Wall's Tableau Mort

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1. See Friedrich Schlegel's, 'Critical Fragments' and 'Athenaeum Fragments' in his *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 1991)

For how many contemporary artists besides Jeff Wall would a conference of papers dedicated to the analysis of individual works be so appropriate, perhaps even required? For who else would this approach fit, and so snugly, as the basis for a special issue of an art journal, let alone an academic one? Wall's practice is in many respects distinguished – one might well say isolated – by the production of a certain individuation or integration of the artwork, which encourages, often spectacularly, the kind of sustained if not altogether academic attention of this approach. Wall's art is an art of the single image, the picture or tableau. This is as much an anachronism as it is an achievement of his modernism.

Wall's work is strikingly distinct from contemporary art-photography's preoccupation with the series, whether in the narrative forms practised by Allan Sekula derived from the photo-essay or book, or the non-narrative and more aggregative or archival forms of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their students, such as Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth. Andreas Gursky is an interesting exception among the latter, but the unity of his images is derived from the overallness of its subject matter, usually itself serial in nature, which is strictly subordinated to its decorative properties in generating a surface unity. This subordination of subject matter to its decorative coherence tends to make Gursky's pictures more stylised and comparable than, say, Wall's. The serial forms of contemporary art-photography register certain conditions of photographic modernism, despite frequent suggestions that this work is simply a technologically enhanced recovery of pictorialism. Photography's mass reproducibility is less determining here – especially insofar as this is repressed in art-photography's limited editions – than the fragmented kind of picture it produces as a result of its mechanized composition: its quality of being a snapshot rather than a tableau, which then requires montage as both the supplementation and the emphasis of its fragmentariness. The intensively composed, encompassingly scaled, images of much contemporary art-photography resist this, but its serial forms reveals a residual circums-cription by this transformation of the idea of the picture. Once the picture is treated as a fragment, unity is sought in some ensemble of picture-units, and the task of composition essentially exceeds the individual image. Seriality is a peculiarly photographic form of unity in its endlessness or incompleteablity. It registers the extent to which a whole cannot be assembled out of fragments. An alternative form of the fragment would be the early German Romantic's apparently paradoxical idea of it as the finite presentation of unity, wholeness, indeed, absoluteness. This is a plural form – Friedrich Schlegel wrote 'fragments' – but it is not serial.[1] These tensions of fragmentation, unity and seriality might well be considered decisive to the forms of contemporary art-photography.

Wall's resistance to serial construction indicates his recourse to an in part pre-photographic idea of the picture. This distinguishes Wall's work from the presuppositions of much non-photographic modern art, not least because of

Fig. 58. Jeff Wall, *Stereo*, transparency in lightbox, 213 × 213 cm, 1980.

the generic impact of this photographic displacement of the traditional idea of the picture across the arts, all the more intensified since Minimalism. It might be said that where the ambition for a unified work has not been abandoned in favour of disparate fragments or events, it has tended to become an enormous labour of montage or composition, beyond or outside the single picture frame. The attempt of Sol Lewitt and others to generate serial systems is less a solution to this than a withdrawal from the kind of systematicity or wholeness demanded by the tableau. The expanded field of the artwork's unity has extended to a Babel-like archive. 'Works' like Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* or Art & Language's *Index 01* are not

2. Charles Harrison, *Conceptual Art and Painting: Further Essays on Art & Language* (MIT: Cambridge, MA, 2001)

3. These are notably early works. *Young Workers*, 1978–83, is a series of individual portraits, each head looking to the left, beyond the picture frame, seemingly echoing the conventions of socialist realist heroism. This distinguishes them from the Sanderesque typography of, say, Ruff's series of portraits, as does its modest delimitation to eight parts. *Movie Audience*, 1979, groups the same manner of portraits in twos and threes, the heroic pose now transcoded as absorption in a movie. (The relation between these works is like an allegory of disillusionment.) Again, this piece is relatively limited to seven parts. However, the compositional modesty of these head shots is also distinct from most of Wall's other work. *Little Children (I-IX)*, 1988 – Wall's contribution to his collaboration with Dan Graham on an unrealised *The Children's Pavilion* – is another exception. These works are like Baroque ceiling-paintings of cherubs scaled to the diameter of the water basin in the middle of the planned pavilion, and, although they do not look like they would have been too vertiginous, the architectural character of these works is opposed to the discreetness and graspability expected of the traditional tableau. *An Octopus* and *Some Beans*, both 1990, are another exception, although perhaps suggestive of a diptych rather than a series of two.

