News from Plato's Cave: Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind* and *Dead Troops Talk*

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To give a concrete example of the possibilities of a specifically visual argument, I would like to concentrate on two works by the Canadian artist Jeff Wall.[1] What both of these works have in common is that the visual event is established in such a way that it can be read as an ironic commentary on images. In contemporary art Wall's oeuvre makes it clear that far from requiring an additional linguistic reflection, images can "argue" for themselves. In an unexpected way Wall's images combine simple everyday perceptions of the spectator with art-historical quotations. Furthermore, they dramatize media-reality and, last but not least, they try to establish a theory of visual cognition.

The first work (fig. 1, overleaf) is entitled *A Sudden Gust of Wind*. According to its dependence on the unity of space and time, it shows what we expect from a classical concept of an image. The photograph gives the impression of spontaneity, almost like a snapshot. In the foreground there are four persons who seem to be affected by the vagaries of nature. While the person on the very left loses his manuscript – it is being blown away by the wind – the man next to him is only just able to hold on to his cap. Opposite him, a man tries to spot his hat, which he has already lost in a sudden gust of wind. He is given particular prominence by his position on the vertical axis. Only the fourth man is able to keep his cap on his head. The entire composition of the foreground emphasizes the instantaneous character of the event. The attitudes of all four persons are determined by extreme postures which result from the strong wind. Two trees, bent by the force of the wind, echo the agitation of the human figures. Overall, the picture gives the impression of being completely "natural", felicitously capturing the events shown.

With another look however we begin to realize how carefully composed this image is. A group of persons is arranged on a narrow stretch in the foreground. The organization of space could be characterized in terms of almost abstract compositional lines: space is made visible and given depth by the diagonal line which starts in the left corner and leads along the shore of the canal toward the center of the image thus stressing the low horizon of the scene. This low-running horizontal line, commonly found in Dutch landscape painting, converts the sky into a screen on which this scene of upward whirling, scattered sheets of paper is projected. The manuscript sheets are trans-

Figure 1. Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind,* 1993. Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 337 cm.

formed into an image of movement delineated on the plane. However, the manuscript also renders visible what usually cannot be seen – that is: the movement of the wind.

The subtitle already gives an important clue for the understanding of Wall's picture: it is additionally entitled "After Hokusai". The cibachrome by the Canadian artist is a paraphrase of a coloured wood-cut (fig. 2) from Hokusai's series *36 Views of the Fuji.*[2] The inscription in the upper left part of Hokusai's picture gives the name of the region where the shrine in the middle is to be found. In Hokusai's wood-cut the same subject as in Wall's picture is depicted – an arrangement of persons who find themselves exposed to the whims of nature and a manuscript belonging to the person on the very left being caught by the wind. Now, at the very latest, it becomes obvious that Wall's rendering is an imitation modelled on Hokusai.

In fact, Wall arranged the scene with actors and probably used a wind-machine to whirl the sheets around. He also drew on the possibilities of photographic digitalization: with the help of a computer, single scenes, taken one by one, have been arranged to form a homogeneous picture. Thus the simultaneity of the scene conceals the procedure of its gradual evolution. However, even if we keep the computer-aided construction in mind the number of the different scenes cannot be perceived. This way of production seems to translate techniques used in nineteenth century history painting. What would then have been constructed by assembling several studio studies in one picture, can today be achieved by the technical possibilities of the digitalized image. Jeff

Figure 2. Hokusai, "A High Wind in Yeijiri", from *Thirty-six Views of the Fuji*, ca. 1831-3. 26 x 37 cm.

Wall's picture is a cibachrome and a large scale transparency, that is to say a medium commonly used in advertising: these transparencies are mounted in aluminium show cases which are illuminated by fluorescent tubes. Compared to common photographic techniques this intense illuminated image has a more striking effect with regard to the illusion of three-dimensionalitly. This results in the somewhat paradoxical effect of the light seemingly being emitted by the image. The hybrid character of this technique must be emphasized. It modifies the slide projection, converting a projection surface into a screen in analogy to the television screen.

