

FONDATION BEYELER

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Jeff Wall



Cover:

Jeff Wall

Parent child, 2018 (detail)

Inkjet print, 220 × 275 cm

Courtesy of Jeff Wall and White Cube

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JEFF WALL

28 January – 21 April 2024

INTRODUCTION

Jeff Wall (*1946), one of the leading exponents of the art of photography, holds a special status within contemporary art. Since the 1970s, the Canadian artist has contributed significantly to establishing photography as an autonomous visual medium and he is regarded as the founder of “staged photography”.

Wall is an unflinching observer of human realities and social interactions. Combining numerous individual shots, he produces mostly large-format photographs, often inspired by scenes of daily life or art history. Wall refers to this type of picture as “cinematographic photography”. He also produces “documentary photographs” – images in which he renders a situation unchanged, as found.

This comprehensive retrospective, conceived in close collaboration with the artist, brings 55 works from all periods of Wall’s oeuvre into rich thematic and formal dialogue.

The exhibition has been curated by Martin Schwander, Curator at Large, Fondation Beyeler, with the assistance of Charlotte Sarrazin, Associate Curator.

BIOGRAPHY

Jeff Wall (*1946) is a Canadian artist, art historian and essayist. He studied art history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Following his studies and a period of experimentation, in 1976 he began producing the photographic works for which he has become famous. Jeff Wall's images have been featured in many exhibitions worldwide, among others at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (2001), at the Schaulager, Münchenstein and at Tate Modern, London (both 2005), at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2007), at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2014) and at Glenstone Museum, Potomac (2021).

Jeff Wall is the recipient of numerous awards, among them the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography (2002) and the Roswitha Haftmann Prize (2003). He lives in Vancouver and Los Angeles.

FOYER (ROOM 1)

**1 Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation,
Barcelona, 1999**

Transparency in lightbox

A Donkey in Blackpool, 1999

Transparency in lightbox

Jeff Wall's works often feature lightboxes that conflate the sources of image and light. His photographs are for the most part no direct renderings of reality as seen; rather, they are composed down to the last detail, oftentimes by combining several precisely staged shots. He refers to his approach as "cinematography". In *Morning Cleaning*, a custodian is cleaning the glass facade of the German Pavilion, built for the International Exhibition in Barcelona in 1929 according to the design of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Through the floor-to-ceiling glass panes, one can make out a reflecting pool and Georg Kolbe's statue *Der Morgen (Dawn)* (1925). Wall confronts the pure lines of the architecture with a mundane routine task, playing off modernism's ideal artistic order against human reality. The pairing with *A Donkey in Blackpool* brings seemingly wholly different worlds into dialogue. Yet here also, we are faced with the themes of aesthetics, care and work – the donkey, groomed for the entertainment of holidaying children, stands for a long history of hard animal labour.

ROOM 2

2 The Thinker, 1986

Transparency in lightbox

An Eviction, 1988/2004

Transparency in lightbox

At first glance, this image of a man pensively gazing into the distance appears like a casual observation of daily life. Yet some details point to a staged composition: a long dagger protrudes from the man's back and he is sitting on a precarious plinth of stacked materials. The figure is reminiscent of Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker* (1880) as well as Albrecht Dürer's proposed memorial to the German Peasants' War – the *Peasants' Column* (1525) is crowned by a seated peasant with a sword in his back. Jeff Wall has placed this allegorical motif against the modern industrial backdrop of the city of Vancouver. The street sign references the history of the First Nation of the Ktunaxa, offering yet another possible interpretation.

An Eviction also plays with the only seemingly ordinary and everyday. The image features a bird's-eye view of a suburban street whose outwardly intact and orderly appearance is disturbed by a dramatic altercation in a front garden at the right.

