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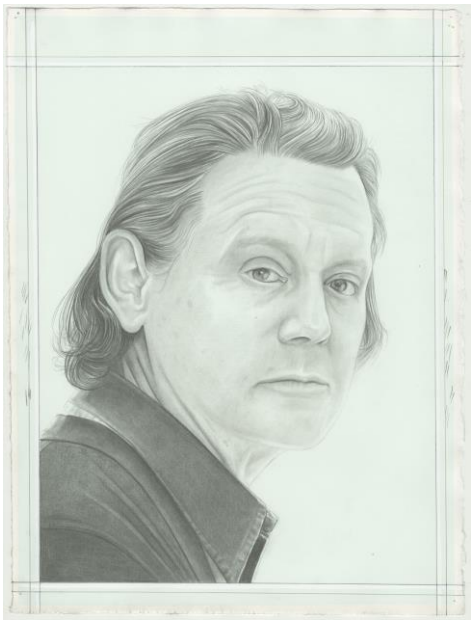
Jeff Wall with Barry Schwabsky

"In every case, I go on a little adventure because I don't quite know what's going to happen."

Barry Schwabsky



Portrait of Jeff Wall, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Since the late 1970s, Jeff Wall has become renowned for his staged photographs—sometimes fantastical, sometimes so factually convincing as to be what he's called "near documentary." He currently has two exhibitions on view, one of them being a survey—his largest US show since his 2007 MoMA survey—at Glenstone Museum, in Potomac, MD; the other at Gagosian in Beverly Hills. Having written an essay for the catalogue of the show at Glenstone, I realized I'd ended up with more questions than I started with, so I asked a few of them in a Zoom conversation with the artist ahead of his show in California.

Barry Schwabsky: (Rail): In one of your early interviews, you said that you had been exiled into photography. In the years since then, it's become clear, and you've acknowledged that, in fact, you're a photographer, and you are somehow at home in photography and not in exile there. Can you help me get a better idea of the trajectory of how the sense of your project has shifted over the years?

Jeff Wall: Exile is a pretty strong term. I can't remember quite when I would have said that, but it has to be twenty-plus years ago. When I began to show my bigger photos in the '70s, the stakes in terms of photography, and how one could be an artist in that medium, were different. I

felt I had to mark a distance from the kind of classic photography that had become ultra orthodox. I wasn't hostile to that orthodoxy. I love the work that made it up. But I knew that there had come to be something really closed about it. Out of my thoughts about that, I moved toward a counter-position, which was to embrace a lot of things that were not orthodox at the time, and in fact, had been pretty much dismissed from serious photography for many decades. And so the term exile meant for me self-exile from that canon, or the structure of that canon. That was a very '70s-ish way of putting it. In those days, there was a lot of polemical, ideological, thinking, different from now. Then it had more to do with the forms of art, now it's more about the content. I guess it also expressed what I must have felt personally, because I'd drifted away from being a painter in the '60s. And I probably had mixed feelings about it at the time, and I still have mixed feelings about it. Later, as you say, I felt differently about it. But in order to feel differently, I had to make 50 or 60 pictures because the process of doing them changed the situation that I was in.

Rail: In your last show in New York in 2019, there was a picture, Recovery, that was a kind of hybrid between painting and photography. Is that a one-off, or something that you think may recur?

Wall: Oh, no, I don't think it'll recur. Recovery has been taken rather literally as some sort of gesture about my being a painter. But that painting was just made for that picture. To me, it has the same status as, say, the room I built for the picture After "Invisible Man." It's something I made in order for it to be photographed. The subject of the picture required that object to be made. It doesn't constitute an idea, or any gesture of mine, as to what kind of painting I would make or ought to make. I enjoyed doing it, but that's all.

Jeff Wall, After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue, 1999-2000. Transparency in lightbox, 68 1/2 x 98.6 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: What were the paintings that you were making back then, as a young artist, when you were making them?

