

## An Interview with Jeff Wall

Mark Lewis

**Lewis:** Art has always been concerned with articulating a position with regard to the question of rights. To understand aesthetic rights simply in terms of combating interdiction, however, would be to risk abnegating art's own identity in favour of putative contents that may or may not be censored according to the myopic interests of petty state officials. The intimate bond that once tied interdiction to art's modus operandi (its historical and delicate attempts to circumvent the laws and protocols that forbade its invasion into certain areas of the territorial subject matters of the state, the church, or the privileged) has long since expired. Today in the West, art is free to represent what it likes with regard to subject matter.

**Wall:** I think that the critique of art has been approximately accomplished. That is, the interrogation of the foundations of its validity has reached a point at which the experience of art is now primarily an experience of the problem of its own validity. I do not think that this problem is related directly to the problem of rights. I don't know what "aesthetic rights" are. Art is covered by the democratic rights to free speech, freedom of expression. I have never been concerned with interdiction on the level of subject matter because it barely exists in our society. Look at Joel-Peter Witken, for example. The provocations, like Robert Mapplethorpe's, are too much a mirror game of publicity to be *artistically* interesting.

**Lewis:** To think of aesthetic rights it may be necessary to return to and rethink the theory of disinterestedness articulated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*. A long line of commentators have tried to keep some form of this articulation alive (Schiller, Adorno, Greenberg, Focillon, etc.), and they in turn have been subjected to critical work that has undeniably pointed to some of the impossible engagements that these thinkers have entertained with the world. But to acknowledge these critiques is not at all to dispose of the underlying drama in these, for want of a better word, formalist texts. I wonder how that inquiry, that formalist inquiry, might be revitalized and understood now? And can we be sure that this enquiry will not get reduced to a kind of caricature of aesthetic connoisseurship – the name of Walter Pater comes to mind.

**Wall:** I am not interested in formalism. I think that the existence of an attitude such as formalism is a symptom of the decay of aesthetic language among the intelligentsia and the elites who support art. There are obviously many reasons for this, but it's a sore point

since Clement Greenberg wrote "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," where he located its causes in the decay of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the imperialist epoch. The philosophical reflection of the inner contradictoriness of art demands an acceptance of the dialectical relation of "form" and "content." The collapse of these dialectics, or of the sense of dialectical reflection, could be seen as Greenberg sees it, as a symptom of capitalist crisis. To an extent, I think it *is* that, but I do not want to participate in a "progressive consensus" which has been so uncouth about "unprogressive" phenomena, like Matisse, Mallarmé, Proust, or Huysmans, and many more over the years up to now. The progressive consensus is itself a symptom of a decline of the left, a decline of the social-democratic elite. Formalism is their *bête noire*, the taboo that holds them together. There is no formalism in art, really. Your question about how we ensure that this does not evolve into a new Walter Paterism is itself part of the consensus idea of aesthetic thought. If a new Paterism evolves, let it – maybe that will create something marvellous. "We" should desist in imagining that "we" are called upon to determine developments in this way. A critique of a neo-aestheticism would be a challenge to the stultified analytical capacities of many members of the critical elite.

56

**Lewis:** With regard to the "progressive consensus," I am less sure of its hegemony and the strength of the consensual bond that would hold its opinions together. What I would say is that the dialectical relation between form and content, the "inner contradictoriness" of the work of art, is really a formal concern. What may be at stake here is a general misunderstanding of mimesis. Certainly Kant's articulation of this fundamental relation between art and nature implies a critique of imitation, and this rigorous and formal thinking of the question of representation is, I suspect, what you find so lacking in what you have called the progressive consensus. Formal concerns are central to the question of the work of art's engagement with the world. At the same time, we are aware that a certain conservative connoisseurship would like nothing better than to return art to a sort of pre-Copernican antitheoretical universe.

**Wall:** I would put it a little differently. I'd say that artistic content is realized in the experience of the form of a work. A work does make a "formal proposition" but maybe not in the form of a proposition. It's like when Hegel says that a dialectical concept of identity, which insists on the "identity of identity and non-identity," must nevertheless be articulated using the word *is*: the propositional form of identity.

