OVER THE PAST TWO AND A HALF DECADES, JEFF WALL HAS SUSTAINED A PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE OF REMARKABLE PRESCIENCE. FOR THIS ISSUE, THE PHOTOGRAPHER LOOKS BACK—AS WELL AS FORWARD. A NEW ESSAY REVISITING HIS OWN COMING-OF-AGE AS AN ARTIST IN THE LATE '70S AND EARLY '80S SETS THE STAGE FOR A PORTFOLIO OF RECENTLY COMPLETED IMAGES PRESENTED HERE FOR THE FIRST TIME.

Spread, left to right: **Jeff Wall, *Diatribe*, 1985,** transparency in light box, ca. 80 x 90". **Dan Graham, *Homes for America*, 1989,** photo-offset reproduction of layout for magazine article, 23¾ x 19½". **Ed Ruscha, page from *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass*** (self-published, 1968). **Ed Ruscha, page from *A Few Palm Trees*** (Heavy Industry Publications, 1971). **Stephen Shore, *Main Street, Redfield, South Dakota, 7_13_1974,*** color photograph, 20 x 24". **Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans #3* (detail), 1981,** black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8".

JEFF WALL

Frames of Reference

In 1977, when I started making my large color pictures, it was still possible to talk about photography in, or as, art, in a way that wasn't terribly different from the way it was talked about in 1970 or 1960. The classic idea of art photography was still predominant, and what I think of as the "new art photography" was just emerging. Cindy Sherman's work was just becoming known, as was Sherrie Levine's, and the students of Bernd and Hilla Becher had just begun to make their pictures but had yet to exhibit them. Walker Evans was alive and working until 1975.

At the time, I was indirectly reacting to that classic photography and liked the same photographers I like now—Evans, Atget, Frank, and Weegee. But I was more immediately interested in the work of Robert Smithson, Ed Ruscha, and Dan Graham, because I saw their photography as emerging from a confrontation with the canons of the documentary tradition, a confrontation that suggested some new directions. I also noticed and liked Stephen Shore's and Garry Winogrand's work, partly because of the cool and knowing view of the American street and suburbs and partly because of the acceptance of the actual, vulgar colors of things. That vulgarity seemed to be related to whatever there was of a new way of seeing the world in Pop art and, through that, back to the rough, improvisatory aesthetic of the New York School.

If I really thought about photography as photography, or about photography as art pure and simple, I had to admit that Evans, Atget, and Strand were better than Smithson or Ruscha. But the problem was that the "better" seemed foreclosed at the time. Classic art photography had been perfected, it seemed to me, and anything that would be done in the present, by me or by anyone, would be a lesser achievement. That is probably just the common defense mechanism of artists when they are confronted with the work of their betters. Any way of foreclosing the encounter with the term "better" is a cop-out in art. With hindsight, it's obvious to me that there was no reason not to just continue where Evans left off, making small pictures in the guise of a reporter. When Sherrie Levine presented her photographs of Evans's pictures, I interpreted the work as her saying, "Study the masters; do not presume to reinvent photography; photography is bigger and richer than you think it is, in your youthful pride and conceit."

I had always studied the masters and respected the art of the past. I had a bit of a hard time during the '60s because I needed to work in and through a situation that simply assumed the art of the past was "obsolete" (to use the Leninist terminology of the time) and that the only serious possibilities lay in reinventing the avant-garde project of going beyond "bourgeois art." Clearly, this was nothing more than the paradigm of the moment, but it was a long moment. Some people see this condition of the neo-avant-garde's predominance lasting from 1955 to 1978, almost a quarter century. So I remained ambivalent about "studying the masters," at least for a while. And that had something to do with ignoring Levine's admonition. The fact that nobody seemed to notice that her work was an admonition, or at least that it contained a hidden, cryptic admonition, is no excuse for ignoring it.

Looking back on it now, I think my ambivalence in studying the masters was one of the most important things that happened to me or that I imposed on myself. Two problems seemed to have emerged as a result: Which masters? And how does one study the masters the way they themselves studied the masters they encountered?

My answer to the first question was to study not just the masters of the photographic tradition, the result in part of thinking about Smithson, Ruscha, and others who deployed or employed photography in Conceptual, post-Conceptual, and para-Conceptual art. (I wrote about this later in *Marks of Indifference*.) Like Duchamp and Warhol, those artists didn't separate photography from other art forms and other media; it wasn't taken as an art form all to itself, with special criteria and standards. Taking it that way was called "photo-ghetto thinking," and young artists like me thought that was a symptom of the decline in quality of work that wanted to continue the traditions of classic art photography.

