A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai): from After to Before the Photograph

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When I was invited to participate in the Tate Modern symposium ‘Jeff Wall: Six Works’, I chose to discuss *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (after Hokusai) without hesitation (Fig. 14). Among the many Jeff Wall works that I have come to admire, not only was this one the first I saw, but that first encounter also had an immediate influence on my thinking about technology and aesthetics. I would like to weave together an account of that encounter with some further thoughts about the photograph’s place within Wall’s work of that period.

When I saw *A Sudden Gust of Wind* ... at the Hayward Gallery’s group show ‘The Epic and the Everyday’ in the summer of 1994, I was confused, unable to figure out how it worked. I realised soon after that Wall was, by that time, an internationally recognised artist whose use of computer-generated effects in his photography were quite well known and, furthermore, *A Sudden Gust of Wind* ... was on the cover of the exhibition catalogue. However, at that moment, standing in front of the picture, I was
fascinated and bewildered by the seemingly incompatible temporalities it depicted. The picture clearly placed itself in the tradition of the aesthetic of the instant, the snap that captures the Cartier–Bressonian ‘decisive moment’. At the same time, the perfection and simultaneity of nature and gesture was more reminiscent of the carefully composed effects of a Hollywood studio.¹ I was disorientated and unsure of what I was actually seeing. Later I discovered more about the picture and how it had been made: more than a hundred separate photographs had been fused together digitally into a seamless tableau and the man’s hat, the leaves and bits of paper blowing sky high had been digitally manipulated. Once I knew that the effect was created by a combination of photography and the digital, the moment of bewilderment was, of course, erased. However, I felt in retrospect as though I had experienced a ‘technological uncanny’, that is, a sense of uncertainty when confronted by a phenomenon that can actually be easily explained by the use of a new and unfamiliar technology.

This sense of a technological uncanny was interesting for three reasons. First of all, it was an actual sensation, involuntary and located in the moment itself, in the sudden feeling of uncertainty. Then, as the sensation

1. Later, when I discovered that aeroplane propellers had been used to create the wind effect, the white line of papers flying away seemed reminiscent of Cyd Charisse’s white scarf in the ballet sequence in Singin’ in the Rain that also used propellers to give it a life of its own.
was aroused by a move into a new technological age, it also evoked nineteenth century experiences of multiple forms of technological uncanny with the arrival of the telegraph and the harnessing of electricity, but also photography and the cinema. Finally, the sensation and the idea gave me a new interest in Wilhelm Jentsch’s 1906 essay ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, that was so decisively dismissed by Freud in his later essay on the same topic. Jentsch located the uncanny in the disorientation experienced by the most rational mind when faced with an illusion that is, only if momentarily, inexplicable. This sense of ‘intellectual uncertainty’ could be aroused, for instance, by automata or wax works that seem to be almost alive. (It was this emphasis on the new and the unfamiliar that Freud disputed, arguing that only something ancient and archaic could touch the unconscious.)

In Wall’s work, even beyond an initial disorientation, the fusion of the photographic and the digital plays on and undermines the certainty traditionally associated with the photographic aesthetic. Out of this blurred boundary, others emerge in keeping with Jentsch’s concept of the

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uncanny as an uncertain perception, particularly one that confuses the animate and the inanimate. In Wall’s work, objects and images that fuse movement and the inanimate and, in reverse, the stillness of the animate, have a symptomatic significance. For instance, in Jell-O (1995) (Fig. 15) two little girls watch with fascination the mobility of the inanimate matter while, in a very similar mise-en-scène, someone who should have found the stillness of sleep lies rigidly awake (Insomnia, 1994) (Fig. 12). In A Woman and her Doctor (1980–1), the woman’s texture, lighting and pose give her, as Wall has pointed out, a porcelain doll-like presence. The inanimate animated is central to A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947 (1990). As the speaking doll takes on the properties of the human, the watching children seem drained of life while the balloons, taking on a life of their own, are hovering or floating to the ceiling. This fusion between incompatible states of being is displaced into another kind of dramatic tension in those pictures in which something suddenly erupts to disturb the surface of the ordinary. An inappropriate violence disorders the order of everyday life. The relation between movement and stillness recurs again: a sudden movement produces shocked stillness. On the simplest level, this tension is epitomised in Milk (1984) (Fig. 16): a young man shrinks away as the liquid substance bursts from its container, taking on a life of its own. In Outburst (1989) (Fig. 33) and An Eviction (1988/2004) (Fig. 60) an eruption of violence stills the onlookers. (In An Eviction, Wall filmed each of the figures in slow motion, as a video installation to accompany the picture, creating a further juxtaposition between movement and stillness.) As a moment of drama materialises, time is held in suspense. These dramatic moments echo the process that transforms the gestures of the animate protagonists into an image in which the instant is extended into infinity. In this sense, Wall displaces the stillness of the photograph into the melodramatic event, elevating the power of the scene beyond the incidental attribute of the photographic machine.

