

Art after photography, after conceptual art

Peter Osborne Let's start with a question about theory. Do you consider theory to play a formative role in your art practice as well as your critical writing? And, if so, what is the difference between the two cases?

Jeff Wall It's changed. In the early 1970s, when I wasn't able to make any work – and that includes the time I was here in London – I was very open to what was being written and talked about – in art, culture, politics – that ensemble of related discourses. Because I was frustrated and unable to have any sort of studio practice, or any kind of practice whatsoever, studio or post-studio, I was probably even more susceptible or receptive to critical theory than I might have been if I'd had a viable *métier*, because a *métier* tends to absorb influences and manages them. But I was probably fortunate about that, because I was freer to get involved in the critical theory and philosophy that was just beginning to become available in English at that moment. I was always a studious kid, so getting involved with all that didn't pose any serious challenge. I was able to enjoy it, and still do.

I'd like to think that it doesn't have any direct relation to my pictures because it would be better if it didn't. But, in 1976, when I finally got back to a studio for the first time in six or seven years, I was pretty absorbed in that kind of thinking, and it sort of shaped me as an artist, and as a person. And that came out in my early pictures, like *The Destroyed Room*. Those first five or six pictures were really 'London pictures', in the sense that they were manifesting a lot of what I'd absorbed and gone through while I lived in London without being able to make anything. Then, after a few years, I began to be dissatisfied with that, and wanted to go in a different direction...

PO What was the character of that dissatisfaction?

JW In my work from 1978 to around 1987, I tried to weave together three threads: studio pictures like *The Destroyed Room* and *Picture for Women*, my early landscapes, which were my first moves to continue with 'straight photography', and what I later began to think of as 'cinematographic' and 'neo-realist' pictures. All of those contain, more or less, energies that came from the frustration of

Jeff Wall is a Canadian artist and writer, born in Vancouver in 1946, who has been at the forefront of the use of large colour transparencies as a medium for contemporary art since the early 1980s. His early work from the late 1960s was conceptual in character. Text-based, it nonetheless began to include photography, in *Landscape Manual* (1969), a 64-page typewritten book, annotated and corrected by hand, that simulates the form of a cheap technical manual, in which black-and-white photographs taken through a car windscreen are accompanied by a detailed theoretical and narrative commentary. Following a break from making art in the early 1970s, while studying at the Courtauld Institute in London, Wall subsequently returned to art practice as a photographer. He has since become one of the most internationally successful art photographers of his generation. However, his importance is not restricted to his photographic practice. It also derives from a body of critical writing that has made a major contribution to the rethinking of the history of contemporary art, and to the relationship between photography and conceptual art in particular. His most important writings to date are collected in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007.

the previous six or seven years. By the time I was finishing some of the later ones, like *The Storyteller*, in 1986, I began to let that thing unravel, let it evolve. I began to hesitate. I tried to become a different person through my work, and to have a different relationship with it.

I like to think that what you might call the theoretical elements of those works weren't really 'elements', they were just part of my personality at that point in time, and if the pictures have any fascination for anyone that might be the reason. Only a certain kind of person would be interested in Delacroix the way I was interested in Delacroix; it's not just a series of ideas that fit together. When I look back at those pictures I have mixed feelings about them, but I feel they have a certain integrity, because they seem to resemble the individual I was at the time.

PO From the outside, it looks as if there has been a change in the relationship between the theoretical aspects of your critical writing and your work. In your earlier writings, from the first half of the 1980s up to, say, about five years ago, you establish a historical narrative within which your own work becomes intelligible. More recently, however, I have a sense that your theoretical writings have taken on more of a role of advocacy in relation to the critical debates about your work. There is a more direct critical advocacy for the work, rather than just establishing its conditions of intelligibility – although there is an unavoidable element of advocacy about that too, of course.

JW I don't feel that I have written anything with the aim of making some kind of case for the validity of my work. But, at the same time, because I am an artist whose work is part of the field about which I have written, it's almost inescapable that my critical perspectives will have emerged from a kind of thinking that I cannot entirely separate from my pictures. A work of art always puts forward a claim as to its own validity, even if it is never articulated verbally or in writing. But it's there nevertheless. If you do some writing about matters close enough to the domain of your own work, you will have to be involved at some level in putting forward at least aspects of the claims you'd make for your work. Because if the



claims you are discussing have validity, and if your work – you hope – shares in that validity in some way, the claims you are making are also ones that would, in another context, and to some degree anyway, be made for your work. I have never been sufficiently interested in writing and theory to steadfastly find a way to divorce my writing from my life as an artist. So I have to accept that people will find that sort of advocacy in what I've written, and maybe not like that, or feel that it compromises my arguments. My only defence against that is to rely on the quality of the arguments or analyses I've made. If they can be convincing despite my own interest in their legitimacy, then there could be some value in them aside from the support they give to my own position.

PO And it doesn't feed back into your practice? It's really just an epiphenomenal relation?