ROOM 3

3 Volunteer, 1996

Gelatin silver print

In 1996, Jeff Wall began working with black-and-white photography. *Volunteer* is the first in a series of gelatin silver prints produced in his own laboratory. The image shows a man mopping the floor of a room whose furnishings are suggestive of the lounge of a social or welfare institution. According to the title, he is carrying out this task as a volunteer. He appears calm and composed, and seems well-practised at his chore. Yet his averted gaze lends him a withdrawn, taciturn air. It is interesting to compare this image with others on display in this room offering depictions of men involved in a variety of activities. *Volunteer* also addresses the relationship between photography and painting: to the right, the image features a wall painting of a stylised mountain scenery whose areas of strong colour the photograph translates into shades of grey.

ROOM 3

4 Staircase & two rooms, 2014

Three lightjet prints

This triptych provides three different glimpses of lodgings with an anonymous feel. The facial expressions and body language of the two individuals in the framing images suggest isolation and loneliness. The central image features the empty staircase with closed doors. What is usually a place of contact and crossing of paths operates here as an element of separation that emphasises the absence of communication. Conversely, the recurrence of magenta, blue and golden hues establishes a link between the three parts of the work.

The loneliness of city life, which finds expression in the tense relation between the different images and in their cool colour scheme, was already a theme of Francis Bacon's triptych *In Memory of George Dyer* (1971). Jeff Wall's photograph was inspired by Bacon's painting, which is held in the collection of the Fondation Beyeler.

ROOM 4

5 Dead Troops Talk (a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986), 1992

Transparency in lightbox

This giant horizontal format features a close-up view of a battlefield strewn with the corpses of dead soldiers. Arranged as though on a stage, the soldiers are represented as living dead at various stages of awakening and realisation of their newfound condition. They are inspecting their wounds or playing macabre pranks on one another. Forming a counterpoint to this group, at the left of the image an enemy fighter remains alive, operating on another plane of reality. He has put down his assault rifle and is unhurriedly rummaging through the dead's field packs. *Dead Troops Talk* refers to the Soviet-Afghan War, which opposed the Soviet Union and the fundamentalist, US-backed mujahidin. The history tableau combines compositional means borrowed from Baroque painting with a graphic portrayal of violence reminiscent of contemporary horror movies. Art historically, it stands in the tradition of famous anti-war pictures, from Francisco de Goya's print series *The Disasters of War* to Otto Dix' triptych *The War*.

ROOM 5

6 Recovery, 2017/18

Inkjet print

This work may be felt to stand apart within the exhibition: the summery park scenery in bold, vibrant colours is clearly a photograph of a painting. In the midst of numerous schematically rendered figures, a young man sits on the ground, his body conspicuous in its photo-realism against the image's overall flatness. He is looking skyward, slightly dazed. Has he fallen off his bike, which can be seen cropped by the picture's edge in the foreground to the right?

According to the artist, we are looking at the depiction of a hallucinating person who finds himself inside an only vaguely remembered painting. *Recovery* could thus also be read as a tribute to the history of painting, which Jeff Wall revisits in his work.

A similar conjunction of photographed real persons and painted surroundings can be found in the image *Restoration* (1993), which features a fictitious restoration of the *Bourbaki Panorama* in Lucerne.

ROOM 5

7 The Storyteller, 1986

Transparency in lightbox

A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai), 1993

Transparency in lightbox

The steeply sloping terrain hemmed in between a motorway and a dark coniferous wood offers little enticement. Absurdly, the two groups at the left of the image appear relaxed and at ease. The body language and facial expression of the withdrawn man sitting underneath the massive bridge at the right seem more in keeping with the uncomfortable situation. In this image, Jeff Wall addresses the social repercussions of the First Nations' displacement into inhospitable peripheral areas of Vancouver. The scene is further escalated by its compositional quoting of the group of figures in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), a key work by French painter Édouard Manet.

A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai) goes back to the woodblock print *Ejiri in Suruga Province* (c. 1831) by Katsushika Hokusai. Wall's supposed snapshot is in fact the outcome of months of meticulous work. Composed of numerous individual images, the collage transposes painterly strategies into the medium of photography.

