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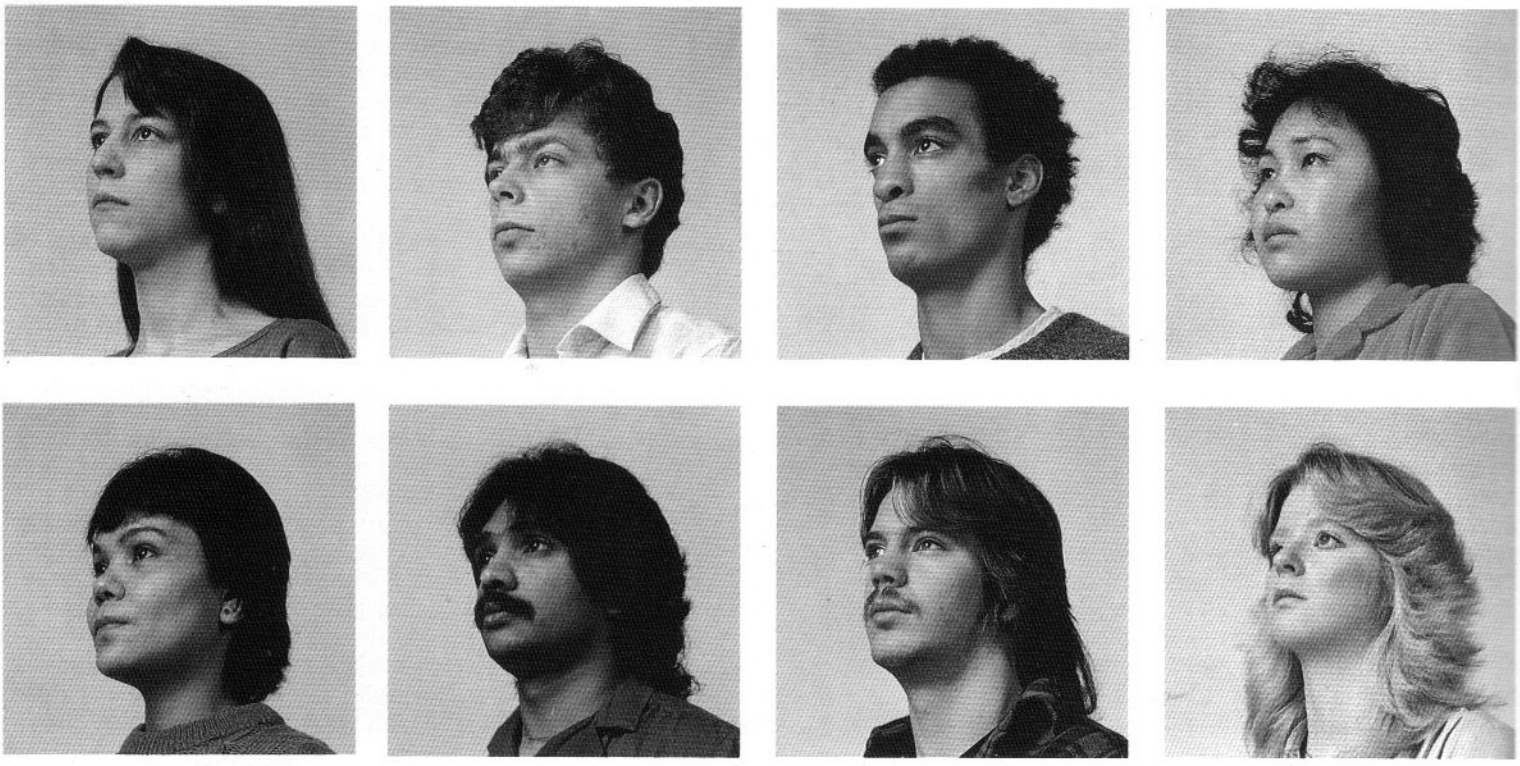
Scenes from a Modern Life



From the series «Young Workers», 1978-83. Right a detail.

JORGE LUIS MARZO

When most people discuss the American art scene, they are usually referring to what is going on in the focal points of the United States of America: New York, Los Angeles, etc. Other markets seem to be relegated to a second-class existence under the shadow of the extraordinarily dynamic creativity and receptivity of the US culture. However, all that is America does not fly Uncle Sam's flag. If we turn our eyes to neighbouring countries, we can see that many quite unique things are going on, and have been for some time, even if it is only now that they are starting to be recognized nationally and internationally.

Despite the enormous differences separating the art scenes of the USA's southern «back yard» (Latin America) and its northern «neighbour» (Canada), we can note certain parallels in their focus on the social aspect and on cultural criticism. Undoubtedly, the ferocity of US-style capitalism has a lot to do with this, but we cannot put their strong intrinsic peculiarities down to something that is, after all, merely an external factor. Certain singularities have developed indigenously in countries such as Mexico and Canada, where a strong sense of specificity has grown up amongst the young artistic circles which have largely rejected theories supporting autonomist representation in art.

The subject of this article, the Canadian artist Jeff Wall, is symptomatic of this phenomenon. His work cannot be separated from the creative energy of the contemporary Canadian scene. We will find it difficult to understand the consolidation of a certain conceptual tendency there in the mid-seventies (Wall, Ian Wallace, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham) without first understanding some cultural aspects of the country as a whole.