4. '*Stereo* originally consisted of two panels: one with the picture, the other with the word 'STEREO' in large black capitals on a white background. The two parts were presented as a diptych. In 2000, the artist proposed removing the sign element. The owners agreed, and the picture was shown separately for the first time in the exhibition *Photographs 1978–2004* at Schaulager in 2005. From the 'Notes' for *Stereo* in Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (eds), *Jeff Wall, Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004* (Schaulager: Basel/Steidl Verlag: Göttingen, 2005), p. 284.

just constitutively incompleteable, but present new exigencies for the unification of 'a work'. (Note Charles Harrison's recent attempt to describe *Index 01* as a kind of picture.)[2] This has placed corresponding demands on curation, if not the expanding demand *for* curation as a supplementary role in this process of unification. The Salons of our time do not pack the walls, relying on the picture frame to provide individuation. Routinely, each artist is accommodated with their own room or space, or more, to assemble their work. How odd then to walk into Wall's room at Documenta 11 to find but one picture, *After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, (1999–2001) (Fig. 28). Its intricate assemblage over three years, creating an environment, an imaginary room from another time, has the qualities of an elaborate installation, but condensed into a picture, a post-Kabakovian photograph.

There are exceptions to the single image in Wall's oeuvre.[3] Perhaps the most intriguing case is *Stereo* (1980) (Fig. 59), both because of the dramatically non-pictorial contrast of the sign panel and Wall's recent decision to remove or cut it, thereby individualizing the pictorial panel.[4] If the task at hand here is not simply a matter of dutifully engaging with a single work, but developing a critique of the conditions of possibility for this engagement, and thereby coming to some assessment of its cultural significance, then *Stereo* suggests itself as exemplary. *Stereo* is anomalous, like a muted crisis in Wall's oeuvre.

The consideration of the constitutive conditions of the single work tends to be suppressed or misrecognized by the enthusiasm for the close interpretation of individual pictures, which is often a reaction to the perceived theoreticism of the art writing of the 1970s and 1980s – its dissolution of the specificity of the artwork. However, the restoration of the artwork of late is more often than not an ironic inversion of this, in which interminable analysis restores the sovereignty of the artwork, rather than disintegrating it. This is a romantic reflex of post-structuralism that probably should have been spotted earlier. However, Wall's pictures are not made in the image of this kind of interpretation. The semiotic transformation of iconology broke radically with the demands for integrity and unity traditionally required of the artwork, enabling what would have been considered mere fragments to be meaningful in an emphatic, but distinct, sense. The conjunction of semiotics and the montage aesthetic of photography reinvented, if not dissolved, the requirements of a successful artwork, and repressed the labour of completeness and autonomy traditionally required of the tableau. Wall's photographs are characterized by an anachronistic persistence of these labours and requirements, and this incongruity is among the decisive issues faced by a critical assessment of the nature of his practice, his modernism. 'Singleness' might not be a sufficient or even necessary condition of a tableau, but it is one of its traditional dimensions that has become most questionable within the photographic conditions of contemporary art – hence its significance for a critique of the present.

Wall's apparent gravitation from the concerns of socialist iconography, identified with the new art history, to the formalism and taste-based criticism restored from the 1960s, which is so surprising for many, is symptomatic of his commitment to a non-avant-gardist modernism for which the memory of the idea of the tableau remains determining. However, this has next to nothing to say about what it means to restore the tableau as a contemporary form within the conditions of an intensified

Fig. 59. Jeff Wall, *The Crooked Path*, transparency in lightbox, 119 × 149 cm, 1991.

capitalist modernity. Certain of Wall's own art historical writings provide a more compelling indication of these conditions, as well as a negative image of his pictorial practice, which emerges from them as if in an afterimage.

Post-Conceptualist Art-Photography

Wall has characterised his art as a recovery of Baudelaire's idea of *la peinture de la vie moderne* for which Manet, rather than Constantin Guys, is taken as exemplary. The restaging of Manet's *Olympia* with *Stereo* is only one indication of this framework (although *Stereo* appears to differentiate itself by taking Titian's *Venus with the Organ Grinder* (1550-2), as its model, rather than the *Venus of Urbino* (1538), which provided the model for *Olympia*). The post-historical implication of this recovery – that *Stereo* has simply extracted itself from the historical conditions and tasks of modern art – is among the most dubious aspects of Wall's pictorialism. This is mitigated by the fact that Wall's painting of modern life is photographic. However, the decisive clarification and justification for Wall's modernism concerns the extent to which it is the solution to a fundamental crisis of

modernism, culminating in Conceptual art. Along with many others, Wall has associated this crisis with a collapse of modernism into an affirmative form of commodity production, in which the values of art are overtaken by the values of the market. Artists like Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach and Richard Prince manifest this more blatantly than the equally commodifed revaluation of painting. It is revealing to consider Wall as their contemporary. His lightboxes fuse the scale of the return to painting with the commodity aesthetics of advertising display, matched in time with corresponding revenues. It is from within this context that Wall has argued for a renewal of modernism, of art's autonomy and critical power. Wall's is a post-conceptualist painting of modern life.

Wall argues that Conceptual art was essentially a crisis of modernism and not a resolution to it; that it revealed the limits of formalist modernism but without managing to overcome them. Conceptual art's criticism of abstract art (both painting and sculpture) proceeded, he claims, by way of a 'radical purism', in which it sought to turn formalism against itself. Thus, Conceptual art critically revealed the equivocalness or affinity that abstract art had to capitalist cultural forms, which Minimalism had manifested unwittingly and Pop Art explicit. Jasper Johns effectively made an art of this equivocation. However, Conceptual art's criticism was characterized by a further reduction, a reduction of the sensuous or aesthetic dimension of art *tout court*. The common contention was that it was sensuousness and tastefulness that accommodated art to capitalist culture. Thus the anti-object would be an anti-commodity.

