

Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday

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Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday

Michael Fried

I want to begin by considering a well-known picture by the contemporary Vancouver-based photographer Jeff Wall, the full title of which is *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing from a Specimen in a Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992; fig. 1).¹ Technically, it is a large Cibachrome transparency mounted on a light-box, which is to say illuminated from behind by fluorescent lights (Wall's preferred medium). In my opinion and by common consensus Wall is one of the most ambitious and accomplished photographers working today, but of course to say this is to say something quite different from what a comparable claim would have entailed even twenty years ago. One of the most important developments in the so-called visual arts of the past twenty-five years has been the emergence of large-scale, tableau-sized photographs that by virtue of their size demand to be hung on gallery walls in the manner of

I have presented versions of this essay at a number of universities and museums in this country and abroad: École des Hautes Études in Paris, Princeton University, Städelschule in Frankfurt, University of Illinois at Chicago, University of Chicago, Schaulager in Basel, Columbia University (where it was the main component of the 2005 Lionel Trilling Seminar in Criticism), University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University (in a symposium on "The Everyday"). For their roles on those occasions I want to thank Danielle Cohn, Eric Michaud, Claude Imbert, Brigid Doherty, Daniel Birnbaum, Werner Hamacher, Margaret Rose, Walter Benn Michaels, Jennifer Ashton, Theodora Vischer, Gottfried Boehm, Ralph Ubl, Jonathan Arac, Diarmuid Costello, Gregg M. Horowitz, Mary-Beth Wetli, and (at the University of Chicago, where this material was presented as part of a seminar on recent photography) especially James Conant, Robert Pippin, Joel Snyder, and David Wellbery. A French translation of a previous version of this essay appeared under the title "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, et le quotidien," trans. Gaëlle Morel, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, no. 92 (Summer 2005): 4–27. My thanks to Jean-Pierre Crique for his interest and support.

1. See *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné, 1978–2004*, ed. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (Basel, 2005), p. 339.

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FIGURE 1. Jeff Wall, Adrian Walker, Artist, *Drawing from a Specimen in the Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver*, 1992, light-box Cibachrome transparency, 119 x 164 cm. De Pont Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Tilburg, Netherlands.

easel paintings and, in other respects as well, aspire to what might loosely be called the rhetorical or beholder-addressing significance of paintings while at the same time declaring their artifactual identity as photographs. This is a topic that goes beyond the scope of the present essay.² The point I want to stress, however, is that Wall has been a central figure in that development and that *Adrian Walker* is a striking example of such a work.

One way of categorizing *Adrian Walker* is with respect to considerations of genre. But the issues with which it engages go far beyond those of genre as such. Here is a brief excerpt from an interview with Wall by Martin Schwander:

Schwander: With *Adrian Walker* you made a portrait of a young man who is concentrating so intensely on his work that he seems to be removed to another sphere of life.

Wall: But I don't think it is necessarily clear that *Adrian Walker* is a portrait. I think there is a fusion of a couple of possible ways of looking at the picture generically. One is that it is a picture of someone engaged in his occupation and not paying any attention to, or responding to the fact that he is being observed by, the spectator. In Michael Fried's interesting book about absorption and theatricality in late eighteenth century painting, he talks about the different relationships between figures in pictures and their spectators. He identified an 'absorptive mode', exemplified by painters like Chardin, in which figures are immersed in their own world and activities and display no awareness of the construct of the picture and the necessary presence of the viewer. Obviously, the 'theatrical mode' was just the opposite. In absorptive pictures, we are looking at figures who appear not to be 'acting out' their world, only 'being in' it. Both, of course, are modes of performance. I think *Adrian Walker* is absorptive.³

2. See Jean-François Chevrier, "Les Aventures de la forme tableau dans l'histoire de la photographie," in *Photo-Kunst: Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren* (exhibition catalogue, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, 1989), pp. 47–81.

3. Jeff Wall, "Restoration: Interview with Martin Schwander" (1994), in Thierry de Duve et al., *Jeff Wall* (London, 2002), pp. 126–27. Wall's reference is to Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980; Chicago, 1986).

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(For the record, Wall and I met by chance in the Boijmans museum in Rotterdam in 1996, which is also where and when I saw *Adrian Walker* for the first time. It quickly emerged that we had been tracking each other's work for years. Since then we have become friends.)

Three genre paintings by the great Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1777), the artist mentioned by Wall, make relevant viewing in this connection.⁴ The first is *Young Student Drawing* (ca. 1733–38; fig. 2) from the Kimbell museum in Fort Worth. Although Wall's *Adrian Walker* depicts the draughtsman largely in profile rather than from behind, we nevertheless feel we are looking somewhat over his shoulder (we are *slightly* behind him in other words), and of course we are shown the drawing he is making (in soft reddish lead) just as in the Chardin. The second work, *The Young Draughtsman* (1737; fig. 3), subtly directs the viewer's attention to the chalk-holder in the hands of the young artist, just as in *Adrian Walker* we are given a clear view of the mechanical pencil in the protagonist's right hand. The third, the superb (if mistitled) *The House of Cards* (ca. 1737; fig. 4), is discussed in some detail in *Absorption and Theatricality*, where I call attention to the telling juxtaposition of two playing cards in the partly open drawer in the near foreground.⁵ I go on to propose that the face card, apparently a jack of hearts, emblemizes the fact that the picture surface itself faces the beholder (is entirely open to our gaze) whereas the dazzlingly blank back of the second card evokes the sealed-off consciousness of the young man absorbed in his apparently trivial pastime. The juxtaposition of the two cards thus offers a condensed statement of the structural duality of the painting as a whole, at once facing the beholder as artifact and closed to him or her as representation. I suggest too that paintings like *The House of Cards*, or the National Gallery of Art's *Soap Bubbles* (1735–40), represent a quietly momentous discovery on Chardin's part, namely, that absorption as such is perfectly indifferent to the extra-absorptive status of its objects or occasions; so that particular actions—playing with cards or blowing bubbles—which in the previous century Pascal would have stigmatized as mere distractions from the thought of a Christian life, emerge instead as the vehicle of a new, essentially “positive” mental or, indeed, spiritual state, the ultimate implications of which for a history of what in another context has been called “mindedness” we have yet to fathom.⁶ And I go on to argue, not

4. All three are reproduced and discussed in *The Age of Watteau, Chardin, and Fragonard: Masterpieces of French Genre Painting*, ed. Colin Bailey et al. (exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 2003).

5. See Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, pp. 48–49.

6. “Mindedness” is first and foremost an English equivalent for the German word *Geistigkeit* in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). See Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 233 and “Hegel's Forms of Life” (unpublished essay). My



FIGURE 2. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Young Student Drawing*, ca. 1733–38, oil on panel. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

just in *Absorption and Theatricality*, but in two subsequent books, *Courbet's Realism* and *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s*, that a central current or tradition in French painting from Jean-Baptiste Greuze's momentous Salon debut in 1755 to the advent of Manet and his generation around 1860 can be understood in terms of an ongoing effort to make paint-

use of the term is also indebted to various essays by Robert Pippin and Jonathan Lear. See, for example, Robert Pippin, "Authenticity in Painting: Remarks on Michael Fried's Art History," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Spring 2005): 575–98.

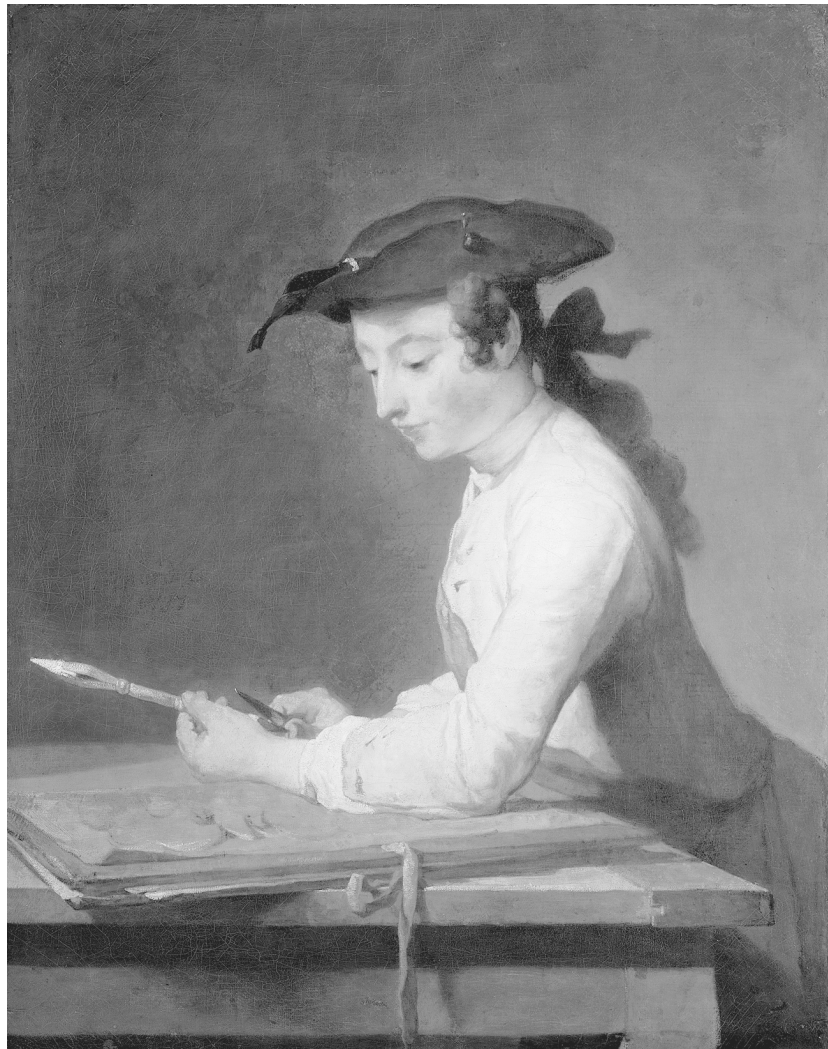


FIGURE 3. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Young Draughtsman*, 1737. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York.