There is obviously a dilemma here, one lacking an obvious solution. To consider photography only within its own frame of reference, within the context of the standards established by the documentary tradition, seemed to condemn it to a restricted status, given the "expanded field" of '60s and '70s art. Every young Conceptual artist using photography but

refusing to be called a photographer could point to the boring examples of traditional photography as evidence of the need to escape the confines of the tradition and its aesthetic norms.

Unfortunately, this blending of photography with other things, like painting, printmaking, or three-dimensional art forms, almost immediately led to the unconvincing hybrids that are so sadly characteristic of art since then. An equally strong argument could hence be made that escaping the confines of "photography" was a road to ruin because there were no valid criteria in the intermedia world, nor could there be any. Photography, it could be argued, had a very specific nature as an art form and a medium, and combining it with other things resulted in nothing new as photography but only the reduction of photographs to elements in a collage aesthetic that was not subject to judgment in photographic terms, and maybe not subject to any aesthetic judgment at all.

With this in mind, I realized I had to study the masters whose work, either in photography or in other art forms, didn't violate the criteria of photography but either respected them explicitly or had some affinity with them. That meant, not necessarily in order of importance: photographers as such and artists working in photography who avoided the multimedia approach, who in some way subjected themselves to the serious aesthetic problems of photography (both Evans and Dan Graham, for example); and artists in other forms or media whose work I felt was connected to those aesthetic ideas in some ways, ways I couldn't

by the other two media to the extent that it could be claimed that there is almost a single set of criteria for the three art forms. The only additional or new element is movement in the cinema.

I had been impressed by Pollock's work since I first saw it as a child in the late '50s. I studied it and saw it more deeply during the '60s, in part through the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. I realized that the physical immediacy and scale of Pollock's work were qualities that, for me, established its affinity with photography. That affinity was the enigmatic element in my earlier fascination with his work, I now believe. When Frank Stella and Carl Andre, among others, extended aspects of Pollock's notion of scale, they separated the issue from the immediate context of Pollock's painting style and from many of the overly codified "'50s" values his work exemplified. That freed some formal and technical aspects and energies and made it possible for them to be taken elsewhere.

Even while I loved photography, I often didn't love looking at photographs, particularly when they were hung on walls. I felt they were too small for that format and looked better when seen in books or as leafed through in albums. I did love looking at paintings, though, particularly ones done on a scale large enough to be seen easily in a room. That sense of scale is something I believe is one of the most precious gifts given to us by Western painting.

People who write about art often think my work always derives in some direct way from the model of nineteenth-century painting. That's

Spread, left to right: **Garry Winogrand, *Easter Sunday, Central Park, New York, 1971,*** black-and-white photograph, 11 x 14". © The Estate of Garry Winogrand. **Jackson Pollock, *Full Fathom Five,* 1947,** oil and mixed media on canvas, 50⅞ x 30⅛". **Robert Bresson, *Mouchette,* 1967,** still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm, 78 minutes. Mouchette (Nadine Nortier). **Carl Andre, *Equivalents I–VIII,* 1966.** Installation view, Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, 1966. **Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas,* 1656,** oil on canvas, 9' x 10' 6⅛". **Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Fox and His Friends,* 1975,** still from a color film in 35 mm, 123 minutes. Hedwig (Christiane Maybach) and Franz Bieberkopf (Rainer Werner Fassbinder).

necessarily always explain to myself but which I sensed and believed existed—traditional painters like Manet, Cézanne, and Velázquez, more recent artists like Jackson Pollock and Carl Andre, whose works showed me something else, which I'll get to shortly, cinematographers such as Néstor Almendros, Sven Nykvist, and Conrad Hall, and directors and writers like Luis Buñuel, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Robert Bresson, Terrence Malick, and Jean Eustache.

I think it is pretty apparent how cinematographers, cineasts, and traditional painters contribute to the aesthetics of photography, and so there's no need to go into that in any detail here. In recognizing these affinities, I was just continuing things that were already part of the classic photographic idea. Photography, cinema, and painting have been interrelated since the appearance of the newer arts, and the aesthetic criteria of each are informed