ROOM 5

8 | Giardini / The Gardens

Appunto / Complaint

Disappunto / Denial

Diffida / Expulsion order, 2017

Three inkjet prints

The images feature several figures of similar appearance placed in various constellations within three park sceneries. The images' sequence and titles invite us to reflect on the narrative connection between the situations on display: are they glimpses of the tense relationship between two friendly couples? Are we looking at an argument between park owners and their employees? The individuals' doppelgänger-like quality seems to suggest that the triptych also depicts various planes of perception. The photographs for the three digital montages were taken on the grounds of Villa Silvio Pellico in the Italian town of Moncalieri. In the late 1950s, British garden designer Russell Page added a formal garden to the park, whose labyrinth seems to play a significant role in the sequence's final scene.

ROOM 6

9 Overpass, 2001

Transparency in lightbox

Four individuals carrying heavy luggage are hurriedly moving away from us across an overpass. The perspective is a peculiar one: we have missed what happened and are given no clue as to the purpose and destination of the fast-moving passersby. The stormy light and sky further underscore the impression of movement. As so often in Jeff Wall's works, the seemingly incidental yet highly specific everyday urban scene references late 19th-century European painting. Its colour scheme is reminiscent of the Paris street scenes of French painter Gustave Caillebotte, in particular *Le Pont de l'Europe* (1876). These scenes give expression to an aspiration transposed from photography to painting, namely to visually process and render daily reality in the metropolis, with its novel pace and modern architecture.

ROOM 7

10 After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue, 1999/2000, print 2001

Transparency in lightbox

Half turned away from us, a man is sitting in a room overflowing with various objects. The scene's mess and clutter include a conspicuous multitude of light bulbs with makeshift wiring, apparently the room's only, precarious source of light. The man, who appears pensively engaged in cleaning a bowl, literally threatens to disappear amidst the accumulation of objects. In the prologue to Ralph Ellison's 1952 cult novel *Invisible Man*, the Black first-person narrator describes his secluded dwelling in a forgotten basement of an apartment building in the New York neighbourhood of Harlem. Based on this account, Jeff Wall conceived a detailed visual interpretation, which also takes up the novel's anti-racist aspects. Here, invisibility is no mysterious physical phenomenon but rather the consequence of social marginalisation.

ROOM 8

11 Pair of Interiors, 2018

Two inkjet prints

The two images each show a man and a woman sitting listlessly in a rather dimly lit, almost monochrome living room. Beyond a tentative physical contact, they barely engage with each other and seem deeply withdrawn. As the figures' inner life remains unknowable to us, we begin taking a closer look at the room's décor, searching its furnishings for clues. The massive objects, reflective surfaces, opulent fabrics and bouncy upholstery create an equally soothing and oppressive effect. They operate as a symbolically charged backdrop to the inside view of a relationship lost to silence. This impression is compounded by various doubling and pairing effects as well as by the images' static symmetry. Only upon comparing the two images more precisely does it become apparent that we are looking at two different couples. Their great similarity in clothing, hairstyle and poses conveys the opacity and impenetrability of the facades presented to us – and the extent to which they drive our perception.

ROOM 9

12 Actor in two roles, 2020

Two inkjet prints

The two large-format photographs each show a moment in distinct stage plays, featuring the same actress in two different roles. Stage actors and actresses are often required to jump back and forth between various plays and roles. The diptych format displays this challenging relation between identity and appearance as a simultaneous reality. *Actor in two roles* provides a classic example of the way Jeff Wall prepares his photography shoots with the precision of a film production. Having selected two current theatre productions, he recreated their set designs to suit the format of Los Angeles' *little theaters*. By thus aligning the settings of his photo shoots, he steers our focus fully onto the events on stage and allows for an ideal comparability of the two motifs.

ROOM 9

13 A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947, 1990

Transparency in lightbox

Spellbound, a group of children hangs on the every word of a ventriloquist's dummy. The ventriloquist herself seems to be listening intently to the utterances of the harlequinesque medium on her lap. Despite the homey atmosphere, the scene feels uncanny: a puppet, a lifeless thing, gains power over living human beings through the use of language. As mere viewers, we cannot know what words the seemingly well-meaning puppeteer is putting into the figure's mouth.