ings that by one strategy or another appear—in the first place by depicting personages wholly absorbed in what they are doing, thinking, and feeling, and in multigure paintings by binding those figures together in a single, unified composition—to deny the presence before them of the beholder or, to put this more affirmatively, to establish the ontological fiction that the beholder does not exist.⁷ Only if this was accomplished could the *actual*

7. See Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago, 1990) and *Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago, 1996).



FIGURE 4. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The House of Cards*, ca. 1737, oil on canvas. Andrew W. Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art.

beholder be stopped and held before the canvas; conversely, the least sense on the beholder's part that the depicted personages were acting or, even worse, posing for him was registered as *theatrical* in the pejorative sense of the term, and the painting was judged a failure. With Manet, in works like the *Old Musician*, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and *Olympia*, that current or tradition reaches the point of overt crisis; the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld can no longer be denied, even for a little

while, and absorption in all its manifestations gives way to radical “facingness.” Taking our bearings from Chardin’s *The House of Cards*, we might say that in Manet the emphasis shifts to the face card in the open drawer (Courbet is supposed to have described *Olympia* as the queen of hearts after a bath), though in view of the notorious psychological blankness of Manet’s personages it might be truer to say that it is as if the other card, the one turned away from the beholder, is reinterpreted as facing us as well.

Returning to Wall and his interviewer: note to begin with how Schwander, before Wall explains the operation of the “absorptive mode,” responds to *Adrian Walker* in precisely those terms. “With *Adrian Walker*,” Schwander says, “you made a portrait of a young man who is concentrating so intensely on his work that he seems to be removed to another sphere of life.” This is indeed the absorptive effect in its classic form; as Diderot makes clear, a personage entirely absorbed or engrossed in an action, feeling, or state of mind is also wholly unaware of anything but the object of his or her absorption, crucially including the beholder standing before the painting. (In *The House of Cards* this unawareness or *oubli de soi* is signalled by the open drawer itself, which, we sense, goes unperceived by the boy. In *The Young Draughtsman* something similar is evoked by the rose-colored string of the draughtsman’s portfolio that falls over the edge of the table in the near foreground. And in *Young Student Drawing* the implication of obliviousness is forcefully conveyed by the hole in the upper back of the student’s coat through which we glimpse a portion of his red undergarment.) It is as if the personage and the beholder inhabit *different worlds*, which is what Schwander as much as says when he describes *Adrian Walker*—the personage, not the picture—as seemingly removed to another sphere of life.

Now there are two points I find particularly interesting about Schwander’s remarks. The first is that Schwander, without prompting from Wall, was moved to describe Wall’s picture in the language I have just quoted, which would seem to imply that he took the picture to be a candid photograph of a draughtsman entirely absorbed in contemplating his work. A moment’s reflection suffices to suggest that that is unlikely, both because the depicted situation appears patently staged—it is, in a sense, too good to be true—and because the conspicuousness of the apparatus of display suggests a comparable conspicuousness of the photographic apparatus as such. (It’s hard to imagine Wall shooting the scene unobserved with a lightweight camera like Cartier-Bresson’s Leica, and in any case had he done so the resulting image could not have been enlarged to *Adrian Walker*’s dimensions without loss of clarity.) As Wall says in the interview, both the absorptive and the theatrical are “modes of performance.” And, in a statement from 1996, he explains that there was in fact a real *Adrian Walker*, who

was a draughtsman and who had made the drawing on his drawing board in the laboratory specified, but that the picture

is also a re-enactment, by the artist in the picture, of his own practice. That is, he and I collaborated to create a composition that, while being strictly accurate in all details, was nevertheless not a candid picture, but a pictorial construction. I depicted the moment when he has just completed his drawing, and is able to contemplate it in its final form, and, once again, at the same time, to see its subject, the specimen, the point from which it began. There was such a moment in the creation of his drawing, but the moment depicted in the picture is in fact not that moment, but a reenactment of it. Yet it is probably indistinguishable from the actual moment.⁸

In an interview four years later, Robert Enright asks Wall why a copy of *Don Quixote* appears in *Adrian Walker* (it sits on the window ledge, partly covered by a brown cloth). Wall replies:

The picture is factual. The man who is named in the title is in fact the person Adrian Walker; that is the corner of the anatomy lab where he worked. It's all real. The Don Quixote just happened to be there. The picture involved a performance in that Adrian was working with me, but he didn't do anything he didn't normally do. I visited him occasionally during the time he was drawing there. He was a student of mine, and wanted to be more involved with drawing the figure. He arranged with the department of anatomy that he could work there for an extended period. I might have moved the lamp over a little bit, but I didn't change anything. The picture is an example of what I call 'near documentary.'⁹

The second point worth stressing is that Schwander's reading of Adrian Walker's state of mind goes considerably beyond the visual evidence. For Wall seems deliberately to have chosen not to depict his sitter in the throes of absorption, so to speak. His measured account of what he tried to do feels exactly right. Walker *is able* to contemplate his drawing in its final form and at the same time to see the specimen he copied, a formulation that avoids positing a definite inner state. (One might even say that Walker *appears disposed* to do both these things, to put matters slightly more strongly.)¹⁰ Moreover, the cold glare of the daylight on the white tile wall,

8. Wall, "Jeff Wall" (information leaflet, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen Rotterdam and Centrum Beeldende Kunst Rotterdam, no. 17, Sept. 1996), n.p.

9. Robert Enright, "The Consolation of Plausibility" (interview with Jeff Wall), *Border Crossings* 19 (Feb. 2000): 50.

10. I owe this formulation to Akeel Bilgrami.

so different from the mid-toned, warm ambiances of Chardin's canvases, reinforces the sense of expressive restraint—as does, even more tellingly, the unpleasantness to sight of the specimen Walker has copied, a reddish-brown human hand and arm cut off above the elbow, the fingers of which are partly contracted as if they too were holding something, if not a pencil then say a bit of chalk (the point is that the hint of activity adds a further disconcerting note to the repulsiveness of the specimen simply as a thing). So Schwander's remarks are doubly misleading with respect to what the picture gives us to be seen. But, precisely because this is so, his commentary illustrates what I have elsewhere called the magic of absorption, which first became a staple of pictorial art in the West shortly before 1600, when in the canvases of Caravaggio and his followers absorptive themes and effects began to serve as a singularly effective matrix for an unprecedented realism and which continues to hold even the most sophisticated viewers in its spell down to the present moment.¹¹ (In that sense Schwander is not so much mistaken as deeply in the picture's thrall. Whether Wall meant him to be, however, is another question.)

Another recent work whose widespread appeal rests largely on these grounds is Gerhard Richter's painting *Lesende* [Reading] (1994; fig. 5), in which a young woman's apparent engrossment in her journal (the German magazine *Der Spiegel*) goes hand in hand with the manifestly photographic character of the presumed "source" image. Once again, however, a moment's reflection suffices to reveal that this picture too cannot be a candid representation of an actual situation. For one thing, the (presumed) photographer's relation to the reading woman—the artist's daughter—feels too near and in the open for her to have been unaware of his presence; for another, the fact that the painting seems so clearly to have been based on a photograph throws into relief the former's particular mode of artifactuality, which in its very technical perfection—I refer to the absence of visible brushstrokes—conveys a sense of expert performance. In other words, both Wall's *Adrian Walker* and Richter's *Reading* mobilize absorptive motifs that recall Chardin, but they do so in ways that expressly acknowledge what I want to call the *to-be-seenness*—by which I mean something other than a simple return to or fall into theatricality—both of the scene of representation and of the act of presentation. And yet, as Schwander's remarks show, the absorptive allure of Wall's light-box, as of Richter's painting, is not thereby undone. (Obviously the features of Chardin's genre paintings I have

11. See, in this connection, Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago, 1987), pp. 42–45. The link between absorption and realism will be a central theme in *The Moment of Caravaggio*, a book-in-progress based on the Andrew W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts that I gave at the National Gallery of Art in spring 2002.