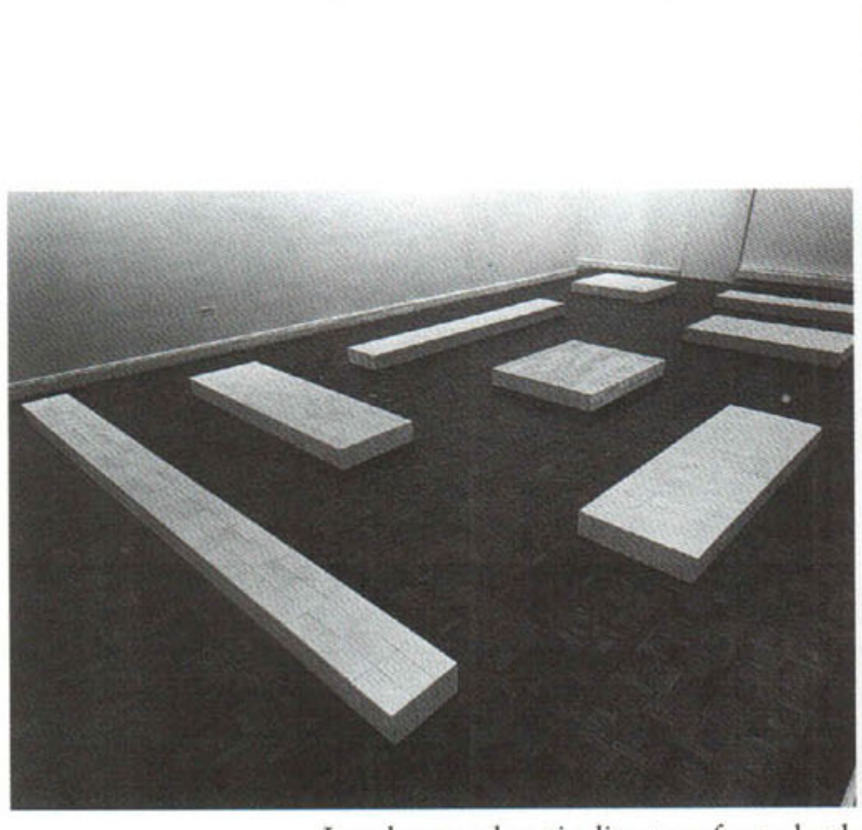
partly true, but it has been isolated and exaggerated in much of the critical response to what I'm doing. I'm totally uninterested in making reference to the genres of earlier pictorial art. I extracted two things, primarily, from the Western pictorial tradition up through the nineteenth century: a love of pictures, which I believe is at the same time a love of nature and of existence itself, and an idea of the size and scale proper to pictorial art, and so proper to the ethical feeling for the world expressed in pictorial art. This is the scale of the body, the making of pictures in which objects and figures are limned so that they appear to be on about the same scale as the people looking at the picture. I don't mean by this that there are no other valid or interesting approaches to the size of a picture; I mean that life scale is a central element in any judgment of an appropriate scale.

The painting and some of the sculpture done by the New York School

and the generation that came after intensified this sense of scale and physicality. My involvement with that art as a young person helped me connect what bothered me about photography with qualities in other art forms that held valuable indications for aspects of photographic making. A sculpture by Andre seemed to me to have affinities with *Las Meninas*, because they were both of the same scale. You could, imaginably, stand on an Andre while looking at *Las Meninas*, and the whole experience would be resonant because the artists, so different in other respects, were in accord about the relation of their object to the body of the spectators who would see it, as well as, of course, to their own bodies while they were making it.

Michael Fried's great essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967) argues in some ways against the isolation of and emphasis on the physical presence of art objects. He proposes that, when works of art allow themselves to be reduced to their apparently fundamental ontological status as physical objects and relinquish the illusionism that has always distinguished them, something significant is lost. Fried understood "illusionism" to mean not traditional perspectival illusion but its subsequent form as the "optical" qualities of what he thought to be the best abstract painting of his time.

MY AMBIVALENCE IN STUDYING THE MASTERS WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO ME. TWO PROBLEMS EMERGED AS A RESULT: WHICH MASTERS? AND HOW DOES ONE STUDY THE MASTERS THE WAY THEY THEMSELVES STUDIED THE MASTERS THEY ENCOUNTERED?



I understood opticality to refer to both abstract painting as Fried intended as well as traditional pictorial illusionism and, as part of that, the optical character of photographs. I was fascinated to watch Fried abruptly shift his focus at the end of the '60s from abstract art to nineteenth-century pictorial art. I intuited that there was an important affinity between his interests and mine.

I read "Art and Objecthood" to say that if an artwork simply cast its lot with physicality and immediacy, it lost its essential possibility as serious art and was reduced to a repetitious staging of the encounter between an object or group of objects in the world and a person looking at that object. It soon became obvious that it was arbitrary what the object was. To those who wanted to go beyond the canonical criteria of Western art, this "staging" of the encounter with the remnant of an artwork appeared to be a new and profound direction. But time has not treated that attitude well. Fried showed that illusion is essential. That aspect of his work connected for me with the problem of the size of photographs, and I realized that, in making photographs in or near life scale, photography could be practiced to a certain extent differently from the way it had been.