In A Sudden Gust of Wind . . . this intertwining of elements is perfectly balanced. The wind stills the human figures and animates things that should have stayed still. This interest in confusing boundaries between the elements of his dramas leads back to the question of technology and to a conceptual space that Wall has described as the ‘improbable’: ‘I have always thought of my “realistic” work as populated with spectral characters whose state of being was not that fixed’. He says of the computer and digital montage:

It makes a spectrum of things possible, and helps soften the boundary line between the probable and the improbable. But it did not create that threshold – that was already there, both in my own proclivities, and the nature of cinematography.3

I have described my reaction to A Sudden Gust of Wind . . . in terms of a technological uncanny partly in order to create the sense of standing on a threshold, paused between the historic period of the photograph and the uncertain future of digital imaging. Wall’s work, however, occupies the boundary in which the old and the new meet, opening up and excavating this particular moment in the history, proposing, as it were, an aesthetic threshold in which two eras merge. This is particularly so in the case of A Sudden Gust of Wind . . . . In most of Wall’s pictures, the drama is produced by emotion and the interaction between people. In this picture, however, the wind is the cause of the event and its fleeting gestures, which creates a
dialectic between the instant derived from nature and the instant derived from the photograph, emphasising the indexical, natural, relation between light and photosensitive material. The picture fuses the old and the new through a conjuring up of a collective memory of the photographic aesthetic, not by means of indexical inscription, but by its representation. There is no actual referent (the picture is, of course, a composition), but the process of photographic reference is cited or evoked. In this sense the picture is a reminder of the photograph’s paradoxical relation to time described by Roland Barthes.4 There is a nostalgic element to A Sudden Gust of Wind...: its aesthetic attributes pull back into the past of photography rather than driving forward towards the digital technology on which it actually depends. Out of the digital technology emerges the uncanny perfection of the image as though it were an idealised memory of an impossible past; it suggests homesickness for instantaneous photography as a collective lost childhood, a mother even, since abandoned and overtaken by history.

My encounter with A Sudden Gust of Wind... took place just before the centenary of cinema in 1995. While this experience of technological uncanniness was fascinating in its own right, it was also emblematic of the cinema’s own state as it too, as an indexical medium, stood at a threshold between past and future. Although it had, of course, been possible to freeze the movement of film electronically for some time, the conjuncture between the cinema’s centenary and the arrival of the digital era dramatised the blurring of boundaries between a collective, historic, experience of film as movement and its new, improbable, mutation into stillness. This temporal boundary of confused transition between eras was

Fig. 17. Jeff Wall, Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986), transparency in lightbox, 229 x 417 cm, 1992.

Barthes had denied that the cinema could have the magical element of the encounter with ‘that-has-been’ as its flow allowed no time to pause and think. Once the cinema could be held in arrest, not only could the ‘that-has-been’ of photographic time emerge but it could also be brought back into motion and extended into duration. The cinema at its crossroad brings a further uncanny fusion of movement and stillness, a frozen instant and the duration of time in flow. As a medium based on the animation of its still frames into the appearance of movement, the cinema brings people long dead back to the appearance of life.

These fusions of the animate and the inanimate necessarily lead to the ultimate boundary between the two: the boundary between life and death that Wall celebrates in Dead Troops Talk (A Vision after an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Mosqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986) (1992) (Fig. 17) and The Vampires’ Picnic (1991) (Fig. 22). In both these pictures, the uncanny is located in the impossible fantasy of the living dead, the ultimate fusion of incompatibles that is actualised by the cinema. This is the boundary threshold between life and death that Freud identified as the ultimate source of ‘intellectual uncertainty’ for the human mind. After the exhilarating thrill of the technological uncanny in A Sudden Gust of Wind . . . for me, these tableaux transformed a chain of incompatible oppositions (movement/stillness, the organic/the inorganic, the animate/the inanimate, life/death) into an imaginative enactment of the paradox of cinema. Yet they also occupy the ultimate space of uncertainty: death. Apparently, Wall once worked as a projectionist. The process of checking a print inevitably involves witnessing the cinema’s fusion of stillness with movement and the imaginary reanimation of the inanimate. The pictures literalise the uncanny ‘life after death’ both as an ironic comment on human uncertainty and as Barthes puts it: ‘that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph, the return of the dead’.

Some of Wall’s dramatic tableaux seem to depict fleeting encounters in the street; some seem more like moments extracted from a movie. Wall describes his method of working as ‘cinematography’ and carefully distinguishes between this aesthetic and that of photography:

In photography, the unattributed, anonymous, poetry of the world itself appears, probably for the first time. The beauty of the photograph is rooted in the great collage which everyday life is, a combination of absolutely concrete and specific things created by no-one and everyone, all of which become available once it is unified into a picture. There is a ‘voice’ there, but it cannot be attributed to an author or a speaker, not even to the photographer. Cinematography takes this over from photography, but makes it a question of authorship again. Someone is now responsible for the mise en scène, and that someone is pretending to be everyone, to be anonymous, in so far as the scene is ‘lifelike’ and in so far as the picture resembles a photograph. Cinematography is something very like ventriloquism.