JW I would like it to have an epiphenomenal relation to my pictures, because I feel that my pictures are guided and motivated by my feelings and my life as a whole, not primarily by thoughts about art and its dialectics. But my thoughts about art are very deeply felt and experienced, so I just don't know how to define the relation. I know that I am also guided by a self-critical sense, which plays a powerful role at each important moment in making something, and that that sense has developed by thinking things through as intensely and clearly as I can. It's a lived relation, in any case. And I think I'm like other artists in that I have some strong feelings about what is good and not so good art or writing about art, or talk about art.

Kammerspiel

PO Nonetheless, some of the sharpest elements of some recent critical debates seem to be delayed effects of your early writings. The obvious example here is the 1981 draft version of your long essay *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, in which you criticized Benjamin Buchloh. That appears to have provoked a cold *October* revenge – in Rosalind Krauss's attack on your work – over twenty years later, in which you become an artistic representative of the spectacle, in the Situationist sense.

JW Yes, it seems that wasn't too popular. When I wrote the draft, it was *only* a draft. I was trying to write the essay and that was a kind of preliminary approach, one I abandoned. The essay took a different direction and the critical reading of Buchloh's analysis didn't go anywhere.

PO It didn't go anywhere in relation to Dan Graham, but it did acquire an independent status as a statement about a certain way of looking at the art of the 1960s and 1970s.

JW Yes. I didn't intend to publish it, but did so at Dan's suggestion, when the essay was published in a French translation in 1988. But, in any case, I don't think it was a bad bit of criticism. It was pretty respectful, pretty serious. If you engage another person's position and give them the respect of thinking about what they've said, reading carefully, there's got to be something positive in that. In the 1960s and 1970s criticism was simply what one did. Artists talked and they argued and they didn't agree and that was natural. It was how I grew up. Even the mythos of the 1950s, with people sitting in bars and arguing, getting up and walking out on each other (and then of course showing up again the next evening, ready to continue) – I always thought that was natural. Among artists it sort of still is. One calls into question someone else's work and that's part of the process of judgement, and it can become pretty critical. The fact that it set off some kind of reaction is fine.

PO To what extent was the final, 1982 version of *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* conceived as an alternative history of conceptual art, with Graham as its emblematic figure?

JW That is hard to answer. I can't say I know how it was conceived or why I wrote it. I had no strategy, I just got involved in the thing the way I would get involved in making a

picture. I wrote it as I went along. I remember being more excited by the analysis of glass architecture in terms of vampirism than I was in the critical version of conceptual art. I am not certain that I was even presenting an alternative version of conceptual art in the sense of making proposals for other possibilities; I was critiquing it, having taken leave of many of its presuppositions already some years before. I didn't see Dan Graham as an emblematic figure of conceptual art, but as an artist whose work had qualities and aspects that were obscured by assuming it was conceptual art, or was essentially conceptual art. I saw subterranean elements glimmering in it and they seemed more significant. In the process of examining those, I had to show how the orthodox presuppositions of conceptual art repressed those elements. Or – since everyone knew that conceptual art set out to suppress those elements – I had to examine the results of that suppression on the way we, I, experienced and understood a work of art. And that examination was critical of the presuppositions. So I ended up criticizing something, and for some people, who had managed to take up the 'critical position' at that time, that was a bit of a surprise.

PO Looking back, it appears as the first in a genre that has run riot in the last ten years: revisionist historiography of the art of the 1960s and early 1970s. I suspect that the broader critical ramifications of your essay only really became intelligible once that genre was established.

JW At the beginning of the 1980s, there was no historiography to revise.

PO But there was the self-presentation of an influential small group, which stood in for the absence of historiography.

JW Yes, there was probably already a sort of orthodoxy, and it became more conventionalized as the people who were the advocates became professors or got more prominent as artists. But at the time, my view was just as much a contemporary view as any other view. It might have been contentious, but it was still current commentary, not a revisionist look back.

PO One of the main issues here (and this bears directly on the debates about the conceptual components – or not – of your own work) is the extent to which the revisionist historiography of conceptual art still bases its understanding of the term on the self-understanding of the small group of conceptual artists who hegemonized it in the late 1960s – providing new empirical material and better historical contextualization – and the extent to which it aspires to *change our concept* of conceptual art, taking it away from those purely linguistic, philosophically reductive definitions and distributing it more widely, both historically (by expanding its periodization back to the beginning of the 1960s) and with regard to the practices with respect to which it is critically significant. In my own *Conceptual Art* book, I took the latter track. One way of reading your *Kammerspiel* essay, historically, is as the start of that process. Placing Dan Graham's work at the centre of conceptual practice meant that conceptual art just had to be understood in another way.

JW It might be right to broaden the definition, especially if you are trying to do some kind of history, but still, I think you have to take into account the fact that hardcore linguistic conceptual art – the work that made the really interesting claims – was successful, as an artistic proposal, in the same way that the readymade was successful. It changed the environment in which all claims are made and one has to acknowledge that achievement. So I am not that interested in the broadened version of conceptual art. My argument – if it is an argument – is with the radical version.