Canada covers an enormous expanse of land, populated by a mixture of ethnic groups and influenced by two main cultural traditions: the European French-speaking tradition and the Anglo-Saxon. This situation has created a deep-rooted feeling of difference, sometimes used as a political weapon. In turn, the massive presence of the communications industry in such a vast country has been a factor of enormous importance, as well as the big urban centres, which function as social conglomerates.

All this has gradually led many Canadians to adopt a very critical stance with respect to the social and cultural standardization of differences. Vancouver,

on the west coast —where Jeff Wall (1946) lives and works— is a good example of this cumulation of disparate characteristics: a large capitalist market, a city with a marked cultural bent (and strong political lobbies) whose highly consumer-oriented Weltanschaung is window dressing to a very different reality of poverty, margination and racial unease.

In this context of multiplicity, one not only finds an artist such as Wall who is a university professor of Art History, but also an entire generation of artists very much involved in supervising and deconstructing the representative models used by mass culture.

The complex theoretical and referential web in Wall's work must be considered in regard to the capital importance of the technical procedure he employs. This process in indissolubly linked to a concrete body of theory and —perhaps more than with any other contemporary artist— reflects his interest in establishing visual responses to his environment in an extremely condensed form.

Wall's works are large Cibachrome colour transparencies, illuminated from behind, thereby creating light-boxes. The image is projected towards the spectator. This use of photography in a directional message is a way of evaluating the production of images in general and, above all, it is a discourse on the character of contemporary perception. In 1985, Ian Wallace described how much we had been concentrating exclusively on the photographic medium, originating images that exploit the tension between artifice and reality, between expression and observation. He pointed out that, beginning with a large measure of accumulated cultural iconography —classical paintings, advertising photography, the cinema and everyday experiences— we construct significance in purely pictorial terms, both in terms of the picture-frame itself and in the way in which it is exhibited in relation to the spectator as critical subject.

Jeff Wall uses photography to represent the appearance of spectacle, a codified representation of masses, whilst at the same time giving the spectator a new context, bringing him closer to the spectacle itself. The use of back-lighting is very revealing in this respect. The mass media, the advertising media, the leisure industry, etc. —media generated with a strict concept of perception and their own aims— produce images that play on and break down the very status of their own formulas for presentation. Cinema and advertising films have condensed an entire schema in which the subject no longer solicits information —it is just materialized autonomously. The subject has been reduced to a simple spectator, whose only participation is tremendously deceptive. The information and the images that objectualize his participation are presented without being convened, thus giving rise to a fragmented reality separate from the ego but with such powers of conviction —borrowed from the reality of cinema and photography— that instead of feeling its potential knowledge to be threatened, the audience becomes involved in a very complex game of personal seductions. How can one expect the subject to retain any independence when the subject is the object in front of the footlights?

Jeff Wall believes it is possible to actively observe the spectator. This leads him to revise the position of the artwork in society. In his own words: «I'm interested in the subject as a problem, in an art of subjects... Dan Flavin was able to do his art by repositioning and recontextualizing both the materials that make up our social spaces and the behaviour associated to them.» The technique of projection works by appropriating the very character of current communication for the sake of using its transparency, its clarity, its familiarity amongst the public, already used to being absorbed by advertisements, films and screens. The observer is attracted towards the lighted screen; he is seduced by it and then discovers he is not just receiving pure information but is standing before the characteristics and similarities of his own social and mental environment.

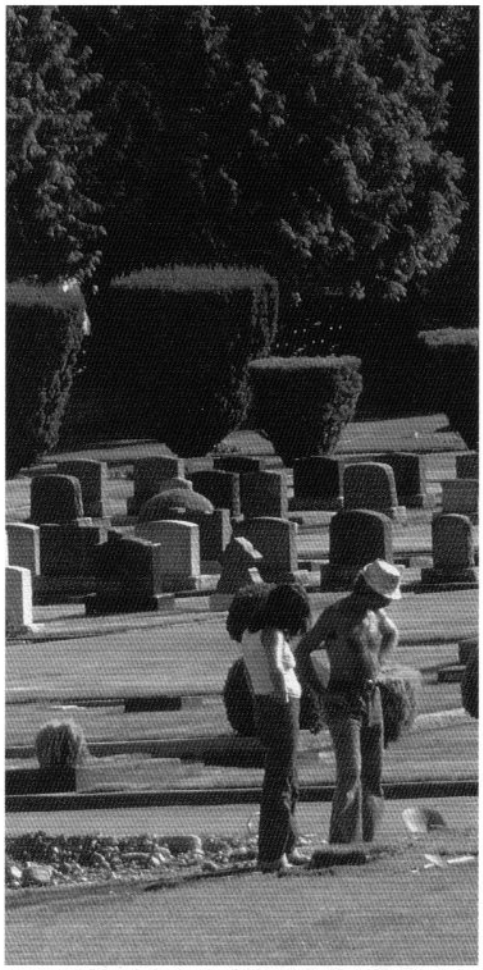
Wall has chosen photography as his means of expression because he believes it would be impossible to start a genuinely contemporary discourse using other media. Painting, for example, cannot serve as a vehicle for expressing the impact of technology on our everyday lives. Closely linked to the creative subject, it is unable to contain a coherent, perceptive debate with the projection, in sociological terms, that the created object must have. Painting's diminished role as a vehicle for *originality* is understood by Wall as an example of the extent to which power has appropriated an auratic, charismatic language in order to control and manipulate economic spaces and social desires.

