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The Artiste

**Blake Stimson**



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Artists feel that anyone who doesn't enjoy their work does not really experience it. So we are insulated, we have this happy space of ours. But we cannot shape very much and so we do not have much direct effect on the affairs of the world. From within our space, our *métier*, we can contemplate and reflect on the difficulty, the burden, the obligation accepted by those who take on practical tasks. (Jeff Wall, 2004.)

Jeff Wall's account of the artist's insulated and happy space at a reflective remove from the burdens of the world – the garret, we might call it, or studio or loft or, perhaps more grandly, the laboratory – is taken from a conversation he had with architect Jacques Herzog published under the title 'Pictures of Architecture – Architecture of Pictures' (Fig. 50). I have chosen to take my epigraph from this text because it is really its latter concern – that about the architecture of pictures – that I will be exploring here. Just to be clear at the outset, I do not mean to use the term 'architecture' as a fanciful substitute for form or composition or design or structure in the usual ways that artists or art historians use these terms when discussing pictures; nor do I mean to flatten architecture's three-dimensions into two by simple metaphor; nor, finally, do I mean to suggest that art's capacity for a 'direct effect on the affairs of the world' might be elevated or enlarged to that enjoyed by architects or others who take on the burden of practical tasks. Rather, what I mean by architecture (and what I take it to mean in the Wall–Herzog conversation) is something more like the concept of housing or factory or pavilion (or, indeed, garret or laboratory), that is, something more in keeping with a non-metaphorical, everyday use of the term even as we consider it in the context of an architecture of pictures (or an architecture of art more generally) rather than as architecture itself.

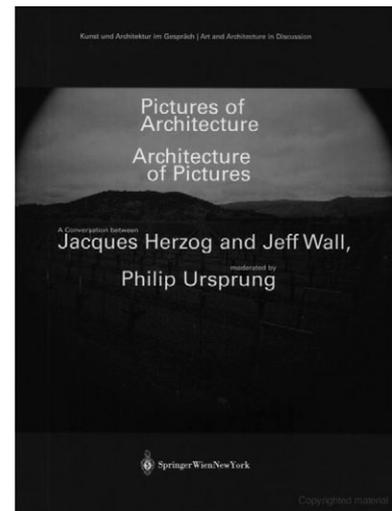
For example, the architecture of art that I will be concerned with in Wall's work is something on the scale of Bruce Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* (1970) or his *Performance Corridor* (1968) or, particularly, his *Lighted Performance Box* (1969) (even, of course, if these examples better illustrate an architecture of performance or imagined performance than they do an architecture of pictures) (Fig. 51). Or it might be as constricted, even, as the locker that Chris Burden climbed into in 1971 for his *Five Day Locker Piece*. The rudimentary definition of architecture that I have in mind, in other words, is nothing more than a container or vestibule that is human-scale or larger – a coffin would do, as would a dumpster, as would a shopping cart, as would the happenstance construction in this or that favela. What matters in the end to qualify as architecture is only that it serve as an enlargement, insulation and fortification of the boundaries of the self, an expansion of the skin ego that, at minimum, promises to protect its soft and vulnerable interior, and, at its most consequential, provides a suitably capacious space to incorporate, protect and govern the mushy interiorities of others. In this way, it might be said, all architecture

aspires to the status of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, just as all art aspires to be architecture – it seeks to expand outwards from the boundaries of the self to become the outer boundaries of one’s world even if it never actually succeeds in doing so.

Of particular relevance for Wall’s work in the latter Nauman example is what Guggenheim museum curator Nancy Spector calls its ‘sense of a hidden, unattainable space, one that can only be experienced vicariously’.<sup>1</sup> It will be my contention here that Wall’s signature lightbox presentation system produces a related effect – that the simple box structure with its internal light source offers itself to the beholder in the manner that vicarious architecture always has: as an architecture designed specifically to curtail access to its interior space in order to conjure in its stead the imagined experience of that insulated or protected interiority. Indeed, I will be arguing that we might well refer to the one or two cubic metre volume enclosed inside each of Wall’s boxes using his characterisation of ‘this happy space of ours’ and, even, that it is constructive to do so (Fig. 52). Seen from the outside, all architecture and all pictures are vicarious in this way to one degree or another, of course – they outwardly present the promise of an another, protected world within – but architecture can generally claim an upper hand over pictures in this game because its interiority is usually real rather than illusory. Either way, the measure of such vicariousness can be said to depend on a public/private ratio or the degree to which the object in question projects a public exterior while simultaneously shoring up and protecting a guarded interior within.

