

JEFF WALL AND THE CONCEPT OF THE PICTURE



ROUTLEDGE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

NAOMI MERRITT

Jeff Wall and the Concept of the Picture

This book grapples with fundamental questions about the evolving nature of pictorial representation, and the role photography has played in this ongoing process.

These issues are explored through a close analysis of key themes that underpin the photography practice of Canadian artist Jeff Wall and through examining important works that have defined his oeuvre. Wall's strategic revival of 'the picture' has had a resounding influence on the development of contemporary art photography, by expanding the conceptual and technical frameworks of the medium and introducing a self-reflexive criticality. Naomi Merritt brings a new and original contribution to the scholarship on one of the most significant figures to have shaped the course of contemporary art photography since the 1970s and shines a light on the multilayered connections between photography and art.

This book will be of interest to scholars in the history of photography, art and visual culture, and contemporary art history.

Naomi Merritt is a lecturer in contemporary art, art history, critical theory, gender studies, and visual culture at the University of South Australia.

Cover image: Jeff Wall, detail from *Restoration* (1993), transparency in lightbox, 119.0 × 489.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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For my nieces: April, Grace, and Piper.

May books, art, and beautiful things always bring you joy,
and may you never stop wondering, creating, and learning.



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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Prologue: a chance encounter</i>	xiii
 Introduction: Jeff Wall and the concept of the picture	 1
PART I	
Pictures ‘printed on the void’	7
1 The photographic condition	9
2 Photography after conceptualism	20
3 The photography of modern life	32
4 Performative pictures	39
5 Photography <i>en-abyme</i> : towards cinematography	51
PART II	
The frame	65
6 <i>Picture for Women</i> : from Manet’s mirror to cinema’s mobile frame	67
7 <i>Restoration</i> : the fugitive condition of representation	81
PART III	
The photographic moment	101
8 <i>Milk</i> : liquid contingency and the grid	103

viii *Contents*

9 <i>A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai): the absence of Fuji</i>	139
Conclusion: photography's negotiation of the terrain of the picture	182
<i>Epilogue: final encounters</i>	185
<i>Bibliography – works cited</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	201

Figures

P.1	Jeff Wall, <i>Untangling</i> (1994), transparency in lightbox, 189.0 × 223.5 cm	xiii
1.1	Jeff Wall, a page from <i>Landscape Manual</i> (1969–1970), edition of 400	17
2.1	Jeff Wall, <i>The Destroyed Room</i> (1978), transparency in lightbox, 159.0 × 229.0 cm	24
2.2	Eugène Delacroix, <i>The Death of Sardanapalus</i> (1827), oil on canvas, 392 × 496 cm	28
5.1	Jeff Wall, <i>Movie Audience</i> (1979), 7 transparencies, each 101.6 × 101.6 cm	56
6.1	Édouard Manet, <i>A Bar at the Folies-Bergère</i> (1832–1883), oil on canvas, 96 cm × 130 cm	69
6.2	Jeff Wall, <i>Picture for Women</i> (1979), transparency in lightbox, 142.5 × 204.5 cm	70
7.1	Jeff Wall, <i>Restoration</i> (1993), transparency in lightbox, 119.0 × 489.6 cm	82
8.1	Jeff Wall, <i>Milk</i> (1984), transparency in lightbox, 187 × 229 cm	105
8.2	Jeff Wall, <i>Mimic</i> (1982), transparency in lightbox, 198 × 228.6 cm	109
9.1	Jeff Wall, <i>A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)</i> (1993), transparency in lightbox, 229.0 × 377.0 cm	140
9.2	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>Ejiri in Suruga Province</i> (Sunshū Ejiri), from the series <i>Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji</i> (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 24.4 × 37.5 cm	141
9.3	Jeff Wall, <i>Study for ‘A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)’</i> (1993), transparency in lightbox, Support: 77.3 × 121.5 cm	146
9.4	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>In the Tōtomi Mountains</i> (Tōtomi sanchū), from the series <i>Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji</i> (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 24.4 × 37.9 cm	153
9.5	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>The Kazusa Sea Route</i> (Kazusa no kairo), from the series <i>Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji</i> (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 24.1 × 37.8 cm	154
9.6	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>View of the Mitsui Stores at Surugachō in Edo</i> (Edo Surugachō Mitsui mise ryaku zu), from the series <i>Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji</i> (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 25.4 × 38.1 cm	155