Certainly during the eighties, the recuperation of pictorial praxis was to a large degree motivated or in any case complemented by the interest that the powers of economic and cultural control had in putting forward originality as a concept that could generate certain behaviour, as an example of individualism and subjectivity. Placing so much emphasis on the ego's creative act brought art back to the museum and to the economic organization of an artistic practice ever more distanced from the problems of everyday life. The attempt to elevate the object above the framework of the production of common goods and information, to create images as part of a private personal language has turned the art work into yet another consumer goods, rare and much coveted for its aura, and only affordable for the wealthy.

Using transparencies, Wall tries to relocate the art work as a means of communication, a means of putting across an understandable, direct message, unrelated to originality in its traditional sense. Because he employs a social language so thoroughly impregnated with reality, access to his work ceases to depend on initiation; an aspect of political criticism is thereby introduced into the

act of creation as a means of self-expression.

The technological image projected from his light boxes also shows the artist's ability to move beyond the traditional artistic space into a space more often hidden. This secret space, related to the «secret» nature of technical inventions that we so often fail to understand, is revealed by opposition. The luminous structures are so glaringly obvious that the creation of a possible *auratic* reduction —or shadow, as Williard Holms calls it (though I disagree with his basic proposal)— is eliminated from the start. The light boxes also make one reflect on the traditional Western and Christian concept of light. After creating the World, God used light and transparency as symbols of truth and order in the face of the obscurity or chaos of a language without systematic order. Thus light and lighting have become part of the dogma of representation. By means of light the subject is seen in ascendance, in both spiritual and social terms. Cinema has been the maximum exponent of this. It has introduced the public to an entire range of prototypes, dispossessing them of their essential qualities and presenting them as «ready-made». This levelling capacity, or tendency to standardize through luminous spectacle is precisely what Wall uses for his own ends, as an instrument still largely



«The Jewish Cemetery», 1980, and a detail.

untapped in its possibilities.

One of the most interesting things that comes to mind when considering Jeff Wall's transparencies is the conjunctive nature of his special technique. The artist himself states, «I saw a lighted sign somewhere and I was struck by the fact that it synthesized perfect technology. It wasn't photography, cinema, painting, or propaganda, although it did have strong associations with all of these. It was something very open. It looked like the technique in which this problem —technological impact— could be expressed; perhaps the only technique, given its very fundamental spectacularity.» Wall thus opted for a photographic approach, which manages to sum up the state of current observation, framing the problem of how to put across the communication in a way that is parallel to its own content.

On the other hand, Wall does not just take the photograph as it is, but rather endows it with new values, revising the very act of photography. He thus offers us a criticism of the snap shot. From its initial conception, the intrinsic condition of giving an instantaneous reflection of what was happening when the picture was taken has produced a degree of mythification concerning photography's nature as an art. The possibility of capturing reality without any prior aesthetic intention (any such intention being brought in a posteriori)

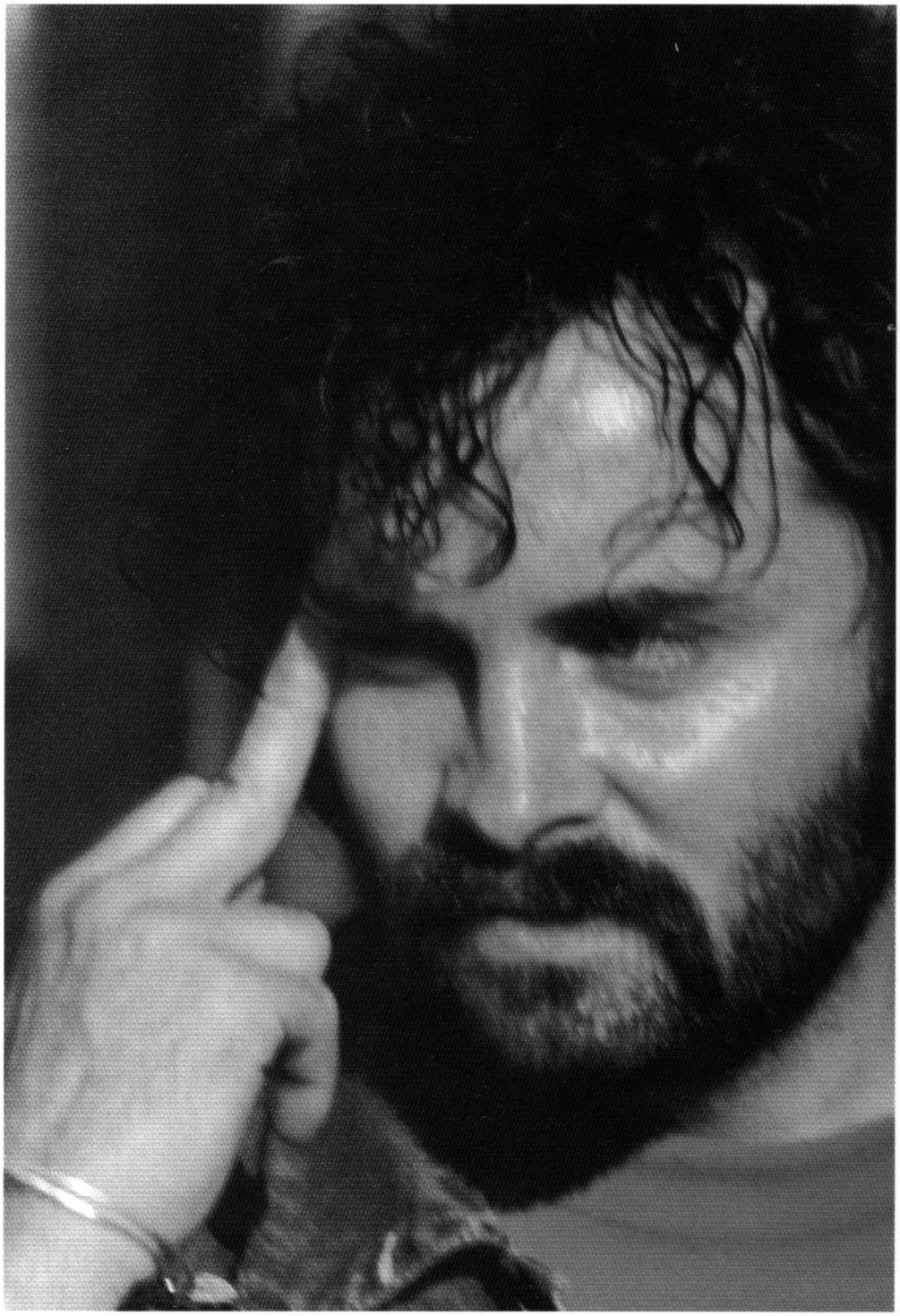
left the doors wide open to the socialization of the creative act. The Vancouver artist is thus offering us a highly intelligent re-reading of —a sort of post-industrial spoof— on Baudelaire's visions of how photography would destroy the very concept of creation. In our current reality of communication and simulation as produced by the mass media, the subject is surrounded by intangible illusions of ideology with, to borrow from William Wood's description, visions of fetishistic gratification swelling the imagination. The use of the photograph has created in society a perspective of semantic identification with all manner of contents that can be used by the systems of information control as the model for their general organization and design. Moreover, this ideological instrumentation of photography makes it possible for painting to be placed in a preferential status of alleged superiority.