Wall's criticism of the limits of Conceptual art concerns the ambivalent status of this reduction, especially its politics. Despite the radicalism of the 1960s, the utopian dissolution of art struggled to realize itself politically, and once this radicalism faded the project of the negation of art was secured as an intra-artistic strategy. Conceptual art's politics was pursued in a negative or melancholic form, invoking an alternative social culture through mimicking its exclusion by the alienating forms of the art world. Wall's response has been to argue that this strategy of mimesis, despite its utopianism, is just as prone to the ironies that Conceptual art had exposed in Minimalism, and that its critically intended mimicking is liable to an inversion into the cynical mimesis of Pop. Joseph Kosuth's definitions are rendered Warholesque parodies of corporate bureaucracy. Wall brands Conceptual art the 'reinvention of defeatism'; its attempt to overcome the commodity form within capitalism is not only a utopian horizon, but 'an ideal *not* to be realized'.[5] Utopianism turns from a spur to action into disillusionment, transforming the critical irony of Conceptual art's critique of commodification into the compulsive irony of neo-conceptualism's commodity aesthetics. This is the 'failure' of Conceptual art according to Wall, from which an alternative modernism is revealed: '[Conceptual art's] attempt to "defeat" or transcend the commodity-form represents, perhaps, something more significant: a displacement or repression of a deeper artistic issue, that of the reinvention of social content in modernist art.'[6] Suppressed by Conceptual art's internalization of a neo-capitalist ideology, according to Wall, in which all social art was identified with totalitarianism, it is this idea of modernism that adumbrates Wall's own practice.

In *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* Wall says nothing explicit about the idea of the picture that might fulfil this modernism. However, this idea is negatively inferred in relation to the readymade, the form that Wall

5. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (1985) (Art Metrople: Toronto, 1991), p. 17. Italics in the original.

6. Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, p. 82, fn. 4.

describes as central to Conceptual art. Wall remarks on how Conceptual art sought, 'to *reformulate* the strategy of the Readymade, in which the withdrawal of aesthetic resources from the work of art is combined with an ironic mimicry of the commodity form. ... For conceptualism, the Readymade's withdrawals and mimicry form the image of an "absolute criticism", a complete negation of the industry of art.'[7] We might say that the equivocalness of abstract art and the commodity form that is embodied by the readymade makes it the supreme form of modernist irony, Conceptual art's reinvention of Romantic irony, which constituted both the radicalism of its self-criticism as well as the disillusionment of its beautiful soul and fall into cynicism. The transmutability of critical and cynical mimesis is central to Wall's critique of Conceptual art, and it implicitly establishes the negative conditions for an alternative form of mimesis offered by the tableau. This post-conceptualist idea of the picture is that it is essentially *not* a readymade.

Wall's most explicit account of this idea of the picture is outlined in his essay '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual art'.[8] Here he claims that photography only emerges as an autonomous art through and after Conceptual art, due to the delayed self-consciousness of its specific form of picturing. Wall argues that the initial concept of art-photography, exemplified in its mature form by Alfred Stieglitz's pictorialism, is dominated by the attempt to reproduce the compositional feats of the Western idea of the tableau, struggling to compensate for the missing sensuousness of the painted surface. It is in the non-art or functional forms of photojournalism, particularly reportage, that photography breaks with this tradition, abandoning its anxiety about painterly surfaces and replacing composition with the capturing of events, momentary acts of framing, enabled by technological advances in camera technology: 'In this process, photography elaborates its version of the Picture, and it is the first new version since the onset of modern painting in the 1860s, or, possibly, since the emergences of abstract art, if one considers abstract paintings to be in fact pictures anymore'.[9] The development of an autonomous art from this utilitarian idea of reportage by photographers such as Paul Strand, Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson becomes the first specifically photographic conception of art-photography.

However, photography does not begin to achieve its major status as an art that is so apparent today until, ironically, this conception of art-photography is subjected to a radical critique of its artification through Conceptual art. Wall points out how this was enabled by Conceptual art's institution of a 'post-autonomous' model of art's autonomy:

> autonomous art had reached a state where it appeared that it could only validly be made by means of the strictest imitation of the non-autonomous. This heteronomy might take the form of direct critical commentary, as with Art & Language; with the production of political propaganda, so common in the 1970s; or with the many varieties of 'intervention' or appropriation practiced more recently. But, in all these procedures, an autonomous work of art is still necessarily created. The innovation is that the content of the work is the validity of the model or hypothesis of non-autonomy it creates.[10]

Photography became a privileged medium for the imitation of non-art within these practices. Thus, for instance, through the documentation of apparently self-sufficient practices of performance that then come to exist photographically – such as in the early work of Bruce Nauman or Richard Long – the aestheticism

7. Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, pp. 105–6.