FIGURE 5. Gerhard Richter, *Lesende* [Reading], 1994. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchase through the gifts of Mimi and Peter Haas and Helen and Charles Schwab, and the Accessions Committee Fund: Barbara and Gerson Bakar, Collectors Forum, Evelyn D. Haas, Elaine McKeon, Byron Meyer, Modern Art Council, Christine and Michael Murray, Nancy and Steven Oliver, Leanne B. Roberts, Madeleine H. Russell, Danielle and Brooks Walker, Jr., Phyllis Wattis, and Pat and Bill Wilson. © Gerhard Richter.

commented on—the open drawer, the dangling cord, the hole in the young man’s jacket, and so on—also posit a beholder positioned so as to take them in; but the operative fiction in Chardin’s canvases is that their protagonists are oblivious not only to the features in question but also, crucially, to the presence before the painting of the entranced viewer—indeed the purpose of all those features is to reinforce that fiction to the extent of making it appear simply true. Wall’s photograph and Richter’s painting stop far short of such assertiveness, which is why neither one nor the other deploys anything remotely like the tokens of *oubli de soi* that Chardin uses so brilliantly.)

As we have seen, *Adrian Walker* is for Wall “an example of what I call ‘near documentary.’” “That means,” he writes in 2002, that it is a picture whose subject was

suggested by my direct experience, and . . . in which I tried to recollect that experience as precisely as I could, and to reconstruct and represent it precisely and accurately. Although the pictures with figures are done with the collaboration of the people who appear in them, I want them to feel as if they easily could be documentary photographs. In some way

they claim to be a plausible account of, or a report on, what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed.¹²

A closely related thread in Wall's recent interviews is his repeated insistence on the primacy for him of aesthetic concerns, which is to say of notions of beauty, pleasure, and quality (citing not just Kant but Greenberg in support of his views), while at the same time calling attention to the congruence between such concerns and an art of the everyday (a concept I want to highlight from here on out). "You can make beautiful pictures out of common things," Wall remarks. "Baudelaire was right when he said that the most fascinating element is the commonplace." And:

The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and the richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. But at the same time, there is an openness that permits people to recognize what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere. So the everyday is a space in which meanings accumulate, but it's the pictorial realization that carries the meanings into the realm of the pleasurable.¹³

What I want to emphasize before going on to discuss a monumental picture that I consider one of Wall's major works is the notion that the near documentary mode involves depicting "what the events . . . are like, or were like, *when they passed without being photographed*." This is, in crucial respects, an antitheatrical ideal, which is to say that it amounts to a kind of continuation or reprise, though of course with subtle but decisive differences owing to the difference in medium, not only of the Diderotian project as I have described it in *Absorption and Theatricality* and related books but also—a far more contentious claim—of the project of high modernist abstract painting and sculpture as I characterized it back in 1966–67 in essays such as "Shape as Form" and "Art and Objecthood."¹⁴

I am currently at work on a book on recent photography in which I shall expand on these ideas.¹⁵ But in the present essay I want to stay with Jeff Wall

12. "Jeff Wall: *New Work*" (press release, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, 20 Sept.–2 Nov. 2002), n.p. The passage continues: "All seven pictures [in the show] depict moments or events from obscure, unswept corners of everyday life, covert ways of occupying the city, gestures of concealment and refuge, shards of hope and rationality, traces of failure and guilt."

13. Wall, "The Hole Truth: Jan Tumlir Talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*," *Artforum* 39 (Mar. 2001): 114; hereafter abbreviated "HT."

14. See Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" (1966) and "Art and Objecthood" (1967), *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Review* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 77–99, 142–72.

15. My claim throughout that book, tentatively called *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, will be that the new art photography seeks to come to grips with the issue of beholding in



FIGURE 6. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, *Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999. Transparency in 4.0 light-box, 187 × 351 cm. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

and concentrate on the monumental picture alluded to above—*Morning Cleaning*, *Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999; fig. 6).¹⁶ The building in which the picture is set is the famous German pavilion that Mies, together with Lily Reich, built for the Exposición Internacional in Barcelona in 1929—or, rather, since the original building was subsequently destroyed, a reconstruction completed in 1986.¹⁷ The pavilion features a radically open plan (conceived “as an architectural analogy of the social and political openness to which the new German republic aspired”)¹⁸ that dissociates space-defining elements from structural columns and merges interior and exterior spaces by means of transparent and translucent walls. *Morning Cleaning*—more than eleven feet wide by just over six feet high—depicts just such a merger of spaces. At the rear, the main interior space is partly closed off by floor-to-ceiling glass panels, beyond which we see a reflecting pool; the floor of the main space extends, however, past those panels to the edge of the pool. At the far side of the pool there rises abruptly a wall of Alpine green marble, divided into large rectangles, beyond the top of which we glimpse a band of tree branches and sky. The room is closed off at the left by a spectacular freestanding wall of *onyx doré*, a warm brownish yellow in color, divided into even larger rectangles, and running across the divisions of those rectangles are the most splendid patterns of striations. The floor is Travertine marble, and atop the floor there rests a long black carpet oriented roughly left to right (rather than near to far). The carpet, in fact the entire “room,” is angled relative to the picture plane, the right-hand portion seeming nearer the viewer than the left-hand one. The effect of this is to subtly dynamize the seemingly emptier left-hand half of the composition. Six of Mies’s Barcelona chrome-and-leather couches, designed for the Pavilion, sit at the two ends of the carpet (three at the left, three at the right), and two matching chairs sit just beyond the partly turned-back carpet, the one at the left bearing several cloths folded across its back. One of the pavilion’s characteristic cruciform-sectioned steel columns punctuates the composition slightly to the right of center; it is cut off by the top of the picture, but we see it penetrate the floor. The column thus stops short of

ways that do not succumb to theatricality but that at the same time register the epochality of minimalism/literalism’s intervention by an acknowledgment of to-be-seeness, just as ambitious French painting after Manet acknowledged painting’s facingness while nevertheless reserving an imaginative space for itself that was not wholly given over to soliciting the salon-going public’s approval.

16. See *Jeff Wall*, p. 393.

17. For the design and construction of the original building as well as for its reconstruction, see Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Cristian Cirici, and Fernando Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe: Barcelona Pavilion* (Barcelona, 1993). My thanks to Stanley Mazaroff for bringing this important study to my attention.

18. Peter Carter, “Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig,” in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner, 34 vols. (London, 1996), 21:491.

the bottom of the picture, but this does not prevent it from playing a vital structural role both compositionally—it provides a powerful vertical accent where one is most needed—and spatially—at once declaring its nearness to the picture plane and throwing the space beyond it into measured relief, not least by partly blocking from view the rightmost of the two chairs. (The placement of the column recalls that of similar foreground elements—telephone poles and the like—in pictures by one of the great photographers of the generation before Wall, Lee Friedlander.) At the extreme right of Wall's picture we are shown another glass wall receding sharply into depth, along with a red curtain that has been partly drawn. The curtain is reflected in the glass, as are parts of two of the three nearby stools, but when we look closely we realize that we are also given a surprising glimpse through the angled glass toward a car parked outside. (We realize too, however, that no amount of close looking can resolve the complexities of transparency and reflection in this portion of the picture.) Finally, beyond the carpet and to the right of the almost central steel column, in blue trousers, sandals, and a white T-shirt, a dark-haired window cleaner bends at the waist over a large yellow bucket on wheels as he manipulates a long-handled squeegee in a way that suggests that he is affixing a new head onto the handle (a suggestion confirmed by Wall in a personal communication) (fig. 7). The cloths we noted over the back of one of the chairs are evidently his. The quality of the window cleaner's movement is at once natural and elegant, and we quickly realize that for all the richness of his surroundings and the artful lateral spread of the composition, he is the principal focus of the work. But his apparent engrossment in his task positively liberates the viewer to look elsewhere, and when we turn our attention to the floor-to-ceiling glass panels beyond him we observe that they are partly streaked with suds (the cleaning is underway); and as we scan the panels toward the left, which the composition with its leftward spatial bias encourages us to do, we notice, on a pedestal rising from the pond, blurred by the suds or because very slightly out of focus, a sculpture of a standing female nude with swaying hips and arms raised above her head—a work entitled *Dawn* by Mies's German contemporary, Georg Kolbe (fig. 8).¹⁹ Only one thing more remains to be mentioned and that is the marvelous, warm sunlight that streams into the room at a descending angle from right to left, illuminating the black carpet, the three couches, and most of the bottom half of the left-hand wall (the sunlight falls short of the floor beyond the carpet and therefore also of the window cleaner), thereby confirming the subtle privileging of the left-hand half of the composition despite the presence of the window cleaner on the right.

