become a permanent monument to the virtues of the American judicial system. Though the final dismantling of the work in 1989 was a victory only for the corruption of democratic procedures, its survival would have entailed an implicit contradiction of his intellectual premises, that is, his resolute intention to assert nothing beyond the psycho-physical experience of sculpture.

The physical extinction of Tilted Arc, however, has allowed it to fulfill the same conditions of meaning established in the work of Asher or Matta-Clark. Serra’s sculpture came to organize and clarify its context by refusing – albeit involuntarily – traditional forms of permanence and monumentality. New York’s Federal Plaza remains as transformed by his art as he ever dreamed it would be: as long as the shared memory of the trauma of the sculpture’s removal remains, the site can be seen in no other way than as deficient, as subtracted-from. The only vocabularies in which Tilted Arc can now be grasped are ones adequate to account for the historical events and conflicts that surrounded it. Large questions concerning the relations between public symbols and private ambitions, between political freedom, legal obligation and aesthetic choice, have been put vividly and productively into play by the work, engendering debates that might have remained abstract and idle had it not existed – and which might have been complacently put aside had it gone on existing.20

Profane Illuminations:
The Social History of Jeff Wall

Crossover between the studio and the seminar room has been a conspicuous feature of advanced practice over the last fifteen years. Since the 1970s, informed discussion about art has turned for ideas and language to the vanguards of established academic disciplines like anthropology and literary studies, the ones most receptive to the style of thinking pioneered by Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. In part because art training has become more closely tied to universities or to concepually orientated programs like that of the California Institute of the Arts, a new generation of artists has been ready to absorb the practical implications of the new critical regime with little or no delay.

But what can one say about the other, parallel development in the study of art within the academy: the strong emergence over the same period of (for want of a better term) a social history of art? Here any passage from college classroom to studio has been much less obvious: the kinds of erudition generated by wide-ranging historical inquiry have been resistant to being codified in ways that suggested immediate practical applications and rewards. If there was to be any transition between new forms of historical awareness and new moves in art, it would necessarily be more deliberate and complicated.

Only a few artists can be said to have bridged the two pursuits, and prominent within this small group has been Jeff Wall. Compared to the legion of artists who have taken their bearings from poststructuralism, Wall for years received strikingly little attention in English-language criticism. While this was balanced by substantial coverage in European journals, his comparative neglect may be one further sign of the difficulty that the topic of history poses for certain critical orthodoxies. His accumulated work over a decade and a half testifies to the potential of social-historical
inquiry to motivate persuasive work in the studio, and also to some of the limiting conditions of the social history of art as it has actually been practiced in North America and Britain over the same period.

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At the end of the 1970s, after a decade-long hiatus in his activity as an artist, Wall began his series of large, back-lit photographic transparencies, establishing a signature format he has continued to use for all of his work (pl. 53). In their exploitation of the existing conventions of film still and popular photo-roman, they bear a resemblance to the contemporaneous work of Cindy Sherman: in a few the artist himself likewise becomes the subject. But the overbearing scale and brilliant projection of color in Wall’s pictures are only the most obvious markers that distinguished his project from hers. While Sherman has lately found her way back to overt art-historical reference in her photographs, Wall began with it; while she has taken art history to be a fixed catalogue of masterpieces to be interrogated and turned inside out by the artist, he situated himself within the processes by which art history as a changing field of knowledge becomes available to the artist in the first place.

Wall has forthrightly declared in a recent interview that “none of my work could have been done without the turmoil in art history.” He spent a significant part of the 1970s, his period away from art-making, pursuing a postgraduate degree in the discipline at the Courtauld Institute in London. Since then interviews have shown him to be at ease with learned citations from the art of the past, and he has explicitly likened certain of his works to canonical paintings going back as far as the seventeenth century. But this kind of general expertise does not point directly to the deeper involvement of his art with an historical enterprise. Nor does the subject matter of his thesis research, which ranged from Berlin Dada to Duchamp. What seems to have mattered most for his 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. As modern art had been admitted to serious attention by academic art historians, largely after World War II, it had arrived already wrapped in modernist packaging. Michael Fried was only sharpening a general assumption when he asserted in 1965 that “the history of painting from Manet through Synthetic Cubism and Matisse may be characterized in terms of the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality – or of reality from the power of painting to represent it. . . .”