THE IDEA OF SPACE AS A TRAVESTY OF TIME

One more discovery is to be made when one closely examines the figure on the far left. Judging by the clothes it seems to be a male person except for the painted hands (fig. 3 – detail), the hands of a woman cross-dressing. This is a visual clue hinting at the travesty which takes place in the picture: a travesty

Figure 3. Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (detail).

symbolising a "picture redressed". Just as the title *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* refers to a point beyond the textual level and leads the viewer to question the self-explanatory character of the work, so the woman in disguise represents an inter-referential marker. Within the picture itself Wall shows us that what we took for evidence is partly already interpretation. The scene is dominated by an autumnal mood. The gust of wind takes hold of the tree's leaves and of the pages belonging to the human text alike. Wall's work transforms a nineteenth century Japanese picture into the pictorical reality of western civilization at the end of the twentieth century. The persons are dressed in a way which is more or less modern. The landscape with irrigated rice-plots shown on the coloured wood-cut is still of an agrarian character. Wall turns it into a contemporary agro-industrial scenery. To the left, different plots are marked out by white stakes. The stretch of running water beside the barren trees may be a canal under construction. In Wall's picture there is nothing purely accidental about the scenery be it the field, the trees, or the water, in fact, everything is designed by man.

There are, however, also significant differences between Wall's and Hokusai's works. For the Japanese artist there is one overruling reason to show us the scene in the foreground: he wants to contrast the transitoriness of human existence with the permanence of the mountain. In Wall's picture there is no such opposition. Mount Fuji is an abstract sign, a symbol represented by a single line. Human thought, recorded on the sheets of paper in Hokusai's

print, is blown away in the face of the mountain's eternal majesty. There are different modes of depiction, too. In Hokusai's print, space is graded by curved lines, whereas Wall uses a system of graduated diagonals according to the rules of central perspective. But there is no target within this model for creating space. It leads – in spatial terms – nowhere, it is merely a principle of quantification, a means of measuring distances. Another contrast can be found regarding the sheets: while the blowing pages on Wall's picture seem to show numbers, Hokusai's are empty. The transformation of pictorial detail in the work of the Canadian artist seems to be somewhat laconic, considering that Mount Fuji finds its counterpart in the skyscraper to the left. Likewise the shinto shrine in Hokusai is echoed by the ramshackle huts on the right. Although nature is depicted in both images, it has a completely different meaning. In conclusion it might be said that the aspect of travesty, which is normally used to entertain and amuse, is transformed into a model of intercultural differences. I have chosen the term 'laconic' because of the absence of any spiritual or metaphysical context. At first sight it seemed as if Wall used the content of Hokusai's picture: the four figures, the landscape as well as the gust can be found in both. But with respect to travesty, the formal organization of the two images differ. The difference becomes even more pronounced concerning the meaning of both images. Hokusai has chosen the Fuji as a meditative sign, while Wall uses the scene for an art-theoretical message. In this context it is interesting to know that the Japanese term for photographing *shashin,* which literally means "writing down reality" can be opposed to the western term "light-drawing".

If we take a final look at Wall's picture we have to admit that the choreography is perfect: three of the figures constitute one single sequence of movements. Standing on tip-toe, the person on the far left is caught in an unsteady pose at the beginning of the movement. The second figure continues this movement by spinning around, and finally, the person in the center of the composition follows the flight of his hat like a discus-thrower watching his discus. This sequence is of interest because it can be seen not only simultaneously but also as a sequence. Only the starting-point and the end of the movement are obligatory, the pictures between these two points are optional. A similiar sequence was first put together by Edward Muybridge (fig. 4, overleaf). One can imagine a series of photographs which contains many or only a few moments of a sequential movement. The photographic image arises by stopping the movement. As for the viewer, it has to be pointed out that the idea of readability of images necessarily implies a link between time and meaning in our perception. The traditional opposition linking duration to literature and simultaneity to the pictorial arts becomes obsolete.
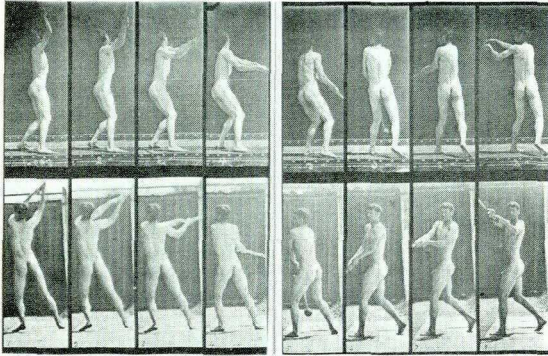
Figure 4. Edward Muybridge, *Man Swinging Bat.*