This was not a question of making "big photographs" any more than it was a question for Velázquez of making "big paintings." The new sense of scale was not significant in itself, and in isolation it is nothing new, since photographs have been enlarged since enlargers were first produced.

I was interested in the debate about what both Greenberg and Fried called "literalism" even though I had no trouble recognizing the superior quality of the critique of literalism. I was interested in the problem, though I felt it had been solved, because I don't think there is a "loser" in a dispute carried on at a high level. So while I wanted my work not to be literalist, I appreciated the way Judd or Andre forced the issue of present time and present space; it made the question of life scale more complex and interesting to me than it would have been if it were just a reworking of seventeenth- or nineteenth-century pictorial approaches.

Some people have thought that the backlighting of my color pictures created a sort of "bracketing" of them such that their mere existence as "pictures of things in the world" could be looked at askance and the physical constituents of their making could show themselves explicitly. That connects them to avant-garde attitudes about revealing the making of the work in the experience of it and prevents them from being "just traditional pictures of things." That's probably true, but for me the backlighting was much less important in this regard than what I thought of as a sort of preservation of some aspect of literalism in the construction of the picture.

The change in scale signified a complex of slight shifts of emphasis in the canon of art photography. In my mind, or at least in one part of my mind, I wasn't moving very far from the canonical aesthetics of art photography. At the same time, I began to call my photography "cinematography."

I was involved in working out the formal and aesthetic matter of scale in a frame of reference in which the lessons I wanted to learn from painting were partly identified with and even confused with those to be got from the cinema. Scale had nothing to do with this, because I don't think there is much, if any, relationship between the way we see moving pictures in the cinema and the way we experience static pictures hanging on a wall in a lighted room.

"Cinematography" referred simply to the techniques normally involved in the making of motion pictures: the collaboration with performers (not necessarily "actors," as Neorealism showed); the techniques and equipment cinematographers invented, built, and improvised; and the openness to different themes, manners, and styles. It was probably an overstatement to identify these things strictly with filmmaking and not with still photography, since photographers, to a greater or lesser extent, have used almost all the same techniques and approaches; but it helped me to concentrate on what was needed to make pictures with the kind of physical presence I wanted.

In 1973, *Artforum* published Roland Barthes's "The Third Meaning: Notes on Some of Eisenstein's Stills." I appreciated the way Barthes "stilled" the film experience and studied single frames as if they were more essential than the moving image. This emphasized the fact that films are made up of still photographs that we experience in a very specific, even peculiar way. We are looking not so much at the photographs but at flashes of their projection, too brief to permit the picture to be seen as it is, which is static, like all photographs. That helped me focus on the fact that the techniques we normally identify with film are in fact just photographic techniques and are therefore at least theoretically available to any photographer.

But it was not a question of imitating cinematic techniques or making pictures that resembled film stills. It was only a question of following the thread of the recognition that films were made from photographs and were essentially acts of photography. I had no particular aim in mind, only my sense of the criteria of pictorial art as they had evolved and which stood over me as a standard of quality.

The notion of "cinematography" was the cause of one of the most complex and confusing results of the situation I'd created for myself. Filmmakers such as Fassbinder and Godard moved between very different manners and styles from film to film or even within single films. The openness and complexity of their photographic approach was at once impressive and disturbing, since it seemed to play havoc with the idea of "style" itself. Cinema appeared to be a form in which multiple, even contradictory approaches were reconciled without effort, as if that were a natural condition of the form itself. There was obviously an element of pastiche, of ironic reference to various other films and styles in this approach, but that seemed to me less important than the experiential condition of the abrupt shift from style to style, or manner to manner, that worked so well in films like *Fox and His Friends* or *Passion* and which I did not see in the work of most still photographers. The fact that Godard and Fassbinder might have been imitating their own masters, like Fuller or Sirk, with greater or lesser doses of irony, was apparent but insignificant.

At the same time, the entirely unified environments created by the realist or Neorealist works of the same period, like Pasolini's *Accattone* and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Bresson's *Mouchette*, and Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore*, clearly stated another fundamental aesthetic proposition, rooted in documentary photography and happy to be so, that required no stylistic mannerism, no referentiality, no "intertextuality." Those films were committed to the directness guaranteed by the nature of documentary photography and were easily the match in terms of quality for anything else. They were usually better than anything else.

