CINEMATIC PICTURES: 
THE LEGACY OF THE 
VANCOUVER COUNTER-TRADITION

Sharla Sava

In the case of contemporary art in Vancouver, it is tempting to suppose that modernist controversies are too remote, both historically and geographically, to supply a relevant interpretive framework. Even in contemporary art, however, modernism remains a thorny issue. Distant from the institutional structures designed to uphold the established cultural traditions of Europe, the colonial culture of the West Coast fostered a climate in which alternative, anarchist, and counter-traditional values were able to flourish. A sense of being removed from the centre of national interest has been typical of west coast culture in both the United States and Canada. In artistic terms, it could be said that personal expression has been less governed by the anxiety of influence. With respect to Vancouver, the interwoven evolution of modernization and modernism has been both sudden and late. As well, it is only in recent decades that Vancouver artists have gained sufficient international prominence to have made an impact on debates taking place in the world of contemporary art.

While there is sufficient reason to suppose that contemporary Vancouver artists must contend with how the reception of modernist discourse informs their work, they also, of course, bear witness to the moment of its erosion. It was during the radicalized era of the 1960s that artists started to look beyond the purely formal concerns of modernist painting and sculpture in order to recover the diverse strategies initially employed by the historical avant-garde. During that period, established artistic conventions were ruptured by vanguardist strategies that dematerialized, politicized, and contextualized the traditional art object. Rather than establish competence within a singular medium, such strategies embraced the potential offered by a variety of media.

This crisis of the medium, what has come to be known as "the post-medium condition," speaks of a period dominated by wide-ranging artistic experimentation. It is the harbinger of our contemporary moment and, depending on one's vantage point, inaugurates either a welcome stage of artistic freedom or the reigning chaos of profound aesthetic confusion. The aesthetic controversies with which I am concerned belong to the period of the post-medium condition. Artists in Vancouver employ a range of image-based technologies (e.g., conventional and digital photography, film, video), but their formative aesthetic emerges from conceptual art and its interrogation of modernism.

In 1997, critic Benjamin Buchloh spoke in an interview about the increasing presence of photography in the contemporary art world. The interviewer, struggling to address the transition between 1960s vanguardism and 1980s pictorialism, was interested in Buchloh’s views about Vancouver, asking pointedly:

But what do you think, for instance, of what some people call the Vancouver group, with artists such as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham?

Buchloh responded:

That is a pretty complicated situation. The work that emerged in Vancouver in the late 1970s was very important as a critical response to the legacy of conceptual art. For me the interesting moment was its subsequent unfolding, its subsequent development and its hegemonic quality, in terms of positioning itself as an artistic practice that apparently resolved all the contemporary questions. It is interesting to look at the historical dialectics between generations or between positions. To see, for example, to what degree the legacy of conceptual art is counter-acted in the late 1970s by artists like Jeff Wall, who criticized a certain model of linguistic paradigm by reintroducing a visual or representational paradigm.3

I am interested in Buchloh’s phrasing, particularly in the last sentence, because it attests to the rupture which separates 1960s experimentation from 1980s large-format photography. Artists like Jeff Wall do not continue, Buchloh says, but rather counteract the legacy of 60s vanguardism. He reminds us that Wall’s production does not fulfill the ambitions of conceptualism; rather, it is a reaction-formation, contesting conceptualism’s fundamental premises. Photoconceptualism has become popular as a term used to address this period of art production in Vancouver. Yet if Buchloh’s comments are credible (and I think that they are), it has been terms such as photoconceptualism which have obscured the political and aesthetic implications of this historical transition.