ICONOLOGY

If at first we consider this image simply as an autumnal scene, we then experi-
ence a shift in our perception as we come to recognize the integrated sequence
of movements or the motif of travesty. Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind* is struc-
tured by irony which determines the change of our perception. In the end we
find our perception of the picture completely inverted. My interpretation of
Wall's image uses the iconological model of understanding pictures. Consid-
ering the current criticism of iconology, it may be helpful to ask why iconology
continues to be a successful method and which future possibilities it may of-
fer.[3] In this context, it is important to stress the close affinity between iconology
and the aesthetics of perception. Both iconology and perception theory stress
the productive role of the interpreter or viewer. This emphasis on the subject
of visual perception in Erwin Panofsky's academic writings is closely related to
his neo-Kantian position.[4] In 1932 the art historian, then in Hamburg, pointed
this out in his article "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung
von Werken der bildenden Kunst", showing that the specific virtue of visual
argumentation is tied to the different degrees of readability of the different
levels of the image.[5] His theory of iconology overcomes a positivistic under-
standing of pictures and can therefore be compared to intertextual research
today. He aims to reconstruct that which is not explicitly shown by using

Figure 5. Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patron Near Mogor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*, 1992. Transparency in lightbox, 229 x 417 cm.

systems of reference associated with the concrete picture. Following Panofsky, no picture can be understood without ist context; understanding pictures is inseparably linked to the previous knowledge of the viewer. The results of interpretation will not be the same if the dependence of Wall's work on Hokusai remains in the dark.

This probably sounds easier than it really is, because meaning in an iconographic correlation is not intrinsic but differential so that the apparent evidence and identity of the picture depends on the pictorial tradition.

Each image combines iconographical and formal "ingredients". Furthermore, each picture belongs to a certain genre which also marks the necessity of a deeper interpretation. The fundamental difference between "word" and "image" cannot fully be grasped by the idea of a distinction between visual and phonetic signs. This does not become obvious before one questions the variety of the rules for linking these signs. While in written as well as in spoken language nouns are necessarily substituted by pronouns to provide a coherence of content, there are no comparable tools in the understanding of images. In most pictures there is more to be seen than is necessary to understand them. But the ability to segment perception in order to focus certain motifs within the image enables the spectator to select information continuosly. To understand an image means to have an idea of the hierarchy of information within the image.

THE THINKING IMAGE

Another of Wall's works which is of interest in this context is entitled *Dead Troops Talk* (fig. 5). We believe to be familiar with these kinds of images from news magazines. Russian soldiers were killed in an Afghan guerilla-attack. A young resistance fighter is searching a backpack for loot. A stoney slope is the background for the scene forming its overall two-dimensional impression set by two diagonal lines bracing the opposite corners of the picture. Horizontal and vertical lines lay out an almost classical construction. This strict scheme only becomes visible after a general impression of chance and accident has been established. In the upper left corner we see a wall, oil barrels and a battered piece of corrugated iron. Barely visible on the opposite side are the legs of two figures that might be two more resistance fighters. The upper part of the picture seems to end rather arbitrarily, thus emphasizing the way reporting photography cuts out a portion of reality.

