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Traumarbeit

«I dreamt,» she said, «of what I really did yesterday: I filled a small trunk so full of books that I had difficulty in shutting it and I dreamt just what really happened.»

— Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

The penetration of photography into all levels of everyday life has reached such a point that the medium is beginning to disclose its true nature. Photography is more than a technique, a tool, or a convenience; it is a mental device: an articulation and extension of human desire. Since this desire itself is multifaceted and equivocal, the device that serves as its extension is bound to be overdetermined. Indeed, photography seems charged with a range of contradictory impulses. Moving about camera in hand, we want everything at once: to animate, but also to capture and arrest; to connect, but also to isolate and detach.¹ Hidden beneath this tangle of contradictory impulses is a fear that feeds into it – the fear that life may pass by unnoticed; that «real life» may be happening somewhere else, without us. To suppress this unsettling suspicion, anything that may pass for an experience or an event must be recorded. An elaborate technological infrastructure, ranging from the phone in your pocket to Zuckerberg's data industry, serves to persuade both ourselves and others of the intensity of the life we are living. However, in order for this to work, a shortcoming must be covered up, a flaw which photography as a medium can never fully repair. «Each device is motivated by a truth that it must deny in order to function. That truth is that seeing is an event that always comes too soon and to which we thus, having come too late, are always already returning. Seeing precedes each act of looking and is in that sense something for which the subject is not prepared. Media are there to cope with this lack, or, put another way, to cultivate the fantasy that they are able to do this.»² You are never truly prepared to see. Whatever you thought you were seeing is already gone by the time you really start to look.

Perhaps Jeff Wall's way of working entails a strategic embrace of this temporal gap.³ He walks or drives around the city in which he lives. When he sees something striking, he refrains from photographing it. He lets the moment pass. Later – sometimes much later – he may decide to fabricate a reconstruction. The scene or event he has witnessed is then re-enacted in his studio or at a carefully selected site, under engineered conditions, with men and women engaged to «perform» in front of the camera. These performers may be contracted through an agency, but more often they are just individuals from Wall's immediate circle, or people who in everyday life coincide with the character or role he has in mind for them.

Why would anyone want to retroactively «invent» an incident witnessed in real life? What might motivate an artist to invest so much time and effort in constructing studio replicas of existing interiors and facades, with the sole purpose of taking a photograph of it? What drives an artist to spend a year or more assembling a large number of digital photographic details and turning them into an apparently everyday scene?

1 This is partly based on: Frank Vande Veire, «Blind Auto-Reflexivity: Dirk Braeckman's Light on Photography», in: *A-Prior* 7, 2002, pp. 39–40. Available online at www.dirkbraeckman.be/texts.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

3 Until ten or fifteen years ago, Jeff Wall clearly belonged to the category of «artists using photography» – artists who appropriate photography as a medium, in the critical tradition of conceptual and post-conceptual art, without fully identifying with it. (Cf. Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, exhib. cat. Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, 2003.) Today Wall is less inclined to position himself in these terms. He considers himself first and foremost as a photographer and wants to explore the full potential of his medium. Besides the backlit transparencies for which he was initially known, he now produces more conventional photographic prints, both in colour and black-and-white. He denies having any kind of conceptual strategy. «I don't have a program, I don't make plans, I drift from picture to picture as the mood strikes me, and I like to do that because I think it's an expression of freedom and a spontaneous way of working» («Jeff Wall: Artist's Talk», 25 October 2005, online video recording at www.tate.org.uk, around 01:09:00). To interviewers he claims that he never interprets his own work (Maria Acciaro, «Floating in an Emotional Ocean of Art with Jeff Wall», 2012, www.vice.com). In personal correspondence he downplays the importance of childhood memories and other autobiographical elements, which have seemed in recent years to occupy a more prominent place in his work. All this may suggest two conclusions: that the work of Jeff Wall urgently needs to be interpreted anew, and that the statements, texts, and explanations issued by the artist himself may no longer be very helpful in that process.

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Jeff Wall appropriates the visible world as if it belongs to him in person. By shifting a true event into the realm of imagination, something may be revealed, yet something else may be obscured. Perhaps each work is like the archaeological reconstruction of a missed encounter with the world, the rehearsal of a moment at which something was not seen, or not experienced.