- 9.7 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji from Ushibori in Hitachi Province* (Jōshū Ushibori), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 25.4 × 38.1 cm 156
- 9.8 Katsushika Hokusai, *Thunderstorm Beneath the Summit* (Sanka no haku u), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 25.4 × 37.5 cm 157
- 9.9 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji and Foreign Embassy*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. III (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 158
- 9.10 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji at Aoyama*, and *Fuji at a Village Boundary*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. III (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 159
- 9.11 Katsushika Hokusai, *Under the Wave off Kanagawa* (Kanagawa oki nami ura), also known as *The Great Wave*, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 25.7 × 37.9 cm 160
- 9.12 Katsushika Hokusai, *The Nihonbashi Bridge in Edo* (Edo Nihonbashi), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 25.1 × 37.5 cm 161
- 9.13 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji as a Mirror Stand*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. I (1834), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 162
- 9.14 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji the Day after Snow*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. II (1835), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 163
- 9.15 Katsushika Hokusai, *Kajikazawa in Kai Province* (Kōshū Kajikazawa), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 26 × 38.4 cm 164
- 9.16 Katsushika Hokusai, *Fuji in a Window* and *Fuji Carved*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. II (1835), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 165
- 9.17 Katsushika Hokusai, *The Farmhand of Fuji in Kai Province* and *Fuji of Elegant Delight*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. III (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 166
- 9.18 Katsushika Hokusai, *Part II of the Same (The Appearance of Hōeizan)*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. I (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 167
- 9.19 Katsushika Hokusai, *The Appearance of Mt. Fuji in the Fifth Year of Kōrei*, from the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, Vol. I (1834), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm 168

9.20	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>The First Hanging Scroll</i> and ‘ <i>Three Whites’ Fuji</i> , from the series <i>One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji</i> , Vol. II (1835), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm	169
9.21	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>Surprise-View Fuji</i> and <i>Fuji in a Grass Hoop</i> , from the series <i>One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji</i> , Vol. III (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm	170
9.22	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>Reflection in Lake Misaka, Kai Province</i> (Kōshū Misaka suimen), from the series <i>Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji</i> (Fugaku sanjūrokkei) (c. 1830–1832), Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper, 24.4 × 37.5 cm	171
9.23	Katsushika Hokusai, <i>Fuji from the Seashore</i> and <i>Fuji through a Knothole</i> , from the series <i>One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji</i> , Vol. III (c. 1849), Set of three woodblock printed books; ink on paper, each: 22.7 × 15.8 cm	172
9.24	Jeff Wall, <i>An Octopus</i> (1990), transparency in lightbox, 182.0 × 229.0 cm	173
9.25	Jeff Wall, <i>Some Beans</i> (1990), transparency in lightbox, 182.0 × 229.0 cm	174
E.1	Jeff Wall, <i>Ivan Sayers, costume historian, lectures at the University Women’s Club, Vancouver, 7 Dec. 2009. Virginia Newton-Moss wears a British ensemble c. 1910, from Sayers’ collection</i> (2009), colour photograph, 224.3 × 182.5 cm	186
E.2	Jeff Wall, <i>Changing Room</i> (2014), inkjet print, 199.5 × 109.0 cm	187
E.3	Jeff Wall, <i>Summer Afternoons</i> (2013), 2 colour photographs, Male: 183 × 212.4 cm, Female: 200.0 × 251.5 cm	189
E.4	Jeff Wall, <i>Pair of interiors</i> (2018), 2 inkjet prints, 152.0 × 207.5 cm each	191
E.5	Jeff Wall, <i>The Gardens</i> , top – <i>Appunto/Complaint</i> , centre – <i>Disappunto/Denial</i> , bottom – <i>Diffida/Expulsion Order</i> (2018), 3 inkjet prints, 250.0 × 380.0 cm each	193
E.6	Jeff Wall, <i>Recovery</i> (2017–2018), inkjet print, 250.0 × 446.5 cm	194

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Prologue

A chance encounter

This book's origin can be traced back to a chance encounter in an art gallery: the moment I came across a huge photograph backlit by a lightbox, by an artist who was unfamiliar to me. I was already more than six months into my PhD candidature at the University of Melbourne in Australia but feeling disengaged and adrift as I pursued a completely unrelated research topic in which I was rapidly losing interest. The encounter with this picture was so powerful that I decided there in its presence that this was what my PhD needed to be about.