In this discourse, Wall creates images that are photographically constructed but developed and staged in ways which make them difficult to recognize as such. He achieves a very tense relationship between the image and reality, an oscillation between what is imagined and what is documented, between reality and fiction, in short, between the formal and the ethical. Confronting the myth of instantaneous «snap shots», the artist prefers to develop the idea of simulation, taking full advantage of the idiosyncratic way that photos lead the mind back to the real world to establish their own reality: the spectator's ability to enter the iconography and find himself in it. The criticism of the ready-made photo —the fragment of reality, given artistic overtones by technological means— is made patent when one considers how photography has been industrialized in a «picture culture». Just think of the Polaroid advertising slogan for its SX-70: «Suddenly you will see a photo wherever you look». The idea of having found something that was already there has been resolved by favouring the interests of economic and cultural formalization.

«Nimic», 1982, and a detail.

Within this revision of photography's role in the context of representation and history, one must remember the idea of «photography beyond cinema», as Catherine David has called it. Before Wall takes a photograph, he does extensive documentary groundwork, locating outdoor shots, taking notes on specific situations that take place on the street, however humdrum they may at first appear. His work is very close to that of the stage director in the theatre or the continuity person in a film, using actors and roles.

Following this procedure Wall then locates himself in what we could call the interval, an instant taken out of time by simulation and constructed in its totality. Not only does he aim at optical condensation into a fragment of reality, but also cultural condensation within an open architecture of the image which he wishes to link to the very history of painting and its theatrical representation in the transfiguration of a scene. Benjamin Buchloh believes that one of the key aspects of the eighties was the fact that painting has become a model of the «ready-made» culture. Wall tries to give the memory's experience some form in reality — itself, not its components: inherent verisimilitude as a model of ready-made culture.