19. The choice of the sculpture “must have been made at the last minute, obtaining the piece on loan from the Berlin garden in which it had already been erected” (Solà-Morales, Cirici, and Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe*, p. 20).

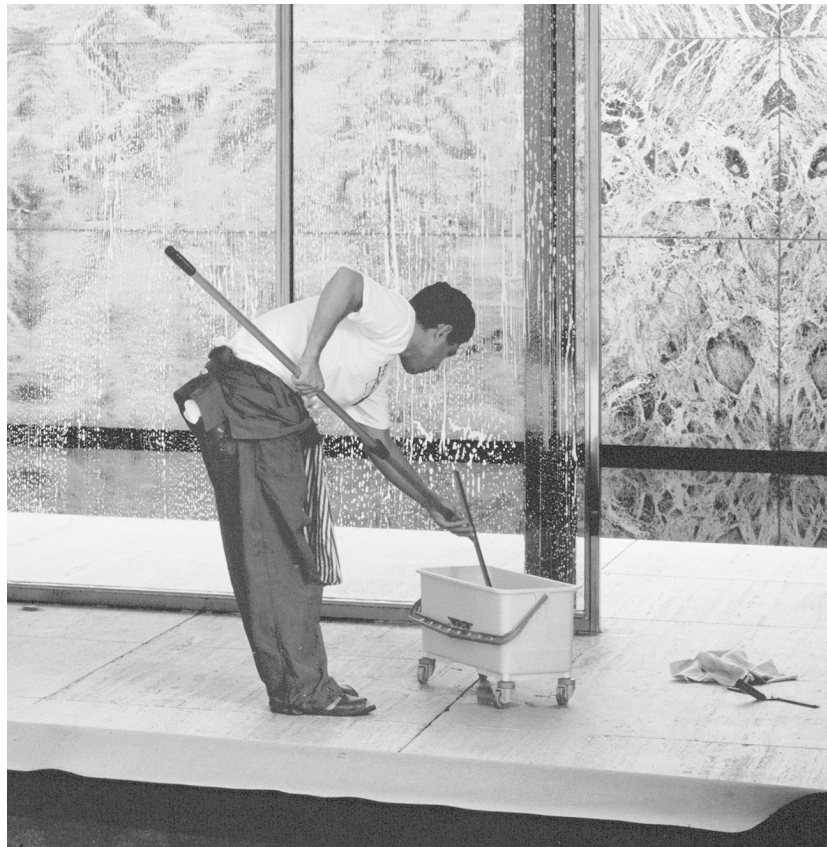


FIGURE 7. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, detail of window cleaner.

Morning Cleaning is a work of great simplicity and directness but also of considerable thematic richness. What precisely, for example, are its political resonances, if any? As mentioned, Mies designed the pavilion on commission from the Weimar government at least partly as an architectural statement of the political principles the latter represented; within five years the republic would be dead, the National Socialists would be in power, and Mies would find it necessary to leave Germany for the United States. (Kolbe, an immensely gifted and accomplished sculptor, would remain, and moreover would try to adapt to the new regime, with disastrous consequences for his art.)²⁰ To what extent is the viewer of Wall's picture invited to bear this

20. On Kolbe, see Ursel Berger, *Georg Kolbe: Leben und Werk: Mit dem Katalog der Kolbe-Plastiken im Georg-Kolbe-Museum* (Berlin, 1990), and *Georg Kolbe, 1877–1947*, ed. Berger (exhibition catalogue, Georg-Kolbe-Museum, Berlin, 1997). In George Heard Hamilton's words: "The National Socialists approved of his technique quite as much as of his subjects, and after 1933



FIGURE 8. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, detail of Kolbe sculpture.

knowledge in mind or, for that matter, the further knowledge that the room depicted in *Morning Cleaning*—like the Barcelona pavilion as a whole—is a fairly recent reconstruction, which is to say the product of an effort to “repair” history at least to a certain extent? In any case, Mies’s Barcelona pavilion is not just any modernist building—though the fact that it is, or was, a key work of architectural modernism is surely to the point. (I mean that Wall would not be averse to being considered a modernist artist.) A

Kolbe extolled the virtue of health and joy through increasingly monumental and proportionately stereotyped nudes, scarcely to be distinguished from innumerable others, no more but no less competent, which are so conspicuous a feature of German academic sculpture. Nonetheless such work should not be allowed to conceal the rhythmic invention and technical perfection of his earlier figures” (George Heard Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe: 1880 to 1940*, vol. 29 of *The Pelican History of Art*, ed. Nikolaus Pevsner [Baltimore, 1967], p. 326).



FIGURE 9. Pieter Janssens Elinga, *Interior with Reading Woman and Sweeping Maid*, 1655–70. Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main. Photo: Ursula Edelmann / VG-Bild-Kunst. Urheber Nr.: 1319008.

related question might be to what extent *Morning Cleaning* may be understood as referring back in a general way to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of ordinary persons performing everyday tasks in domestic settings. Not that Mies's pavilion qualifies as domestic. Nevertheless the affinity between Wall's picture and a painting such as Pieter Janssens Elinga's absorptive, partly shadowed, partly light-struck *Interior with Reading Woman and Sweeping Maid* (1655–70; fig. 9) in Frankfurt is food for intense thought.²¹ Wall has stated that "the historical image I want to create is one which recognizes the complexity of the experiences we must have every day in developing relationships with the past," and in more than one respect *Morning Cleaning*—not yet made when he said this—may be taken as exemplifying some such recognition.²²

21. The two works (among others by the same artists) were juxtaposed in a marvelous small exhibition in Frankfurt-am-Main in 2002. See Léon Krempel, Rolf Lauter, and Jan Nicolaisen, *Camera Elinga: Pieter Janssens begegnet Jeff Wall* (exhibition catalogue, Städelches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt am Main, 2002).

22. Wall, "Jeff Wall," n.p.

Then there is the issue of reflexivity, as Wall terms it. “Because I grew up at the time I did, and experienced the art I did,” Wall tells Jan Tumlir in 2001, referring to his early formation in the wake of minimalism and early conceptualism (and also, of course, high modernism), “I’ve always felt that good art has to reflect somehow on its own process of coming to be. I have never been really convinced that this reflexivity had to be made explicit, though. . . . I’ve always thought that if the work is good it will automatically contain that reflection, but you won’t be able to see it immediately. It will flicker into view in some subtle way” (“HT,” p. 117).²³ In the same interview Wall acknowledges that in earlier works, presumably including pictures as different from each other as *Picture for Women* and *Dead Troops Talk*, he had operated polemically in a forced, exaggerated, or worried way “in order to provoke internal problems, to stimulate the kind of reflexivity we were just talking about. But I don’t think this is the only way, or even the best way, to do that. It’s just one possible, interesting way. What I think of as a Neo-Realist strand of my work is just as good, and I’m a bit more interested in that these days” (“HT,” p. 117).

In this regard, too, *Morning Cleaning* is a case in point, not simply in its thematization of light falling on surfaces as if to make the picture we are seeing—a picture in which blackness, like that of the inside of a camera or of a darkroom, plays a crucial role—but in other respects as well. For example, in a short, dazzling essay, “Photography and Liquid Intelligence,” Wall alludes to “a confrontation of what you might call the ‘liquid intelligence’ of nature with the glassed-in and relatively ‘dry’ character of the institution of photography.” He continues:

Water plays an essential part in the making of photographs, but it has to be controlled exactly and cannot be permitted to spill over the spaces and moments mapped out for it in the process, or the picture is ruined. You certainly don’t want any water in the camera, for example! So, for me, water—symbolically—represents an archaism in photography, one that is admitted into the process, but also excluded, contained or channelled by its hydraulics. This archaism of water, of liquid chemicals, connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an ‘archaism’ here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production-processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving and so on, which are connected to the origins of *technè*—like the sepa-

23. In Janssens Elinga’s *Interior*, through the doorway at the left, a painter is at work on a canvas we cannot see; on the wall above the seated woman absorbed in reading, a mirror tilts downward so as seemingly to reflect a portion of the black-and-white paved floor of the room. Reflexivity in Wall’s sense of the term is by no means solely a feature of modernist art.

ration of ores in primitive mining, for example. . . . I think that this 'prehistorical' image of photography . . . can help us understand the 'dry' part of photography differently. This dry part I identify with optics and mechanics—with the lens and the shutter, either of the camera or of the projector or enlarger [which in turn is usually identified] with the projectile or ballistic nature of vision when it is augmented and intensified by glass (lenses) and machinery (calibrators and shutters). This kind of modern vision has been separated to a great extent from the sense of immersion in the incalculable which I associate with 'liquid intelligence'. The incalculable is important for science because it appears with a vengeance in the remote consequences of even the most controlled releases of energy; the ecological crisis is the form in which these remote consequences appear to us most strikingly today.²⁴

Wall goes on to note that electronic and digital systems are in the process of replacing photographic film, and while he considers this in itself neither good nor bad, he recognizes that it brings with it

a new displacement of water in photography. It will disappear from the immediate production-process, vanishing to the more distant horizon of the generation of electricity, and in that movement, the historical consciousness of the medium is altered. This expansion of the dry part of photography I see metaphorically as a kind of hubris of the orthodox technological intelligence which, secured behind a barrier of perfectly engineered glass, surveys natural form in its famously cool manner. I'm not attempting to condemn this view, but rather am wondering about the character of its self-consciousness.