PO Your own view seems to have shifted quite decisively since the *Kammerspiel* essay, in a way that appears, ironically, to reinstate the basic opposition off which Kosuth himself thrived: the opposition of concept and aesthetic. Whereas the *Kammerspiel* essay offered a novel contextual and relational reading of conceptual art – reorienting its critical



Jeff Wall, *Stereo*, 1980, Transparency in lightbox, 213 x 213 cm, two panels

significance towards urbanism and an architectural problematic, in a way that deepened and made far more complex the question of form – more recently, you seem to have given up on that particular expanding field, and returned to *métier*, which can be understood as a return to a certain (non-conceptual) ‘aesthetic’.

This seems to be exemplified in your decision to request that the ‘text/sign’ half of your piece *Stereo* (1980) no longer be shown; that the piece be reduced to a single panel. In its original form, *Stereo* was always something of an anomaly in your *œuvre*. I always liked its anomalous character. This decision seems to have an emblematic significance for your current rethinking of your practice. If one was looking for an emblem of a Friedian turn in the self-conception of your practice, this would be it.

JW I’m going to resist that way of looking at it because it assumes that the claims made by radical conceptual art are unproblematically valid and that therefore any diversion from that validity must be some kind of ‘return’. As if we’ve been to the frontier, didn’t like it there, and fled back to a more comfortable interior. I think there are fundamental weaknesses in the concept/aesthetic duality, and so therefore the critique of other art made in the name of that duality is not the unimpeachable frame of reference it has been so often taken to be.

I like your interpretation about the sign panel of *Stereo*; it is so much more interesting than the reality. The sign side was always too bright. I never figured out a way to make it less bright. I always disliked the imbalance, so I asked the owners of the picture to remove it. But it’s not removed in the sense of ‘absolutely and forever’.

PO OK, but if that’s the reason then presumably you might show the sign side separately?



JW I might! It still exists.

PO Sticking with the *Kammerspiel* essay for a moment longer, at a general thematic level, you make a strong critical-historical claim about the relationship between a ‘good’ conceptualism and architecture. Basically, you claim that the urban is the social content of a critical conceptualism; that the urban is the means by which conceptualism keeps ‘the dream of a modernism with social content’ alive. It’s hard not to see some resonance of this in your photographic practice. The dream of a modernism with social content seems to cross the theory–practice divide.

JW I might have thought there was a connection at the time, because of my dialogue with Dan, who is so interested in architecture. But I discovered years later, to my surprise, that I wasn’t interested in architecture at all! When you talk to Dan you talk about what Dan is interested in, that’s how it goes. So I don’t know whether the claim holds up, other than as a way of thinking about Dan’s work.

PO Well, I think one can make critical claims about textualization, for example, on the basis of an urban anthropology of non-place. There is a distinctiveness to certain kinds of urban space, in which anonymity and the lack of conventions and practices associated with place mean that social relations are mediated primarily by signs, texts, instructions etc. You can find a lot of the genres of early conceptual work, in its pre-Fluxus stage there – like the instruction piece – in their original social form. There is a kind of unconscious recovery of a quite specific form of social communication that is tied to a certain kind of social space. That leads to the question: what is the place of photography in this type of social space?

JW Your idea that the prevalence of instructional and technical language in conceptual art derives from that specific aspect of urban life seems right. But once you involve photography, things open up. The absence of signs in a place is as conducive to photography as is the presence. Photography might have been born in the city, but it does not need to stay there. It's a medium and a practice which doesn't need to make a decisive distinction in this regard.

Scale

PO I didn't mean at the level of photographic content, I meant at the level of the relationship between photographic representation in general and the experience of urban space. People often make the point, with reference to your work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, that as the lightboxes get larger they seem to be registering a need for contemporary art to adopt the same visual scale as billboard advertisements, in order to occupy social space. Some people defend you on that ground, because of the engagement, while others criticize you, saying your art has become part of the spectacle. But the underlying analysis is pretty much the same.

JW I have never wanted my work to occupy 'social space'; 'social space' seems to mean places where one does not usually find works of art. That is an important tradition, but I don't feel part of it. I am more or less content to see my pictures in the places where we usually find pictures – museums or related places, or some private rooms. The scale wasn't determined by some engagement with billboards, but by other things, more internal to what I see as the important traditions and manners of picture-making, whether in photography or other media.

PO I was thinking more structurally about the relation to scale. Is it not the case that a certain scale might be required in order to articulate a certain form of experience?

JW I don't think that can be generalized because each subject – and the experience of that subject in a picture, or as a picture – will suggest a solution to its scale, along with all the other essentials.

PO Is it not still to do with publicity – even in the history of painting?