By Wall’s own careful analysis some 25 years ago, architecturality was always the cornerstone of the conceptualist tradition that gave rise to his own practice. ‘Artists like Graham, Buren, Weiner or Kosuth understand architecture as the discourse of siting the effects of power generated by publicity, information and bureaucracy’, he wrote at the beginning of the second version of his long and thoughtful study of Dan Graham’s work, arguing that it is from this understanding that conceptual art gained its critical purchase on the world and was able to stake its claim as art.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Wall writes, Graham and his colleagues were respondents to the modernisms of Bruno Taut, Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson as much as they were to the postmodernisms of Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris and Donald Judd. For example, Graham’s work is said to ‘reveal the structural and historical isomorphism’ at work in pop and minimalism by disclosing ‘the relationship between the experience of art and the experience of social domination’ just as it is said to expose how the utopian planning schemes of modernist architects have ‘shrunk into the gratuitous structure of the suburban grid, the garden of subjection for a lost proletariat’.<sup>3</sup> Where pop and minimalism drew their claim to relevance by overtly adopting the look and feel of urban form and abandoning the modernist aim of picture-making (thereby, it should be noted in passing, staking an art-into-life claim as a neo-avantgarde), conceptualism presumed to enter the public sphere through a critique of that form by addressing it as one of several ‘effects of power’.

At the centre of this dialogue for the conceptualists, their pop and minimalist forebears, and the modernist architects before them, just as would be subsequently for Wall himself, is a singularly powerful architectural element: the great modernist glass wall (Fig. 53). With its transparency, on the one hand, and its mirror effect on the other, the glass wall served as a superior figure for the grand bourgeois project of



**Fig. 50.** Philip Ursprung, *Pictures of Architecture/Architecture of Pictures: A Conversation Between Jacques Herzog and Jeff Wall*, 2004.

1. See Spector’s comment on the Guggenheim website: [http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_work\\_md\\_117\\_2.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_117_2.html). Thanks to Simon Sadler for prodding me to refine the account of architecture provided in this paragraph and the last.

2. ‘In this way, conceptualism participated in the development of the New Left’s critique of academicism’s and publicity’s interdependence . . . Conceptualism’s exhibition strategy self-consciously presents the museum-gallery system – the institutional complex whose architectural look was foregrounded by Minimalism – as the crucial arena of this new synthesis . . . The strategies of Graham, Buren or Kosuth are, each in their own way, informed (through the issues raised by the institutionalisation of Minimalism and Pop) by the combination of concepts drawn from the Frankfurt School tradition with related, historicist, critiques of urbanism’. Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel* (Art Metropole: Toronto, 1991), pp. 11, 13.

3. Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel*, pp. 27, 17, 29.

4. 'The result', as Manfredo Tafuri had it about the avant-garde opening up of the imagination of production from object to space with devices such as the glass wall, 'was that aesthetic experience was revolutionized. Now it was no longer objects that were offered to judgment, but a process to be lived and used as such. The user summoned to complete Mies van der Rohe's or Gropius' 'open' spaces, was the central element of this process. Since the new forms were no longer meant to be absolute values but instead proposals for the organisation of collective life – the integrated architecture of Gropius – architecture summoned the public to participate in its work of design. Thus through architecture the ideology of the public took a great step forward. Morris's romantic socialist dream of an art of all for all took ideological form within the iron-clad law of profit'. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1976), pp. 102–103.

5. Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, p. 42.

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**Fig. 51.** Bruce Nauman, *Lighted Performance Box* 1969. Aluminum and 1000-watt spotlight, 198.1 × 50.8 × 50.8 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Panza Collection, 1991.91.382. Photograph by David Heald@The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. © 2003 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

mediating inside and outside, privacy and publicity, individuality and collectivity. Indeed, more than any other single form, it might be said, the glass wall has operated as a motif for both the promise and the failure of enlightenment, and with it, both the promise and the failure of modernity.<sup>4</sup> The mistake that many artists have made since the 1960s, according to Wall, is to simply reverse the polarity of the old modernist telos as it had been overextended by visionaries like Taut or Tatlin or Mies or Le Corbusier by casting the glass wall as 'an architectural emblem of lost or falsified openness, one containing the specifically modern form of oppression which appears to have no secret or hidden core forbidden to sight in the ancient sense of holiness and Law'.<sup>5</sup> The play of mirrors in the work of Warhol or Robert Morris or Robert Smithson, for example, and the empty containers of Morris, Nauman and Michael Asher, say, or of



**Fig. 52.** Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979, on view as part of the exhibition 'Le mouvement des images' at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, November 2006. Photograph by the author.

minimalist and conceptualist exhibition spaces generally, all bear that anti- or post-Enlightenment reaction and play out the theme of the empty centre – the theme of inside violated to its core by outside and its flipside, the outer world degraded into what Lauren Berlant calls 'the intimate public sphere' – again and again and again.<sup>6</sup> While we might readily find good reason to sympathise with such a postmodernist reversal (pace Adorno's plaint, for example, that the 'pure mimetic impulse – the happiness of producing the world once over – which animates art and has stood in age-old tension with its antimythological, enlightening component, has become unbearable under the system of total functional rationality'), it is still equally as much its own endgame.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of whether it is merely a reflection of the spectacularisation of the world or a critique of that spectacle, it can only be understood – like the opposite but equally facile modernist truism before it – as more and more of an indulgence in each repetition after its point is first made.

