made possible by Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann. Major corporate support is provided by RBC Capital Markets. The accompanying publications are made possible by Carol and David Appel.

PUBLICATIONS:

Two publications accompany the exhibition:

Jeff Wall includes color plates of all of the works in the exhibition; an interview with Jeff Wall by James Rondeau, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago; and a richly illustrated essay by Mr. Galassi that traces the evolution of Wall's work and links his originality to the breadth and complexity of his artistic and intellectual interests. Clothbound: 9.75 X 10.75 inches; 168 pages; 90 color and 30 b&w illustrations. \$50

Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews is the first collection of Jeff Wall's essays and interviews to be published in English. The subjects of Wall's essays range from the work of Édouard Manet, On Kawara, and Dan Graham to the role of photography in Conceptual art. Paperback: 6.75 X 9.75 inches; 348 pages; 120 b&w illustrations. \$24.95

Both books are distributed to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada and through Thames & Hudson outside of North America. They will be available in March 2007 at MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org.

PROGRAMS:

Jeff Wall will discuss his work on Monday, February 26, 2007, at 6:30 p.m., in MoMA's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. This event is sold out. Members of the press who wish to cover the event may contact Meg Blackburn, 212/708-9757 or meg_blackburn@moma.org.

In addition, two Brown Bag Lunch Lectures about the exhibition (the same lecture on each date) will be given on Monday, March 26, and Thursday, March 29, from 12:30 to 1:15 p.m., in Classroom B of The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building at 4 West 54 Street. Attendees may bring their own lunches. Tickets (\$5; \$3 for members, students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the Film desk, or in the Cullman Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

EXHIBITION WEB SITE:

The accompanying Web site, www.moma.org/jeffwall, features a selection of works from the exhibition accompanied by excerpts from Wall's published remarks about the works. Images are dynamically scaled to custom fit each visitor's screen size, and a zoom capability provides even greater access to the details of the works. The site is designed and programmed by the Belgian firm group94 from images and texts selected by Béatrice Gross, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Photography, MoMA. It will be available when the show opens to the public on February 25.

TRAVEL:

Following its New York showing, the exhibition will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago (June 30–September 23, 2007) and conclude its tour at SFMOMA (October 27, 2007–January 27, 2008).

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Press Contact: 212/708-9431 or pressoffice@moma.org

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www.moma.org/press. Please call for username and password.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

Hours: Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.-8:00 p.m.
Closed Tuesday

Museum Admission: \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free for children 16 and under. Free for members. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs)
Target Free Friday Nights 4:00-8:00 p.m.

Film Admission: \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D. \$6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only)

Subway: E or V train to Fifth Avenue/53rd Street

Bus: On Fifth Avenue, take the M1, M2, M3, M4, or M5 to 53rd Street. On Sixth Avenue, take the M5, M6, or M7 to 53rd Street. Or take the M57 and M50 crosstown buses on 57th and 50th Streets.

The public may call 212/708-9400 for detailed Museum information.

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