Figure P.1 Jeff Wall, *Untangling* (1994), transparency in lightbox, 189.0 × 223.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist.

The picture I encountered was called *Untangling* (Figure 0.1), it was created in 1994, and the artist was Jeff Wall. The work was a recent purchase by the National Gallery of Victoria in my home city of Melbourne. I remembered reading a newspaper article about the controversial price tag on this photograph: no less than one million dollars! The small reproduction of the photograph that accompanied the article did not attract but a passing interest from me. But, the unexpected encounter in the gallery was of a different order: the picture literally stopped me in my tracks, and I was captivated. The picture struck me as possessing an epic quality, arising from its life-size scale, its internal illumination, its exquisite detail and composition, not to mention the philosophical connotations of its subject: a man seated in a grimy, starkly-lit workshop, quietly resigned to the task of untangling a gargantuan mass of ropes. At close range a peculiarity caught my eye: a vertical split in the centre of the picture where the two large sheets of transparency film were joined.

My gaze and intellect were intensely engaged but remained restless – shifting constantly between the split in the very surface of the picture, its composition and formal properties, the apparatus of the lightbox, and the frozen narrative centred upon a man reconciled to a seemingly impossible task. The picture was indeed commanding. However, I was struck by a poignant realisation: I would never know whether the man would achieve his objective. Despite my fascinated scrutiny, in a sense, this picture would forever remain unfinished. And with this anti-epiphany so began my research project, accompanied by an odd sense of willing forfeit.

While years have now passed since this event, my PhD long complete and transformed into this book, I still experience the thrilling sense that Jeff Wall's pictures are very much alive, unfolding, evolving, unfinished, and waiting for the next transformative encounter.

Introduction

Jeff Wall and the concept of the picture

In an age when the meaning, authority, proliferation, and dissemination of images has been transformed by socio-technological changes, this book grapples with fundamental questions about the evolving nature of pictorial representation, and the role photography has played in this ongoing process. It does so through a close analysis of key themes that underpin the photography practice of leading Canadian artist Jeff Wall (born 1946). In the late 1970s, after observing modernism implode in conceptual and minimalist experiments, Wall reinvented himself as an artist through reviving picture-making as an art. Wall's strategic revival of 'the picture' has had a resounding influence on the development of contemporary art photography from the late 1970s until the present day, by expanding the conceptual and technical frameworks of the medium and introducing a self-reflexive criticality. This book examines the intellectual and artistic imperatives that underpinned Wall's early to mid-career. It argues that Wall's seminal project should be understood as a critical investigation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture'. Wall's artistic project was shaped by the historical moment, especially the demise of modernism and the transition from analogue to digital photography. From a contemporary vantage point, this book evaluates the conditions that established Wall's legacy, and his shaping of the medium of photography. Wall's erudite and provocative body of arts writing and key artworks from his early to mid-career – his formative period conceptually and aesthetically – are examined in depth and are contextualised thoroughly in relation to major socio-technological shifts that challenged and redefined the terrain of the picture. This book provides critical insights into Wall's treatise on pictorial representation, temporality, and spatiality in a period when photography was undergoing its own tumultuous technological reinvention. It offers original insights into the intellectual work in Wall's art practice while highlighting the richness of Wall's thinking about the evolution of what we call a 'picture'. The discussion and analysis to follow sheds new light on one of the most important figures to have shaped the course of contemporary art photography since the 1970s.