This is exactly why Wall advocates for Graham over all the others: 'Graham transformed conceptual methods into their opposites', he tells us on the first page of his essay; 'Graham begins from the failure of conceptualism's critique of art', building in its ruins a 'critical memorial to that failure', the failure to 'bring to the surface of its own conscious practice the repressed and forgotten name of the social force (the working class) whose revolutionary upheaval had animated and inspired the earlier

6. See among other of Berlant's publications, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 1997), for example, Chapter 1, 'The Theory of Infantile Citizenship'.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 1998), p. 339.



Fig. 53. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, transparency in lightbox, 187 × 351 cm, 1999.

8. Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, pp. 7, 79. His critique of the others is uniquely incisive and uniquely harsh. Here is one example among several: 'What is unique about conceptual art . . . is its reinvention of defeatism (of the quietism implicit in 'purist' art.) The grey volumes of conceptual art are filled with somber ciphers which express primarily the incommunicability of social thought in the form of art . . . A work by Kosuth, (or those by Johns, Morris or Reinhardt before him) is seized by a nostalgia for a kind of political stance which he is sure is no longer possible or even "useful" to maintain. Kosuth's works, exhibitions and tomes created the mausoleum look that struck just the right note. They brought the tomb-like aspect of Minimalist exhibitionism out from the "dead" gallery space into "life" – billboards, newspaper ads, etc. . . .

Conceptual art carries only the mortified remains of social art silenced by three decades of capitalist war, political terror and "prosperity" out into the city. Its display of these remains can only be exhibitionistic, and it is the expression of its bad, distraught conscience . . . in its rueful immobilisation before the mechanisms of falsification of language in the perspective of neo-capitalism, it represents the terminus point of serious modern art – its scene of shipwreck. Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, pp. 102–103.

avant-garde'.<sup>8</sup> All of this – the long history of longing, loss and near oblivion for the enlightenment dream – is summed up and commemorated most economically, most sensitively, and most reflexively, according to Wall, in Graham's signature semi-transparent/semi-reflective glass walls, walls that do little more than put the boundary between inside and outside into a heightened or exaggerated perceptual state, a state of perceptual tautness or discord (Fig. 54). Graham is an artist of spectres, or rather 'vampires', writes Wall: his 'Kammerspiel' or play in and with the room or chamber or container is a rehaunting of bourgeois interiority, an intermixing of that which cannot be mixed, a putting into discordance of its twin myths of transparency and invisibility. It is a return to the bourgeois project of vicarious architecture, of the outward promise of another world within, not by reactively reversing its polarity and casting its interiority as empty, as myth, as penetrated through and through by exteriority, but instead by melancholically casting it as a tomb or crypt or coffin, by casting it as a figure that can only draw its sustenance as if it were blood from the soft flesh of enlightenment's promise at the moment of its demise. In this way, by Wall's reading, Graham's *Kammerspiel* re-embodies the bourgeois project, making it visible once again by thickening or making flesh or skin-like again the membrane that keeps the outside out and the inside in, even if it does so only as a death mask or figure of loss.

So it is that Wall begins his own project at the end of the 1970s by building on Graham's reactivation or re-embodiment of the architectural container as a figure of bourgeois interiority. Where Graham recast the endgame of flatfooted postmodernist demythologisation – the circular truism that total transparency equals total rationalisation – by memorialising the attendant loss carried by the claim to post-ness, Wall flips the coin and risks actually



Fig. 54. Dan Graham seen in his *Half Square-Half Crazy*, Como, Piazza del Popolo, 2004. Courtesy Dan Graham, New York.

renewing the old bourgeois myth by reconstituting the glass wall not as a memorial for the lost ideal of transparency but instead as a container for a renewed form of life, as a skin ego for human agency, indeed, we shall see, as a kind of reinstatement of that other most hackneyed of enlightenment chestnuts: ‘commitment’.<sup>9</sup>