JW Objectively maybe, yes; as some kind of argument or analysis, but not for me. I never wanted effects that were drawn from publicity to become folded back critically into what I was doing. For me, it had more to do with my critical reaction to my own acceptance of conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s. At a certain point, I had a startlingly critical reaction to my own previous engagements. That helped me to recover a relationship with what was then so-called non-avant-garde art – with Matisse, Pollock, Manet ... but also Wols and Atget, and the other artists I admire and have always admired. At that moment, I felt I had recognized something essential about the depictive arts, something that could not be the subject of the kind of critiques made of it during the previous few decades. The scale of my pictures was one of the ways for me to find a palpable artistic mode in which my rethinking of reductionism could be expressed, even though that was not my main aim. For a while, it was important to de-reduce things in order to counter the reductionism of post-Duchampian conceptual art (the reduction to language). Scale was a charged issue because it was one of the essential criteria of pictorial form.

PO Was there a point at which your reaction against reductionism ended and your practice moved on without it? When was that, the end of the 1980s?

JW It's hard to say exactly. Maybe I haven't reached that point yet.

PO Nonetheless, throughout the period we have been talking about, from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, your reaction can still be narrated as a transformed continuation of an avant-garde project, in terms of a modernism with social content. Pictures like *Vampires' Picnic* (1991) and *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) seem to present themselves quite explicitly as

historical allegories – as the capitalist and communist versions of contemporary history, respectively. But your engagement with that kind of historical narrative seems to cease by the mid-1990s. Did you lose interest?

JW I think of *Dead Troops Talk* and *Vampires' Picnic* as comic pictures, and so as comic allegories, but yes, allegorical in the sense you define. I also wanted to take the literary aspect as far as I possibly could – the notion of emphasizing or disclosing the literary interior of the subject, and its treatment. The sense of blatant artifice was able to create all sorts of tensions, which had fascinated me ever since the cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the work of Fassbinder, Straub-Huillet, Godard and some others – as a counterpoint to neo-realism and documentary photography. And I was interested in Benjamin's notion of allegory – *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. It made me think about falsity or artifice, about the potential of arrestedness and of the process of masking, all those things. Those two pictures were part of the outcome of that experiment. But once I'd done them, I felt that I'd reached the end of a path, and that I should go somewhere else. I was also beginning to be dissatisfied with that emphasis on the arrestedness of motion, something that seemed to be necessary on that allegorical path. I had done pictures like *The Goat* (1989), a couple of years before, which is very statuesque and rather mannered in that direction and I began to feel I was going too far.

It may also have had to do with the fact that, after ten or twelve years of feeling I needed to establish something by means of a picture, I now began to feel that I not only had established it but I had started wasting my time establishing it. Let's assume that *Dead Troops Talk* is a successful picture; still, the feeling of its success wasn't very positive. I felt I should make a move, do something else. And when you start feeling that way, the something else is probably already there. At that point, the something else was to re-emphasize neo-realism. I'd already done pictures like *Mimic* (1982) and *Doorpusher* (1984) – street pictures that were drawn from direct experiences.

Medium in contemporary art

PO I would like to ask you about the category of photography and its relation to 'art'. In your essay on photography and conceptual art in the catalogue for *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, you say something like: photo-conceptualism was the condition of possibility of photography becoming Art, with a capital A. Implicit in that formulation is the idea that it is photography as a medium that becomes Art. However, there is another standard narrative about the work of the 1960s, of which you give your own version in your recent essay in *Afterall* magazine, in which Art with a capital A develops *against* the concept of medium. In your recent version, these two narratives do not compete but describe parallel developments. There are two streams: a continuation of what you call the canonical forms, and an opening up to art in general. What strikes me as peculiar about this is how critically self-sufficient you consider the two streams to be. You develop an interesting concept of second appearance, so that the non-canonical stream – the generic art stream – is a space in which non-art can have a second appearance as art. But what you don't do – which I was expecting you to do – is that you don't allow canonical art into the realm of second appearance. But surely the canonical arts themselves only remain 'art' by virtue of their own second appearance. Yet you don't let the two streams occupy the same art space.

JW First, I must object. The 'canonical forms' cannot make a 'second appearance' in art because their appearance as such defines them as art. The canonical forms are always about a 'first appearance', not a second. Even when an existing work reappears in a newer work, the way Walker Evans's photographs reappeared in, or as, Sherrie Levine's photographs, Levine's photograph makes an originary appearance. It is just another photograph that happens to be of an older photograph. That is not the same as, say, a performed event making an appearance in the context of the canonical forms. The canonical forms do not

need to make any claims for being art, since what we call 'art' has been defined by them from the beginning. So, if contemporary art has bifurcated into two streams, the canonical forms stream and the 'event-structured' stream, medium can only matter in the canonical stream where art is recognized as it always has been, by its evident physical characteristics – it's a painting, a sculpture, a photograph. It can't matter in the other stream where, by definition, that art is obliged to prove that art can be anything the artist can imagine it being regardless of what it is made of – 'art in general', as you say.

It does seem that the two streams are self-sufficient or at least it doesn't look like there is a way to cut a channel between them. Going radically against the notion of medium and *métier* makes it difficult at the same time to devote yourself to either, and devotion to both is the fundamental characteristic of the canonical forms. That doesn't mean, though, that individual artists can't cross between streams; quite a few do. They are experiencing the bifurcation very directly; maybe one of them will find the channel.