Overview

This introduction will give an overview of the book, the chapters, and the key issue that drives the narrative: how Wall's project functions as a critical investigation of (what he refers to as) the 'Western Concept of the Picture'. I began this book with a prologue consisting of a personal recollection of the unexpected and powerful encounter with one of Wall's photographs in a gallery that led me to focus on Wall in my PhD research, which then led to the publication of this book. Personal

2 Introduction

recollections of encounters with Wall's art will be employed throughout this book as a framing device for the discussion of key works. These personal recollections represent an engagement with a key argument posed by Michael Fried in his highly influential book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008). Fried argues that the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it is central to the 'new regime' of art photography that has emerged since the late 1970s, to which Wall has made a resounding contribution. My use of personal reflections applies and extends on Fried's idea by creating a narrative about the transformative power of such encounters. My approach could be described as putting theory into practice, and framing scholarship through real world 'close encounters' with art. The close personal encounters are a reminder to the reader of the materiality and spectacle of the life-scale photographs – something that can be easily forgotten when highly detailed enormous photographs are reproduced in a book or on a screen.

This book is divided into three main parts. Part I – 'Pictures "printed on the void"' – consists of five chapters that establish the book's central narrative: that Wall's photography practice should be understood as a critical investigation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture' shaped by the historical moment.

Chapter 1 – 'The photographic condition' – introduces the reader to Jeff Wall's thinking about photography's place in the history of art via a close reading of his essay "'Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art' (1995). In this essay Wall writes a history of photo-conceptualism that also establishes the context from which his own photography practice emerged. This chapter establishes Wall's critical interest in (what he terms) the 'Western Concept of the Picture', that is, the unified classical type of picture governed by linear perspective. This chapter unpacks Wall's arguments about how the temporal and technological nature of photography challenged traditional notions of pictorial representation, leading to the emergence of a new version of the 'Western Concept of the Picture'. Yet even as photography challenged established notions of pictorial representation, it struggled to be accepted as an art form. Wall proposes that it was through the 'artlessness' of photo-conceptual experiments that photography finally emerged as 'art'. These ideas are illustrated through a discussion of Wall's own conceptual artwork *Landscape Manual* (1969–1970).

Chapter 2 – 'Photography after conceptualism' – traces Wall's difficult journey through the gauntlet of 1960s neo-avant-gardism, his disillusionment with conceptualism that led to an artistic hiatus of seven years, the factors that led to the reinvention of his practice through large-scale, staged, lightbox photography, and examines how this offered a means of critiquing the 'Western Concept of the Picture'. This chapter introduces the reader to Wall's critique of conceptualism in his essay 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel' (1982). For Wall, the implosive tendencies of conceptual art (that is, the reductive and negating tactics that stripped art back to 'non-art' to protest the commodification of modern art) represented a great crisis in modernism. In his essay, Wall presents a second narrative that is intertwined with conceptualism's failure: the significance of Dan Graham's work *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978). Wall locates the beginnings of Graham's work (like his own photography project) within the failure of conceptualism's critique of art. In this chapter Graham's 'countermonument' to conceptualism's failure is contrasted with Wall's first successful lightbox photograph *The Destroyed Room* (1978). A close analysis of *The Destroyed Room* draws on Graham's writing to reveal Wall's critique of the commodity

status of the art object and media representations of eroticised violence, as well as to highlight the resonances between *The Destroyed Room* and Marcel Duchamp's diorama *Étant Donnés* (1946–1966). The discussion of *The Destroyed Room* demonstrates the ways in which Wall strategically engages with a mythology that conceptualism sought to disavow – the Western pictorial tradition. This chapter establishes the factors that led Wall to draw upon historical artworks (such as Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827) in his early photographs. It examines how this artistic strategy facilitated Wall's critique of the condition of the 'Picture' after the demise of modernism.

Chapter 3 – 'The photography of modern life' – examines Wall's strategic response to the impasse of conceptual art and the demise of the modernist project. In order to move forward, Wall imagined an alternative lineage of modernism extending from a thread abandoned in modernism's nineteenth-century infancy – the 'painting of modern life' associated with the writings of Charles Baudelaire and the art of Édouard Manet. Baudelaire called for artists to regard the conditions and experiences of modern life as a worthy subject for art. By restituting the painting of modern life, Wall reconfigures the conditions of modernism, extending it past the implosion of conceptualism. This chapter closely examines Wall's photographic reconfiguration of the concept of the 'painting of modern life' and considers the specific conditions that define the terrain of Wall's 'modernity'. This includes the nature of spectatorship in a late twentieth-century society consumed by media spectacle, and the impact of digital technologies on visual culture.