The broadest strokes of commitment are there in Wall’s diligently methodical (and, now after a quarter-century, clearly untiring) return to the old-lefty enterprise of reportage, focusing his lens without deviation, as he does, on the stock repertoire of social themes most strongly associated with the 1920s – the older standards of class, race and labour, of course, but also resentment, isolation and alienation, the machinery of fear, fantasy, despair, and the look and feel of social life generally or broadly perceived as a totality.<sup>10</sup> We can even see the reportage legacy in his move beyond its historical forms, upgrading its production value beyond photomontage and the photographic essay and their literary and theatrical equivalents to a level of spectacularity consistent with our own times.<sup>11</sup> Such a return to the modernist foundations of social realism by way of conceptual art is generally consistent with the work of a number of Wall’s peers – Allan Sekula, say, or Mary Kelly, or Martha Rosler or

9. This is how Wall describes Graham’s accomplishment: ‘Graham’s project appears to mount a terror campaign against the terminal nihilism of bourgeois consciousness. . . . the empty core of oppressive bourgeois nihilism has been shattered by a cunning guerrilla operation using weapons provided by the same nihilism’. Wall, *Dan Graham’s Kammerspiel*, p. 71.

10. Although it has not been described so before to my knowledge, it seems safe enough to say that Wall’s restaging of social situations is a form of ‘three-dimensional reporting’, that it makes its claim to truth not by appealing to the comprehension of simple facts but instead by allowing the viewer to ‘experience the event recorded’ rather than merely understanding it, as Joseph North once put it, and as such is a textbook example of reportage. In the terminology of the movement’s founding theorist Sergei Tretiakov, it is the work of a ‘psycho-engineer’ or ‘psycho-constructor’. This, it seems, is what is at stake in the distinction between understanding and

experience Wall falls back on again and again in discussions of his work, for example here: 'Slowly, I have come to feel that meaning is almost completely unimportant. Because of our education in art over the last 20 or 30 years, people expect to relate to art by understanding it, by apprehending what it means. But I may have returned to an older, simpler point of view, namely that we don't need to understand art, we need only to fully experience it. Then we will live with the consequences of that experience, or those experiences, and that will be how art affects us'. See North's contribution in Henry Hart (ed.), *The American Writers' Congress* (International Publishers: New York, 1935), pp. 41–42. Tretiakov quoted by Vladislav Todorov in *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1995), p. 41. The Wall quote is from *Pictures of Architecture – Architecture of Pictures* (Springer: Berlin, 2004), p. 46.

Michael Schmidt, just to name some of the best known – but even more at odds with the postmodern condition from which he emerged and largely dissimilar to the concerns of his neo-reportage contemporaries, is the figure Wall cuts as an artist housing that commitment. Indeed, if we look closely at the persona put in play by his work and statements, we can see there the single most celebrated and extravagant of all containers of bourgeois interiority – that is, the skulking and brooding, self-absorbed and circumspect, internally conflicted and isolated, mythological figure of the artist himself (Fig. 55). Seen from this angle – peering out at us with twofold suspicion as he does – he cuts a very different profile from the self-presentations of Sekula, Kelly, Rosler and Schmidt which, each in their own way, engage their audiences on the level playing field of reasonable minds. Indeed, with that leery gaze confronting us, he might as well be van Gogh, say, or Cézanne, or Munch, or, perhaps better, Gustave Courbet when he cast himself in the defiant mould of wandering Jew or 'desperate man'.

As Wall put it himself recently to a good-sized audience, indicating the central tension or problematic in the development of his role as an artist, 'I was interested in a certain occultation of my practice, of bringing it away from the world, and somehow making it private, and at the same time using this rather dynamic transparency medium to project that sense



Fig. 55. Jeff Wall, *Double Self-portrait*, 1979, transparency in lightbox, 172 × 229 cm.

of privacy outwards in the form of a picture'.<sup>12</sup> This statement was not a flat confession or even description, of course, nor was he simply telling his audience to mind its own business. Instead, his comment served as both a pulling back and a 'projection outwards', as he says, from his insulated and happy garret to an audience out there, to critics, admirers and other interlocutors who were there to engage him. The ambivalent tone of his performance confirmed this as well – from the public expression of his desire to make his work private already noted to his consistent defence of his own artistic intentions against various, often generous, efforts at interpretation by his audience.

While such an effort to be both inside and out at the same time – in debate with others about the private experience of art as if it could lay claim to being of the 'affairs of the world' by the act of removing itself from that same world – is long out of fashion, it is hardly new: indeed, it is really just a latter-day form of 'critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself', as one historian of the bourgeoisie has put it about the practice in its original eighteenth-century mould, 'a process of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness' as a matter of collective concern and deliberation, and further as a means for somehow challenging the status quo.<sup>13</sup> Such, it might be said, is Wall's Kammerspiel, his play with the container form, his engagement with the architecture of pictures, his reworking of the insulated and happy space of artists: once again, he suggests, art might concern itself with the publicness of private experience by working inside against out and outside against in; once again art might fulfil its social obligations by becoming fully bourgeois.