Photoconceptualism gained currency around 1990, when Vancouver artist, critic, and teacher Ian Wallace published “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” his history of Vancouver art from the mid-60s to the late 80s.4 There he described the continuous development of a movement referred to as “photoconceptual art.” The essay marks Wallace’s most ambitious attempt to address the conditions of artistic production which governed not only his own work, but also that of his students (including Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham). According to Wallace, photoconceptual art, while identifiable in the work of a few individual artists, was a result of the encounter between late modernism and the dominant features of the modern city. His essay outlines the formative stages of this period, emphasizing the importance of the artist duo N.E. Thing Co. and exhibitions curated by local artist Christos Diakos as well as New York-based critic Lucy Lippard. Wallace’s essay also draws attention to the artistic and conceptual precedents established by American artists Dan Graham and Robert Smithson.5

Wallace’s reliance on photoconceptualism as the narrative thread that weaves together the history of recent art production in Vancouver is by no means anomalous. This terminology has routinely been used by critics and commentators for well over a decade. There are any number of examples demonstrating how pervasive the term photoconceptualism has become both within and outside of local circles: in 1996, art critic and educator Judith Mastai invoked a longstanding rift within the Vancouver art community when she cited local artist Gregg Simpson, claiming that “Vancouver has wrongly been portrayed as a major centre only for conceptual and photo-based art instead of what we should really be known for: a regional art, spiritual in nature and mainly landscape-based.”6 Similarly, National Gallery of Canada curator Kitty Scott discussed the vitality of the Vancouver art scene in 2002 in “Ken Lum Works with Photography,” observing that “Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ken Lum, Jeff Wall, and Ian Wallace [are] the école de Vancouver—often referred to as the Vancouver photoconceptualists—are among the most established artists in the city.” Another typical example taken from Canadian Art magazine explained: “[Ian] Wallace was mentored by Iain Baxter (of N.E. Thing Company) and went on to teach Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, Ken Lum, Roy Arden, and Arni Haraldsson. This esteemed group rose to international prominence in the 1980s, forever linking Vancouver with photoconceptualism.”7

The examples cited here demonstrate that the contemporary art world has come to associate Vancouver with a particular kind of art, and the current terminology is the “Vancouver School” or, alternatively, “photoconceptualism.” It is not my intention to argue for photoconceptualism’s insignificance within Vancouver’s art history—clearly, the photoconceptual experiments characteristic of artistic practice in Vancouver emerged in response to the perceived limits of Greenbergian modernism and they make a significant contribution to the historical development of the post-medium condition. But what kind of contribution, exactly, do these experiments make? And, further, how did the legacy of 1960s photoconceptualism play out in subsequent decades?

Photoconceptualism, as a critique of representation, played a crucial role in inspiring artistic curiosity about the various ways in which dominant techniques employed by media culture could be redeployed in the context of art. This impulse toward theatricality or cinematography can be seen in various early photoconceptual projects. Within this paradigm,
every site is a potential stage-set, every car window a new opportunity to transform land into speculation.

I am thinking, for instance, of Jeff Wall's best-known contribution to the era, Landscape Manual, produced in 1969 and 1970. Above and beyond the photographs which appear in it, the accompanying text attests to a serious concern with the creation and production of the visual image. Wall's Manual is littered with references to movie cameras, projectors, slides, and projectors, and with cinematic descriptions of the landscape as well as absurdist movie treatments. The language is not about vision so much as it is about the technology of vision. For example: "On the street outside, a car passes. On the seat beside the driver a slide projector throws images of the passing landscape against the side window, on the dashboard, on the padded ceiling inside the car, or into the rear-view mirror. Interspersed with these landscapes might be images of meals eaten in restaurants, sex acts carried out in cars similar or identical to this one, etc." 7

Another early photoconceptual work created by Jeff Wall, Cine-Text (Excerpt) (1971), produced in Vancouver and London, also attests to the artist's growing interest in cinematic production. Lucy Lippard selected it for inclusion in Six Years, her celebrated anthology of dematerialized art. Cine-Text is a document with two columns of text in which photos have been inserted. The text on the left side reads like a film treatment, describing the interior of a factory filled with workers; the text on the right is a transcription of the proposed audio accompaniment, a thought-piece about artistic labor. Ian Wallace took the photos that accompany Cine-Text, and in a later essay, he reflected on his and Wall's growing interest in a theatrical landscape: "By 1970 the sense of location in its specificity... led us to see a kind of future 'movement'. These locations seemed to act as a stage or backdrop to some sort of dramatic action.... This was the potential, if forbidden, direction of our work." 10