He concludes: "In photography, the liquids study us, even from a great distance."²⁵ The pertinence of the above to *Morning Cleaning* scarcely needs to be spelled out; in fact my main concern about citing Wall's text is that it threatens to make his picture, which itself was produced with the aid of digital means, seem more programmatic—calculated, not incalculable—than I believe it is. My guess is that Wall did not intend his picture as an allegory of "liquid intelligence" or of the tension between "liquid" and "dry" aspects of photography (fully ten years separate essay from picture). But it doesn't follow that the vision of the medium so surprisingly articulated in his essay wasn't somehow active in his later choice of subject matter, and who can say to what extent it may have conditioned the final image as well? (One index of the incalculable—also the photographic—in *Morning Clean-*

24. Wall, "Photography and Liquid Intelligence" (1989), in de Duve et al., *Jeff Wall*, pp. 90–93.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

ing is the way in which the curving chrome legs of the three stools to the left partly disappear in relation to the black carpet. If *Morning Cleaning* were a painting, I want to say, that would be a flaw; but it is a photograph, and that is simply how the legs and carpet were registered by Wall's camera. Of course, back in Vancouver he could have modified the legs digitally to make them stand out more distinctly, but he chose not to, a decision that shows how intertwined the issues of calculation and its opposite—accident or contingency—are in his work.)²⁶

Finally, though, I want to return to the linked issues of absorption and the everyday that receive in *Morning Cleaning* perhaps their most profound treatment to date in Wall's oeuvre. For there can be no doubt that the window cleaner is meant to be seen as absorbed in his daily task—a task, it is worth noting, that involves using specific pieces of equipment (a Heideggerian theme I cannot go into here) and the dailiness of which is itself a further expression of the everyday.²⁷ Once again, however, the picture is not candid; as its cinematic scale and proportions suggest, the photographer did not instantaneously capture a scene exactly as it happened.²⁸ Rather,

26. In answer to the question of what exactly is left uncontrolled in his work, Wall remarks to Jan Estep:

I think this "control" idea has become a kind of cliché about my work. I don't think I control anything anyone else doesn't control, or want to control. Art inherently involves artistry. I prepare certain things carefully because I believe that's what's required. Other things are completely left to chance. Anything that is prepared, constructed, or organized is done in order to allow the unpredictable "something" to appear and, in appearing, to create the real beauty of the picture, any picture. [Jan Estep, "Picture Making Meaning: An Interview with Jeff Wall," *Bridge*, 2003, www.bridgemagazine.org/online/features/archive/000027.php]

A further instance of this in *Morning Cleaning* might well be the flecks of light that here and there brilliantly "star" the black carpet. It's impossible for the viewer to know for certain what these originally were—imperfections in the carpet, bits of dust, or something else entirely? But the carpet would not appear comparably lightstruck in their absence, though of course it is also true that the brilliance of the flecks directly expresses the backlighting of the light-box medium—a doubleness that can be positively disconcerting in the instant when it is first recognized.

27. In my book-in-progress, the chapter on Wall and Wittgenstein is preceded by one on Wall and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, centered on a reading of Wall's *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Preface* (1999–2001).

28. From the start, cinema, or what Wall came to call "cinematography," has been a major factor in his conception and practice of his art. Indeed throughout his catalogue raisonné individual works are designated either as "cinematographic" or as "documentary" photographs, depending on whether or not they were staged by the artist. In fact only one photo with figures, *Pleading* (1984; printed 1988), falls into the "documentary" category, though in a short discussion of *Adrian Walker* the editors comment that although "the work is designated as a 'cinematographic photograph' . . . it could also be listed as a 'documentary photograph' . . . This work is one that suggested the term 'near documentary' to the artist" (*Jeff Wall*, p. 339). I think it would be truer to Wall's categories to say that "near documentary" is for him a subcategory of the "cinematographic." See also Wall's remarks on "cinematography" in the important essay "Frames of Reference," *Artforum* 42 (Sept. 2003): 188–92; rpt. in *Jeff Wall*, pp. 443–47.

Morning Cleaning involved perhaps a month's work in Barcelona: "a couple of weeks organizing practical things with equipment, and another two weeks shooting." As Wall explains:

Maybe it was more than two weeks shooting, I am not sure now. When the shoot began, I wasn't certain whether it would be sunny weather or cloudy. After a few days, it got clear and sunny and I realized that that was the best light for the picture. So then I was committed to staying and shooting for as many sunny days as were required to do what I had to do. Luckily, the summer weather there is pretty consistent, so once it got clear, it stayed clear almost without interruption for the whole remaining time.

I think I shot for about twelve days. The light was right only in the early morning, from about 7 to 7:35. I had only about seven minutes each day to photograph the space as a whole, because the shadow patterns change so quickly in the morning. I had to be ready for those seven minutes each morning, and during them I made the "master" views, without the figure.

He was standing by, and as soon as the masters were done, I readjusted the camera and photographed him changing the end-piece of his mop-squeegee. Since he is in shadow, and since that shadow did not change shape and brightness as quickly as some of the other areas did, I had maybe twenty to twenty-five minutes to work with him each day. Once his shadow area changed, the shoot was over. That was about 8 a.m.

I'd get the film back around 4 or 5 p.m. and spend some hours each evening studying it, trying to determine what I had and what I still needed, then got ready for the next morning's shoot, getting up at 5.

It is a little stressful to be shooting for digital assembly without being able to make some test assemblies because I am usually uncertain about various possible problems. Most of these have to do with hard technical things, like depth of field, focal plane, exposure and so on, things that need to be very consistent if the different pieces are going to go together properly. I had to examine all the film from each day extremely carefully, looking for problems and making certain that key pieces were compatible with others. The computer work was done later that fall [1999], back home.²⁹

29. Wall, personal communication to author. Here is a second account by Wall of the making of *Morning Cleaning* in another personal communication that contains more detailed information about exposure times and the depiction of the window cleaner, Alejandro:

In Barcelona I wanted to photograph the actual process of cleaning the building and preparing it for the day. Because the picture was made in the summer, in strong sunlight, I had to deal with the fact that there is a big difference in brightness between the interior and the exterior. If

And yet, as in *Adrian Walker*, for all *Morning Cleaning*'s noncandidness and its acknowledgment of to-be-seenness, the appeal to absorption, which is also to say to the implication that the window cleaner is unaware both "of the construct of the picture and the necessary presence of the viewer," is not thereby undercut. Rather, the impression of absorption and unawareness is to my mind considerably stronger—less obviously qualified than in *Adrian Walker*—both because of the precise practical reality of the window cleaner's action (whereas *Adrian Walker* is shown merely looking

I exposed for the interior, the outside would be overexposed; if I took the exterior into account, the interior would be underexposed. Moreover, since the sun was shining into the building, certain parts of the interior were much brighter than others. The black carpet seemed to need its own exposure. Also, I needed a small aperture to keep enough of the building in focus in making an image of whole interior; that meant a long exposure. But I could not stop the movement of the man doing the cleaning at that exposure; he'd be badly blurred. For these reasons, I realized almost immediately that it would not be possible to make a good picture getting everything on one piece of film, and that I would have to make a group of pictures and assemble them digitally.

The photography was done between 7 and 8 a.m. each morning. We were ready about 6. The direct sunlight entered the building about 6:15. Since it was low in the sky, it lit up all of the large orange onyx wall. As it rose, the shadow of the roof began to move down the wall. After a few days of test shooting, I determined that the best proportion between the shadowed and the bright parts of the wall could be photographed in about a seven-minute interval, sometime after 7 a.m. (I don't remember the exact time any more.) That meant I had seven minutes to make any exposures I needed for the overall view of the interior.

I wanted the washing of the windows to be in progress during the shooting of the interior, and so the cleaner, Alejandro, had to soap the glass at just the right moment, so that the movement of the soapy water on the glass would correspond correctly to his actions.