'Occultation' or shoring up one's special domain away from the world, we know well enough, was the centrepiece of the public life of modern art in its mature form. As Peter Bürger described it a few years before Wall began his project, 'it is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art becomes a fact', and careful attention to, and repeated declaration of, the protective boundaries of garret and the like is how art was able to present itself to the world as an autonomous institution unto itself.<sup>14</sup> Rather, such self-institutionalisation was one of two reciprocal endgames for the modernist project of autonomy, the second playing thanatos to the narcissistic eros of the first: 'When art and the praxis of life are one' – this is Bürger again – 'art's purpose can no longer be discovered, because the existence of two distinct spheres (art and the praxis of life) that is constitutive of the concept of purpose or intended use has come to an end'.<sup>15</sup>

Breaking from Bürger's critical assumptions but sticking broadly with his historical analysis, we might say that aestheticism and avant-gardism together constitute the opposing extremes of a bipolar condition or the symptoms of modernism's own distinguishing pathology. To the strife or spectacle or drama of this play back and forth between poles, Wall responds following Graham not by a postmodern collapse of inside and out but instead by working the middle. The key to his response, at its most basic, is a simple formal principle: by holding firm to the founding enlightenment duality of inside and outside, self and world, modern art might not only curb its midlife pathology, it could also reconstitute itself around its own founding principle or dynamic that gave it its heroic sense of purpose in the first place – that is, the form of contained disruption, institutionalised debate, dynamic contrariety, and the like, or what one scholar has called the space

11. This is how Wall describes that spectacularity: 'I think there is a basic fascination with technology which derives from the fact that there's always a hidden space – a control room, a projection booth, a source of light of some kind – from which the image comes . . . the luminescent image is fascinating because it is lit with another atmosphere. So two atmospheres intersect to make the image'. Els Barents, 'Typology – Luminescence – Freedom: Selections from a Conversation with Jeff Wall', *Jeff Wall: Transparencies* (Rizzoli: New York, 1986), p. 99. Thanks to Alex Alberro for referring me to this text.

12. Jeff Wall lecture at Tate Modern, London, 25 October 2005, available at: [http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/jeff\\_wall/](http://www.tate.org.uk/onlineevents/archive/jeff_wall/), min. 14:20–15:00.

13. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 29.

14. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 1984), p. 17. Such, of course, was the blurring and muddling of the perceptual threshold or window on the world in Monet, say, or Cézanne, or Picasso. Like Graham's semi-reflective, semi-transparent glass walls, impressionism, cubism and the like were effective ways to make the liminal space of mediation between self and world visible, visceral, plastic, ways to draw the relation of self to world back from the horizon of reification in order to make it pliable or negotiable.

15. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 51.

of 'enfranchisement of competing voices'.<sup>16</sup> That is, in other words, it would reconstitute itself as bourgeois subjectivity no longer in denial of itself, the locus classicus of the public sphere.

In its original, eighteenth-century form, the opposition between inside and outside, self and society, that gave structure and dynamism to the public sphere and subsequently came to launch modernism was not so abstract or formal as this, of course, referring instead to a concrete opposition between the value systems of two classes. The ideal of autonomy, of self-creation and self-determination, that was celebrated first and foremost in the figure of the artist, emerged as a bourgeois ideal against the pre-existing ideal of value as a birthright, of a pressure toward selflessness in the face of larger, predetermined truths. For a lively and formative moment, artists were equally the weighty inheritors, perpetuators and extenders of the aristocratic past and the bright heralds of an emergent and oppositional, self-fulfilling rather than other-fulfilling, bourgeois future. This cross of purposes would soon lose its concrete historical specificity to the successes of the revolution, but it would have lasting consequence as a formal memory or residue or habit-of-mind born of that early experience of incongruity. What was on offer in the simple formal split between past as value and present as value, between born-into value and earned value, between entitlement of the old and shock of the new, was the experience of contradiction or antinomy which by its form alone would subsequently serve as engine for other circumstances, regardless of whether it was exercised consciously or manifest as unconscious symptom. The larger occasion of this contradiction as form in the subsequent life of modernism would be its pathological swing back and forth between self and selflessness, cloistered interiority and raw exteriority, aestheticism and avant-gardism, art and life, but it also posed itself as a problem to be solved and gave modern art as a whole the grand ambition of mediation, even if it rarely realised that aim.