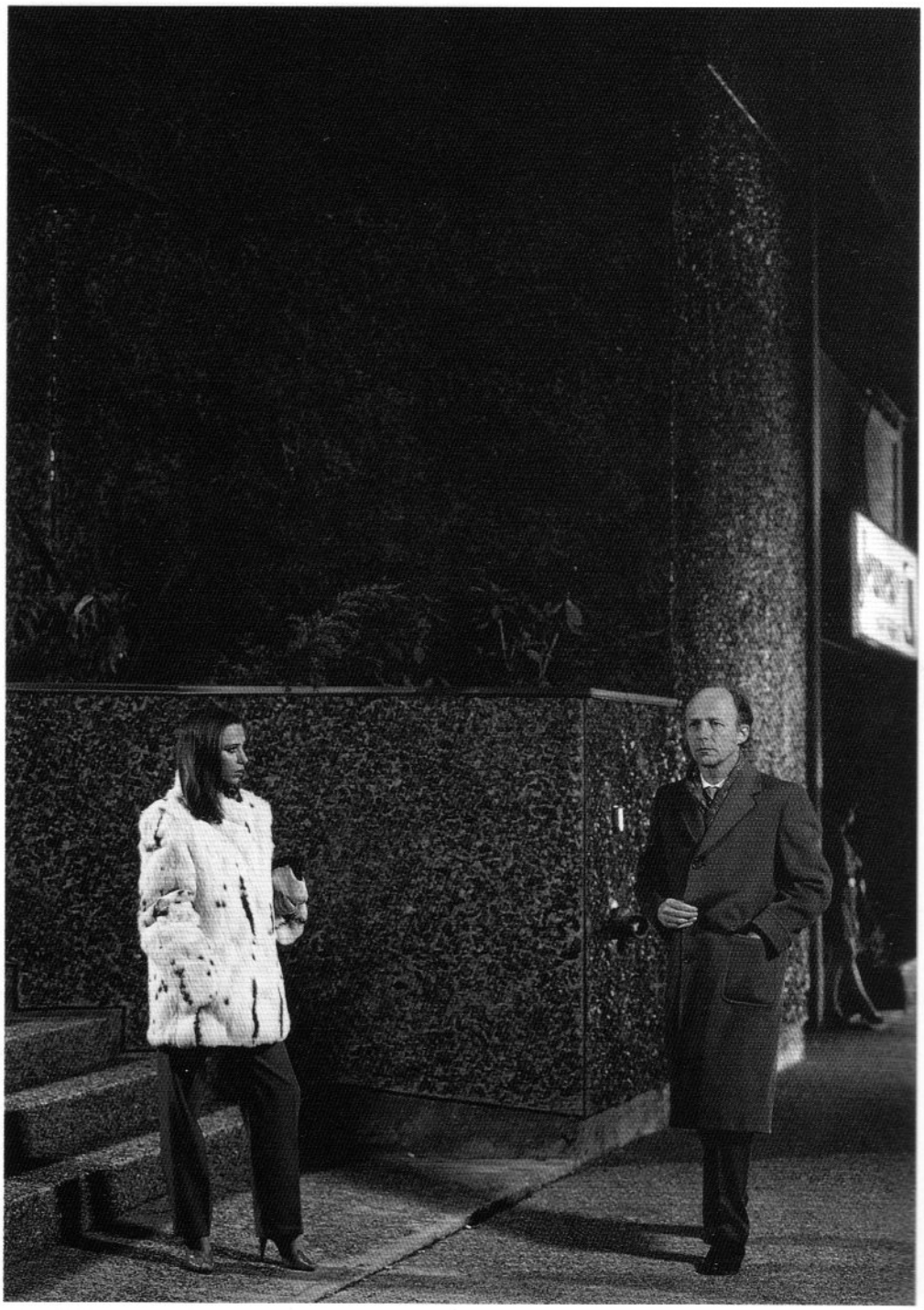
Since the well known *The Destroyed Room* (1978) until his most recent show in Germany, Jeff Wall has been working on series or groups of works considered as single pieces. Evidently, his development has run along the tracks of a coherent theory, but each work or series offers new and very disparate perspective on the world.

Firstly, all of Wall's art has been made in Vancouver. The landscape and individuals that people it are all from this city. This provides his work with a genuine physical specificity, whilst at the same time making one see the problem of internationality of contemporary art in a new light. Wall seems to be suggesting a criticism in social terms of placing art within a sort of ideological market system. To what extent can it have a social impact if problems are pigeon-holed in abstract categories? Wall's need to become thoroughly involved in a concrete context is delimited by the concept of a «version» as opposed to that of «di-version». A version is the application of a reflection within a controlled, known space in which the creative subject does not disappear (as one might initially suspect in Wall's case) but is expressed as a participant in the context. One can take this further still: His desire to provide versions is translated into a desire to condense reality, overcoming the traditional bipolarity of induction and deduction. It is not so much that he shows the particular in the general or vice versa, but more that he focuses on the Western problem of representation in almost anthropological terms, looking at the real fragmentation of society into separate parts linked by different sorts of cultural production, but with a global view. In this way, Wall has managed to deal with questions related to a specific space without losing sight of the referential powers of the international spectator.