At the beginning of the seven-minute period, Alejandro would soap the windows, just as he usually did, but a bit more precisely and quickly. Then I would make the exposures I needed. He usually managed to apply the soap more than once in a session. Once the seven minutes had elapsed, I reset the camera and began to photograph Alejandro. He was to be shown changing the implement on the end of his mop-stick from a sponge mop to a squeegee in preparation for clearing the water from the glass. I had to focus differently on him because he had to be shot at a different aperture than I'd used for the main interior shots, as I explained above. I had about twenty minutes to work with him before the interior lighting changed too much and the pictures of him would no longer match the other views. I could make about fifty takes of him in the twenty minutes.

The shoot involved about a week of test shooting to work all this out, and another week going through all the takes each day. There was another week and a half of preparation involved, so the whole shoot took about four weeks.

The digital work was done a few months later, in Vancouver. Since the pieces were fairly well made, with relatively few errors, that work took only about ten days.

And in "A Note about Cleaning" in his catalogue raisonné, Wall remarks: "I've realised that over the past few years I've made a number of pictures on or somehow related to the theme of cleaning, washing or of housework. There is much to say about dirt and washing. It is an opposition like 'the raw and the cooked'. I like things to be clean and neat. A serenely well cared for place can be very beautiful, like the garden at the Ryoan-Ji in Kyoto, or my darkroom when everything has been washed and put in perfect order. But I also like dirty sinks, the soggy abandoned clothes I see in the alley behind my studio all the time, crusted dried pools of liquid and all the other picturesque things so akin to the spirit of photography" (*Jeff Wall*, p. 393).

at his drawing) and because of our sense of his separation from us, by which I refer not merely to his physical distance from the picture plane but also, more importantly, to his location beyond the zone of direct sunlight. The viewer is made to feel that the man bending over his squeegee is oblivious even to the one indisputably great event, itself an emblem of dailiness, depicted in *Morning Cleaning*—the dramatic influx of warm morning light—and what makes his unawareness all the more plausible is the fact that the light does not fall directly on him. (In Janssens Elinga's *Interior*, too, neither the maid nor the reading woman notices the bright trapezoids of sunlight falling on the wall and floor toward the right.) On a lesser note, which becomes more salient the longer one looks, the window cleaner also appears unaware of the lightstruck Kolbe nude displaying herself—should one say theatrically?—above the pond. Then, too, the division of the internal space into two zones, one brightly illuminated and the other not, is reinforced by the contrast between the relatively formal placement of the two trios of couches and the way in which the two chairs have been moved from their normal positions to make room for the cleaning of the glass wall. (That is why the carpet has been partly rolled back.) The result is a composition of great pictorial and intellectual sophistication, one that exploits the magic of absorption to induce the viewer to accept as verisimilar something that he or she “knows” to be improbable at best, and what is worth underscoring is that according to Wall's narrative of his picture's genesis the sunlight wasn't part of the conception at the outset but rather emerged only in the process of shooting as the weather cleared—a further instance of the incalculableness that Wall welcomes in his art.

At this point I want to introduce a philosophical text that bears closely on the issues I have been pursuing. The text is the whole of a long extract from Ludwig Wittgenstein's notebooks for the year 1930. It appears in the fascinating volume *Culture and Value*, which gathers a number of remarks and observations dealing with topics outside technical philosophy. It reads:

Engelmann [Paul Engelmann, Wittgenstein's close friend and faithful correspondent] told me that when he rummages round at home in a drawer full of his own manuscripts, they strike him as so glorious that he thinks they would be worth *presenting* to other people. (He said it's the same when he is reading through letters from his dead relations.) But when he imagines a selection of them published he said the whole business loses its charm & value & becomes impossible I said this case was like the following one: Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone who thinks himself unobserved engaged in some quite

simple everyday activity. Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up & we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating *himself* etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes,—surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage. We should be seeing life itself.—But then we do see this every day & it makes not the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view.—Similarly when E. looks at his writings and finds them *splendid* (even though he would not care to publish any of the pieces individually), he is seeing his life as God's work of art, & as such it is certainly worth contemplating, as is every life & everything whatever. But only the artist can represent the individual thing [*das Einzelne*] so that it appears to us as a work of art; those manuscripts *rightly* lose their value if we contemplate them singly & in any case without *prejudice*, i.e. without being enthusiastic about them in advance. The work of art compels us—as one might say—to see it in the *right* perspective, but without art the object [*der Gegenstand*] is a piece of nature like any other & the fact that *we* may exalt it through our enthusiasm does not give anyone the right to display it to us. (I am always reminded of one of those insipid photographs of a piece of scenery which is interesting to the person who took it because he was there himself, experienced something, but which a third party looks at with justifiable coldness; insofar as it is ever justifiable to look at something with coldness.<)>

But now it seems to me too that besides *the work* of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured *sub specie æterni*. It is—as I believe—the *way* of thought which as it were flies above the world and leaves it *the way* it is, contemplating it from above *in its flight*.³⁰

30. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright, Heikki Nyman, and Alois Pichler (Oxford, 1998), pp. 6e–7e; hereafter abbreviated CV. The passage is dated 22 August 1930. The original German reads:

Engelmann sage mir, wenn er zu Hause in seiner Lade voll von seinen Manuscripten krame so kämen sie ihm so wunderschön vor daß er denke sie wären es wert den anderen Menschen *gegeben* zu werden. (Das sei auch der Fall wenn er Briefe seiner verstorbenen Verwandten durchsehe) Wenn er sich aber eine Auswahl davon herausgegeben denkt so verliere die Sache jeden Reiz & Wert & werde unmöglich. Ich sagte wir hätten hier einen Fall ähnlich folgendem: Es könnte nichts merkwürdiger sein als einen Menschen bei irgend einer ganz einfachen alltäglichen Tätigkeit wenn er sich unbeobachtet glaubt zu sehen. Denken wir uns ein Theater, der Vorhang ginge auf & wir sähen einen Menschen allein in seinem Zimmer auf & ab gehen,

This is arguably Wittgenstein's most original and sustained contribution to aesthetic thought, although it may be only now, in the wake of developments in photography since the late 1970s, that it can be taken in that way. The following points should be stressed:

1) The thought experiment Wittgenstein proposes—imagining a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity as if in a theater—belongs to the cast of mind I have been calling antitheatrical. And although Wittgenstein does not actually refer to the man as absorbed in the performance of that activity, it seems fair to say that it is implicit in his words—remembering that in Diderot's writings on painting and drama absorption goes hand in hand with unawareness of being beheld (not the least interest of the 1930 extract for me is that it forges a link between these two thinkers).

2) The thought experiment also explicitly involves what I have been calling—in part basing myself on Wall—the everyday, which turns out to be an immensely privileged aesthetic category for Wittgenstein as well. More precisely, the everyday is here imagined by him as available only in an antitheatrical (and implicitly absorptive) form, with artistic consequences that go beyond anything previously known; we should be observing something “more wonderful than anything that a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage. We should be seeing life itself”—a *ne plus ultra* of realism, it would seem.

3) Wittgenstein (or one of his voices) immediately objects: “But then we do see this every day & it makes not the slightest impression on us!” And

sich eine Zigarette anzünden, *sich* niedersetzen u.s.f. so daß wir plötzlich von außen einen Menschen sähen wie man sich sonst nie sehen kann; wenn wir quasi ein Kapitel einer Biographie mit eigenen Augen sähen,—das müßte unheimlich & wunderbar zugleich sein. Wunderbarer als irgend etwas was ein Dichter auf der Bühne spielen oder sprechen lassen könnte. Wir würden das Leben selbst sehen.—Aber das sehen wir ja alle Tage & es macht uns nicht den mindesten Eindruck! Ja, aber wir sehen es nicht in *der* Perspektive.—So wenn E. seine Schriften ansieht & sie *herrlich* findet (die er doch einzeln nicht veröffentlichen möchte) so sieht er sein Leben, als ein Kunstwerk Gottes, & als das ist es allerdings betrachtenswert, jedes Leben & Alles. Doch kann nur der Künstler das Einzelne so darstellen daß es uns als Kunstwerk erscheint; jene Manuskripte verlieren *mit Recht* ihren Wert wenn man sie einzeln & überhaupt wenn sie *unvoreingenommen*, das heißt ohne schon vorher begeistert zu sein, betrachtet. Das Kunstwerk zwingt uns—sozusagen—zu der richtigen Perspektive, ohne die Kunst aber ist der Gegenstand ein Stück Natur wie jedes andre & daß *wir* es durch die Begeisterung erheben können das berechtigt niemand es uns vorzusetzen. (Ich muß immer an eine jener faden Naturaufnahmen denken die der, der sie aufgenommen interessant findet weil er dort selbst war, etwas erlebt hat, der dritte aber mit berechtigter Kälte betrachtet; wenn es überhaupt gerechtfertigt ist ein Ding mit Kälte zu betrachten.<)>