Following Graham, Wall responds to the postmodern rejection of this drama as (false) cure for modernism's pathology by reconstituting the turning point, by reinserting the opacity or materiality or embodiment of the boundary between inside and outside, self and other, art and life. To appreciate just how different his version of this boundary is, we might contrast it with the aims of turning inside out and outside in as seen in the work of his postmodern forebears and contemporaries – think of Michael Asher's 1979 project for Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, or the Nauman referred to above, or any of Warhol's endless plays on the theme of being nothing more than a mirror to the world. So too we might see this impulse summed up in myriad period declarations like this one by Asger Jorn in 1960: 'The form of a container is a form contrary to the form of its contents; its function is to prevent the contents from entering into process... And all change will always be made against it' (to which we might add, yes indeed, 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned').<sup>17</sup> Wall responds, following Graham, by reconstituting the boundary between inside and out as angst or anguish or alienation, as a problem to be solved. In this way his approach shores up and thereby conserves the relation of self to world given to us by the great bourgeois figure of the artist.

Like the gothic cathedral standing in as the mystical body of Christ or Mary or the church itself, or the great body of the Leviathan manifest in the various chambers of government that both safeguard and set in motion the social mass, the container form developed by Wall is at once architecture and

16. Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in 18th-Century Paris* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 1987), p. 254.

17. Asger Jorn, 'The End of the Economy and the Realization of Art' first published in *Internationale Situationniste* no. 4 (June 1960), available excerpted and in translation at: <http://www.infopool.org.uk/6002.html>

subject – no longer, of course, the body of church or state but instead the body of the artist in his modern form or the long-lost housing of bourgeois subjectivity itself in its most essential or reduced state, the housing of inner human capacity realising itself through public exercise. As with Graham's work, that housing serves as a skin-ego delimiting the terms of aesthetic experience by defining the relative thickness and permeability of the boundary between self and world. As Wall puts it, 'A picture is normally devoted to depicting a space extending back from its surface. The surface is a threshold itself, but we don't tend to look at it that way.' That is, we tend to fold our space into the space of the picture; we tend to believe its illusion, 'but', he says, 'it is more interesting to depict something in a way that the viewer feels he or she is really seeing, but at the same time suggest that something significant isn't being seen – that the act of picturing creates an unseen as well as a seen'.<sup>18</sup> That unseen is the threshold or glass wall itself, the boundary or interface that separates self and world – or splits the self into subjectivity and subject positionality, worldly and innerworldly component parts – and opens up the great lost bourgeois promise of negotiating the world by negotiating that split, the great lost promise of an authentic and meaningful public sphere.

This split between inside and outside is ideological, of course – in Marxian terms it is really the very definition of ideology – and so being it is what makes it modern, what constitutes it as the challenge or struggle or unease that is the province of modern art. As Wall puts it, 'this experience of two places, two worlds, in one moment is a central form of the experience of modernity'. This is why the lightbox form is so valuable, so central to his practice: 'In it, space – the space inside and the space outside of the picture – is experienced as it really exists in capitalism', that is, as the experience of disassociation from control over one's own life.<sup>19</sup> Above all else the glass wall in Wall's work is a figure for that experience of alienation, a figure that makes manifest the tautness or discord that gives body to that experience of inside and out by making it into a problem. In so doing the old project of modern art is reconstituted, with all its baggage, and the artist's travail with alienation – alienation understood and experienced as a technologically enabled dissociation from oneself, alienation understood as a problem to be worked on, a problem that might even be solved! – is risked once again.

Understanding art as a vehicle for negotiating one's relationship to the world, as grappling with alienation, as a method for the care of the self, is all well and good, of course, but the elephant in the room for modern art has always been its audience and this is certainly as much or even more the case for Wall. Indeed, in the end this is really what makes art modern for him or any other: to be modern for art means first and foremost to have no meaningful audience, to be thrown back on the self – that is, to have no *public* (other than the 'public of one', as Carl Andre once put it<sup>20</sup>) but instead only a coterie of connoisseurs, culture vultures, speculators, industry insiders and sundry hangers-on who have (or claim to have) a specialised capacity to parse modern art's self-absorbed abstractions and thereby display to each other their membership in a faux-elite club (Fig. 56). In this way, modern art's ciphers and symbols serve as the medium that constitutes a community or society or club – just like the mysterious codes of the freemasons and other secret societies of old – but they do not, cannot, constitute a public, they cannot lay claim to the

18. Sheena Wagstaff, 'Beyond the Threshold: Jeff Wall in the Studio' *Tate Etc.*, vol. 4, Summer 2005, <http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue4/inthestudio4.htm>

19. Wall, Barants, 'Typology, Luminescence, Freedom', p. 99.

20. 'Art is what we do. Culture is what is done to us . . . . Each man has a public of one; that's how it is, always has been'. Carl Andre, statement in Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler, 'Sensibility of the Sixties', *Art in America*, January/February 1967, p. 49.

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any inconvenience.