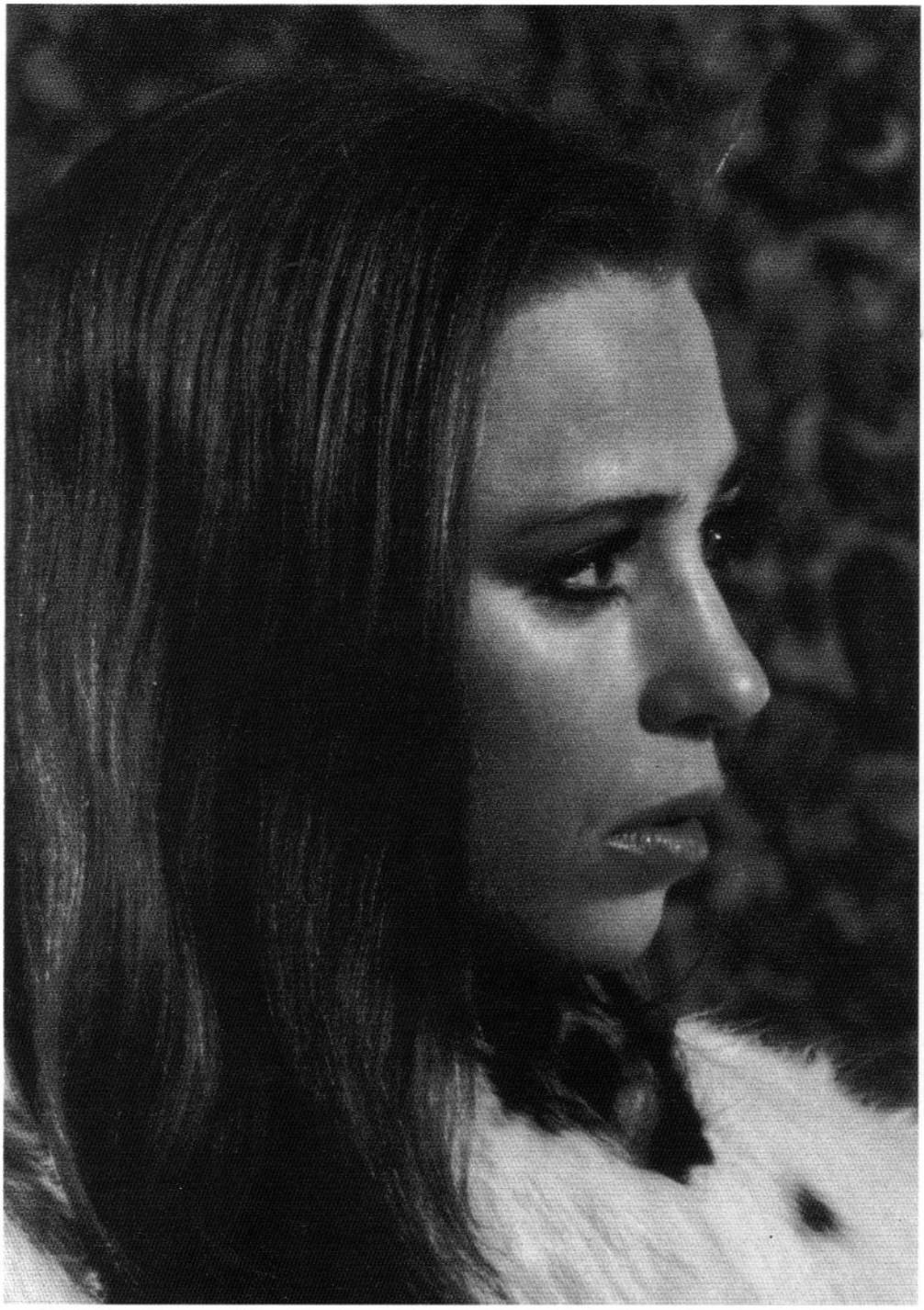
Jeff Wall's work can be divided into three different genres: portraits, landscapes and staged environments. Through the use of the concept «genre»

he is able to relocate the presence of art history in the codification of visual representation.

In his series of portraits, *Young Workers* (1978-83) and *Movie Audience* (1979), he comes back to a classical problem of genre such as the «heroic» transformation of the subject in photography. In the first series (with two different versions), young male and female workers from different ethnic groups are photographed in three-quarter close-ups, looking up towards a point outside the photo frame. They are very clear pictures that give full details about the texture of skin with all its pores, spots and make-up. Hung on the wall above the spectator's eye-level, we see the subjects' face, identifying them with ourselves as we look. Through our observation of their imperfections, similar to our own, their heroism is transformed into intimate personal association, albeit under the constant presence of a global utopian point on which the subjects rest their gaze. The characters are presented before the same promise of a future, optically enclosed within an identical typology. The repetition of the same poses underlines this codification of individuals more than it does their personality, thus offering a criticism of systems of representation that claim to capture the «complete story». It is easy, then, to guess that the use of such a clichéd form of representation, totally foreign to the social reality of the workers shown, serves to demythify workers as a class and leads the spectator to self-consciousness, making him recognize how he participates in and generates this false standardization of people. In *The Thinker* (1966) for example, Robert Fones has noticed that the dagger in the back of the thinker —a ragged beggar in the same pose as the Rodin figure— is an archaic weapon, which does not even form part of the *spectacular* culture into which it has been absorbed. Wall uses this anachronistic association of objects or the clichéd heroic representation so inappropriate to the subject, in order to



«No», 1983, and a detail.



allow the spectator to notice how his own vision is being manipulated, so that he will then realize that what he sees is what has been fed to him by the mass media.

The reference to works from before and after the birth of the avant-garde is a fundamental part of Wall's work, due to his interest in analyzing and examining the presence of tradition in current representation and its inherent possibilities for giving a coherent expression of reality. Works such as *The Destroyed Room, Picture for Women* or *The Storyteller,* for example, are references to Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* and Manet's *Un bar aux Folies-Bergères* and *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* respectively. Wall does not see this attempt to place tradition as an end in itself but rather as a possible bridge to the explanation of the everyday: «Everything happens, in fact, as if the *dejà-vu,* what has already been seen, were a support in his photos, an indispensable means for the expression of reality. As if the *dejà-vu* were no more than an agent for the transmission of that which has never been seen», writes Catherine Francblin.