In the early 1970s, this aesthetic direction had been "forbidden" by the discourse of Greenbergian modernism, which argued for the separation of visual art from dramatic content in the name of greater self-reflexive value. In a 1946 review of an Edward Weston exhibition, Clement Greenberg summarized his attitude to photography, stating: "Photography is the most transparent of the art mediums devised or discovered by man. It is probably for this reason that it proves so difficult to make the photograph transcend its almost inevitable function as document, and act as a work of art as well." 12

Photoconceptualism, because of its reliance on the photograph as a kind of pure material document, was consistent with modernism in this respect. It too was grounded in scepticism toward the literary, allegorical, or narrative aspects of visual representation. It is not surprising, then, to find that artists such as Wallace and Wall would hesitate before imagining the turn from photoconceptualism to the dramatic picture. By 1973, however, experimentation with photoconceptualism had led the artists away from documentary-type photography and into the potential offered by cinema.

In 1973, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and Rodney Graham began to collaborate on a feature-length film. Rather than conforming to the tenets of experimental or documentary film, the young artists turned toward fiction and non-fiction in the manner of Hitchcock. Reflecting on their collaboration years later, Wallace commented: "Jeff and Rodney and I met probably daily for a couple of months... working out what it was going to be about, on the script." 13 Although they eventually completed their film, the artists decided not to show it publicly. Wallace explained: "Some of the images were quite strong and arresting, but it wasn't enough to carry a film. I think Jeff in the end felt that way too." 14 While their aesthetic development continued to incorporate aspects of cinema, all three artists stopped short of moving out of the world of visual art into that of the film industry. Rather, as we can now see, the parameters of visual art would expand to incorporate the potential of narrative film.

In order to track the impact of cinema on recent developments in Vancouver art, it is necessary to consider the term "counter-tradition," and emphasize that photoconceptualism is to be understood as a formative, yet distinct, aspect of the Vancouver counter-tradition. This historical transition is outlined most explicitly in Jeff Wall's essay "Traditions and Counter-Traditions in Vancouver Art: A Deeper Background for Ken Lum's Work," which was originally presented as a lecture in Rotterdam in 1990: "In my essay in the catalogue for [Ken] Lum's show, I claimed that [Rodney Graham's] 'Illuminated Ravine', along with Lum's furniture sculptures, first presented in 1978 and 1979, were the indicators of a new direction in the art discourse of Vancouver. ... [A] counter-tradition, long in preparation, surfaced." 15 Wall thus dated the emergence of the counter-tradition to 1978 or 1979, a historical moment that coincided with his own return to the pictorial, after various experiments with language and a variety of media formats.

The counter-tradition is a means by which to track the innovations made by a generation of artists who, although interested in the artistic potential of photography, were unwilling to remain confined by the progressive logic demanded by fidelity to a singular medium. Wall's defense of a Vancouver counter-tradition functions in the background, shaping accepted notions about Vancouver art, even up to the present day. While it may not lead to a definitive school, movement or genre, it is a discourse thoroughly entwined with larger trends in the global art market.

According to Wall's lecture, the decade prior to 1978 is not part of the counter-tradition; it was the formative period leading up to its emergence. This periodization is significant because it leaves open the question of how photoconceptualism—which dates back to the 1960s—relates to the idea of counter-tradition. Configuring the transition from the iconoclastic, conceptualist experiments of the 1960s to the restoration of the pictorial

in the late 1970s remains highly fraught. This is because the transition carries an implicit claim about the shifting sociopolitical function of art in a society which must contend with the onslaught of postmodernity and its fanatical reproduction of the image.

In retrospect, it has become apparent that the point at which Wall's argument entered into public discussion, around 1990, was also the historical moment when the marginalized counter-tradition began to establish itself as the new modus operandi in Vancouver. It was after 1990 that the counter-tradition became firmly entrenched as the dominant tradition, and it is as tradition that younger practitioners—notably Geoffrey Farmer, Evan Lee, Judy Radul, and Kelly Wood—encounter this aesthetic position. What we will see is that the emergence of the Vancouver counter-tradition was both a product of, and a reaction against, the political aims of photoconceptualism.