PO One consequence is that you continue to use the category of art photography, which feels quite archaic. To what extent is this an institutional phenomenon? I notice the MOMA book of your writings and interviews comes out of their Department of Photography. Are you comfortable with the institutional construction of photography as a medium-specific modernist category, as a living form? Hasn't medium been if not destroyed then at least problematized, as an *ontological* category, giving it a different status within the same field as the non-canonical arts?

JW I don't think 'art photography' is an institutional phenomenon. Photography is one of the canonical forms because it's a depictive art and so akin to painting, drawing, sculpture. There is no means within our notion of art for there not to be an 'art photography'. Therefore it really is a living art form, and is practised as such by those with the desire for it. Medium has been made problematic, but only outside the canonical forms. The canonical forms simply do not have a way to escape medium, or a need to do so.



PO But is that a strategic stance within a predominantly transmedia field or is it an attempt to insulate a practice from such a field?

JW Art is probably now dominantly transmedia. But I am not sure whether that fact, or that dominance, is that significant as far as the canonical forms are concerned. They are differentiated, if not insulated, by nature, as we've been talking about. I don't think my argument attempts to insulate the canonical forms, or art photography, from the dominant element, but just to recognize that there is a fundamental differentiation that is inherent in the arts as such and that remains important and meaningful even if it is not dominant.

PO What would the test of that claim be?

JW The test is always in the quality of the art, at least within the canonical forms.

PO Is there really nothing more to be said? There may not be criteria, but are there not fields of relevance, kinds of things such art would have to do?

JW Nothing could be relevant in the absence of artistic quality. It's the quality that discloses everything else.

PO That's a very Greenbergian claim. The problem for Greenberg was that once he got into the position of having to examine those claims – once history had turned against him, so to speak – his thought more or less fell apart. Once he tried discursively to redeem his concept of quality, by moving to the level of philosophical aesthetics, in the late seminars, there is very little there...

JW I don't think he did so badly. I like a lot of his later writing and seminars on aesthetics, like *Homemade Aesthetics*. He boiled it down to 'art deals only in results' – meaning if the work convinces you aesthetically, then any other claims it makes or are found in it can be taken seriously, or must be taken seriously.

PO But even Greenberg's own concept of purification (which is, of course, the historical model for reduction) comes in two forms. In the first form, purification condenses certain kinds of social experience, but later on a kind of physicalism takes over (laying the ground for both minimalism – the continuity – and conceptualism – the reaction), allied to a more Kantian concept of aesthetic experience. The question of whether aesthetic experience conveys significant social experience, or what the significant social experience it conveys is, tends to drop away. In the end, there is an aesthetic reductionism.

JW That might be true of Greenberg, but it's not what interests me about him. I think that, at least for some substantial part of his career, he was saying something related to what Adorno argued – that if a work is artistically successful it will condense significant social experience in some way. His reductionism, if you want to call it that, could have been a response to the tendency always to look for social significance in art first off, without caring for the aesthetic formation and mediation, which is what makes that significance possible.

PO But can you redeem the claim for aesthetic success here without giving an account of the significant social experience?

JW Not if you really want to talk seriously about art, to analyse it, but it has to emerge from your real experience of the work, your aesthetic experience, which is inseparable from your judgement of the work's quality. It is in that experience, that experience of the work and the experience of your judgement of the work, that you will recognize the revelation, or disclosure, of that significant social experience, or social material, to use Adorno's term.

PO But unless it's elaborated, isn't the claim for the quality of the work in danger of becoming a mere mantra? Don't ontological questions about the historical state of the work need to be spelled out a bit, in relation to medium and autonomy? In the later period,

Greenberg himself certainly appeared to believe in a kind of immediacy, especially in relation to painting and sculpture, which seems to obliterate any Adornian claim about the immanence of social mediations.

JW As I said, I feel there is an affinity between the two. I interpret Greenberg to be saying, 'Only under these circumstances will whatever kind of condensed social material make itself available to experience and reflection on experience.' I believe he meant that without the conviction of quality the social elements could never become significant, because people would never truly experience them. Only in aesthetic experience do they occur to you, only then do you even really notice them. Only then will there be a connection to the viewer's life and vital interests.

PO Is a Greenbergian viewer the ideal viewer of your work?

JW Well, in so far as we can think of this 'ideal viewer' as definable, it is someone who is capable of and open to having aesthetic experience and making judgements, even if that person cannot account for the process intellectually; someone who has a sense of how the pleasure they receive from their experience of art will affect them in the time they are not enjoying art. But that is all unstructured, and can't be codified, and so can't be predicted or planned for.

PO It is a decisive retreat from the notion of comprehending a work that is tied to the question of its experience in a way that involves some reflective relation to the system of mediations that it is.

JW But comprehending art is a moment of enjoying it.

PO And what are the conditions of enjoyment?