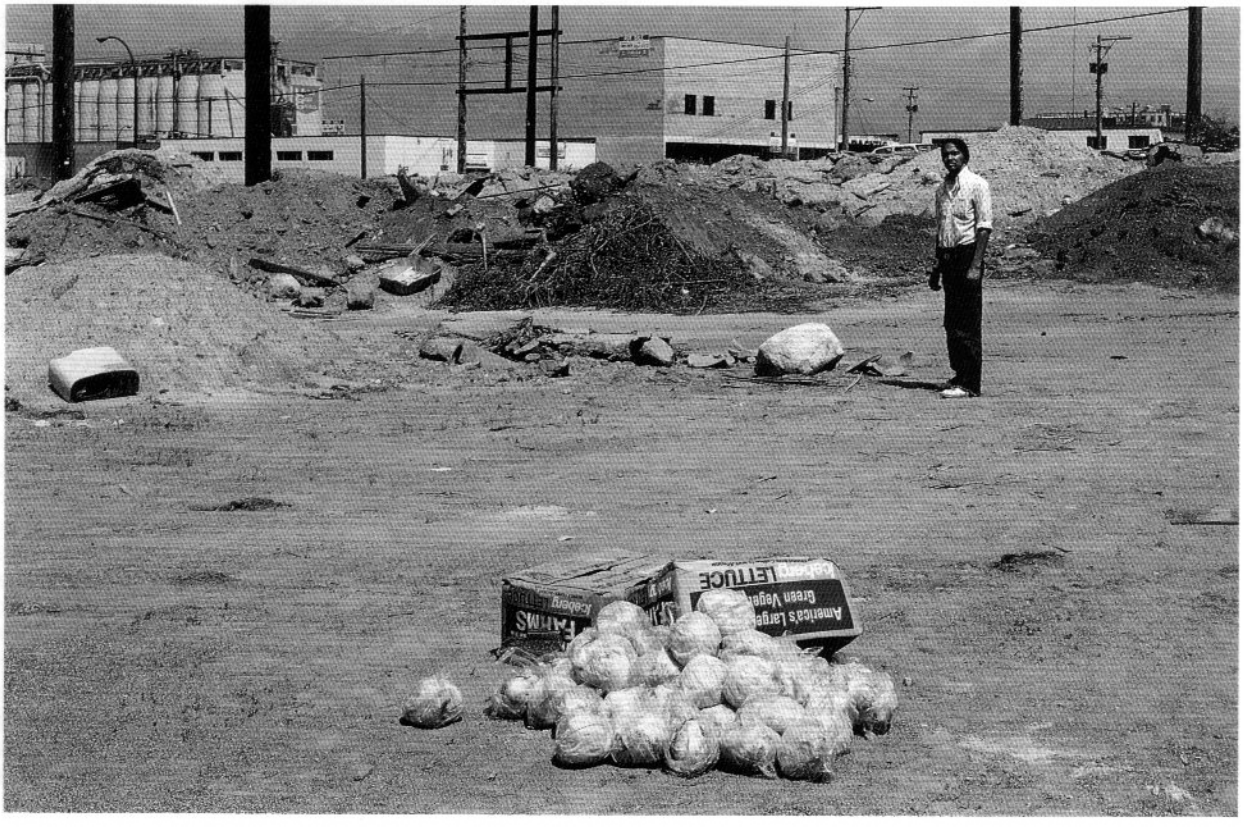
And indeed, it is precisely this image of tradition presented wrapped and ready for use that gives him the chance to transcend his own vision and turn it into a reflective object. It does not matter so much that Manet painted this piece or that, as that it now forms part of our mental furniture, in the same way as advertising and television. The historical reference is included to indicate the idea of the failure of experimental artists to generate a truly new model of expression, to really break from tradition in this area, this being largely due to the appropriation of their attempt to do so by the political and economic powers of oppression and social control.

In *The Destroyed Room,* Wall gives us a staging of chaos; we see the violent eroticism of consumerism with a feminist discourse effected by the presence of a porcelain ballet dancer, intact amidst the disorder. In *Stereo* (1980) (with its references to Goya's *Maja)* we see the