8. Jeff Wall, '"Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (eds), *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965–1975* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1995), pp. 247–67.

9. Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', p. 249.

10. Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', p. 252.

of reportage was both negated and reconstituted. Photography is instrumentalized to document an action, while also, almost inadvertently, being rendered autonomous insofar as the photograph becomes the substantive form of the work, as if the performance was made in order to make the photograph, which is therefore no longer reportage. In sum then:

> photoconceptualism led the way toward the complete acceptance of photography as art – autonomous, bourgeois, collectible art – by virtue of insisting that this medium might be privileged to be the negation of that whole idea. … Inscribed in a new avant-gardism, and blended with elements of text, sculpture, painting, or drawing, photography became the quintessential 'anti-object'.[11]

However, photography's status as a medium of art's negation is limited in a crucial respect for Wall, namely, insofar as it remains essentially depictive. Wall argues that this limited photography from the radical linguistic tendency of Conceptual art to suppress depiction completely. It is this limitation that reveals an essential property of modernist photography, which then becomes secured in its post-conceptualist form. Thus, Wall reads Conceptual art's avant-gardism in Greenbergian terms. The negation of first generation art-photography does not undermine this form, but critically clarifies what is essential to it, depiction, thereby securing it. Photoconceptualism is therefore considered the 'last moment of the pre-history of photography as art', which 'failed to free the medium … from its ties to the Western Picture', and in the process, 'revolutionized our concept of the Picture and created the conditions for the restoration of that concept as a central category of contemporary art by around 1974'.[12] Enter Wall stage left, or maybe right.

Photography's escape from Conceptual art's negations takes with it the privilege of being their aesthetic medium. According to this logic, art-photography emerges not only as a central category of contemporary art, but its supreme form. Wall's latent claim to the sovereignty of art-photography is not the least of its ties to the 'Western Picture'. His pictures recapitulate Conceptual art's negations as failed attempts at good pictures, which he then often goes on to produce. Think of the affinity of *The Crooked Path* (1991) (Fig. 59), to Long's early photos; or of how Nauman's precedent is apparent in the performance dimension of *The Outburst* (1989) (Fig. 33), or *An Eviction* (1988/2004) (Fig. 60), which was even supplemented by a video installation of the movements of each figure in the picture. *Stereo* appears to stage a confrontation with the reductivism of linguistic Conceptual art, like a parody of one of Kosuth's tautological works. In contrast to Kosuth's attempted de-aestheticizing doubling of image and definition, *Stereo* is a play of aesthetic transcoding. The sign panel codes the picture, a little superfluously perhaps given the headphones, but the position and character of the typology – simple but low both in the frame and as if it were stretched out – mimics the reclining nude, interiorizing it and becoming a sign *of* the picture rather than just its concept or label. *Stereo* is an erotic dialogue. The only residual asceticism is perhaps in the impoverished couch. Wall's decision to cut the sign panel rids *Stereo*, and probably his oeuvre as a whole, of its conversation with linguistic conceptualism, like a final triumph or reassurance (and hence anxiety) of his pictorialism.

Wall's claim to the critical character of his pictorialism hinges on the extent to which he does not just recover the traditional model of the

11. Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', p. 252.

12. Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', p. 266.

Fig. 60. Jeff Wall, *An Eviction*, transparency in lightbox, 229 × 414 cm, 1988/2004.

tableau, but rather its crisis; that his is a 'crisis-model' of the tableau. This is the modernism drawn from the idea of the painting of modern life in Manet, which he claims continues to condition contemporary art negatively, offering a critique of its accommodation to capitalist culture. We can read this out of the concluding sentences of Wall's essay on Manet, where he encourages the refunctioning of Manet's dead or ruined concept of the 'Western' tableau – sentences that offer another negative impression of his own practice:

> Brecht's notion of the 'functional transformation' (*Umfunktionierung*) of modes of cultural production should be related to Manet's insistence on the 'Western' image as a ruin. Such a labour of relation would possibly create a means of access to the closed interior of the image in the dead concept of the picture which forms the empty centre of the 'Salonism' of our period. This is the dual picture-type rooted in the institutionalised culture of fragmentation: totalised montage and 'abstract art'.[13]

Wall is referring to Manet's response to the crisis of the tableau as it was propagated by the Academy. Technically this is characterized by a crisis of the value of perspective and in particular, its increasing incapacity to provide the unifying space for the painted human figure, which was constitutive for the highest genres of painting. Wall argues that the traditional idea of the tableau – at least at the level of the mechanics of its composition – is constituted by the means through which the human body is rendered 'as both *painted* and *represented*': 'It is painted by means of the sensuous tracings of the painter's hand, arm and body; it is represented by means of a mechanism which inhabits it and marks its origins as modern subject: perspective'.[14] This is instituted through the Academy as its 'Law'. Further, Wall argues that the crisis of this idea was not simply due to the invention of photography, which, certainly in its earliest days, could

13. Jeff Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', in *Jeff Wall* (Phaidon Press: London, 1996), p. 89.

14. Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', p. 78.