In a way, you could say that there isn't any subject matter in a work of art. Subject matter is like a pre-text. It determines nothing directly artistic about a work, but, as pre-text, it determines the generic character of the work that is about to be made. This is another

inner contradiction, I think. You begin with a subject, but the content of the subject is only made visible ("appears" in the Hegelian sense of necessary appearance) in the way the work actually looks – which comes from the ways it is made, formed, realized.

I am not as negative as you are about what you call conservative connoisseurship. I think connoisseurship is an extremely theoretical approach to art, in principle, since it aims at making the subtlest distinctions between (and within) works. I feel that this terminology has just become frozen over the years and has lost the sense that critical philosophy and ideological critique are aspects of connoisseurship. A "serious" work of ideological critique *begins from* a concept of the "valid" and the "serious" work (or its opposite – counterfeit or kitsch). Connoisseurship and a canon of taste are already present in it. The academic radicals and conservatives have allowed themselves to tear apart a discourse which is more expansive than either of their positions can recognize. I'm not interested in connoisseurship in its auction-house sense and the snobbism of reactionary elites, except where fine empirical distinctions are concerned. There, the critical elite would probably have a lot to learn from a connoisseur-like study of the granular or molecular nature of individual, physical art works, or objects – which is what we artists make.

**Lewis:** Because you use photography and because you use some of the technologies of advertising and public imaging in general, and, above all else, because the subject matter of your pictures has tended to include particular aspects of "public life," your work can be understood as reengaging the fundamental connection between the museum and the public life that ought to make the experience of the former a critical and aesthetic one. How might your work be understood as attempting – if indeed it is – to prolong this right for the aesthetic to be taken seriously, its refusal to be subsumed to a more generalized economy?

**Wall:** I have always thought that public museums were at least as good a place as anywhere else to look at works of art, and think about them. But I have to approach the question a little differently than you are doing, because the concept of aesthetic rights does not work for me. The seriousness of the aesthetic experience, or its being taken seriously, is more a question of public literacy and values, of the ethical world created by education, urbanism, and the interlinkage of various institutions, including religious institutions as well as the museum world, or the art market. Just as you have noted that legislation and censorship have not deterred the process of completely opening (and ending) the question of the subject matter of art, no mass of "rights," however conceptualized, can substitute for the practical construction and preservation of what could be called "worlds of seriousness," established and evolving sites of praxis and reflection which are valued and protected

by society, by institutions and social capital, and by individuals, by citizens and their property, or private capital. Society already has the legal means to do this. Art can be subsumed in a more general economy and still be taken seriously – that is, art can be a commodity (which it really has to be in capitalism) and still be taken seriously. The idea that the commodity status of art prevents people from taking it seriously and developing profound relations with it is another sacred cow of the progressive consensus. We take land seriously and it is a commodity, and this could be said of any other object people are seriously involved with.

**Lewis:** There can be no argument about whether or not art enjoys commodity status. As your remarks suggest, a work that is not a commodity is a work that must remain completely invisible. However, the commodity form is not the sum total of our relations to objects and things, and this might explain some of the shortcomings of much recent art that has attached its critique single-mindedly to this aspect of the work's value. I think Adorno is useful here.

**Wall:** Like Adorno recognized, the orientation here is in terms of the dialectical character of use-value and exchange-value, the "identity of their identity and non-identity." The commodity status exhausts no object's whole existence, and art makes that visible as its beauty.

**Lewis:** Identity is something which is forcefully raised as a question in your work. All of your characters seem to emerge in your photographs in a state of tension with regard to identity. They are in effect on the cusp of an interpolation that would grant them a definitive identity (from bullies, from the police, from employers, from the CIA, from landlords, from rituals, from prescribed moralities, etc.); yet being on the cusp they have *not yet* received that identity. The tension that surrounds them so theatrically is, I think, this sense of having not taken the final step, of a resistance – often silent, often no more than a barely visible gesture – that is a utopian and perhaps impossible attempt to imagine oneself as producing an identity outside of any demand to identify oneself, and therefore to be something that is ultimately unknowable (to bullies, to police, to landlords, to bosses, to the state). To be unknowable, of course, is to be useless, a condition which the aesthetic has a close interest in.