**Fig. 56.** Visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York learning about modern art, July 2006. Photograph by the author.

expression or realisation of universality that is constitutive of publicness. What they can do, however, is constitute a proto-public, or publicness in its abstract form without the backbone of reason, or what Jean-Paul Sartre once called a 'virtual public'. It is this virtuality – modern art understood and experienced as a kind of secret society available to its membership alone – and the drive to open it out to a new reality, to a public that flowers from its virtual-publicness, that has always given modern art its vitality and served as the basis of its outsized claim to social consequence achieved through special access to genius, mastery, self-exploration and the like.

This split between the happy and protected space of art, on the one hand, and the burdens of the world out there on the other – like the split put forward by art in its capacity as bearer of the eighteenth-century public sphere – has its own concrete class basis, of course. Allowing for some fine-tuning and assuming a kind of forthrightness that is available only under special conditions, we might imagine Wall expressing this split with these earnest words written by Sartre during one such special period immediately following the war: 'We were born into the bourgeoisie, and this class has taught us the value of its conquests: political freedom, habeas corpus, etc. We remain bourgeois by our culture, our way of life, and our present public', he wrote, before cutting to the chase, 'But at the same

time the historical situation drives us to join the proletariat in order to construct a classless society'.<sup>21</sup> The problem for Sartre, of course, just as it is for Wall, just as it almost always has been for modern art as a whole, is that the proletariat is not available as an audience for modern art and not available to occupy the bourgeois role of the modern artist. It is and has forever been 'lost', as Wall put it, whether to factory or party apparatus or garden of subjection of suburbia.

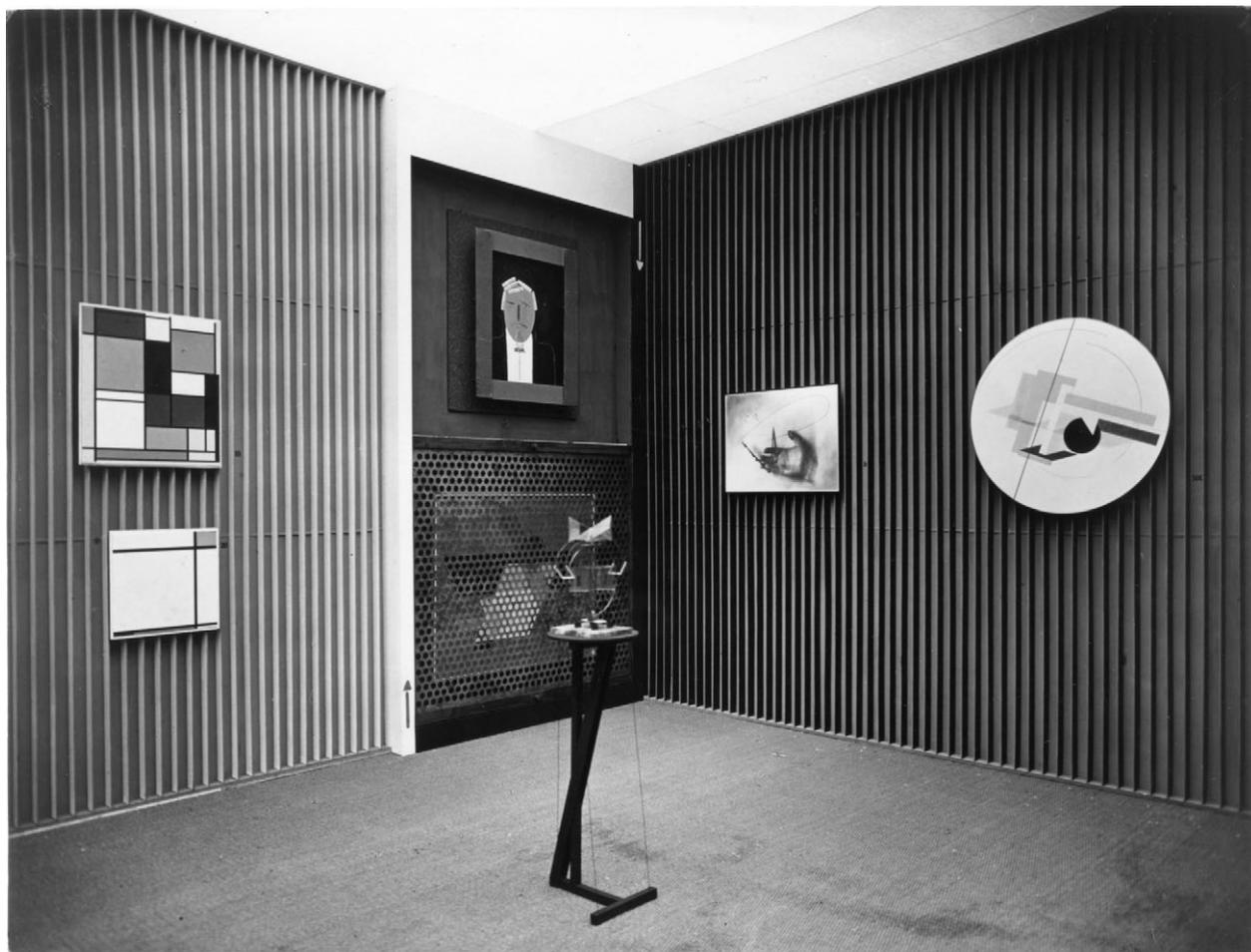
Bourgeois revolutions and proletarian revolutions are, by necessity, fundamentally different. The bourgeoisie produced its successful counter-hegemony by renouncing class consciousness whereas a proletarian revolution can only achieve its aims by resuscitating it. To be an artist in the modern sense and constitute one's practice in the name of a future public based on a universalist understanding of human nature, poses a peculiar problem in the age of the bourgeoisie. It must be both a figure for (proletarian) class consciousness and a (bourgeois) denial of class, it must both endorse and exercise the truths of the bourgeois universalism and lay bare their falsification. The challenge that Wall set for his own work just as Sartre did before him – to somehow resolve art's failure to 'bring to the surface of its own conscious practice the repressed and forgotten name of the social force (the working class) whose revolutionary upheaval had animated and inspired the earlier avant-garde' – is the challenge to mediate between worker and artist, proletarian and bourgeois, class consciousness and the classlessness of enlightenment reason. In the end, this is the governing contradiction of modern art as a whole and the source of its perpetual frustration and, it might be said, perpetual failure. The question raised by Wall's work is whether art can or should reasonably return to this challenge as its own special task.

