

Notes on Stallabrass, "Museum Photography and Museum Prose"

Julian Stallabrass, a photographer and art writer, begins his essay with a series of questions on the emerging role of photography in the institutions of fine art and on the symbiotic relation between "museum photography and museum prose".

- [W]hat has the museum done to photography in this accommodation (as well as vice versa)?
- How has it been framed, literally and conceptually?
- What are its viewers encouraged to think about it, and how?
- Has there emerged a form of photography, distinct from the mass of photographic production, that it is worth calling 'museum photography'? [93]

Having raised the questions, Stallabrass turns immediately to the career of Jeff Wall for answers. His survey of Wall's career as an artist and theorist is nicely laid out and presented in considerable detail. All that's missing are the illustrations. (See appendix following this text for some of the works cited in the article.)

Stallabrass's goal is not so much an art historical survey of Wall's career as it is a political critique of what he takes to be Wall's apparent shift in sensibility from that of a radical conceptual artist using photography as a tool for social change to a comfortably situated defender of traditional modernist, "high art" values and producer of limited edition photographic works for wealthy collectors and museums.

Julian Stallabrass is an exemplary figure in the contemporary art scene. There is no one, it seems to me, as honest and courageous a critic of the artworld as he. The essay we're discussing this week is an insightful and well researched account of Wall's career, although there are several points on which I either disagree or feel need additional support. More on that in the discussion forum. We won't have time to discuss all of the issues raised, so to get us started let me point out just two relevant to our previous discussions.

On page 106, Stallabrass argues that an ontological shift has occurred with the introduction of digital photography. After describing the meticulous care Jeff Wall takes in stitching together his digitally collaged compositions so that no trace remains that would reveal the process, he compares the tools available to the digital photographer with those of traditional photojournalists.

In photojournalism...there is a large measure of chance, and photographers have little control over the image; they can make choices about

- where to place the camera,
- when to press the shutter,
- how to use selective focus, and
- the focal length of the lens...

But in Wall's digital photographs, the

manipulations are so far-reaching that the viewer is placed in the position of assuming that every element of the scene has been worked on by the artist, either through

- the selection and manipulation of the object to be photographed, or
- through digital means.

Contingency is not entirely abolished but intention saturates every point of the image, just as it does in the photography of advertising, commerce and the public-relations industries.

Thus, "[t]he digital photograph must count, surely, as a new medium".

Stallabrass adds the following commentary:

[I]f the [digital] manipulations are made openly, it may be used to reflect on the relation of straight photography to contingency. Here, though, through their **concealment**, we are faced with a state of half-photography, in which each surface has been digitally brushed over and **bent to the will** of the artist. [Thus], the new medium is **denied** and concealed.

Stallabrass leaves it there. No additional argument appears to be needed to help the reader understand why Wall's technique and use of digital techniques amounts to "concealment" and "denial". But couldn't one characterize Wall's approach as employing strategies analogous to fictional composition intended to construct visual narratives or expressive content? This would put Wall's practice well within established conventions of artistic production. So why are we pressed to see it as a form of deception or **dissembling**?

The grounds for Stallabrass's argument that digital photography constitutes a new medium brings to mind John Berger's distinction between the "quoting" that characterizes the photographic capture of reality in an analog image, and the "translation" that occurs in a drawing or painting. Has Stallabrass also given an argument for a new medium **analogous** to painting and drawing? If so, what are the implications for his account and critique of Jeff Wall's work?

Timothy Quigley, 17 March 2012



Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978
Transparency in lightbox 1590 x 2340 mm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.
Cinematographic photograph
© The artist



Jeff Wall, Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994, 1994
Transparency in lightbox 2290 x 2890 mm
Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main. Acquired with funds of the Stadt
Frankfurt am Main, the Hessischen Kulturstiftung and a donation by Dr. Karl-Heinz
Heuer, Frankfurt am Main
Cinematographic photograph
© The artist



Jeff Wall, Restoration, 1993
 Transparency in lightbox 1190 x 4895 mm
 Museum of art, Lucerne
 Cinematographic photograph
 © The artist



Jeff Wall, The Storyteller, 1986
 Transparency in lightbox 2290 x 4370 mm
 Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main
 Cinematographic photograph
 © The artist



Jeff Wall, A view from an apartment, 2004–2005
Transparency in lightbox 1670 x 2440 mm
Collection of the artist. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Cinematographic photograph
© The artist



Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979
Transparency in lightbox 1425 x 2045 mm
Collection of the artist.
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York
Cinematographic photograph
© The artist



Jeff Wall, A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai), 1993

Transparency in lightbox 2290 x 3770 mm

Tate. Purchased with assistance from the Patrons of New Art through the Tate Gallery Foundation and from the National Art Collections Fund 1995

Cinematographic photograph

© The artist



Jeff Wall, Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999

Transparency in lightbox 1807 x 3510 mm

Collection of the artist, on permanent loan to the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

Cinematographic photograph

© The artist



Jeff Wall, The Flooded Grave, 1998–2000
Transparency in lightbox 2285 x 2820 mm
Friedrich Christian Flick Collection
Cinematographic photograph
© The artist