This was a view implicitly shared by many others in the field who lacked Fried’s express commitment to searching out a pedigree for 1960s color-field abstraction. And it meant that there could be no systematic iconography for the art of the modern era. The formal preoccupations of a Wölflin could be transferred easily enough to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this was not the case with Warburg’s or Panofsky’s systematic parsing of traditional subject matter. The latter mode of inquiry had been underpinned by centuries-old symbolic systems of religious emblematics or princely allegory. After artists had consciously rejected such governing orders, to what system could the interpreter reasonably
appeal beyond contingent personal histories or the technical parameters of art?

The perceived radicality of social art history was paradoxically traditional in its actual challenge to this complacent bifurcation of history; it simply insisted that there was no reason to stop applying iconographic concerns at any juncture. Had societies at any point ceased to be governed by symbolic codes? Were there grounds for believing that artists were any more free from the power of these codes than the rest of humanity? Obviously not, but the symbolic life of a secularized social order, one continually subject to drastic transformations in its economy, demographics, and communications, was going to be more hidden and transitory — and that much harder to describe.

The territory needed a map, and art historians availed themselves of three basic kinds. The first was as literal as could be: the complex physical and social geography of Paris was exploited as a master code for grasping the seemingly opaque or incongruous iconographic choices of the avant-garde that clustered in the city from the 1850s to the 1880s. So much that seemed wilful and unexpected in that iconography could be matched to the actual dislocation and provisional reconstruction of the city under Baron Haussmann, and “Haussmannization” became a talismanic word for a generation. The second was that same geography but as specifically filtered through the imagination of Charles Baudelaire, identified as the great prophet of modernity, then filtered a second time through the imagination of Walter Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire. The third was derived from one outcome of the attempt, in the uprisings of 1968, to remap the city from below. During the following decade the British journal Screen took its lead from French theory in the project of linking a Marxist critique of ideology with a poststructuralist account of the formation of subjectivity: sharing many of the same sources and ambitions, the most sophisticated wing of social art history had by the early to mid-1970s extended its theoretical horizon beyond the Frankfurt School to become adequately conversant with the likes of Lacan, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, and Irigaray.

The last map was the one that most powerfully underwrote attention to subject matter as primary, doing so by its ability to place the iconography of advanced nineteenth-century art under a negative sign. Canonical examples of liberated technique, such as Delacroix’s Death of Sardanapalus and Manet’s Bar at the Folies-Bergère, could be situated beyond the standard accounts of adventurous colorism, abbreviated description, and expressive handling of the brush, beyond even preoccupations with the artist’s individual sexual psychology. Instead they were to be seen primarily as symptomatic instances of structured sexual positioning — fantasies of male visual control as indulged in the former, or interrupted in the latter — potentially generalizable to the culture as a whole. And it was with this last map that Wall began at the point of his return to sustained studio work and from there proceeded backwards through the other two, as often as not in advance of their full realization in the writing of academic social historians.

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Among his earliest large transparencies are two that took up the challenge of precisely these monuments by Delacroix and Manet. Picture for Women of 1979 (pl. 53) found its point of departure in the latter. The lines of bare bulbs in the studio echo Manet’s globular lamps in a perfect diagram of Albertian perspective, the window frames and the two symmetrical lamp standards chart the artist’s translation of depth into a functional linear grid (that being the stable order permitting the Bar’s multiple violations of unified illusion). Studio space and mental map become one. The flanking standards, which rise out of the frame, also edge male and female to the wings of a central panel dominated by the camera as lens and recording device. The play with edges is a further formal homage to Manet, and, like the painting, it employs the effect of a mirror behind the model, finding a new purpose to that painting’s unstable interplay between the spectator’s centrality (as “seen” by the woman) and displacement (as “reflected” in the objective optic of the mirror). It revived this disparity in order to make concrete the fresh theoretical speculation then circulating around questions of male spectatorship and the complicity of both Renaissance perspective and the camera’s technology in that regime.

Nor is the Renaissance evoked in an idle way, Wall’s departures from Manet push the Bar into the most ritualized of painting’s formats, the devotional triptych. As in the van Eyck’s Ghent altarpiece, male and female take the positions of Adam and Eve flanking the all-seeing God, who constitutes them in sexual difference. While the Italian Renaissance theorized perspective in terms of the godhead at the vanishing point (as in Raphael’s Disputa), the late twentieth century resorts to Lacan’s Name of the Father. Picture for Women makes the two so entirely coincident that it becomes the task of the viewer to work out the actual distance that separates them. And all of this is saved for art, as opposed to clever illustration, by the thoroughly prosaic and contemporary character of
manent idea it implanted as it is for the impression it may or may not have made on its limited original audience. It was the residue of grand historical painting as offered to and transformed by the vision of the random urban pedestrian. Delacroix rather than Manet was Baudelaire's idea of the consummate artist: *The Destroyed Room* is Delacroix under the gaze of the flâneur and his lowlife surrogates—the prostitute, street criminal, and derelict raggpicker. For each of them the violent tableau would hold distinctly different meanings.