In any case the considerable amount of work invested in Wall's larger productions, executed with the help of specialised assistants, has more than just economic significance. It is truly work – a process of transformation that involves the «condensation, displacement and pictorial arrangement of the psychical material».⁴ There may be other artists who work in a similar way but Wall's case is remarkable in that the psychical material appears to be quite generic and impersonal. This starts at the basic level of his subjects. Most of his recent works represent anonymous situations. The plainness of the titles – often using generic descriptors such as «a man», «a woman», or «a boy» – is an accurate reflection of the character of the events represented. A woman traverses a small park with a covered tray in her hands (*A Woman with a Covered Tray*, 2003). A boy falls from a tree (*Boy Falls from Tree*, 2010). A group of male day labourers wait for work (*Men Waiting*, 2006). A young man is wet with rain (*Young Man Wet with Rain*, 2011). A discarded suitcase fills up with rainwater and junk (*Rainfilled Suitcase*, 2001). As will become apparent, these are works in which the unconscious speaks. However, the source of the obsessions and desires that feed into them is situated in sections of civil society, rather than in the mind of a specific individual. It is exactly because these works are clear-cut and matter-of-fact, rather than oneiric, that they can be read as dreams – dreams of the whole community.

Men Waiting is a silver gelatin print nearly four metres wide. The title is the briefest possible description of what the picture represents: a group of 22 men, standing at the roadside, apparently waiting for something to happen. It is a mixed group in terms of age and ethnic background. The location where the men have gathered is an anonymous commercial zone on the urban periphery, judging by the clutter of malls, shops, and warehouses. The horizon is low, and the greater part of the picture is occupied by an overcast sky. Two trees stand out sharply against the even grey of the low clouds: a tall fir at the right-hand edge of the photograph, and a smaller, leafless tree nearer the centre. Most of the men are standing alone or in small groups, showing no signs of interaction. More than half of them have gathered near the fir. The dark vertical mass of the tree appears to be mirrored by the jumble of human forms

4 This is Freud's characterisation of Traumarbeit («dream-work»), in: «On Dreams» (1901). See: James Strachey and Anna Freud (eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London, 1953, vol. V, p. 666.

5 Information obtained from Arthur Lubow, «The Luminist,» *New York Times Magazine* (25 February, 2007).

6 Ibid.

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assembled beneath it. The reverse happens in the left-hand part of the picture, where the men stand further apart and the sky over their heads is not obscured by branches.

The men in the picture are day labourers. They gather every morning at one of the so-called «cash-corners» in Vancouver, hoping to be hired for casual jobs in construction or elsewhere. Wall asked them to «perform» for this work. He paid them to do something that they had been doing anyway: simply waiting around. The location he found was half an hour's drive from the place where he had originally spotted the men. Every morning for several weeks they were transported by bus to the new site and told just to stand there while the artist was adjusting his camera position and waiting for the right weather conditions. He let the men decide for themselves how and where to stand but whenever he saw something he liked, such as an umbrella planted in the ground, he would hold on to it. The concentration at the right-hand side of the picture came about as the performers sought shelter under the fir tree during a rain shower.⁵

At a designated spot in the city, able-bodied men gather in order to do nothing but wait. Their lack of activity is charged with tension because of the pressing need to find a job and earn money. Together the men make up a reservoir of unused masculine energy, covered with a thin cloud of gloom due to their enforced inactivity. They just stand around, their faces turned towards the street, without speaking or moving, waiting to be picked up. It is this passivity that adds a «feminine» layer to the masculine potential.

The positive view of inactivity implied by the decision to pay someone to do nothing, so to speak, had led ten years earlier to *Citizen* (1996). The title of that work may have been meant to suggest that even economically inactive people should be considered as equal citizens; however, the paper bag in the recumbent man's hand identified him as a worker on his lunch break. In *Men Waiting* the inactivity is more structural, perhaps also more menacing, and for the protagonists more humiliating.

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If the location Wall selected for this work interested him because of its formal complexity,⁶ the change of location also provoked a shift in content. The two trees, in particular, have an impact on the image as a whole. The vertical shapes of the waiting men are metaphorically touched and transformed by them: the men seem to turn into young trees themselves. As a result, *Men Waiting* embodies a peculiar fantasy of labour. It represents the capitalist dream of a workforce in its pure and natural state: an unlimited supply of highly motivated workers. What the picture represents is a human plantation, a forest of workers ready to be harvested. But the fantasy has another side as well. The paid work that these men had been waiting for, and that Wall decided to give them,

7 «I like things to be clean and neat. A serenely well cared for place can be very beautiful, like the garden at the Ryoan-Ji in Kyoto, or my darkroom when everything has been washed and put in perfect order. But I also like dirty sinks, the soggy abandoned clothes I see in the alley behind my studio all the time, crusted dried pools of liquid and all the other picturesque things so akin to the spirit of photography.» Wall, «A Note about Cleaning» (2000), in: Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (eds.), *Jeff Wall. Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004*, Göttingen, 2005, p. 393.

8 «Jeff Wall: Artist's Talk» (around 00:57:00).

consists of more standing and waiting. Thus *Men Waiting* evokes a desire that it simultaneously fulfils – the desire for an authorized and officially approved kind of idleness; a desire for stasis without guilt; a wish to be planted into the ground like an umbrella, or to strike root next to a fir that has been standing in the same spot for over thirty years. This is how the two trees in the picture seem to diminish the sense of humiliation and gloom.