Wall: I'd been drawing and painting since I was about 10 or 11 years old. I did all sorts of stuff—from very realistic drawings and paintings to wild abstractions on a very large scale to almost invisible paintings done in the mid to late '60s mode of disappearing monochromes. I did

all that from between the ages of 10 and 25. I was experimenting with all sorts of things, some of which I still have stored away. So, I did lots of different things and never of course found a métier of any sort. If I had, maybe I would have stayed with it.

Rail: By contrast, when you started to do your big photographic pieces in the late ’70s, it seems you sort of immediately found your métier, you found a path you’ve been able to follow ever since.

Wall: Photography had in it, or has in it, technical energies—potentials, qualities that were inhibited by the existing canon of reportage-based photography. There was, of course, color and scale. And what I later began to call cinematography, which is an approach derived partly from the procedures and attitudes cinematographers use when they shoot films, which doesn’t have to remain encapsulated by filmmaking itself. All that was available to photography from the very first; it wasn’t something alien to photography, it was something that had been moved out of the center of the discourse by things that happened in the early part of the 20th century, important things and justified things. As I’ve said, many times, I never had a quarrel with what became the canon of photographic esthetics, I just couldn’t fit into it myself, for all kinds of reasons. And in not being able to fit into it, I was attracted to these suppressed elements, mostly involving artifice, or degrees of artifice. They must have resonated with my own personality in some way. And when I managed to make some pictures in the ’70s, I realized that it did not have any limits that I could discern. And I haven’t discerned them yet, though I keep looking for them. Picture-making art at its basis corresponds to how we see in the world, so it can never be a minor kind of art, can never be limited, it doesn’t have boundaries. As long as we have eyes, and are seeing creatures, there can’t be a boundary that pictorial art could run up against. Whereas if you were working in a more experimental vein, or art-critical vein, you might. And many artists who took up those directions have run up against boundaries, but they treated their encounter in an interesting way. So yes, it opened up something that I don’t think is unique to me. I just walked into that space.

Rail: Something that I’ve wondered about in all the things I’ve read about your work—there’s a lot of them, and I haven’t read them all—no one ever mentions the essay that A.D. Coleman published in Artforum in 1976 on the directorial mode. It’s kind of an interesting piece to go back to, because he tries to unveil that whole counter-tradition within photography that you were just talking about. And then, almost as an aside, he says something to the effect that a lot of the conceptual artists who are constructing photographs are redoing things that others have already done. He thinks they don’t realize that because they don’t know enough about the history of photography. I don’t know if that’s really true that they did those things so unknowingly. But I wonder if the very fact that Coleman made that connection, even in and even though in a disparaging way, might have pushed people who had been interested in conceptual work to realize that they were connected to bigger and longer traditions and maybe weren’t as much of a break as they had imagined themselves to be.

Wall: I remember the article. It was part of a special issue on photography. In fact, I looked at it again not long ago. I was clearly moving into the same track. But I have a feeling that writers like Coleman were a little isolated from things outside the United States. He was looking at people like Les Krims and Duane Michals—and I was never very impressed with their work—but there were other people who were using photography partly in conceptual ways, like, say, Klaus Rinke, Christian Boltanski, or James Collins, who kind of began the narrative art thing in the ’70s.

I had a feeling that when Artforum came out with that issue concentrating on photography, they were already a few steps off the beat. Because it seemed to me that people like Coleman were still attached to John Szarkowski's notion of what the canon was. They didn't also appreciate the link with cinema as a way of getting away from the Victorian treatment of photomontage and staged photography. Everybody laughs at the Victorians for their hokey version of how to do photography using elaborate artifice. And they deserve to be laughed at because they didn't do it very well. The whole atmosphere of their attempt was colored by their rather vulgar artistic ideas, so that they couldn't really constitute a model that could be taken seriously. There was good reason why photographers by 1900 or so moved away from that: because it was not very good, and what was happening in direct photography was much more impressive. Even painters, like Degas or Munch, were using the camera in a much more interesting way than any of those people. So, there were alternatives to this kind of Anglo-American version of artifice already in play, which it doesn't seem that writers like Coleman appreciated in 1976. That made their version of the directorial mode less compelling. Later, I tried to revise that whole history, in the sense of showing how these things emerge from both reportage and from conceptual art in a much more dramatic way.