15. See Jeff Wall, 'Monochronme and Photojournalism in On Kawara's Today Paintings', Lynn Cooke and Karen Kelly (eds), *Robert Lehman Lectures on Contemporary Art* (Dia Center for the Arts: New York, 1996), pp. 146–8.

in no serious sense compete with the compositional and imaginative feats of painting. It was rather due to the affinity of the mechanism of perspective with other mechanisms of capitalist modernity that blatantly contradicted or destroyed the harmonious and unified rendering of the human body. Photography was pivotal to this crisis insofar as it transformed the meaning of a technique that was already fundamental to the Western idea of the picture.

Wall's implicit contention is that 'totalized montage' and 'abstract art' are the twin effects of modernism's withdrawal from the Academic picture; in other words the abandonment of perspective is dominated by the fracturing of perspectively constituted space through montage or its suppression through abstraction. A further diagnosis of this outcome can be seen in Wall's reading of Andy Warhol's disaster paintings as a late form of the painting of modern life, in which a radical extension of abstract painting, the monochrome, is immediately juxtaposed with a radical extension of montage, a serialized news shot.[15] However, the legitimacy of recovering Manet's dead concept of the picture is not established merely by identifying its originary and mediating role. This is a history lesson rather than a contemporary art practice. Wall depends on the stronger claim that modernism after Manet has tended to mimic the fragmentary effects of capitalist culture, normalizing them and thereby alienating them from the forms of unity in which this fragmentation can actually be experienced and therefore criticized. Wall's recovery of Manet's ruined model of the tableau is proposed as the recollection of a crisis of capitalist culture that has become ordinary, a recovery of the contradiction of fragmentation and unity. This explains Wall's claimed transgression against the institution of avant-garde transgression. The integrity of Wall's pictures, the seamlessness of his computer montages in which the constraints of perspective are harmonized, evinces this project. *Stereo*'s repetition of *Olympia* has subtle indications of this, perhaps most intriguingly in the contrast of beds or couches. *Olympia*'s luxurious cushions and sheets are typical of the eroticized folds that ripple caressingly around the painted bodies of traditional painting. In *Stereo* the modernist orange sofa contrasts strikingly with the man's body. The three square backing cushions are regimented, not sumptuously layered as in *Olympia*, providing a measured space in which the figure is contained. He is relaxed, although slightly incongruous grey cushions have been introduced to support his head. The sofa's geometry is lessened by its worn and stained state, but these traces of human bodies are liable to be experienced as mere dirt.

However, Wall's claim to Manet's painting of modern life is precarious, perhaps even sophistical. Manet's crude brushwork and disjointed composition are features that Wall scarcely achieves photographic equivalents for. The crisis of perspective is finessed and the result is neo-classicism. Wall's works are never scandalous. *Stereo* is hardly a reinvention of *Olympia* in this sense. Modernity, the 'now', is suppressed in the normality of his depictions of everyday life. Even his fantastical works like *The Vampires' Picnic* (1991) (Fig. 22), or *Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* (1992) (Fig. 17), are at once epic and incidental, rather than dramatic – he calls them 'philosophical comedies'. Wall's pictures, especially in their theatri-calizations of modern life, evince an experience of the reification of human bodies and gestures, as much as their

wholeness. He has spoken of the need to recover a relation to academicism in order to recover the distinctiveness of Manet's modernism, but it often seems as though this strategy has been too successful and therefore failed. Wall reflects Manet back to us in the image of academicism.

Modernism and the Tableau

The rapprochement with certain elements of formalist modernism in Wall's works and writings is surprising for many who regarded his recovery of social iconography as anti-formalist and part of the general orientation of the social history of art to forge a third way between what has tended to be the hegemonic dispute over the avant-garde: namely, between the avant-garde as a tradition of autonomous art, and the avant-garde as a politicized transgression of art's autonomy. Wall has identified himself determinedly with the former. Along with Thierry de Duve, he has been keen to emphasize Clement Greenberg's openness to the possibility of a modernist photography that, in keeping with the principles of medium specificity, would be determined by tasks and limits distinct to those of painting.[16] In his few remarks on photography Greenberg argues that it should emphasize the transparency of the picture plane, not its opacity, enabling it to be an art of subject-matter through which the traditional genres might be restored. For those who have confused Greenberg's conception of painting with his view of all the arts it is worth recalling his injunction: 'The final moral is: let photography be "literary"'.[17] Wall has also made a law of this distinction between modernist painting and photography. There are no blurs of movement in Wall's photographs. The explosion of *Milk* (1984) (Fig. 16), is less an exception than a feat of picturing. Little in Wall's oeuvre is even out of focus. He has rigorously suppressed the blur as a point of indifference between photography and painting – something Gerhard Richter has explored so extensively. De Duve has argued that Wall has drawn attention to the specifically photographic form of the picture plane in the geometry of reflections of *Picture for Women* (1979) (Fig. 1).[18] However, the plane here is essentially the mirror-plane, and the mirror is in many ways a problematic form of the picture in Wall's trajectory. The mirror is a pictorial readymade or a pictorial monochrome, as Richter has also explored. Its mechanised mimesis makes it a tableau only ironically. As his reaction to Dan Graham's mirror works reveals, Wall's pictorial critique of modernism faces the mirror as a limit it must overcome. Another problematic feature of seeing Wall as dutifully fulfilling Greenberg's job description is precisely the extent to which art-photography emerges from Photoconceptualism as a privileged medium.

