Jean-François Chevrier and Jeff Wall: A Critical Stance

Anna Guilló

Translator: Simon Pleasance

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REFERENCES

Chevrier, Jean-François. *Jeff Wall*, Paris : Hazan, 2006

Jeff Wall, Paris : Phaidon, 2006

- 1 Although Jeff Wall's last exhibition in a French institution already dates back to 1995 (Jeu de Paume), today sees the publication of two books which complement the impressive *catalogue raisonné* of the Canadian artist's oeuvre, which was shown in all its splendour in the retrospective held in the vast arena of the Schaulager¹ in Basel in 2005. Adding his name to the list of critics forever associated with an artist or a movement, Jean-François Chevrier here puts his name to an ambitious essay, going back over Jeff Wall's career while at the same time singling out his most recent pieces. It is a constant factor—and the authors of the second book manage to examine it with undisguised enjoyment—that Jeff Wall's oeuvre and writings offer a ballpark informed by unusual intellectual rigour.
- 2 Back in the mid-1960s, Jeff Wall embarked simultaneously on both an artistic career that was close to conceptualism, and a writing career that, to begin with, took the form of articles about topical art matters, and then consisted in essays about artists who, in one way or another, “acted”—had an effect—on his own visual work (Dan Graham, Stefan Balkenhol, Edouard Manet, and the like). He already admired Robert Smithson for the dialogue he kept up with art criticism, as well as the work of Donald Judd and the essays of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, which he would have many an occasion to refer back to. In writing about others, J-F. Chevrier notes that Jeff Wall talks about himself², thus recording the hermeneutic stance of the artist-writer aware that any interpretation of the other ends up as self-interpretation. Nevertheless, this very probing link with the

theoretical thing did not encourage him to develop a conceptual art. He was persuaded that aesthetic experience is always a crucial event in our approach to artworks, and it was his opinion that Conceptual Art is too simplistic. In the late 1970s, Jeff Wall stood apart from it by using the cinematographic narrative, rather than photography, to talk about pictures, although he proposed work that stemmed technically from this latter. After discovering the various masterpieces of Spanish art in the Prado Museum in 1977, he opted for the picture form. Within a space on a scale with the viewer—as in history painting—non-professional actors were presented in roles familiar to them. Traditional images which conceive of the history of painting by way of cibachromes on light boxes (a procedure borrowed from urban advertising)—this was the programme of a painting of modern life which, in passing, also came across as a critique of photography itself. What the artist describes as “cinematography” (J-F. Chevrier prefers the word “cinematography”) thus differs from “straight” Henri Cartier-Bresson-style photography, which he challenges for the fact that it prefers the eye’s spontaneity to critical analysis. Likewise, he charges it with depicting social situations unbeknownst to those appearing in them (J-F. Chevrier mentions the instructive example of the exotic photograph), and of nostalgically reducing the world to a collection of small-format renderings of things seen, instead of representing them as things to be seen. The point must however be made that Jeff Wall went astray in his intention to go against photography. J-F. Chevrier actually observes that, back in 1982 (*Mimic*), Jeff Wall was already—even if he denies it—involved in a prophotographic approach, because he mixed the performance of actors—whence the cinematographic presentation—with street photography. So the artist’s theoretical standpoint would evolve in the late 1980s towards work which he described as “near documentary”, in which he incorporated both the picture’s composition as descriptive space, and the snapshot as recording.

- 3 The springboard for J-F. Chevrier’s essay is the work *Picture for Women* (1979) in which the photograph accentuates the mechanics of the picture (effects of false perspective in *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*), by borrowing the fragmentation of bodies peculiar to Edouard Manet’s painting, while promoting the specular unity offered by the photograph³. In a most learned essay in the book published by Phaidon, Thierry de Duve also examines *Picture for Women*, analysing the Canadian artist’s work as a compromise between the transparency of the photograph and the opaqueness of the painting, as discussed by Clement Greenberg. These extremely far-reaching analyses, which show how Jeff Wall’s art is at once modernist and pictorial, while still being photographic, suffice to show what a mistake it would be to place his work in the historicist movements close to so-called plastic photography (the mixture was probably motivated by the presentational effect and the effect of the more or less conspicuous references to past painting). “Original” pictures are regarded as “generic constructions” rather than images to be quoted. In some cases, what appears is even the reminiscence of an image of the past, much more than a borrowing, strictly speaking. And this is where hermeneutics turns critical in an art which “invites the spectator to rethink, not to say reconstruct the very idea of art history upon which so-called “contemporary” art has been defined, in its institutional forms and in its consumerist forms”⁴.
- 4 The basic question still being raised is the following: is all critical art essentially a critique of art? Not necessarily, ripostes the artist, but if art claims to be critical, it must be in cahoots with what it wishes to criticize, perhaps like what Jeff Wall himself has ended up

understanding through a photography which questions the pictorial tradition, its challenges, its forms, and its legitimacy.

NOTES

1. *Jeff Wall. Catalogue raisonné 1978-2004*, (Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef, eds.), Basel, Göttingen : Schaulager and Steidl, 2005
2. Jeff Wall in conversation with Jean-François Chevrier, introduction to *Essais et entretiens : 1984-2001*, Paris : Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2001
3. Here the analogy with the formal model of Charles Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*, so admired by Jeff Wall, is quite elegant.
4. Chevrier, Jean-François, "Les Spectres du quotidien", *Jeff Wall*, Paris : Phaidon, 2006, p. 164