JW The conditions are that there should be some good art somewhere in view and that a person has enough freedom to be able to come and see that work of art. So we need art of quality and some minimum of personal freedom, even surreptitious personal freedom.

PO The disagreement is in unpacking the phrase 'the quality of the art'.

JW Of course, but the disagreement is part of the process of establishing the reputation of the art, and it is a mark of that freedom.

PO This looks like a fundamentally ahistorical notion, though. What of the idea that works are in large part intelligible by virtue of their relations to other works?

JW I don't see it as ahistorical. The process of judgement takes place within a specific social context and moment, each time. It is marked by that context but is not aimed at simply expressing or reproducing the context. It's aimed at the encounter with the art, which is itself not just the reproduction of the 'art context' in the form of an individual art work. And judgement is always the comparison of a work with other works.

PO It is hard to think of the modern other than in terms of some Valéryian relation of negation to previous works. There does seem to be an element of aggression in modern works towards past works: new works 'kill' old works.

JW That is the orthodox avant-garde attitude to the relation one has to one's predecessors. I begin more from admiration of my predecessors and an attempt to do as well as they did. There is a rivalry there, but the rivalry doesn't involve the destruction of the old works or their reputation, it's more a quest to equal or even surpass the level of achievement, but at a new moment, which can never be like the moment in which the quality of the older art was achieved. So the new art of the new moment can't repeat anything of the art of the old moment except its quality.

PO Even so, in a broader sense, don't new works change the conditions of experience of older works?

JW Yes, precisely. But then something else Greenberg claimed is relevant, namely that, as time passes, works of high quality tend to resemble each other even if they are not at all contemporaneous, and they resemble each other more than they resemble works of less quality done contemporaneously to them. The formation of a canon emerges from the recognition of this resemblance. New works can change the way we experience older works only if the new works resemble the older ones in quality.

Fried's phenomenological reduction

PO Let me ask you something about Michael Fried. There seems to be an irony in your increasing appreciation of Fried's writings. The irony being that one of the main criticisms of your work accuses it of theatricality, which is the very thing Fried himself was most famously against, in his critique of minimalism.

JW It's not an increasing appreciation; I was always interested in Fried. I read all his published work of the 1960s as soon as it appeared, more or less, and was very much involved with it, especially 'Art and Objecthood'. I recognized the line he was trying to draw between literalism and illusionism. It meant a lot to me, even though I turned my back on it for a while, when I followed the move towards literalism and conceptual art. And when he made that surprising turn towards Manet and the pictorial art of the previous two centuries, that meant a lot to me as well. Those moves became guidelines that helped me deal with my own situation.

His turn towards the art of Courbet and Manet and the others was a dissenting view of the evolution of the avant-garde; it dissented from many of what quickly became the orthodoxies of the 1970s. So there was a serious influence from Fried when I realized what I wanted to do with photography around the middle of the 1970s.

To find an irony in this is a bit off. Fried was not talking about whether there are so-called 'theatrical' effects within a picture, he was talking about the staging of an object in a space. 'Literalist' art is content with confronting a person with an object in a real space and insisting on the superior realism of that encounter, as opposed to the illusionism of so-called 'previous art'. In pictorial art, there is no such staging. So it is of secondary importance whether the construction of the image displays 'theatrical' or 'anti-theatrical' characteristics. Both are always present within any picture in the process of being made. A picture is never experienced fundamentally as an object, it is experienced by means of the illusion it creates, what Fried called 'opticality'.

PO Is it not relevant at the level of the light box as an object in the gallery space?

JW No, I don't think the light box has much to do with it.

PO The critical contention is that it *can* happen in relation to light boxes.

JW Can it?

PO The issue is: what is the light box/picture relation? You are using the term 'picture' in such a way as to require an illusionistic reduction to surface. But is there not a tension or a struggle between the light boxes as objects and their picture-producing function?

JW It's very secondary, because the object-person form of theatricality that Fried was objecting to doesn't exist in pictures.

PO For Fried that's true, but it sidesteps the point...

JW No, because it's true it doesn't sidestep the point!



Jeff Wall, *Rear View, Open Air Theatre*, 2005, Transparency in lightbox, 226 x 293 cm

PO Well, it avoids the whole question of the relation of the light box to the readymade, for example, and thereby the question of the ontological status of the work. The whole point of Fried's phenomenological reduction of pictures to opticality was to remove the thing-like-status of the carrier – to abstract from ontology and reduce the term 'object' to a purely phenomenological sense.

JW I don't see it as a reduction, more as a relation. Everyone who looks at a picture sees that it is some sort of object hanging there. It is futile to attempt to eliminate that perception from the experience of the picture. The aspect of pictorial art that is so rich is that while you are of course looking at an object you are simultaneously experiencing the illusion of seeing other things. And with pictorial art (and this includes abstract art) it is the other things that you are seeing, and the traces of the making of that illusion, that are artistically decisive. The provision of the object upon which the illusion is created is fundamental, but not decisive, as such. An emphasis on the being-there of the object underlying, or supporting the illusion, is a completely valid way of making a pictorial work; it tends towards the reduction of the illusionistic treatment of the surface, finally, to the monochrome. The monochrome is a limit-condition of opticality, not a rejection of it. But pictorial art exists within those limits. It acknowledges but overcomes the primordial fact that it is an object. That is how it is experienced.