Everything has a flipside in Wall's work. This can be shown by isolating his modus operandi from the artistic context and describing it in terms of good citizenship. Wall is a convincing embodiment both of civic vigilance and of liberal tolerance. He patrols the city as if on community watch, taking note of anything shady or out of the ordinary. Works such as *Forest* (2001), *Siphoning Fuel* (2008) and *Man with a Rifle* (2000) seem to match this profile perfectly. In the case of *Rear, 304 E 25th Ave., May 20, 1997, 1.14 & 1.17 pm* he has even recorded the exact coordinates of time and place. Yet he is also tolerant. Wall can be easily charmed by things that are old and decrepit – a dirty sink or boarded-up window – or by figures on the margins of society, like the man selling roses to clubbers (*In Front of a Nightclub*, 2006). He likes both cleanliness and dirt.⁷ A fascination with misfits, outsiders and outcasts has been the one unchanging element in his work throughout the years.

Wall's contemporary model of civic virtue – vigilance allied with tolerance – sets him in opposition to Santiago Sierra, the Spanish artist known for his sarcastic embrace of the principles of capitalist exploitation. When Sierra hires a number of unemployed men to sit for days in large cardboard boxes – *Workers Paid to Remain inside Cardboard Boxes* (1996–1998) – he appears not to have the slightest interest in the individual experience of the performers. Such a lack of empathy is alien to Wall. His love of the singular and the individual accounts for the gentle undertone of *Men Waiting*. But, even in Wall's practice, not everything is what it seems. For example, *Volunteer* (1996) may present itself as a homage to the social responsibility and commitment shown by the middle classes; however, to achieve this result, Wall had the performer return to the studio where the set had been built and repeat his «voluntary» cleaning duties night after night over an extended period of time. For Wall this was the only way to transcend the aspect of fiction and role-playing and to reach the point where the photograph could finally be made.⁸ It is truly paradoxical: in order to turn someone into the perfect volunteer, the artist deemed it necessary to treat him like a paid worker and make him do monotonous work for nights on end.

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Siphoning Fuel, a colour inkjet print, was produced two years after Men Waiting. It is a smaller work with a different composition, yet also situated outdoors. The horizon is high, leaving room for only a small patch of blue sky. The image is concentrated on two crouching figures: a young girl and an older man on a grassy slope. Three cars are parked immediately behind them. The low camera angle reveals the shadowy spaces underneath the cars, which are the darkest elements in the picture. The man is transferring fuel from the tank of the middle car into a plastic container that he is holding in front of him. Sitting only two metres away, the girl seems to be picking grass. The sun is bright; it looks like a warm day. All the social indicators point to a poor and disadvantaged milieu.

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The man is probably in the process of stealing fuel; at the same time, the presence and behaviour of the girl suggest business as usual. The connection between the two remains unclear. She might be the girl-next-door; he might be an uncle. A family relationship, however unlikely, is suggested in an elliptical way by the cars in the background. The two white pick-up trucks are identical, yet the one on the left is bigger, or perhaps framed to look bigger; this evokes a family connection – mummy and daddy Chevrolet – that by way of association, or by proxy, implicates the man and the girl.

It is partly due to the presence of the girl that the act of siphoning fuel becomes a pseudo-sexual activity. The fact that she is a minor makes little or no difference; she still represents the female element in the scripts of the popular sexual imagination, blessed with the universal power to make men produce liquids anywhere, anytime, all the time. This stimulus works like an unlimited and everlasting source of sexual energy: a «horn of plenty» – a metaphor apparently confirmed here by the fact that the man in the picture is getting his petrol «for free».

The bourgeois fascination with the lower classes can be traced to their supposedly uninhibited behaviour, which may serve as a projection screen for a primitive and regressive sexuality. Perhaps this is what Siphoning Fuel represents. The girl is small compared to the Chevrolet towering behind her, but the man is also dwarfed – by the other, larger Chevrolet on the left, which turns him into a child. The infantile regression is confirmed both by the ridiculous floral shirt he is wearing and by the way he is sitting in the sand, messing around with liquids. The chain of regressive associations is easy to pursue further: in order to get the fuel flowing, the man must have sucked on the hose, and the liquid in his container is the colour of urine.

The recognition of this hidden stratum of sexual ecstasy, closely connected to the liquid element, sheds new light on Young Man Wet with

Rain (2011). This life-sized figure enters the circle of visibility in his wet clothes. The embarrassment associated with the moment of entering and being-looked-at may be tainted by the remembrance of a different, infantile wetting incident.