Chapter 4 – 'Performative pictures' – examines the significance of Wall's exploration of the contemporary 'condition of the picture' through the platform of the illuminated lightbox, a medium borrowed from advertising. While the lightbox offered Wall a way to evoke the commanding presence of old master paintings and the luminosity and enveloping spectacle of the cinema screen, Wall was aware of other connotations: as an apparatus that could be 'switched on' or 'switched off', the lightbox highlighted the picture's status as 'representation' and the lightbox's status as 'object'. This chapter examines the continuities between Wall's 'new pictorialism' and the 1960s avant-garde through ideas proposed by Michael Fried in 'Art and Objecthood' (1967). In this essay, Fried criticises minimalist art's failure to adequately distinguish between art and object. This chapter examines Wall's engagement with Fried's ideas, especially the problem of 'beholding' (that is, the relationship between the spectator and the work of art), which is further developed in Fried's book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

Chapter 5 – 'Photography *en-abyme*: towards cinematography' – extends on the lessons that Wall learned from Fried's concepts of beholding, absorption, and theatricality, to consider how he applied these ideas in developing a new photography practice, influenced by cinema, in the late 1970s. This includes an examination of the personal experiences and intellectual and artistic influences that led Wall to invest in the notion of cinematic narrativity as a solution to the failures of modernism and as a means of expanding the territory of photography. A discussion of Wall's photographic installation *Movie Audience* (1979) illuminates Wall's interest in cinema as a frame of reference for photography. This discussion examines Fried's arguments about the problematic status of cinema in relation to the issue of theatricality. For example, Wall's *Movie Audience* serves to illustrate Fried's claim that the 'new regime' of photography (to which, Fried argues, Wall is a central figure) found itself

4 Introduction

compelled to address issues of beholding. The chapter considers the significance of cinema's mobile frame within the context of the evolution of the 'Western Concept of the Picture', and how the play of presence and absence associated with cinema's mobile frame resonated with Wall's critique of 1960s avant-gardism.

The chapters in the remainder of this book offer a close analysis of several key works from Wall's early to mid-career (the formative years in which he established his seminal photography project). While Part I establishes the book's central narrative (why Wall's photography practice should be understood as a critical investigation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture' and how his project was shaped by the historical moment), Parts II and III build the narrative by considering further issues that emerge from the close analysis of key artworks.

Part II – 'The frame' – consists of two chapters that explore Wall's written and photographic critiques of one of the most fundamental structures that organises pictorial space: the frame. Each chapter carefully traces Wall's references to nineteenth-century visual technologies and artworks (such as photography, cinema, the panorama, and the paintings of Manet) that challenged the traditional role of the frame. The unfolding discussion reveals surprising new insights into Wall's manipulation of the frame, and reflects on what this suggests about Wall's broader critical investigation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture'.

The chapters in Parts II and III are presented chronologically in respect to the year the key artworks to be discussed were created, and in regards to the evolution of photo-technology used to produce the work (i.e. analogue to digital). Each of these chapters will also begin with a short personal recollection of my encounters with the particular artworks (as described earlier).

In Chapter 6 – '*Picture for Women*: from Manet's mirror to cinema's mobile frame' – Wall's *Picture for Women* (1979) is the subject of a close reading that explores the perspectival and pictorial dramas that are played out in both Wall's photograph and the painting it was inspired by – Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). Beginning with Wall's essay – 'Unity and Fragmentation in Manet' (1984) – a range of scholarly perspectives are considered (including that of T.J. Clark, Ruth E. Iskin, and Thierry de Duve and Brian Holmes), which examine and interpret the puzzling spatial inconsistencies in Manet's *Bar*. My analysis of *Picture for Women* reveals insights into the means by which Wall's re-interprets the ambiguities associated with *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. In particular, I examine the manner in which cinema's mobile frame and developments in the field of film theory (especially Laura Mulvey's writings on the gaze in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', and psychoanalytic theories of suture) are reflected in Wall's photographic 're-framing' of Manet's mirror.