These tensions with Greenberg's formalism confirm perhaps the decisive proposition of Wall's writings and practice: that the photographic recovery of a transformed idea of the tableau provides a solution to the crisis that formalist modernism faced in the readymade. The equivalence that artists like Dan Flavin and Johns had shown between abstract art and readymades was a problem that Greenberg himself reflected on, most famously in his consideration of the relation of a mere tacked up canvas (ostensibly a readymade) and the monochrome.[19] His proposed solution was to subordinate formal principles to those of judgements of value or aesthetic judgements, developed through recourse to Kant.[20] However, Kant was little help here, since for him aesthetic judgements pertain to what is

16. See Thierry de Duve, 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path', in *Jeff Wall*, (Phaidon: London, 1996) pp. 26–55. See also 'Post-60s photography and its Modernist context: a conversation between Jeff Wall and John Roberts', pp. 153–167.

17. Clement Greenberg, 'The Camera's Glass Eye: Review of an Exhibition of Edward Weston', in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1993), p. 63.

18. See de Duve, 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path', pp. 30–1.

19. 'By now it has been established, it would seem that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness; and that the observance of merely these two norms is enough to create an object which can be experienced as a picture; thus a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture – though not necessarily as a successful one'. Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', *Art International*, vol. 6, no. 8, 1962, p. 30.

20. See for instance, Greenberg's 'Necessity of "Formalism"' (1971), in Clement Greenberg, *Late Writings* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2003), pp. 45–9. For a general discussion of this crisis of Greenberg's criticism see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1996), chapter 4.

21. 'Diderot's conception of painting rested ultimately upon the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist'. In Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University of California: Berkeley, CA, 1980), p. 103.

22. Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), 'A Notion of the Historical Draught of the Tabulature of the Judgement of Hercules', in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds), *Art in Theory, 1648–1815* (Blackwell: Oxford), p. 374.

23. See Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, 1996), pp. 405–6.

24. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 413.

25. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, p. 408.

beautiful and do not discriminate between what is art and not art. The yoking of aesthetics to this latter task is a strictly post-Kantian project.

Wall's relation to this problem appears to be inflected above all by Michael Fried's response to it, which was to try to resist the indifference of art and non-art through emphasizing the distinction between absorption and theatricality. In ways that are not apparent from his essay, 'Art and Objecthood', Fried's elaboration of this distinction derives from Diderot's criticism in the mid-1700s, and in particular his development of the notion that the essential convention of pictorial art is that it should be made as if it were *not* made to be beheld.[21] This 'supreme fiction' is apparent in scenes of figures completely absorbed in their actions, oblivious to being viewed from beyond the picture frame, such as Chardin's *The Card Castle* (1737), or *Soap Bubble* (1739). Fried treats this self-enclosed quality of absorption as the fundamental consideration of the idea of the tableau. For Fried the crisis of the tableau is not a crisis of perspective and its unity, but a crisis of theatricality, that is, of whether the painting played to its audience and thereby subordinated the integrity and autonomy of the picture to its relation to the viewer. Shaftesbury provides another interesting precedent for this idea of the tableau in his definition of the picture as a 'Tabulature', which is not determined by what it is made from or the shape of the support, but by 'when the work is in reality a single piece, comprehended in one view, and formed according to one single intelligence, meaning, or design; which constitutes a real whole, by a mutual and necessary relation of its parts, the same as of the members in a natural body'.[22] The harmonious comprehensibility stressed here may in fact be regarded as a theatrical quality – the extent to which the object is there to confirm the capacities of the mind of the beholder – and this remains in many ways a problem with all attempts to think of absorption in Kantian terms.

Manet marks a crisis of the tableau principally in terms of absorption according to Fried – the theatricality of his works, their confrontation of the beholder – and not in terms of perspective. (Indeed, it might well be argued that perspective is essentially theatrical in its reduced direction of a scene to a viewer – hence the fictionality of absorption as the self-denial of this framework or tradition.) The tension in Manet's paintings between unity and fragmentation was experienced as a tension between tableau and morceau.[23] Fried argues that it was only with Impressionism – in a counterintuitive paralleling of photography – that this contradictory tie between tableau and morceau is displaced, along with the task of picturing it demanded, replacing it with the sketch or study. There remained an anxiety about the incompleteness of these forms, but this was not resolved through the ambition of the tableau, but through working in series of pictures and exhibiting them as an ensemble where possible, as in Monet's *Water Lilies*.[24] Fried's wider argument here is that the idea of modernist painting that culminated in formalism had its origins *not* in Manet, as Greenberg claimed, but in Impressionism and its transformation of the privileged qualities of painting: namely, the primacy of paintings' optical effects, an implicitly realist conception of the directness and naivety of the instantaneous impression, the harmonious and non-confrontational relations of colours and tones, the essentially surface mode of unity that critics called 'decorative', and the simplification of painting to painting-as-such, reducing the significance of subject-matter and genre.[25] These qualities were retroactively read back into Manet, thereby suppressing his distinctiveness.