But not absolutely better. From Fassbinder's dream scenes and erotic fantasies it is a brief step in time, space, and culture to the high artifice of studio cinema and to imaginary worlds outside the framework of documentary treatment. Cinematography as such did not suggest a choice to be made between the imaginary space of the studio and the seamless actuality of the documentary approach. The Brechtian spirit in which Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet made *Not Reconciled* in 1966 or *Othon* in 1969, films I saw in the early '70s, also suggested that there was a theoretical and even political stake in pursuing the thread of stylistic or technical indecisiveness, in not choosing between fact and artifice, in working only in the shadow of choice, in hesitating. □

Jeff Wall is a Vancouver-based artist. (See Contributors.)

Left to right: **Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Accattone*, 1961,** still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm, 120 minutes. **Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Othon*, or *Les Yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer ou peut-être qu'un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour*, 1969,** still from a color film in 35 mm, 88 minutes. Albin (Leo Mingone), Plautine (Anne Brumagne), and Othon (Adriano Aprà). **Pier Paolo Pasolini, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964,** still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm, 137 minutes. Judas (Otello Sestili) and Jesus (Enrique Irazoqui).

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SVETLANA ALPERS

SVETLANA ALPERS, professor emerita of art history at the University of California, Berkeley, and a cofounder of the interdisciplinary journal *Representations*, is the author of such major art-historical studies as *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 1994), written with Michael Baxandall, and *The Making of Rubens* (Yale University Press, 1995). *Rembrandt's Enterprise* (University of Chicago Press), her 1988 study of the Dutch artist's studio practices and market, won the Charles Rufus Morey Book Award of the College Art Association. She is currently completing *The Vexations of Art*. In our fall preview of noteworthy exhibitions from around the world, Alpers sizes up the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' "Rembrandt's Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher," which opens October 26.


ROBERT STORR

ROBERT STORR is Rosalie Solow Professor of Modern Art at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. As a curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 1990 until 2002, Storr organized numerous shows, including retrospectives of Gerhard Richter, Chuck Close, Tony Smith, and Bruce Nauman, and coordinated the Projects series from 1990 to 2000. He is the cocurator of "Max Beckmann," an exhibition on view at MOMA QNS through the end of this month, and will organize SITE Santa Fe's Fifth International Biennial in 2004. A frequent contributor to *Artforum*, Storr is the author of the monographs *Philip Guston* (Abbeville, 1986) and *Philip Pearlstein: Since 1983* (Harry N. Abrams, 2002) and is currently at work on a critical biography of Louise Bourgeois. In this issue, Storr considers the work of painter Alexander Ross. PHOTO: DAWOUD BEY


JEFF WALL

JEFF WALL, an artist based in Vancouver, has exhibited his large-scale photographs for twenty-five years. The first US retrospective of his work was mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1997, and he has since been the subject of comprehensive surveys at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal (1999), the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2001), and the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (2003). Wall has participated in numerous international group exhibitions as well, such as Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, last year, and he is now the subject of a documentary film, *Hourglass/Jeff Wall*, by Canadian filmmaker Lu Nelson, which is slated for release in 2004. In these pages, Wall looks back to the dawn of the "new art photography" and debuts a portfolio of recent images introduced by editor Jack Bankowsky.


LAURIE SIMMONS

New York–based artist **LAURIE SIMMONS**'s first solo was at Artists Space in 1979. Included in Metro Pictures' inaugural show the next year, her work has since been presented in countless exhibitions, including "A Forest of Signs" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1989. In 1997 she received a twenty-year retrospective at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Simmons's work is currently on view in "Design for Living," a three-person show with Louise Lawler and Sarah Charlesworth that opened this month at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles. Next spring in New York she will exhibit recent work at Sperone Westwater and screen her filmed musical puppet show at Salon 94. For this issue, Simmons examines the life and work of "outsider" artist Morton Bartlett. PHOTO: SARAH CHARLESWORTH


RHONDA LIEBERMAN

RHONDA LIEBERMAN, a regular contributor since 1991 (her column "Glamour Wounds" ran in these pages from 1993 to 1995), joins *Artforum*'s masthead this month as a contributing editor. From her 1992 article "The Loser Thing," which catalogued the "abjectogenic" impulse in the art of that moment, to her recent look at Madonna's "X-STaTIC PRo=CeSS," Lieberman's singular voice (borscht belt meets Benjamin?) has been an *Artforum* staple for more than a decade. An artist as well as a critic, her low-tech installation work featured in "Bad Girls (Part II)" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, in 1994, "Too Jewish? Challenging Traditional Identities" at the Jewish Museum, New York, in 1996, and most recently, "Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting" at the Jewish Museum in 2003. In this issue, Lieberman commences the fall exhibition preview with a look at "Diane Arbus: Revelations," the much-anticipated retrospective that opens October 25 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. PHOTO: TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

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