The focus of Chapter 7 – '*Restoration*: the fugitive condition of representation' – is *Restoration* (1993), an early digital montage presented in the lightbox format in which Wall stages the restoration of a nineteenth-century 360-degree painted panorama. This chapter begins by considering the multiple connotations of the photograph's title – *Restoration* – including the notion of the work being emblematic of Wall's attempts to restore the 'picture' as a central category of art after the demise of modernism. Wall's suggestion that it was the panorama's 'frameless' 360-degree structure (which escapes from view) that inspired him to make the photograph serves as a springboard for a close analysis of the work. This discussion of the artwork is contextualised in relation to the innovations, popularity, and obsolescence

of the panorama (within the context of nineteenth-century visual culture), to uncover the paradoxical nature of Wall's treatise on the essential condition of pictorial representation.

Part III – 'The photographic moment' – consists of two chapters that explore Wall's written and artistic critiques of the notion of the 'photographic moment'. Part III builds upon the narrative established in Part I (Wall's project being a critical investigation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture', shaped by the historical moment) and Part II (the significance of Wall's manipulation of the frame as a pictorial structure), by considering his engagement with new ways of thinking and seeing associated with the invention of analogue photography and digital imaging. The chapters examine Wall's concerns with photographic temporality and instantaneity, including the tension between staging and contingency, and how digital imaging re-configured notions of 'photographic time' and challenged established concepts of 'The Western Picture'.

Chapter 8 – '*Milk*: liquid contingency and the grid' – consists of a close reading of Wall's *Milk* (1984). It begins with an examination of his essay 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence' (1989). In this essay, one of Wall's key objectives is to reflect on the dialectical relationship between (what he terms) the 'dry intelligence' of photography and the 'liquid intelligence' of nature. Wall refers to the explosive liquid in the artwork *Milk* to introduce and allude to a number of debates about the capacities of camera vision and the impact of new technologies on notions of time. The complexities at play here require multiple perspectives to make sense of it. This chapter draws upon a range of conceptual frameworks to unpack Wall's interrogation of photographic temporality, including Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of the 'decisive moment', Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious', Roland Barthes's concept of the photographic 'punctum', the traditions of late nineteenth-century and early to mid-twentieth-century high-speed photography (in particular, the work of Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, and Harold E. Edgerton), Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze's philosophies of time, and the significance of the grid as a means of mapping time and space. A close analysis of Wall's *Milk* and his essay 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence' against this historical backdrop reveals resonances between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century in terms of how the development of new kinds of technological pictures impacted on notions of 'thinking' and 'seeing' time.

Chapter 9 – '*A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*: the absence of Fuji' – focuses on a close reading of Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993), alongside the print that inspired it – Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's *Ejiri in the Suruga Province* (c. 1830–1832), from his famous *Views of Mount Fuji* series. While the incongruous temporalities of Wall's digital montage typically dominate discussions of *A Sudden Gust of Wind*, I instead explore the connotations of the two neglected words in brackets at the end of the title – (*after Hokusai*). When we consider Wall's photograph 'after Hokusai' perplexing questions are raised: what is the significance of Mount Fuji's absence and what does this suggest about the contemporary condition of the picture?

The Conclusion – 'Photography's negotiation of the terrain of the picture' – will draw together the threads of the book's central narrative concerning Wall's interrogation of the 'Western Concept of the Picture' and the insights gained through the

6 *Introduction*

close analyses of key works. This chapter highlights Wall's contributions to the development of art-photography characterised by his strategic revival of 'the picture' after the demise of modernism, his introduction of a self-reflexive criticality to photography practice, and his expansion of the conceptual and technical territory of the medium.

The Epilogue – 'Final encounters' – makes observations about the lineage and evolution of themes and motifs from the formative years of Wall's photography practice, to resonances within examples of his late career work. It reminds the reader of the revelatory power of first-hand encounters with art (and how such encounters informed this book), and how we relate to, read, and think about pictures.

Part I

Pictures ‘printed on the void’



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