Fried's account resonates with Wall's own project – his resistance to working in series or ensembles like the Bechers, or producing the decorative surfaces so apparent in Gursky. Wall's picturing appears pre-Impressionist. It also emphasizes the tension between theatricality and absorption that many of Wall's works share with Manet. The theatricality of Manet's dressed up models, facing the viewer self-consciously, such as *Mlle V . . . in the Costume of an Espanda* (1862), or *Young Man in the Costume of a Majo* (1863), is apparent in Wall's photographs, like *Abundance* (1985), where a woman posing for the viewer is contrasted with the absorption of another. However, the dressing here is not exotic – free, second-hand, clothes are layered on compulsively, poised between need and play. *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing from a Specimen in a Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992), seems to recreate one of Chardin's absorbed draftsmen. *Stereo* is distinguished from *Olympia* by the absorption of the reclining man. The only gaze returned here is from his one-eyed trouser snake. Yet, inactive and staring into space, there is a quality of distraction rather than absorption in his manner. This peculiarly modernist mode of attention is like a point of indifference between absorption and theatricality, an overcoming of their contradiction. (This is probably how we should think of Fried's relation to Benjamin.)

De Duve has argued that the crisis of formalist modernism is resolved once Duchamp's original deployment of the readymade is recognised as *not* a form of anti-art in which the difference between art and non-art is dissolved, but rather as a new type of aesthetic judgement that distinguishes art from non-art: so not Kant's 'this is beautiful', but 'this is art'.[26] This is the essential convention of modernist art according to de Duve, and not the quality of appearing as if not to be beheld, namely, absorption. Wall's adoption of a more orthodox Kantian sensibility – that he aspires to make pictures beautiful – when combined with his critique of the readymade, suggests an alternative trajectory and proposition about the ontology of modernist art: that art invokes the judgement 'this is a picture' or 'this is a tableau'. Wall's photographs do not propose a model of functionality or non-art in order to establish themselves as art, as his own articulation of post-autonomous art requires, therefore the implication is that art's autonomy has become a consideration of whether something can be experienced as a tableau.

Kant After Marx

However, the decisive issue that is more or less repressed in formalist modernism is the relation of the tableau to capitalist culture. This is vital to the critical status of Wall's practice and position. For the tableau has often appeared to be a supremely commodified form: 'not so much a framed window open on to the world as a safe let into the wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited', to quote John Berger's well known judgement of the Western idea of the picture.[27] A picture he does not mention, Pieter de Hooch's *The Goldweigher* (c. 1664), is exemplary. A sumptuously dressed woman is depicted attentively weighing gold pieces against an intensely gold-coloured wall. The wallpaper is patterned but this only highlights the gold, whose shininess stands out from the spatial illusion of the room and sits on the surface of the painting, asserting its literal qualities, gold. Absorption and literalness are contrasted but only to reflect one another in a spectacle of value. Wall himself offers what is in

26. See de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, chapter 5.

27. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (BBC and Penguin Books: London, 1972), p. 109.

many ways a remarkable articulation of the relation of the tableau to capitalist culture:

> Perspective proved itself as a totalization, a transcendent quantitative cosmic design, and gained the status of Law in the Academy. It did not, however, automatically thereby destroy the conditions for the harmonious expression of the human body and human experience until historical development reveals capitalism's inherent negation of and hostility to the entire previous ideal of the complete development of the human being. In capitalism all bodies are projected as uniform functions of production and exchange, and can survive as bodies only insofar as they prove themselves as partial functions in the process of creation of surplus value. The culture of the commodity is a totality guaranteed by the process of reduction of the ideal of completeness, unity and harmony, identified with the image of the body in *its* space, to a state of fragmentation and homelessness.[28]

The implication here is that capitalism – or capitalist culture, if we are to think of culture as a way in which human societies *take form* – displaces or inverts the ideal of the tableau. It no longer indicates the autonomy of human being, but the autonomy of capital. Modern subjectivity turns out belatedly to be subjection to capital. It is as if capitalist culture is itself a picture. Once this is experienced, pictures come to be experienced as capital. One might then interpret Wall's text as a contribution to the mechanics of the society of the spectacle. However, Guy Debord's critique of the autonomous image finds far less to redeem in it than Wall, and their practices differ accordingly.[29] We might extrapolate these implications at the level of capitalism's cell-form, the commodity. The value-form does not provide a harmonious unity in which that-which-is-commodified is given its own space and time. Rather all is reduced to the abstraction of exchange-value, which is indifferent to any specification other than the quantification of capital.