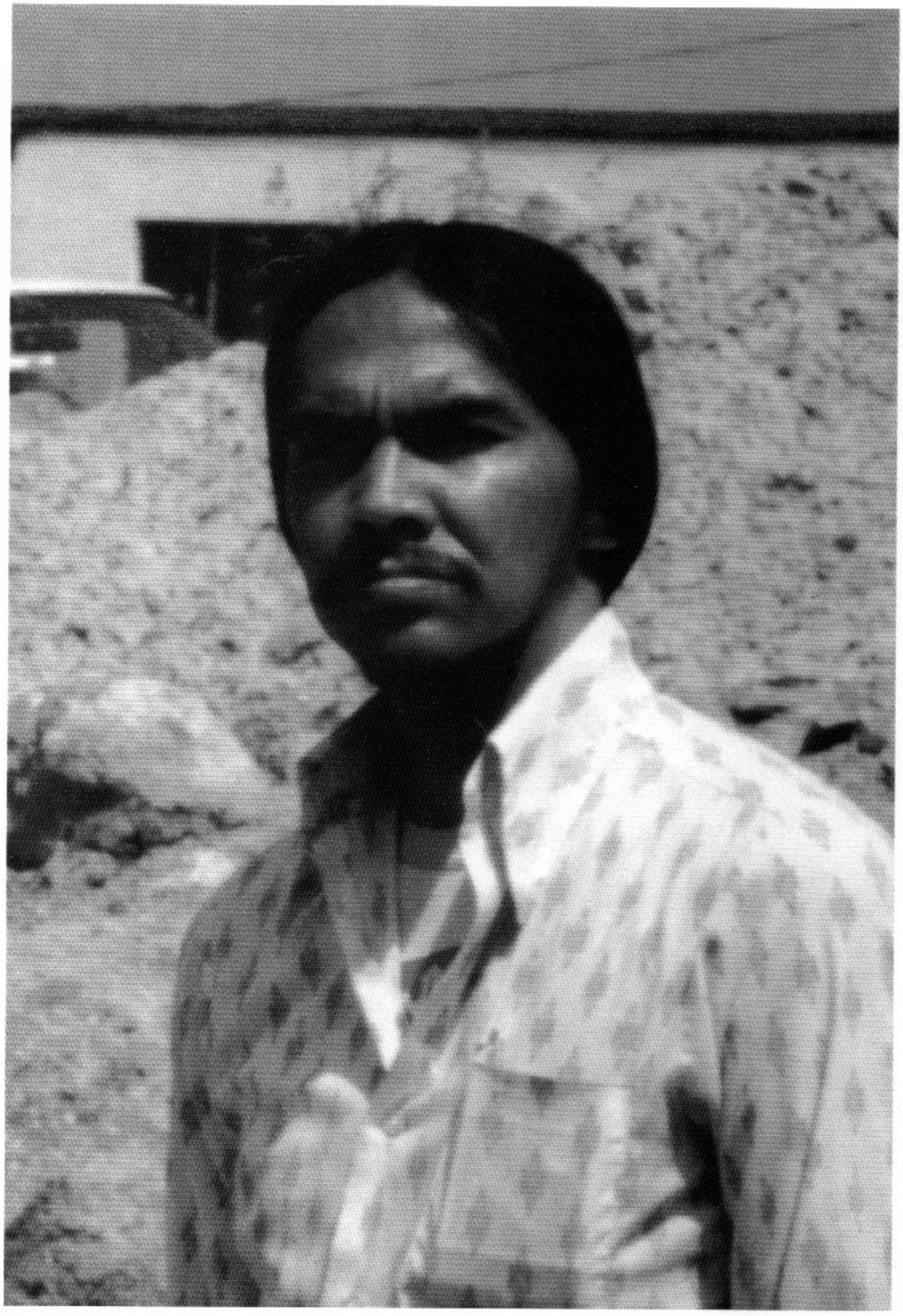
absence of *body* in contemporary culture. But in pieces such as *Mimic* (1982), *Bad Goods* (1984), *No* (1983), *Diatribe* (1985) or *Abundance* (1985), Wall seems to be trying to recover the Baudelairian idea of «the painter of modern life», the view that some sectors have of the artist.

In *Mimic* and *Bad Goods,* two of his most admired works, the Canadian artist dramatizes (in the most literal sense of the verb) the everyday situations to be found in Vancouver. In the first, we observe a couple walking along the street just as they cross with an Oriental gentleman. The boy, who is holding the hand of his girl, who seems to be absent from the scene, looks at the Oriental with disdain, pulling one eye tight, like a Chinese eye, in a gesture expressing his racism. The man insulted is well dressed (desire for social integration) while the couple typifies everything that we would consider bad taste. In *Bad Goods,* we see a rubbish heap on the outskirts of Vancouver in which an Indian squats and observes a pile of fresh vegetables located in the foreground of the picture. Wall thus sets off a game with the spectator, obliging him to recognize a possible everyday scene, to recognize himself as voyeur, as the organizer of the concepts in the picture itself. The construction of an event based on the active presence of the spectator leads this spectator to annihilate the scene when he ceases to observe it; he conditions it to his political understanding by endowing it with the importance of such a decision. In *Bad Goods,* the Indian, despite his hunger and his need for these vegetables, remains proudly in his place due to «our» presence in the scene. For him, his desire to be free is more important than stooping to pick up the food in front of our eyes. As voyeurs integrated into the picture, our participation becomes its limit and boundary, thus awakening our conscience with respect to the drama shown.

Wall not only tries to display modern life but also the perception we have of it, the option to be selective towards the manipulation of realities and pictures. Regarding this concept. Wallace has described how the most everyday incidents are elevated to the role of icons. *No* (1983), *Mimic* and *Outburst* (1989) are revealed with maximum charge of expressive tension. The customs and attitudes are codified to the ultimate degree of signification so that the picture is frozen in a precise instant in which these can be assimilated. The stress in the businessman and the expression in the prostitute's eyes in *No* generate the interval —the most decisive, most



«Bad Googs», 1984 and a detail



recognizable gesture) and is strong enough to draw us into the scene.

Why is it that Jeff Wall has been described as one of the artists who best understood how to express contemporary life? There can be no doubt that he has managed to combine a lucid theory with a tremendously forceful practice by recognizing the spectator, not as a strategy but as an indissoluble part of the making of his work. This obliges him to use the means available to him in his everyday life to revise his view of the pictures to which he is exposed, to critically recognize his «ecstatic» participation in the processes of representation. Wall criticizes modernity and the evolution of the avant garde's assumptions, but considers that their original aims have yet to be realized. We simply need to redefine what we determine as memory, whether we think it in terms of recall or of living presence and to propose a commitment to action in the face of widespread passivity.

Wall's landscapes —a subject that should be treated in greater depth— represent the strictest reality whilst at the same time appearing to be «constructed» in the frame of an image that is, above all, commonplace. If reality imitates art, perhaps we now have the chance of seeing it and therefore participating in it. ■