Rail: And the change of scale is part of that?

Wall: The reworking of scale was central because a number of photographers, myself included, were approaching the awareness of the significance of the tableau mode. The photographic image was seen not to be essentially limited to the scale of the publication page, which was of course the sine qua non in 1970. There was a discovery or perhaps a re-discovery of an energy inside the very act of enlargement that had never been—or at least had rarely been—exploited or even examined. The tableau is a form of picture that belongs in the architecture of a room, in such a way that it has a presence. It's a fundamental way of looking at an image, one that stands in front of you as another entity, seemingly independent of you. And as such has a more physical way of capturing your imagination. That is a rich tradition in painting, from which photography had excluded itself by a series of important but limiting developments. So to make the picture bigger meant to enter into a new relationship with the other picture-making arts and also to revise the idea that photography was something so essentially different from any other picture-making art that it could never have anything in common with them, which was the discourse of the '20s—that photography was an unprecedented invention that did something that no other picture making medium could do. True, but not the whole story.

Rail: Is there a connection between this sort of reality effect, the sort of quasi-physical presence of such a big image, possibly with life-size figures, and your idea of the cinematographic image? Because back then—maybe no longer now when we're used to seeing moving images on a small screen, domestically—the cinema was something that you saw in a quasi-public space, and on a grand scale.

Wall: That idea of the very large image didn't play that big a part for me. The tableau form has its limits, it's not simply a large (or very large) image. It has a great range of sizes, but tends to be limited by image sizes that can be experienced directly and with some relation to the scale of the world in which the image is presented, the wall on which it is hung. I don't think the huge cinema projected image is within that range and so cinema as such is something different, even aside from the fact of the illusion of motion. What I took from cinema wasn't so much the enlargement as the collaborative aspect. I make strict distinction between cinematography and cinema. They're really not the same thing.

Rail: You've done things on that tableau scale that, if you had done them smaller, might have been thought of as illustration, like the Invisible Man piece you mentioned, and then the Odradek image from 1994, from the Kafka story "The Cares of a Family Man." How do you see the relationship between images like those and the texts they refer to?

Wall: Pictorial art has its origins in illustration. Giotto in Padua is illustrating specific scenes, from a known text. That's an obvious, fundamental example. But illustration as a term got a bad name, at a certain point, as if it didn't belong in the repertoire of a serious picture-making artist, but rather in that of a commercial artist doing things for a mass market. But illustration is simply an available mode of picture-making. The dismissal of that fact is another example of how essentially valid artistic ideas can become hidebound. The idea of "pure painting" that began with Manet or Cézanne established itself in a critique of the disappointing academic art of 1870. That art was "illustrating" commonplace anecdotes that every exhibition visitor could recognize. It was intolerable to serious artists. But we're talking about 2000, not 1870 or 1900, and "pure painting" is of course itself an orthodoxy, along with the translation of that into photography. This is not to say it's not valid, just that it is not absolute, and that its immense validity also produces new blindnesses. I think I have a nose for when things get like that. I don't like them. It provokes me. Because I agree that one of the aims of modern-type art, serious art, is not to conform to conventional taste, but to be aware of how conventional taste is flowing, where it's going and what's becoming conventional and why. Because conventionality tends to become a recipe for inferior achievement. That was at the forefront of many artists' minds for a long time. I'm not sure it is anymore, by the way. We now have an art industry, and industries are about standardization and conventionalization. Illustration as a potential space occurred to me when I was reading some Kafka stories, I suppose, and "The Cares of a Family Man"—the Odradek story—in particular. It just struck me that it could be a starting point, just like anything can become a starting point. The second time, I happened to be reading Ellison again, after many years. And it just hit me. That scene is pretty obvious. And you know, Gordon Parks had done a beautiful version of it earlier.

Rail: Sure.