There is another touchstone that we can look to that may be helpful for furthering our understanding of the status of commitment in Wall's pictures. The comparison I have in mind is between the 1979 *Double Self-Portrait* and Lissitsky's pivotal demonstration rooms from the mid 1920s (Fig. 57). Wall's striped wallpaper, the funny basket chair moved to the centre of the picture at odds with the layout of the room and without its cushion, the conspicuous change of clothing between shots (from work-a-day attire to after-hours garb?) signalling different forms of embodiment, even, perhaps, the HVAC vent behind the left Jeff, all suggest a kind of play with Lissitsky's rooms (or at least the surviving photographs of them) akin, perhaps, to the way he alludes to have been playing with Manet's *Bar in Picture for Women* from the same year. This may or may not have been his intention, of course, but the comparison opens up a parallel that I take to be central to his accomplishment. Both the double self-portrait and *Picture for Women* are early works for Wall and they wear their smartness on their sleeves, at least when compared with his later work, but in so being they also lay bare some of the central concerns of his practice as a whole with unusual schematic clarity.

Lissitsky's demonstration rooms were notable for, as he termed it, 'activating' the beholder by encouraging him or her to experience their position in space differentially. In this way the subject is doubled, experiencing her vision one way over here and another way over there, corporealising and therefore dereifying it.<sup>22</sup> Wall's picture produces a very different sort of experience which we might take as a rejoinder to the Lissitsky of the mid 1920s, as a kind of factography to his faktura or

21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *'What is Literature?' and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1988), p. 223.

22. For one such account see Maria Gough, 'Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitsky's Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*', in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (eds), *Situating El Lissitsky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (The Getty Research Institute: Los Angeles, CA, 2003), p. 113.



**Fig. 57.** Alexander Paul Walther, installation shot of El Lissitzky's *Raum für konstruktive Kunst*, International Kunstaussstellung, Dresden, 1926. Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (950076).

23. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 349.

reportage to his constructivism. By reiterating or reinforcing the experience of inside and out with the doubling of his own image (as he does similarly with the mirror in *Picture for Women*, Fig. 1), crossing the picture plane and rendering the spatial dynamics transverse or oblique to those in the Lissitzky, Wall psychologises the corporeal experience of looking given to us in the demonstration rooms by casting it as an experience of alienation or distance from oneself. Insofar as he is successful, his work may be said to pass the aesthetic litmus test once put forward by Adorno: 'Consciousness of the antagonism between interior and exterior is requisite to the experience of art'.<sup>23</sup> That antagonism between the happy, protected space of art and the burdens and obligations of the world out there, between the private reserve of the bourgeoisie and the rationalised social world of the proletariat, is itself the matter or medium of the old public sphere just as it has been the standard engine of modern art. The degree to which that consciousness of the antagonism between outside and in is available to us now and therefore the degree to which Wall's work can make sense for the world we find ourselves in today may be another question altogether.