The fact that vigilance and tolerance are matching civic virtues is in many respects symptomatic of a highly developed society that combines post- and neo-authoritarian features. On the one hand, this society is marked by a widespread obsession with individual autonomy, personal growth and self-improvement. There is a collective urge to postpone adulthood and to continue both learning and playing. Couples wait to have children and, once they arrive, prefer to act as their buddies. The traditional model of parental authority has been replaced by forms of reciprocity and negotiation. On the other hand, society is suffused by a phantom idea of security, inspection, and supervision. Despite the apparent contradiction with the importance attached to self-determination, citizens willingly



Young Man Wet with Rain
2011

9 Two of Wall's early writings – «To the Spectator» (1979) and «A Note on Movie Audience» (1984) – suggest that his work is a product of the crisis in the public domain triggered by the introduction of television in North-American homes around 1950. The artist reflected on this crisis without ever directly depicting a television set. He incorporated the flickering, disquieting light of television in the medium he used: backlit transparencies. Works like *The Quarrel* (1988), *Insomnia* (1994), and *Jell-O* (1995) show compressed, windowless interiors inhabited by figures that evince the «restless passivity» which Wall believed to be the effect of television on people in their homes. As the light emitted by the fluorescent tubes inside the lightbox shines through the translucent image, it falls on the viewer, who is thus pulled into the enclosed space represented in the work. Jeff Wall. *Catalogue Raisonné 1978–2004*, pp. 280–282 and 437–438.

10 A statement by the artist concerning *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) could apply equally well to *Boxing*: «Since the picture was made in the studio, I do see it as a hallucination, a hallucinatory work, that has to do with that other secluded space, which is your mind, or my mind, in this case maybe.» «Jeff Wall: Artist's Talk» (around 00:53:00).

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subject themselves to a mixed regime of government and corporate surveillance, simply in order to feel safe and secure. For similar reasons, the quality of hospitals, schools and other facilities must be constantly checked and thus guaranteed. The underlying ideal is total transparency. No contradiction is felt to exist between unlimited surveillance and individual freedom. On the contrary, supervision, surveillance, and safety guarantees are seen as essential conditions to enable people to play and continue playing.

Two of Jeff Wall's recent works, *Boy Falls from Tree* (2010) and *Boxing* (2011), seem to bring all these aspects together. Here, the vigilant eye of Wall's camera floats inside a vacuum of authority that it both articulates and interrupts. The first work enacts the moment when a boy falls out of a tree in a large garden. The second one shows two kids in a living room, barefoot but dressed in full boxing outfits. Both scenes appear to be set in prosperous middle-class environments. The spotless interior of *Boxing* is decorated in the modern style of the 1950s, with plenty of white and cream-coloured elements. Daylight comes pouring in from various sides, yet no windows are visible to offer a view of the surroundings. Even more striking is the absence of a television set. Although this appliance played a crucial role in Wall's critical orientation as an artist in the 1970s, for a long time he seems to have avoided photographing it. *A View from an Apartment* (2005) is the first – and so far possibly the only – work in his oeuvre in which a television appears.⁹

As the tastefully decorated living room of *Boxing* shows no sign of teenage habitation, the presence of the boxing kids is almost hallucinatory.¹⁰ They don't really seem to belong in the space. The garden used for *Boy Falls from Tree* is quite different in character: it could be described as casual and comfortable, with a light, «contemporary» romantic touch. The ample lawn suggests the affluence of the more privileged parts of suburbia, but its emptiness evokes something else too. The boy in the tree is alone: his parents are somewhere else; there is no-one to prevent the accident. In *Boxing*, the situation is similar. The sunglasses and magazine on the coffee table act like markers of parental absence. It is the lack of supervision that allows these kids to play freely. If both works evoke the fantasy of unlimited freedom to play and to move about, the outcome is dramatically different. The scene of kids boxing in the living room is light and seems inconsequential compared to the incident in the garden.

In an instinctive attempt to reduce the imminent impact with the ground, the falling boy has spread his arms. His facial expression is invisible but his whole body seems to express shock and fear; then again, it could be euphoria and exaltation, like that of a football player who has just scored a goal. It is at this point that the central element in the

picture, the garden shed, manifests itself like an intervention from the realm of the unconscious. The boy falls from the tree like a ripe piece of fruit. The discovery of his own ripeness or maturity may be what has triggered his ecstasy. Various meanings of the word *shed* come to mind, like a secret stored in the windowless wooden structure underneath the tree. A tree may *shed* its leaves or blossoms; a snake may *shed* its skin. The boy's euphoric state may be premature: after all, he doesn't really know why he is falling; he doesn't know who or what is shedding him. The expression «shedding fruit» refers to trees casting off their *unripe* fruit, as a symptom of disease or a way to prevent overproduction. Sexual maturity is something that always arrives both too soon and too late...