Wall: So I wasn't the first person to do it. But I knew Parks's version, and obviously I didn't want to do it like that. He did it like a '60s TV theater set, very spare and jazzy. And it was really great. If Parks and I achieved anything, it may be evidence that there's no reason to worry about the term "illustration." This doesn't mean—I repeat—that the objections to the presence of "illustrational" features in a picture are obsolete or irrelevant. Its critical value remains in force. It's just how you handle it, the same as how you handle any of the other major criteria in your work.

Rail: To what extent are other pictures of yours almost equally illustrations? I mean of stories of your own, private stories that we are not privy to? Or there's the case of the triptych that you showed in New York, I Giardini/The Gardens, where there was actually a sequence of successive scenes that really set out a skeletal story.

Jeff Wall, I giardini / The Gardens (left) Appunto / Complaint; (centre) Disappunto / Denial; (right) Diffilda / Expulsion order, 2017. Inkjet print, in 3 parts, overall dimensions variable. © Jeff Wall, Courtesy Gagosian.

Wall: I didn't answer part of your previous question about whether these pictures would have been more illustrational if they were smaller. It's a hard question to answer because they aren't smaller. I didn't ever want to make them smaller. And so I can't really give a definitive answer except to say that if illustration is legitimate, then scale shouldn't matter. If the principle is legitimate, and the picture that you make is successful, then it can be any size. And—about stories of my own: they must be stories of my own, but I just don't write them. Their presence is as not-written. The relationship between the writing, or not-writing, of a subject and the picturing of it is one of the core energies that I work with. I mean, a story doesn't have to have the actual shape of a story; it can simply have the shape of a couple of words that trigger an image. And those two words—let's say "man sweeping," or "man mopping," because there's a picture of that, Volunteer. The two words are still a literary construction, words put together for a reason. So it seems to me that there is no "un-literary" starting point.

Jeff Wall, Volunteer, 1996. Silver gelatin print, 87 1/4 × 123 1/4 inches. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

Rail: And does it happen like that more often that you start from a verbal construct than from something that you've seen or…?

Wall: No, not necessarily. I did in fact see a man mopping, as depicted in Volunteer. And in that case, no actual writing was required. But nevertheless, in general, I feel I do have a writing activity… moreover, that all picture-making artists have this to infinitely different degrees. They just don't define it as literature. And it isn't strictly speaking literature, but it's an activity of writing, and that writing has threads out to all the dimensions of literature. Another way of saying it is that, in the process of picturing, the artist erases the text. And in the process of beholding the picture, the viewer rewrites it. There's a constant transfer of energy that can become verbal at any given time. I've always thought it would be interesting to hear a viewer talking to himself or herself, verbalizing what they see in a picture. I feel this talking is the origin of art criticism.

Rail: Can you give a bit more of a sense of how you typically move from whatever that initial jumping off point is, whether it's the perception of a man mopping, or the words, "man mopping," or whatever. So when that happens, and you think, oh, somehow there's a picture for me to make with that. What happens then? What's the next step? And the next ones? I mean, is there drawing? Are there sketches? Are there smaller working photographic images? Is there more writing? What are the things that go into it?

Wall: Sometimes I leave a subject for a long time because I'm not sure about it. The only subjects I really can get involved in are ones that reveal, not just a picture, but a kind of picture that I want to make—that probably I didn't know I wanted to make until that particular subject suggests it. The picture-making, or picture-structuring possibilities are infinite in principle, but at the same time, they fall into genres. And you can find yourself working in genres, even ones you might have originated. So the problem sometimes is that the subject you've hit on is interesting or meaningful, but you've essentially done that kind of picture already. In order to let that subject become visible, I'm going to have to make a picture that is structured like others I've made. And the longer you've worked, the more likely you will run into that situation—the problem of repeating yourself, at least on the structural level. The repetition might not be the subject but the way of seeing a certain part of the world—a street, a garden, a room with a window. There's a long balancing act involved here. This is just to reach the starting point you asked about. Once that obstacle has been passed, then it becomes a practical question—how to do whatever it is that now needs to be done? Saying "practical" suggests routines and known techniques, but that practical work is not very routine and what is fascinating about it is the complications and the surprises that arise in the process of doing it. In the case of After "Invisible Man," it had to be invented from the written descriptions. I went to New York and managed to examine and photograph a number of cellars in Harlem. And at first I thought I would do it in New York, but it was too difficult, there were so many obstacles that I decided to make a replica in my studio. I also had to do a lot of research because it was a different time period, which always makes for difficulties. I had to do quite a few drawings, to design the space; had to make or have made numerous objects, find and acquire others, to create that complete environment.