Wall has also pointed out that the highly constructed nature of his mise-en-scène gives them a sense of enclosure, a contained state of being without any ‘outside’. He underlines the difference between this aesthetic and that of the photograph, the fragment of everyday life that always implies a temporal and spatial continuum. Once again, he locates himself in the borderland between the two, finding contradictions both within the traditions of western art and the more aestheticising tendencies of photography. In his landscape pictures this ambivalence is often located in
the iconography of a path or road, constricted within the image but implying a space beyond.

A Sudden Gust of Wind ... is located very much within a contradiction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. The landscape is rural but not natural. Cleared of its original vegetation, two small trees give some reminder of a possible past while banks and drains have channelled a little stream into a canal. As the landscape is heavily marked by the presence of intensive agriculture the picture is correspondingly marked by hard lines: the stream, the telegraph wires and the rows of plants all bear witness to the transformation of the land into capital investment. This is one of Wall’s many investigations of the imposition on human industry and urban sprawl in the environs of Vancouver. These phenomena seem to be superimposed on a way of life that either belonged to the First Nations (marginalised to the edge of the motor-way in The Storyteller, 1996) (Fig. 37) or to a less regulated rural economy (traced in The Crooked Path, 1991) (Fig. 59), that leads to a few little bee-hives). While the lines of agricultural development mark out the picture’s ‘inside’, the wind comes from an indeterminate ‘outside’, introducing a force that cannot be regulated and that brings a sudden disorder to the human order. The last remnants of the old landscape mark out the picture’s internal dynamic as the trees create a strong vertical and the straight lines of the stream lead into the distant urban sprawl. The figures of four men stand on the bridge in the foreground. Three struggle to hold their hats while the central figure watches his fly away with a gesture of almost amused liberation.

Wall has described his sense of tension between nature and photography in terms of the liquid and the dry in order to evoke the contradiction between flow and its instantaneous representation. This he extends to the opposition between the liquid process of developing, essential to photography, and its dry elements: optics and mechanics. He takes the analogy further:

Now it is becoming apparent that electronic and digital information systems emanating from video and computers will replace photographic film across a broad range of image-making processes. To me, this is neither good nor bad necessarily, but if this happens there will be a new displacement of water in photography.7

To me, A Sudden Gust of Wind ... maps out an intricate allegory of these contradictions. The ‘liquid’ element in the picture is the constricted, constructed, drainage canal, deprived of the freedom of natural movement but still present as a residual form of flow. However, the gust of wind introduces an uncontained flow of movement traced by the leaves, sheets of paper and the man’s hat as they swirl into the air. The papers leave their folder in a kind of arabesque, but then lose any shape or form as they are carried away by the wind. The eruption of nature returns the landscape to a momentary liquidity but, of course, the beauty and precise meaning of the picture depends on the ‘dry’ technology of the computer. The wind as a return of the repressed and the photographic aesthetic of liquidity and flow are celebrated in a complex tableau that seems to have more in common with the contained dynamism of the baroque than the decisive moment with which it is fused. Here too there is an element of the uncanny in the old belief (referred to by Freud) that behind the mysterious, beautiful and often threatening forces of nature lurked a supernatural, ‘animating’ presence.
Wall and other commentators have pointed out on numerous occasions that the new technology takes the photographer away from an essential subordination to the camera machine into the comparative freedom of composition. With the new freedom, the image loses its indexical quality, its status as a trace of a specific and unrepeatable instant, but this ‘threshold’ moment leads back to the representation of time in painting:

Part of the poetry of traditional painting is the way it created an illusion that the painting depicted a single moment. In photography, there is always an actual moment – the moment the shutter is released. Photography was based in that sense of instantaneousness. Painting, on the other hand, created a complex and beautiful illusion of instantaneousness. So past, present and future were simultaneous in it, and play with each other or clash. Things which could never co-exist in the world could easily do so in a painting.8

The complete title of the picture is, of course, A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai). The citation of the master of the prints known as ukiyo-e in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Japan immediately locates Wall’s A Sudden Gust of Wind in relation to Hokusai’s Ejiri in Suruga Province (a sudden gust of wind), which was one of his ‘Thirty six views of the Fuji’ (Fig. 18). In his print, there are the two wind-blown trees, the papers flying sky high mixing with the leaves, the four figures, the lost hat. The lines of the landscape are more fluid than those of the British Columbian cranberry farm. Hokusai, who died at the age of eighty in 1849, was an artist of modern life, recording contemporary scenes, sometimes rural, but most particularly the everyday city life of Edo, moving away from aristocratic or court scenes and topics. His work, and that of other ukiyo-e artists, was modern not only in its subject matter, but in its process of production. The work of the artist was transformed into a marketable commodity through the collaboration of engravers and printers, depending on the investment of a publisher to ensure mass circulation. As Hokusai recorded details of everyday life, his style concentrated on the instant, in this sense, prefiguring the photograph,

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invented only shortly before his death. The citation of Hokusai seems to bracket the life of photography, from the mass-produced wood print to Wall’s complex, computer generated image designed for the museum, gallery or collector. Just as Hokusai could only aspire to the instantaneity of photography, Wall commemorates its loss. In this sense while \textit{A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)} inscribes the temporality of pre-photography on to the temporality of post-photography, it still stays within the framework of modernity and the urgency, felt by both artists, to record and comment on everyday life.