The title of the work refers to the year before the television set began its triumphant march into the hearts of North American living rooms. The image therefore suggests itself as a reflection on the power of the media and the responsibility of media makers. Yet its disturbing effect is rooted in the radical disparity between the natural flow of language and the static nature of photography, which now and forever only grants us a frozen and muted glimpse of past events.

ROOM 10

14 War game, 2007

Gelatin silver print

The image shows children playing a war game in a patch of wasteland in a typical North American suburb. In the foreground, an armed boy sits in a fortress built with junk and salvage materials. His gaze directs us to three other children lying on the ground like prisoners. In the background, another three boys are stalking up, close-combat style, toward the neighbouring houses. As a black-and-white photograph, the image initially calls to mind a documentary snapshot. Yet the painterly play of light on the scene in the foreground and in the blooming treetop testifies to the aestheticising power of the gelatin silver technique and gives away the fact that what we are looking at is a carefully considered composition. A closer look at the image gives rise to growing unease at the sight of its combination of beauty and violence: one of the shadowed faces on the ground is distorted by a dreadful grimace. In the background, a woman is walking along the street, apparently wholly unperturbed by the symbolic violence that is edging dangerously close to the garden fences.

ROOM 10

**15 Maquette for a monument
to the contemplation
of the possibility of mending
a hole in a sock, 2023**

Inkjet print

Does it make sense to repair what has been worn out or damaged? Are we able and willing to do so? These are the philosophical questions posed by Jeff Wall's most recent work in the exhibition. It features a woman of a certain age seated on a small low table, about to mend a hole in a sock. This domestic task takes place in a public space: the dim backdrop of high bookcases, the worn stone floor and the bright cone of light are evocative of a library after closing time – a stage-like scene that may very well be more about the woman's inner world than about any real space. The lighting imbues the figure with sculptural monumentality. The woman's bowed, seated position is reminiscent of *Pietà* scenes, in which the grieving Virgin Mary cradles the body of Christ. This allegorical aspect of Wall's photograph also invites parallels to his work *The Thinker*.

ROOM 11

16 In the Legion, 2022

Inkjet print

The image shows a sociable evening gathering in a typical bar of the Royal Canadian Legion, a charitable organisation for members of the police and military forces. The highlight of the scene can be found in what is at once the darkly shadowed background and the centre of the composition: one of the patrons is hovering mid-air, having reached the high point of an impromptu back flip! Some heads have turned his way, a woman at his table has jumped to her feet, but most have yet to notice anything. Just one moment later, and the situation would have been a very different one, for there is a good chance this flip will not end well. In its cinematic composition, the image calls awareness to our own mode of perception. It addresses the irreconcilability between the necessarily limited viewpoint of those involved in a situation and our position as all-seeing observers, a privilege which also precludes us from intervening in any way.

INFORMATION

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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at: kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch

CATALOGUE



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Art Shop: shop.fondationbeyeler.ch

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19 May – 11 August 2024

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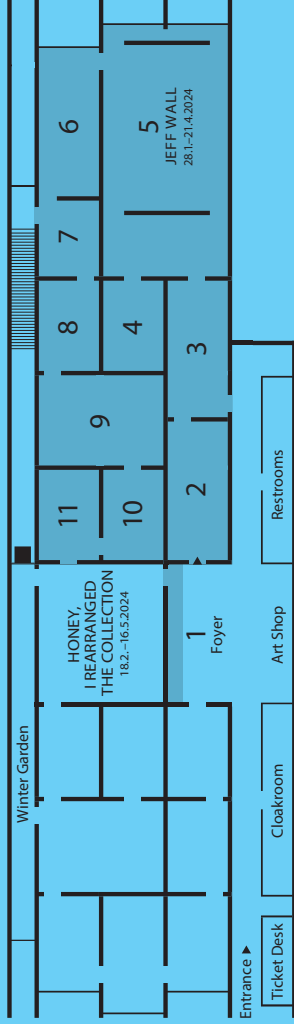
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Please do not touch the artworks!