Nun scheint mir aber, gibt es außer der Arbeit des Künstlers noch eine andere, die Welt sub specie æterni einzufangen. Es ist—glaube ich—der Weg des Gedankens der gleichsam über die Welt hinfliegt & sie so läßt wie sie ist,—sie von oben *im* Fluge betrachtend. [CV, pp. 6–7]

then at once counters the objection by saying: “True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view.” I take this to mean that in the course of our ordinary dealings with other persons we not infrequently come upon someone who, at least for a few moments, is unaware of being observed and that we are far from regarding such a turn of events as “uncanny and wonderful.” But our point of view—or, to use Wittgenstein’s subtler term, our perspective—when this occurs is not at all the one posited by the thought experiment. The question, then, is how to characterize the latter perspective, which he associates with seeing the scene in question as a work of art (as he says Engelmann, without quite realizing it, is led at moments to see his own life as God’s work of art), and my suggestion is that Wittgenstein imagines it as fundamentally—not just contingently—separate from that of the person being observed (as God’s point of view is separate from Engelmann’s), as if—to put it strongly—the person and the observer inhabit different worlds (a formulation that has come up previously in this essay in my summary of Schwander’s response to *Adrian Walker*). The two worlds are otherwise identical; there is no difference between them beyond that of perspective—which is why the viewing of the first from the perspective of the second gives rise to an impression of life itself.³¹

4) In this connection the extract deploys a crucial distinction between (the representation of) “the individual thing,” *das Einzelne*, and, in the absence of art, “the object,” *der Gegenstand*—a “mere” object, I am tempted to say (probably the temptation should be resisted). Wittgenstein leaves the distinction untheorized, which on the one hand is a pity but on the other is a goad to further thought. As I understand it, the distinction joins up unexpectedly with certain claims in *Art and Objecthood*, and it will also prove fundamental to the discussion of the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher in my book-in-progress. Roughly, I shall want to make a distinction between “good” and “bad” objecthood somewhat along the lines of Hegel’s distinction between “good” (or “genuine”) and “bad” (or “spurious”) modes of infinity in the *Science of Logic* and to associate the first terms in those distinctions with the typological depiction and presentation of industrial objects in the Bechers’ photographs. I shall go on to suggest that the distinction

31. In a recent discussion of the present essay in a Wittgenstein workshop at the University of Chicago, it was objected by several participants that my two-world formulation is indeed too strong as a reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks—that however one understands his use in this context of the terms *point of view* and *perspective*, there is in crucial respects only one world, this one, that is seen in those different lights. (Not that simply saying this resolves the complexities of Wittgenstein’s thought.) No doubt my two-world readings were partly inspired by the links I saw (and continue to see) between Wittgenstein’s remarks and both the Diderotian tableau and Wall’s photographs, *Morning Cleaning* in particular. My thanks to David Finkelstein, James Conant, and Robert Pippin for pressing me on this point.

between good and bad modes of objecthood can be said to hold, to be in-tuitable, only in photographs.³² And I shall further relate these claims to a remarkable passage in Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914–1916* in which he distinguishes between the ordinary way of beholding objects from out of their midst and “the view *sub specie æternitatis* from outside.”³³ My notion is that the latter view anticipates the “separated” perspective of the 1930 extract. (I realize of course that all this is obscure as it stands.)

5) The last few sentences in Wittgenstein's long first paragraph turn on yet another distinction: between looking at something “without *prejudice*”—the Kantian term would be “disinterestedly”—and looking at something “with coldness,” which emerges as a (perhaps unavoidable or inevitable) failure of humanity. This too may be new to aesthetic thought, although the distinction is fully as ethical, perhaps even religious, as it is aesthetic. “Insofar as it is ever justifiable to look at something with coldness”—one way to take this tremendous and unexpected qualification is not simply as a rebuke, in the first instance to himself, but also as an intellectual caution, lest one assume that absence of prejudice or aesthetic disinterest simply *is* a kind of coldness. At the same time, Wittgenstein is clear that nothing gives someone the right to display to another person insipid objects or pieces of nature—photographs of scenery are the example he cites—in the expectation that they could possibly mean to a second party what they do to the first.³⁴ Interestingly, Wittgenstein wrote in a notebook entry: “My ideal is a certain coolness [*eine gewisse Kühle*]. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them” (CV, pp. 4,

32. I was led to think about Hegel in this connection by Wall's reference to a passage in the *Science of Logic* on the question of infinity in “Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham's Work,” in *Rodney Graham: Works 1976–88* (exhibition catalogue, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1988), pp. 9–10. The distinction between “good” and “bad” modes of objecthood is briefly introduced (without reference to Hegel) in my essay “James Welling's *Lock*, 1976,” in Sarah J. Rogers and Fried, *James Welling: Photographs 1974–1999* (exhibition catalogue, Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, 2000), p. 27.

33. See Wittgenstein, entry for 7 Oct. 1916, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. von Wright and Anscombe (Oxford, 1961), pp. 85–85e. My thanks to James Conant, Michael Kremer, and David Wellbery for (simultaneously) calling this passage to my attention.

34. In fact, he refers not to a second party but to a *third* one—as if he imagined the photographs having been taken by a member of a couple. Of course, this may simply be a slip, but just possibly it is something more. According to Maurice O'Connor Drury, who first met Wittgenstein in Cambridge, he was visited in Dublin by Wittgenstein and his young friend Francis Skinner in 1936 (six years after Wittgenstein wrote the notebook entry in question). The day after the two arrived, the little group went to Woolworth's for some purchases. “Wittgenstein noticed some cheap little cameras: ‘What fun it would be to take some snaps of each other,’” Drury reports him as having said. “So he insisted on buying three cameras, one for each of us. Then he wanted to climb to the top of Nelson's Column to view the city from there. We took a lot of photographs but they didn't turn out very well” (*Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees [Oxford, 1984], p. 137; hereafter abbreviated RW).

4e)—a statement that I cannot help but read in relation to the extract of 1930 as well as, stretching the point, in relation to *Morning Cleaning* itself. I might add that looking at things with coldness is one way of describing a certain recent photographic practice—I am thinking, for example, of Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibition, appropriately entitled "If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters," held at Tate Britain in 2003—in which what may be thought of as the inherent coolness (not coldness) of ordinary photography is taken to an extreme along with the apparent indifference of the photographer to subject choice and pictorial composition.³⁵

6) In view of Wittgenstein's distaste for the promiscuous displaying of snapshots, it is perhaps only fitting that, sixty or seventy years later, it has devolved upon photography to take up the artistic challenge that his reflections adumbrate. In Wall's *Morning Cleaning*, this involved shooting aspects of the same scene over twelve consecutive mornings for about half an hour starting at 7 a.m., while bright sunlight was streaming into the large, glassed-in space at more or less the same angle during each session, as well as working collaboratively with the window cleaner much as he had done with the real Adrian Walker, and then combining the various images digitally back in his Vancouver studio. For this is my strongest claim, as well as my deepest reason for adducing Wittgenstein's remarks in the present context: I take Wittgenstein to be inviting one to imagine an artistic medium significantly different from anything available at the time. Obviously the theater couldn't supply what was wanted, even though he begins by asking us to imagine a curtain going up on a stage such as had never—he seems to think—actually existed. I have suggested, however, that the dramaturgy of his thought experiment is extremely close to that of Diderot's writings on drama and painting of the 1750s and 60s. What I haven't said is that the Diderotian *dispositif* of the dramatic tableau with its invisible fourth wall provided a model for stage realism throughout much of the nineteenth century, but that by 1930—indeed well before—such a *dispositif* no longer sufficed to produce the impression of metaphysical aloneness the extract seeks to evoke. Or perhaps one should say that the very ideal of metaphysical aloneness had lost its attractiveness—no doubt largely because in the post-Ibsen era it had become a bourgeois cliché.³⁶ In that sense the extract may be read as rediscovering, as if on new grounds, the spiritual and artistic

35. The exhibition, accompanied by a catalogue with the same name, was held from 6 June–14 Sept. 2003. My remarks about the coolness of ordinary photography were stimulated in part by Gregg M. Horowitz's response to my Trilling lecture at Columbia University in November 2005.