Rail: Do you work with stylists or people like that, to help you find the right objects and the right...

Wall: I work with people who can help me do what I need to do at the time; they don't necessarily have to be from any professional background. Most of the people who have worked or do work in my studio (and there are very few of them) are really skilled. Therefore, we do a lot of this work ourselves, because we can do it better than anyone else, for what I'm trying to do. But in every case, I go on a little adventure because I don't quite know what's going to

happen. And I love it when things change as I work on them. The picture changes as you work on it, no matter how simple it is.

Rail: Can you give me an example?

Jeff Wall, Staircase & two rooms, 2014. Lightjet print, in 3 parts, overall dimensions variable. © Jeff Wall, Courtesy Gagosian.

Wall: I made Staircase & two rooms in 2014, in a Hollywood rooming house. I wanted to show the interiors of two of the rooms in a triptych. The center panel was an image of the staircase. I arranged to photograph a few of the residents in their rooms. First, however, I wanted to complete the image of the staircase and hallway. The hallways were of course lined with the doors of the apartments. As I was shooting there, the resident whose door was just behind my camera, over my right shoulder, had a habit of opening his door slightly and listening to what was going on in the building. Since he was only a few feet from me, we exchanged some words over a few days, and I kept seeing him with his door ajar, listening. I realized that that image was something that made my original subject much more complex. It disturbed a sort of symmetry that would have occurred had I done interiors of two—probably rather similar—rooms, and so made the whole composition more unstable and open. And his behavior, which would have been hard to imagine or predict, also added something unique, real, and unwritten. So the whole shape of the project was distorted and improved by my unexpected collaboration with that resident.

Rail: And the show that you're about to have in Los Angeles, I gather, focuses on works that were made there, in Los Angeles.

Wall: Seven of the ten are made there.

Rail: Does that make it a show about Los Angeles, somehow? Does it take you a little bit closer to the documentary side of things?

Wall: I don't think so. I started working in LA quite a long time ago, in the 1990s. And my wife Jeannette and I have had a house there for about ten years now. We like to be there as often as we can be. I don't feel that I have anything to say, or show, about that place, that is particularly significant, except maybe my own view of it. I work there just as I do in Vancouver or anywhere else.

Rail: When I first got to know your work and also that of some other artists who were working in Vancouver, the work seemed very much about that place or, if not about it, to be of a piece with the place. It wasn't regionalism but an idea of asserting in a certain sense their locality in a much wider discourse. So I wonder about the whole question of place in your work and how it's developed.

Wall: That's complicated. I can't speak for the others. Vancouver, like other smaller and what you can call "provincial" places, has had a long tradition of art that valorizes that provinciality or, more accurately, regional specificity—what's usually called regionalism: Art—or writing, or theater, etc.—that wants to express the uniqueness of a place that has had a history of being overlooked. That has been very important in Vancouver, but I found it restrictive. I saw the place more as a generic instance of characteristics and conditions that exist more or less everywhere and anywhere in the modern world, and so I concentrated on creating a pictorial appearance of that. I avoided all the picturesque elements of the city as much as possible, probably creating a new kind of anti-picturesque in the process—ironically, I guess. The assumption, or hope, was that people from anywhere could recognize and relate to what they saw in my images, which happened to have been made in Vancouver. I suppose that in that process over, say, twenty years, I—and some of the others—invented or revealed a "look" of the place that hadn't really emerged before, and that "look," both provincial and familiar anywhere, could say something about subjects that intrigue people generally. That process was elaborated in the work of these artists—Ian Wallace, Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, and to a lesser degree, Rodney Graham, over a certain period, say from 1980 to the late '90s. Things have changed since then, but I feel I'm still involved in that process when I work there, which is still most of the time.