This transformation of form produced by commodification extends to aesthetic experience, rendering Kant's aesthetics suspicious in ways that are routinely disregarded. The *Critique of Judgement* is not explicitly oriented towards the problem of picturing, except insofar as we think of picturing in terms of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*), which is indeed pivotal for Kant's aesthetics, as a capacity to combine, if not produce, what we sense and thereby render it meaningful. Judgements of taste revolve around acts of imagination, for Kant, in which ultimately the unity of experience and subjectivity is established, mediating the tension between freedom and nature.[30] As Shaftesbury suggests, it is apparent how the integrity of the tableau can be seen as reflecting the unity of the subject's experience, as well as how it might thereby be privileged as something to be judged aesthetically. However, the terms of capitalist culture produces a certain displacement or inversion of the terms of Kant's aesthetics. If we should think of capital as an instrumental form of unification, then the primary issue of aesthetics within capitalist cultures becomes how capital relates to the unity required by received conceptions of taste, such as Kant's. Central to this is the consideration of aesthetic 'form'.

Commodity form, as Marx outlines it at least, is abstract in the strong sense that it is indifferent to the content it provides form for: 'the commodity-form ... [has] absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this'.[31] In this respect it is radically distinct from Kant's concept of the form of the beautiful, which is nothing if not the harmonious relation between form and content, between the manifold of what we sense and our

28. Wall, 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet', p. 83.

29. 'The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life.' Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (1967) trans. Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books: New York, 1994), p. 12.

30. See for instance Kant's first and second Introduction to the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) trans. W.S. Pluhar (Hackett: Indianapolis, IN, 1987), pp. 383–442 and 1–40, respectively.

31. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes (Penguin Books: London, 1976), p. 165.

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capacity to know it in terms of (universal) concepts. The experience of beautiful form is the self-reflection of the subject, its 'feeling for life'.[32] In contrast, the abstractness of the commodity form is the form of capital, which reproduces itself parasitically through human labour, living labour. It is the feeling for death, not life: 'Capital is dead labour', in Marx's words, 'which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour ...'.[33] Commodity culture subjects sensibility to a play of exchange-value. This is an aesthetics of value, like Kant's, but it inverts his terms.

The issue here is not merely conceptual rectitude, but whether this inversion has historical substance. In particular, has the beautiful become less the experience of the autonomy of subjectivity than of the autonomy of capital, to which humans are subjected? Is taste no longer an index of autonomous life but its subjection to commodification? These are familiar anxieties, not least due to their development in the critique of formalist modernism, whose crisis in the 1960s was perhaps above all one of commodification. The indifference of art and non-art follows from the extension of commodification across all cultural spheres, re-articulating their own value and autonomous determination according to the autonomy of exchange value. This fragmentary or nominalist effect of dissolving the distinction between genres and arts is complimented by the unifying or 'idealist' effect of exchange-value becoming the universal general equivalent. This underpins the functionalization of art and the aestheticization of non-art in capitalist culture industries. Greenberg's and Fried's response to the dissolution of the arts can be therefore interpreted as a reaction to commodification, as can Wall's recovery of the tableau. However, they remain at best naïve unless they recognize the way in which the terms of aesthetics have been transformed by the process of commodification.

The practical consequences of this recognition remain ambivalent with respect to the critical value of art's autonomy and the rejection of the indifference of art and non-art. In many ways, those practices that have continued to pursue this indifference are far more compelling critical responses to the nominalism of capitalist culture. Some so-called 'relational' artists, such as Thomas Hirschhorn or Rirkrit Tiravanija, have developed a heteronomous and theatrical art of social content that stands directly opposed to Wall's model of art-photography, although the idea of 'relational aesthetics' propagated by Nicolas Bourriaud is equally problematic in its critical claims for the social dissolution of art's autonomy.[34] Relational aesthetics and Wall's model of art-photography confront one another like a reconfigured battle over art's heteronomy or autonomy, theatricality or absorption. Considered in terms of a critique of capitalist culture, they present less a choice than two trajectories within the same antagonistic situation. Wall's dead concept of the tableau is ultimately not a solution to the crisis of (formalist) modernism, but an alternative configuration of its bindingness.

It has been suggested that Wall's recovery of the painting of modern life is a dialectical image in Benjamin's sense of a lost future that reconfigures the present. Indeed, Benjamin's historiography might itself be seen as a painting of modern life, producing images of the present, of 'now-time': 'image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill'.[35] However, Benjamin's practice is revolutionary in intent: now-time is a product of montage, of shock, revealing a political possibility of

32. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 44.

33. Marx, *Capital*, p. 342.

34. See my 'Critique of Relational Aesthetics', forthcoming in Marta Kuzma and Peter Osborne (eds), *Isms 1: Constructing the Political in Contemporary Art*, *Verksted* 8, (Office of Contemporary Art: Norway, 2007).

35. Walter Benjamin, [Convolute N — On The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress], *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 463.

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transformation in the present. Dialectics at a standstill acquires an inverted significance in Wall's project, the transfixing of revolution. This ties his images to the memory of the avant-garde, and they avoid being archaic or mythic perhaps only insofar as they recall it.