36. See Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford, 2006), in which these and related issues are treated with great subtlety and originality. I thank her for allowing me to read the book in manuscript.

depth of such an ideal (for Wittgenstein the two dimensions are one). In the decades that followed, Wittgenstein often went to the movies, usually accompanied by friends, and we know that he liked to sit up close and give himself over completely to the doings on the screen. But I seriously doubt that movies, even Italian neorealist films of the postwar period or the masterpieces of Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu, would have fulfilled for him the terms of the thought experiment of 1930. Needless to say this cannot be proved, but perhaps Wittgenstein's famously total immersion in films, to which there is ample testimony, worked against the ideal of disinterested and in effect distanced contemplation implied by the extract. (While Wittgenstein was staying in Newcastle during the Second World War, he "went frequently to the cinema—'every night', according to Miss Andrews [someone who knew him]—to watch 'westerns or frankly bad films with happy endings and when asked about them the next morning, he could not remember details.'")³⁷ In any case, I suggest that certain photographs by Wall, *Morning Cleaning* foremost among them, may be understood, if not as wholly realizing the terms of Wittgenstein's simple but exalted vision, at least as coming closer to doing so than any other works of visual art with

37. J.C., "NB," *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 Jan. 2004, p. 14. Miss Andrews was a secretary with whom Wittgenstein shared digs. Norman Malcolm also writes of evenings spent with Wittgenstein at the movies in Cambridge in 1939:

Wittgenstein was always exhausted by his lectures. He was also revolted by them. He felt disgusted with what he had said and with himself. Often he would rush off to a cinema immediately after the class ended. As the members of the class began to move their chairs out of the room he might look imploringly at a friend and say in a low tone, 'Could you go to a flick?' On the way to the cinema Wittgenstein would buy a bun or cold pork pie and munch it while he watched the film. He insisted on sitting in the very first row of seats, so that the screen would occupy his entire field of vision, and his mind would be turned away from the thoughts of the lecture and his feelings of revulsion. Once he whispered to me 'This is like a shower bath!' His observation of the film was not relaxed or detached. He leaned tensely forward in his seat and rarely took his eyes off the screen. He hardly ever uttered comments on the episodes of the film and did not like his companion to do so. He wished to become totally absorbed in the film no matter how trivial or artificial it was, in order to free his mind temporarily from the philosophical thoughts that tortured and exhausted him. [Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London, 1958), pp. 27–28]

John King, another former student, testifies to Wittgenstein's distaste for British (as opposed to American) movies precisely on the ground of their theatricality. "The Mill Road cinema . . . was the one he most favoured," King recalls, "and here he sat as far to the front as he could get, leant forward in his seat and was utterly absorbed by the film. He never would go to any British film; and if we passed a cinema advertising one he pointed out how the actors looked dressed-up, unnatural, unconvincing, obviously play-acting, while, in comparison, in the American films the actors were the part, with no pretence" (*RW*, p. 71). The advertisements Wittgenstein pointed out to King were of course stills, that is, photographs. Drury adds that Wittgenstein disliked all English and Continental films: "in these, the cameraman was always intruding himself as if to say, 'Look how clever I am.' I remember him expressing a special delight on the dancing of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire" (*RW*, p. 120).

which I am familiar. "Oh a key can lie for ever where the locksmith placed it, & never be used to open the lock for which the master forged it," Wittgenstein writes (CV, p. 62e). Does it go too far to imagine that the extract of 1930 amounts to such a key?

7) An elaboration of the last point as well as of the earlier one about disparate perspectives: Wittgenstein writes, "But only the artist can represent the individual thing so that it appears to us as a work of art." In other words, only a work of art, precisely because it "compels us to see it in the right perspective," can make life itself, in the form of absorption, available for aesthetic contemplation. I want to associate this acknowledgment of artifice (for that is what it is: think of the theater and its curtain) with the frank acknowledgment—the foregrounding, so to speak—of photographic and dramaturgical artifice in Wall's pictures, the first via the light-box apparatus itself, the second via the implied painstaking collaborative staging of the depicted action (and in some works the implied painstaking construction of the setting itself). What makes that association pertinent, of course, is the depth of Wall's commitment to the—may one now say Wittgensteinian?—everyday in the mode of the near documentary, that is, to the antitheatrical project of making pictures that "in some way . . . claim to be a plausible account of, or a report on, what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed." By now it should be clear that the entire purpose of Wall's labors in Barcelona and back in Vancouver was to produce such a picture. (As yet Wall has found no means of acknowledging in his art the prolonged and repetitive labor that goes into the making of a work like *Morning Cleaning*, though perhaps the imagery of digging a well, a grave, or an anthropological site, as in *The Well* [1989], *The Flooded Grave* [1998–2000], and *Fieldwork* [2003] may be viewed in that light.)³⁸

8) Finally, I read the brief concluding paragraph in Wittgenstein's extract, with its image of contemplating the world from above (and in flight, lest we think he is envisaging a fixed position of divine omniscience) while leaving it the way it is (not in coldness or indifference, but so to speak disinterestedly), as an early intuition of what would become in *Philosophical Investigations* the notion of perspicuous representation and the vision of philosophy as leaving the actual use of language as it is rather than "correcting" it in the spirit of traditional philosophy—a vision linked, as Stanley Cavell has demonstrated, to notions of the ordinary and the everyday.³⁹ This

38. See, in this connection, "HT" as well as Fried, "Being There," *Artforum* 43 (Sept. 2004): 53–54, most of which consists in a discussion of Wall's *Fieldwork: Excavation of the Floor of a Dwelling in a Former Sto:lo National Village, Greenwood Island, Hope, B.C., August, 2003*, Anthony Graesch, Dept. of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles, *Working with Riley Lewis of the Sto:lo Band* (2003).

39. Thus Wittgenstein writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the

suggests that between the enterprise of *Philosophical Investigations* and the seemingly more narrowly aesthetic concerns of the 1930 extract there exists an affinity as deep as it is unexpected.

To sum up: I have tried to show that in representative works such as *Adrian Walker* and *Morning Cleaning* Jeff Wall has moved decisively toward an antitheatrical art in and through a focused concern with the everyday and an aesthetic strategy he calls near documentary. And I have done this in part by bringing Wall's pictures into close contact with an extraordinary but hitherto overlooked text by Wittgenstein. This is, I believe, no accident. Wall's pursuit of the everyday and his commitment to an explicitly anti-theatrical aesthetic are, I want to say, inherently philosophical in the sense that certain philosophical texts—in the first place Heidegger's *Being and Time* (but that remains to be demonstrated) and more profoundly Wittgenstein's extract of 1930 and beyond that his later philosophical writing in general (the latter as glossed and developed by Cavell)—are particularly well suited to the task of articulating the fullest implications of his photographic vision. At the same time, Wall's interest in absorption and anti-theatricality links his work with the Diderotian tradition as I have presented it in my books on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French painting. But there is a further possibility, touched on earlier, that I want to raise more vigorously in closing: a picture like *Morning Cleaning* also amounts to a kind of reinterpretation or, say, renewal, across a jagged breach, of the anti-theatrical aims of certain high modernist painting and sculpture as I interpreted those aims back in 1966–67 in "Shape as Form," "Art and Objecthood," and related essays. To speak personally, from my first encounter with *Morning Cleaning* in Frankfurt in 2002, I haven't been able to get Morris Louis's multi-rivulet Unfurleds of 1960–61—*Alpha-Pi* (1960; fig. 10), for example—out of my mind.⁴⁰ I am deliberately stopping short of

way we look at things." And two paragraphs later: "Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Anscombe [Oxford, 1958], §§122, 124, p. 49e). Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy leaves everything as it is, is cited in Stanley Cavell, "The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting," in *Rendezvous: Masterpieces from the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Guggenheim Museums* (exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1998), p. 88. Cavell also mentions in this connection Heidegger's advocacy of "'letting-lie-before-us' as the mode of thinking to be sought in stepping back from our fantasies of thinking as grasping the world in fixed concepts" (ibid.). The reference is to Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York, 1968). The importance of the everyday for the later Wittgenstein is a major theme in Cavell's writings. See, for example, Cavell, "Declining Decline," *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, 1989), pp. 29–75. On the everyday in a Kierkegaardian (also a Wittgensteinian) sense in the art of the great nineteenth-century German painter and draughtsman Adolph Menzel, see Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, Conn., 2002).

40. On Louis's Unfurleds, see Fried, "Morris Louis" (1966–67), *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 100–131.



FIGURE 10. Morris Louis, *Alpha-Pi*, 1960. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1967 (67.232). Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

spelling out all the reasons for this. Suffice it to note the similarity of overall format and dimensions, the grouping in both of crucial elements near the right- and left-hand edges of the picture together with the openness of the composition as a whole, and the suggestive analogy between the liquid flow of Louis's color-rivulets (controllable or uncontrollable?) and the washing of the windows in *Morning Cleaning*. And is there not a parallel of sorts between the dazzling blank expanse of the bare canvas in the Louis and the irradiated black expanse of the carpet in the Wall? Not that Wall is likely to have intended the connection, any more than he was thinking of Janssens Elinga's exquisite *Interior* or, more broadly, of seventeenth-century Dutch painting of quotidian scenes when he began shooting in Mies's pavilion in Barcelona. But it will be a central claim of the book that I am now finishing that more than a few of the most important and vital recent initiatives in photography turn out to have been renewing—even while revising—the aesthetic and philosophical stakes of the most ambitious high modernist art of the 1960s and 1970s, a body of work, I need hardly add, that is almost universally assumed to be irrelevant to the present situation. *Morning Cleaning* will be a key work in that larger study.