Wall did not make a habit of this unexpectedly public mode of display, but he proceeded in his suspended narratives to work his own way through the inherited mythology of the flâneur as hero of modernity. Benjamin had called particular attention to disjunctive interplay in Baudelaire's poetry between the most aggressively common image and the most elevated allegorical abstraction. A direct counterpart to this attention in social art history was a turn toward those artists who combined a precision of urban typology with a certain pompous academic scale and compositional order. From this altered point of view, the stiffness and estrangement of ritualized leisure in Seurat were revelatory, as was “the unexpected desolation” present in the monumental street scenes by Gustave Caillebotte—the real discovery of that moment in scholarship (pl. 55).  

In the making of his intense, mural-sized transparencies, Wall found a plausible contemporary equivalent to the physical impact achieved by these artists, in his words, “a specific opposite to painting.” In the painstaking, finely detailed staging of his photographic subjects, he found a way to match their laborious deliberation over composition and technical refinement, all without descending into quotation or museum-bound revivalism. The analogy with film is unavoidable, but rather than making the more obvious identifications with director, cinematographer, or editor, Wall singled out the crucial but unsung role of the art director, the creator of the look of a film and the necessary master of every trick of illusion.

Even with its elaborately refined construction, the illuminated transparency might have remained a remote metaphor for flâneur-academicism had not Wall constructed thematic parallels to Benjamin's reading of nineteenth-century modernity that were explicit to the point of literalism. In the latter's aphoristic formula, it was the figure of a woman, the prostitute, who summed up the perpetual displacement of human subjectivity in thrall to the capitalist mirage; she is “the pure commodity . . . who is seller and product in one,” and this same condition overtakes the ordinary bourgeois male, who submits his own being to the regime of things and their exchange.  

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beside that unreadable encounter between the man and woman at the left side of Caillebotte’s Le Pont de l’Europe (pl. 55). The setting of the painting was a marvel of nineteenth-century capitalist expansion, the iron bridge spanning the rail lines leaving the Gare Saint-Lazare; the adjoining district was itself entirely new, its wide avenues and straight lines epitomizing Haussmann’s rationalized urbanism. No places its non-encounter between prostitute and passing businessman in an exact late twentieth-century counterpart to Caillebotte’s assertively modern environment, a faceless financial and corporate center typical of scores of modern cities, which have repeated the pattern set by Haussmann in ruthlessly displacing older, more varied social ecologies. The man’s buttoned-up overcoat and the woman’s cheap fur evoke a chill outdoors, but the architecture encloses the scene into an interior with no visual outlet: a transformation of boulevard into room is precisely what Benjamin described as the vision and experience of the flâneur.

At the same time, the still chilliness of No displays a rigid and rarefied abstraction similar to that which Benjaminian theorizing tended to generate.
in art-historical work. That parallel academic activity, subject itself to the seductive fascinations of Paris, has largely failed to move on from competitive cultivation of expertise in the interpretation of one past cultural episode. Wall, on the other hand, has been able to advance from this parochialism (national, chronological, and theoretical) by returning to the most basic of the three mapping exercises outlined above: the description of a geography that is at once familiar and strange.

In his case the obvious resource was directly under his feet: the city of Vancouver. Some of his earliest panels are panoramic landscapes (more recently realized in a large format) which exploit the self-evident scenic potential of the format. In each one, the city is seen only at its fringes or is registered at a distance by the rough incursions of industry into the surrounding wilderness. Those fringes are typically a clutter of cheap, ill-planned suburban housing, mixed with a patchwork of warehouses, overpasses and littered waste ground, which the camera and scale of the image force incongruously into the dramatic sweep and grandeur of the traditional landscapist’s distant prospect.