Only on second glance the viewer finds that he has been taken in by a cliché – the cliché of fallen soldiers on the battlefield. For the blood-stained supernumeraries are not dead: grinning and talking to each other they rise from their poses, laughingly showing their fatal wounds – as if it were the scene after the "take". Everything was just posed, the cruel reality is fiction. One is reminded of a scene of Coppola's "Apocalypse Now", where a successful assault is being replayed for television. Furthermore the deathly pallor of battered corpses and their sinister games reminds us of the zombies as known from horror movies. The pictures of our media-reality may provide what we expect from them. The image we first suppose to be a visual stock-taking, reveals itself as an illusion. Now the crumpled paper (fig. 6 – detail) tissue and a tube of make-up or paint can be seen between the bodies. A snake is just crawling under a rock. These details are visible only if we look at the picture with a detective eye. This game with the viewer's distance to the picture reminds me of the many-figured compositions by Pieter Bruegel, which force the viewer to step closer to discover new details in an almost microscopic sphere. In this act of getting closer we move about with detailed detection. The viewer's position gets more critical or rather: more analytic. The make-up tube is tiny and can only be seen right in front of the picture. But still there is no privileged point of view. *Dead Troops* is the paradoxical combination of an obsession for detailed objects, e. g. the uniforms and the over-arrangement of this massacre with artificial blood and exaggerated poses. Wall's work is an irritation, an alienation of the supposed certainty of pictorial perception. On closer look the picture taken for a war photograph falls apart and reveals in a very unspecific way motifs from nineteenth century history painting: a soldier to the right pathetically touching his chest is a recurring motif from battle pieces. The pose of another figure reminds us of the mourning melancholic

Figure 6. Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk* (detail).

father from Géricault's *The Raft of Medusa*.[6] Or the strange figure in the left foreground is similiar to a character in Delacroix' *Dante's Bark*.[7] The arrangement of the personnel inside a triangle works in a similiar way. What looks like a random arrangement at first, as in the case of the *Sudden Gust,* proves to be a formal composition. The figure seen from the rear in the left hand corner determining an entrance into the picture is a set piece of aesthetic perception: the composition rises from the lower left hand corner to the figure opposite on the right side. At the center of the composition is the vertex of the compositional triangle which is also the intersection of the diagonal lines. By means of this formal composition three soldiers form a central group enacting a grotesque scene. As if in play the "living dead" are showing each other their wounds, two soldiers aggravating a third one, by making him look into their wounds. This absurd motif condenses the narrative action of the picture: disgust and visual pleasure, sadism and exhibitionism force us to look at what we do not want to see. Yet another figure to the right seems to be rather amused by this scenario.

Wall's cibachrome is a history painting of our time, relying equally on the pictorial tradition of both "high" and "low" culture. The large picture offers two different possibilities of perception: one that relies on distance for a total overview, another that encourages the detection of minute detail. Thus, we are confronted with two problems. How many single pictures were in fact fashioned into one unified scene? What does understanding a picture mean if one

cannot rely on the evidence of the visible? Complex iconographic allusions are characteristic of most of Jeff Wall's works. It would be hard to pin-point all the references to other works of art that characterize his compositions. What is the purpose of these references? Would one misunderstand his works, if one did not take them into account? Wall's concept emphasizes the fact that any picture – whether intentionally or not – points beyond itself and can thus only be understood as one voice in a concert of many different voices. The blending of allusions into high art and with ordinary scenes brings up the problem of the relation between pictures inside and outside the museum. Some of Wall's pictures are open structures, they will find neither an identity nor a self-contained meaning. From this point of view *Dead Troops* is itself a visualised theory of the non-identical picture.

(The paper was translated by Sebastian Hackenschmidt.)

NOTES

1   de Duve, Thierry, Boris Groys, Arielle Pelenc, eds. *Jeff Wall.* London: Phaidon, 1996.

2   Hillier, J. *Hokusai.* Paintings, Drawings and Woodcuts. New York: Phaidon, 1978 [third edition].

3   Arrouye, Jean. "Archäologie der Ikonologie". Andreas Beyer, ed. *Die Lesbarkeit der Kunst, Zur Geistes-Gegenwart der Ikonologie.* Berlin: Wagenbach, 1992. 29-39.

4   Heinz Abels. "Die Zeit wieder in Gang bringen. Soziologische Anmerkungen zu einer unterstellten Wirkungsgeschichte der Ikonologie von Erwin Panofsky". Bruno Reudenbach, ed. *Erwin Panofsky. Beiträge des Symposions Hamburg 1992.* Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994. 213-28.

5   Erwin Panofsky. "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst". Ekkehard Kaemmerling, ed. *Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem. Ikonographie und Ikonologie.* Köln: Dumont, 1984. 185-206. [third edition].

6   Eitner, Lorenz. *Géricault's Raft of the Medusa.* London: Orbis Publishing, 1972.

7   Huyghe, René. *Delacroix.* München: C.H. Beck, 1967. 107-12.