**Wall:** This question of the uselessness of art I understand in its more classical sense of a negation of the instrumental relation to things, people, and images. The validity of art is involved with this negation, in the name of reflection, and of the dialectical relation of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, as Hannah Arendt, for example, describes it in *The Human Condition*. I like your account of the formation of identity in my pictures – it does correspond to my way of thinking about them. Photography has the problem of being a

very definitive and static mode of representation – it “fixes” things. So I have been interested in using the static qualities of the image to focus on something fugitive and intangible. This is an aesthetic value which for me often determines the viability of this or that subject for a picture.

**Lewis:** Photography is now a classical medium. Your work suggests this significantly because it seems to point to the probability that photography has approached the condition of painting. I would like to ask you about how the two media of cinema and painting, the media that technologically and historically antedate and follow photography, meet in your images.

**Wall:** I agree that photography has now become an art, or a medium with status equal to that of the older ones. Many of the critical problems have not been resolved (like the status of the print in relation to the negative), but in general the debate about whether photography is an art of high ambition and status is over. I think that the debate about whether art will be anything else than photography is also finished. It is clear that the older forms, like painting, are not dead – they will obviously continue. We have just been fascinated with the glamour of the “end” of things. I hope that’s over too! I always thought that photography attained its artistic status by means of the cinema, that before the cinema evolved to the point where it had obviously become a major art form, nobody was in a position to comprehend the problems posed by photography in relation to the pictorial traditions. When cinema permitted photography to become conscious of itself as art, photography also became conscious of itself as nonpainting. The new imaging technologies are warping this though, and so now we have not-photography.

**Lewis:** Earlier you mentioned Huysmans and I began to think about how in the novel *Against the Grain*, Des Esseintes leaves the realm of “social utility” and his life becomes determined by aesthetic concerns. Hence his obsessive interest in smell and taste, which are peculiarly productive of the *mémoire involontaire*. The gesture of resistance (to identity) in your work is also like the madeleine in Proust, or for that matter the punctum in Barthes. It takes the moment out of its *mise-en-scène*. The whiff of its presence allows the picture to yield certain truths that are primarily sensed by aesthetic, formal apprehensions (and this is why Proust is very close to Freud). So the decadence that Huysmans stands charged with could be another way of describing how he is able to understand this close relationship between knowledge and form. I wonder, though, if Huysmans’s romanticism – and I introduce this new “ism” cautiously – runs the risk of displacing the concerns of, for want of a better word, political action into a wholly private, and ultimately unknowable, realm of taste.

**Wall:** Maybe there is no real risk of the displacement you are concerned about. I do not think a concern with the formativity of art threatens the possibility of making political statements in art. Artistically, there is no other way of making them. Works like Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, or Goya's *Disasters of War*, or *Hedda Gabler*, *Olympia*, or Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*, certain of Munch's pictures or Grosz's earlier works, Duchamp's *Urinal* – all have political content formulated as philosophical problem and experience of a work, an image, or story, etc. Or, referring to the figures you mention, think of Huysmans's analysis of anti-clerical extremism in *Là-bas*, or Proust's discussions of the Dreyfus case in his novel. The shadings of these works, the fact they open onto different and even conflicting horizons of implied political behaviour, is to me *not a problem*. It's a phenomenological condition of art. Certainty fleeting along a curve of continually evolving experience is a model of reflexivity, and of a critical attitude. All these works were and are politically effective enough. In art I do not think that there ever has been the kind of polarity between inwardness and activism that you suggest. The relation is elsewhere – maybe it's in terms of the use-value of the beautiful?

**Vancouver, October 1993**

*The Arrest*

Cibachrome transparency, fluorescent light, display case.

Image 119 x 160 cm

Jeff Wall, 1989