Epic sweep in those panels prevents the urban fringe from offering the reassurance of a melancholy picturesque. A suggestion of the latter does, however, hang over the close-up studies of similar locations which followed a few years later, Bad Goods of 1984 and Diatribe of 1985 (pl. 57), for example. For the latter work, Wall has proposed adventurous analogies with Poussin’s Landscape with Diogenes and, by thematic extension from that prototype, with the peripatetic philosophers of antiquity, in whose stead he places the young welfare mothers impersonated by his models. As Diogenes threw away his last possession in pursuit of truth, it is they, as
“the least favored members of society,” who possess “a generic, objective relation to the traditional aims of critical philosophy.” His gloss is persuasive as a report on the rudimentary chain of thought prompted by his flânerie-by-automobile in the outskirts of Vancouver and on his discovery of the social invisibility suffered by poor young women coping with small children in that landscape. But one has to wonder if the actual density of information in the panel is sufficient to guarantee a response of this sophistication. At the same time, he has a secure claim to have discovered the importance of the suburban terrain vague as a diagnostic feature of modernity at more or less the same moment that it was called to the attention of academic art history in T.J. Clark’s The Painting of Modern Life. More than with any classical landscape, action and setting in Diatribe converge in an uncanny way with Van Gogh’s small, uncharacteristic painting Outskirts of Paris (pl. 58), which launched Clark’s dissection of the topic, and which was then hardly known in the literature.

Clark describes Van Gogh’s work as, in all likelihood, a provisional response to Seurat’s monumental procession of suburban humanity in Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte. The blank, undecided nature of the Outskirts of Paris was an achievement in itself and may be the grounds of its accuracy, but it resists any more ambitious scale than the one Van Gogh gave it. Nor did he pursue the direction that the painting suggests, with his subsequent shift to rural Provence removing any necessity to do so. The size and unnatural clarity of Wall’s panels demanded a higher, more Seurat-like degree of articulation. And when he found the necessary organizing principle, it came with an impeccably Benjaminian provenance: shock as the defining feature of modern experience, the sensory assault that lends to urban life its perpetual aspect of the uncanny.

This, for Benjamin, was the reason that the truth of modernity assumes allegorical form. William Empson, writing in the same period, had arrived at a similar realization when he observed that “the facts of the life of a nation... are very strange indeed, and probably a half-magical idea is the quickest way to the truth.” A sympathetic response to Wall’s subsequent work will require consent to some such proposition. The liquid explosion set off by the tense streetperson in Milk in 1984 (pl. 59) begins to provide a satisfactory focus and intensity of internal incident; it succeeds in dramatizing the condition of homelessness with minimal reliance on pathos (something few artists have managed since Martha Rosler’s prescient Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems of 1974; see “Unwritten Histories of Conceptual Art” below).

Conveying a subjection to shock did not necessarily require such abrupt and incongruous action. The Guitarist of 1986 (pl. 60) pursued another vein of illusion altogether, one plausibly (and in fact) provided by the actors themselves. The adolescent squalor of the setting – graffiti and detritus together – carry the imprint of myriad shocks and undigested impressions from the city outside, as well as from a half-understood history of symbolic protest by their elders since the 1960s. The panel documents the complete vernacular assimilation of collage aesthetics cemented by Punk, which is now pre-history for this generation. For this reason it was prescient about the sensibility – Punk and Hardcore thrash mixed with disorganized counter-cultural attitudes going back through the Hippies to the Beats – that in the early 1990s came to fascinate a worldwide audience in the music of bands from neighboring Seattle such as Soundgarden.
line of descent at another angle, connecting Manet’s Mlle. V...in the 
Costume of an Espada with Caravaggio’s ephibic lute-players.

No informed (adult) viewer who takes time over the work will be able 
to fend off these connotations. The dense condensation of vivid historical 
reference disrupts the unity of the photographic impression from the inside 
without resort to collage or montage, and this is brought home by the 
inclusion of their achieved vernacular equivalent. (The Guitarist – down to 
a precise motif like the knitted, stuffed toy – anticipates both the thematics 
and the characteristic raw material of Mike Kelley’s installations of the last 
few years; it deploys both matter and ideas in a way that is more precise 
and certainly less physically cumbersome.)

A parallel internal fissure takes place in Outburst of 1989 (pl. 61), 
a panel that returns to the overt theme of urban shock, amassing the terror 
of factory discipline and the thousand daily assaults of sweat-shop labor

Mudhoney, Pearl Jam, and (of course) Nirvana. The late Kurt Cobain of 
the last came up with the descriptive coinage “Kerouwacky”: his Smells 
like Teen Spirit could have provided the work with a good alternative title.

Casting a certain parental regard over the tableau, Wall claims all this 
back for art by maneuvering contemporary disorder and aimlessness into a 
conceptual grid, again provided by the urbanity of nineteenth-century 
Paris. The dark-haired eponymous figure, actually a young woman born in 
Guatemala, lifts itself from the immediate photographic continuum to 
join Manet’s Latin guitarists and dancers, the painter’s response to the 
fascination exerted by the touring Spanish troupe of the 1860s. The 
pertinence of the connection derives from Manet himself having used these 
teachers to collapse the historical distance between his own moment 
and the tradition of Spanish tonal painting and self-declarative technique 
extending from Velázquez to Goya. The manufacturer of the electric guitar 
has sought to disguise the origins of the instrument behind an Iberian aura, 
taking the name of the latter artist as a brand identity and allowing Wall 
in all plausibility to emblazon the magic signature at the center of the 
composition. The beauty and androgyny of the central figure crosses this
into one figure of sudden, startling outrage. But it is not the violent emotion that rends the image from within as much as it is the small adjustments to the supervisor’s gesture. Something in the curve of the fingers most of all turns his stance into one akin to an emblematic martial-arts pose. Here, the allegorical key comes from popular culture, the Asian as filtered by film fantasies of occult power. No element of the scene precisely contradicts a prosaic exposé of petty authoritarianism (conceivably, the man might even be a fanatic prone to imitating Bruce Lee in moments of anger), but the reaction of the female worker is invested with alarm on another level altogether, one triggered by unexpectedly seeing her own existence mirrored in a horrific stereotype.

Two of the most recent panels take such suggestions of the occult and make them explicit in comedic science fiction and out-and-out visions of the fantastic. The Stumbling Block (pl. 62) imagines that it has become a responsibility of municipal government to administer shocks. Staking out the pavement is a civic employee, equipped in outlandish protective gear—

somewhere between Samurai armor, the pads of an ice-hockey goalie, and a sleeping bag—which renders him incapable of movement. A simulated electronic device, connected by computer cable to the monopod body-casing, bears an official seal reading “Office of the Stumbling Block—Works Dept”; his helmet keeps him in radio contact with headquarters. The personification of urban shock, its translation into static farce, signals a change in the logic that had governed Wall’s work for more than a decade: that is, its tense inscription of allegorical meaning into a screen of apparently seamless naturalism. The voluntary pratfalls undergone by Wall’s characters connect the panel to the suppressed potential for a genre of silent film in technicolor, with all the promise of heightened fantasy entailed in that counter-factual entity.

The high-technology stumbling block is a comically passive surrogate for the artist’s now far more interventionist control of advanced reproductive media, one in which the temporal succession of film is replaced with the spatial suture of disparate images permitted by photographic digitalization. That process also permits a gradual working-up of a composition part by part in a way that approximates the studio procedures of traditional narrative painting (in Wall’s prior work that approximation
had been restricted for technical reasons to the building of sets and direction of actors). The characters in The Stumbling Block were all posed in the studio, but perhaps the first full extension of that change can be seen in Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Mogor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (pl. 63). In that allegory about the end of the Cold War, seen from a place and through an event maximally remote from Western awareness, Wall gives free rein to the occult. Entirely constructed in the studio, integrating the sort of special effects normally encountered in Hollywood horror, its imagery can shift in a matter of inches from the pathetic to the noble to the utterly grotesque, from Baron Gros to Ilya Repin to Hieronymus Bosch to Goya yet again (another way of describing it would be as a modern equivalent to the survivors of The Raft of the Medusa with all the gore that Géricault recorded in the morgue but could never put on a monumental canvas). At the same time, negotiating this mobility of reference requires an orderly march through a composition unabashedly based on the rigid pyramidal structures of Ancien-Régime academic practice. Advanced technology seems to have permitted a move past the surreptitious, ad-hoc academicism of modern-life painting in the later nineteenth century to a frank encounter with the real thing. The compositional pyramid is the leitmotif of virtually all Wall’s work of 1991–4, even that still based on live photography; it assumes emblematic form in the reclining male nude at the center of Vampires’ Picnic of 1991 (pl. 64), in which a Hellenistic warrior and Hogarth’s Rake in Bedlam are elided under the auspices of George Romero’s genre-bending combinations of comedy and cannibalistic shock on film (shades again of the repressed in Géricault’s castaways).

One way of finding an aphoristic verbal gloss for Wall’s work would be to give a positive turn to T.W. Adorno’s famously negative appraisal of Benjamin’s first, 1938 version of his Baudelaire essay: “If one wished to put it very drastically, one could say that the study has settled at the crossroads of magic and positivism. That spot is bewitched.” He went on to recommend to Benjamin that “only theory could break the spell – your own resolute, salutarily speculative theory.” For this reader at least, that first essay remains superior to the allusive and abstracted revision which he then offered in conformity to the demands of the Frankfurt school. That bedevilled crossroads may yet offer a vantage point from which to see the territory where existing theory cannot take us. As Benjamin himself said in a praised defense of his first approach, “speculation can start its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of putting on the waxen wings of esotericism, it seeks its source in strength of construction alone.”