PO Isn't the problem for you an unintended consequence of a decision about luminosity, the decision to go for a light box rather than a C-print, for example? It allows you a certain optical quality, but some other – unwanted – things come with that decision.

JW Definitely an unintended consequence! These light boxes have a greater object quality than a conventional framed opaque photograph. I will not go into the circumstances that led me to begin working with this form rather than with opaque photos, but there were a number of contingencies involved. The upshot of it is that the picture does announce itself as an object more emphatically than do other techniques. I realize that, and I realize that people are going to concentrate therefore on the object quality more than they would otherwise. But,

for me, all that happens is that the tension between perceiving an object and experiencing a picture is more pronounced, and so maybe more interesting, at least to some people.

PO But there are also structural cultural connections, eliminable only by fairly self-conscious individual acts of phenomenological reduction – between light boxes and televisions, for example – which make the light box a carrier of certain kinds of social experience, or relate it to certain types of social experience. Surely these are an inherent part of its contemporaneity. Yet you want to eliminate them by a reduction to pictorial status.

JW I don't think I want to eliminate them. I agree that those resonances with other media and so on are part of the experience and part of the significance. I only want to emphasize that all of those aspects become meaningful only by means of the experience of the picture and the judgement of the picture. If I appropriated, say, some existing media imagery and re-presented it as a light box, then that would be using the light box strictly as a sign of its social function. And that would be a sort of 'readymade' way of relating to the medium, and to its relations with other media, like television. But I am not doing that, I am making a picture for the same kinds of reasons other artists make them. So the medium is identified, almost ontologically, with the criteria of pictorial art, not the other way around.

PO This leads us to the question of autonomy – the meaning of autonomy and its conditions. From the standpoint of your Friedianism, autonomy appears largely to be about the work's capacity to impose a pictorial aspect and to insulate itself from external relations. This is a version of the conventional modernist view of autonomy as self-referentiality. But there's a competing Adornian version whereby because of the socially affirmative character of autonomy itself, 'true' autonomy requires autonomy from autonomy: that is to say, an anti- or non-art element. Here, a critical autonomy always functions via anti- or non-art elements.

Your recent sketch of the field of contemporary production reads as if you are associating autonomy and quality *exclusively* with the canonical forms, and that while the other side of the field is doing something different, which might be considered valuable, it isn't to be understood in those terms. Alternatively, on the modified Adornian version of autonomy, which I accept, the non-art element is constitutive of autonomy. It suggests autonomy on the other side of the field, despite the fact that there are not canonical forms.

JW That's an interesting way of looking at it. There's no argument about autonomous art always having a relation with a non-art element, it always does. But I don't agree that autonomy is about insulating the work from external relations. In that lecture, 'Depiction, Object, Event', I emphasized that point. Artistic autonomy is a social relationship, a way in which art relates to what is not art. I think my view has affinities with the Adorno version. But, as I said, so does Greenberg, and so does Fried. In that essay I claimed that the canonical arts simply are not structured so as to set aside the criteria of artistic quality, but that the non-canonical forms exist and thrive precisely by setting those criteria aside. But both are forms of autonomous art, even those that imitate heteronomous forms.

PO It seems to be a consequence of what Adorno called the nominalism of late modern art (in a decisively non-de Duvean sense of nominalism). There is an increasing burden placed on the critical part of the individual work, in mediating its relations with the concept of art (as a result of the decline of medium at an ontological level, on this side of your divide). Now, if judgements of significance are individual, in the sense that it is the individuality of the great works that associates them with each other, then surely quality will be spread across the two fields. Individuality is easier in a nominalistic field, but *significant* individuality is harder; whereas in the canonical forms, precisely because they are rule-governed fields, individuality itself is harder.

JW Yes, if the judgement is of the individual work – and it always is – then you can't rule out the non-canonical forms achieving the kind of artistic quality normally identified with the canonical forms. I am not arguing against that; I am saying that, if that happens, it will happen somehow through the process of suspension of criteria, which seems contradictory. But therefore we ought to expect it to happen, and it is probably happening. I'm sure there are a number of non-canonical works that could be pointed to as examples.

The Warhol effect

PO What are your views about currently commercially successful contemporary art?