At the time of his participation in the collaborative film project, Ian Wallace also produced a large-scale, photo-based work titled La Mélancolie de la Rue (1973). This hand-coloured photo-mural remains the most poignant example of an artistic imagination deeply engaged in transforming the ideas of bohemia into content for high art. Christos Dikeakos has discussed Mélancolie as an important transitional work in Wallace's development, because it signifies a departure from conceptualism and a move toward the literary potential of art. Here we see the tension of locality embodied in architecture: institutional architecture, suburban housing, and the marginalized squatter shack. Jeff Wall argued for the significance of this work as a landmark on the road between photoconceptualism and the counter-tradition.

By 1990, when Wall was actively involved in constructing this period of Vancouver's art history, his work was well on its way to becoming established according to terms which remain aesthetically and politically distant from the vanguardism of the 1960s. Indeed, we might suppose that Wall developed the notion of counter-tradition to serve this purpose; for as much as the concept was intended to create a distance from the tradition of lyrical modernists, including Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt, it was also intended to refute the political imagination of the neo-avant-garde. In the "Traditions and Counter-Traditions" essay, Wall argued that the dynamic period of experimentation that took place in the late 60s, while representing a break from certain established artistic conventions, did not signal the end of the romantic tradition. For Wall, many of the local experiments of this era were still too caught up in "the romanticism of nature and the Native." Inasmuch as it is a response to the post-medium condition, the counter-tradition also claims a stance of relative autonomy, shored up against those bohemian experiments, such as Image Bank, which collapse art into the more abundant realm of "cultural ecology."

As Buchloh also realized, what is distinctive about the Vancouver counter-tradition is the way in which it translated the aims of conceptual art. In other cities, conceptualism became the basis of further deconstruction, but in Vancouver it inspired a concerted return to pictorial photography. In this way, the Vancouver counter-tradition became the next logical step in a continuous tradition of modern pictorial form. What the term also did, along the way, was recast the radical aims of the 1960s era. For Wall and others, the experimentalism of the 60s—what Peter Bürger has theorized as "the neo-avant-garde"—signaled a period in which transgression itself became institutionalized. Neo-avant-gardism—art created for the purpose of addressing its own institutional and commodified constraints—was readily appropriated as a vehicle for the liberalization of museum and gallery systems and, as such, was dismissed as both naive and misguided.

In a 2003 essay about Jeff Wall, Bürger suggested that the artist chose to respond to the "institution of transgression" by directly engaging with the taboos that transgression had evoked. According to Bürger, Wall returned to practices that had been dismissed, such as figuration and narrative photography, in order to reveal the limitations of 1960s vanguardist strategies. His line of thought fashions a "critical" rather than a thoroughly "affirmative" project while also steering clear of photoconceptualism (that is, the neo-avant-garde). How does this reasoning unfold?

Vanguardism should remain a part of this discussion. Or we can say, at least, that some of Wall's early interviews do not disavow the notion of vanguardism altogether. For instance, in a widely cited interview from 1985, Wall commented: "I mentioned that I thought there is a 'counter-tradition' within modernity. This counter-tradition is what I identify as avant-garde." Further in the interview Wall stated: "The counter-tradition I'm interested in is not just an art movement, it is a whole political culture. And because its politics are based on the material possibility of change, art plays a prominent role in it." While understanding that the counter-tradition is employed as the means by which to refute the neo-avant-garde, it is still necessary to...
position this tendency within the radical context of the 1960s. During this period, key texts from German critical theorists—Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse—began to appear in English, influencing the artistic and political imagination of the era. These texts introduced English-speaking audiences to forms of political modernism which had been suppressed by the hegemony of American-Jewish modernism. It is valuable to note the degree of enthusiasm which an artist such as Jeff Wall could bring to the work of these thinkers. "An amazing series of syntheses were fragmentarily happening between 1965 and 1973 ... At that time there was a momentum to what I really think now is an ultra left view of artistic activity. I was really influenced by it," