

Putting on the Frock: Jeff Wall's Talk at the PMA

Jeff Wall's inaugural lecture at the 1st Annual Anne d'Harnoncourt Memorial Symposium at the PMA marked another step in a retreat from his exacting attempt to come to grips theoretically and artistically with the void opened in the late 70s by the crisis of the neo-avant-garde and by the failure of conceptualism's attempt to "write out" the work of art. For the reader familiar with Jeff Wall's attempt in the early 80s to forge an artistic position whose historical viability consisted in neither ignoring, accepting nor jettisoning the critical radicality of conceptualism's cult of negation will no doubt find his recent attempt to define the criticality of his work as "a militant exploration of the legitimacy of tradition" a tad disappointing if not downright repugnant. Wall's struggle to articulate this artistic position was evident in his conflicted attempt to bind his interests in the great works of the past—the masterworks of the museum—to a keen sensitivity to the importance of ideological critique. The new stance articulated in Wall's lecture effaces the importance of critique in favor of the authority of tradition.



The retreat, if I may be permitted to put the point polemically, takes the form of a kind of Neo-Greenbergianism in which, through a tortuous theoretical trajectory whose logic I cannot here trace, Wall claims to have resolved the conflicts that cleaved his earlier work and initiated his turn to the light-box. This resolution now allows him to return to a notion of art based on a concept of "aesthetic pleasure" rendered more complex, but by no means ineffectual, by its critical demolition by the avant-garde. Given that his project now attempts to revitalize a conception of artistic practice dependent upon the claim to art's autonomy vis-à-vis social and historical determinants, the Duchampian legacy of the Ready-made doubtless provides the greatest challenge to the legitimacy of Wall's artistic project. Hence the suspect character of Wall's thesis concerning the historical importance of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*.

In all brevity, Wall's thesis essentially claimed that the function of *Étant donnés* as Duchamp's second masterwork (the first being the Large Glass) served to restore the historical viability of the masterwork

as such, whose legitimacy the Ready-made had jeopardized. Strategically, Wall's central thesis must be read as a brilliant tactical gesture whose consequences effectively neutralize Duchamp's critical legacy and the exemplary role he plays for the neo-avant-garde. By reading *Étant donnés* as the definitive overcoming of the deleterious and corrosive effects of the Ready-made on the artwork's autonomy from social, institutional, historical and economic forces, Wall has effectively resituated his own practice as an historical heir to Duchamp's own restoration, that is, after the Ready-made, of the legitimacy and authoritative status of the tradition of masterworks. Wall can thus acknowledge the Ready-made's, and indirectly the neo-avant-garde's, historical importance without grappling with their essential problematic, which according to Duchamp's own authority has been rendered moot, a matter of scholarly interest but no longer a viable artistic position.

Acute intelligence put to a perfidious end is of course nothing new. However, Wall's case is particularly odious in my view because of the continued vitality of his initial struggle to articulate a critical artistic position that neither accepted the cynical defeatism or abject melancholia that seems to plague those practices that identify criticality with negativism tout court, nor the wholly

reactive artistic position that became dominant during the last market swell and that allows the market to provide a "benevolent" umbrella to all and sundry. Wall's previous attempt to question the assumptions upon which conceptualism labored prefigures Jacques Rancière's recent attempts to rethink the very concept of modernity outside the rather wooden and hackneyed identification of representation and figuration. For Wall's early attempts to recast the problem of modernity in distinctly Baudelairian terms (the painter of modern life), viewing the present less as a rupture with the past than as an occasion to rethink the relation to the past, remains a vital site of contestation for those invested in

thinking the present. Yet, the astuteness with which Wall charted the artistic conjuncture in the 1980s with all its productive tensions and contradictions has apparently dissolved into a discourse that can only be called reactionary.

This does not by any means necessitate joining the chorus of those who see the museum and various other institutions as nothing other than mausoleums for urbane judgment. However, it seems particularly important in the critical desuetude of our present to remain faithful to the enduring importance of the Duchampian legacy of the Ready-made. Duchamp's continued importance for the art of this city—which has so rarely heeded his exemplary radicality—lies in "his impulse," to appropriate words that Duchamp himself reserved for Picabia, "to defrock himself, to remain a nonbeliever in those divinities that are too lightly created for social needs."

-Alexi Kukuljevic