JW What we used to call 'high art' has become too involved in its own 'not-being-high'. What has fascinated people since Warhol is to look at a simplified image like, say, a golf ball painted by Roy Lichtenstein, and be thrilled by the shock that many of the qualities that were once present in a work of serious or high art have vanished and yet the thing is still being experienced as a work of high art. This is the Warhol effect, and it is related to reductionism – what Judd called 'the look of non-art'. It was at one time a challenge to conventional taste. But now that *is* conventional taste. Takeshi Murakami uses the term 'superflat', which means, I assume, 'radically without depth'. Warhol's effect was a dialectical depth created by the absence of depth. It was the same with the readymade: an absence of qualities experienced as the presence of those absent qualities. But now we are reaching the point where the presence of the absence is taken for granted, since no one expects to be in the presence of the qualities themselves. Artists now routinely produce the absence of qualities in a conventional way. And in the art world, the things that most blatantly display the absence of qualities are most highly valued. That's the post-Pop look. But the line between an undialectical absence and a residual dialectical absence of qualities is becoming blurred. We are probably now at the point where that dialectical absence of qualities has evolved to the point where art works have a 'positive' absence of qualities; they really do lack almost everything that art needed to have. We are searching for that dialectical lack and we keep finding it, maybe in smaller and smaller percentages, but it's getting to the point where we are not certain we need that little percentage any more.

Jeff Koons has emphatically said that he wants his viewers to feel good about their cultural background, no matter what that cultural background might be. In saying that he is, I think, trying to say that if you should prefer the *authentic* absence of qualities (rather than the dialectical absence of qualities), because of your cultural background, then that is OK. The knife-edge of this dialectic fascinates people, even if they can't quite articulate it.

PO It's a game played with commodification. The latest move – if you think of Damien Hirst's diamond *Skull* – seems to be to play with production costs, at the same level as the top of the art market's inflated prices: to make art that costs more than £1 million to make...

JW It's another way of trying to withdraw quality and create that residual avant-garde shock. It's still reductionism. The addition of any number of diamonds cannot turn the negative of reductionism into a positive, in this sense.

PO Is there a reactive quality to your own work, in this context?

JW The situation is defined by what we could call a mannerist version of reductionism, in which further and even unexpected reductions are being effected. So we may be quite far from the point of no-art, even though we don't quite know where that is. At one point we thought that no-art was a conceptual reduction to discourse, which was both true and untrue. Then we thought no-art was the total, complete mimesis of the commodity as an artwork. That's happened or is well on the way to happening, so that's not quite it. Now some people are trying to push past that, to enter into the production of commodities on a totally com-

mercial basis, conforming to public taste in a way in which one should apparently never do; to spend money on a level that only commercial films and the extravagant end of the fashion industry do; to take away every gesture that at one time distinguished high art from commercial art and entertainment.

PO In London, this is a practice associated with the White Cube Gallery.

JW Touché. Fortunately, the new approaches have not completely replaced the older ones, and there is still some appreciation for the kind of art that we normatively call 'high art'. It could easily be that the new types of art will be the dominant forms for a long time, but I don't think they will invalidate the older forms and attitudes. This is obvious just in terms of the art market, where the canonical forms, mainly painting, are extremely highly valued.

Reproducibility and singularity

PO In the case of photography, because of its reproducibility, there is also the question of editions. A lot of contemporary art photographers make their living as artists via a strategic relationship to editions – five, ten or even more. What are your views about multiples, as a problem imposed by the medium? Have you ever done multiple editions?

JW The conventional view, which comes from the 1920s and is reproduced in all the critical attitudes of avant-garde thinking about photography, was that photographic prints are inherently reproducible and that is one of the essential things about them, one of the things that distinguishes photography from all previous art forms. However, in so far as we just think about it as a medium, the process or act of photography is complete when one print is made from a negative. Why would one make a second print? Is there any photographic reason to make a second print from any given negative? Reproduction of a photograph is a social matter that has nothing to do with its artistic identity in a strict sense. Therefore, the editions of photographs are a secondary consideration. For some time, I made only one print of each picture because this is how I saw it. But I began to have so many practical problems I had to make some pragmatic adjustments, and I've been making editions of between two and eight prints since the beginning of the 1990s.

PO Reproducibility is related to another issue, which is conceptually distinct: serialism. One of the main forms of art photography at the moment is a form of serialism verging on the accumulation work. People like Tillmans present us with a vast profusion of photographs...

JW In the past, photographers laboured under a major disadvantage that derived from their obligation to conform to some form of journalistic model. That tended to identify them with a certain subject, a certain opportunity or encounter – Walker Evans and the sharecroppers of Hale County. That seems to have bound him to an epoch or at least to a certain situation in a thematic way and you can find the same thing with many others. In contrast, painters have never been bound that way. The painter has a sovereign relation to the subject. I have always wanted that sovereignty, that freedom from the subject of the picture. And, for me, that has to do with the singular picture as opposed to the series. With a series, you seem to be committed to the presentation of a theme or a situation, and that the presentation of that theme is your goal and your accomplishment. After that presentation has been completed, you will need to attach yourself to, or discover, another such theme or situation. I am trying to make good pictures, in the sense of the autonomous picture, one by one, and trying to do so over or under – however you want to put it – any subject that occurs to me. The singularity of the picture emphasizes that and protects me from what I see as a limit of my autonomy. As soon as you devote yourself to a subject, you have another purpose. For me, it is important not to have another purpose.

London, 25 November 2007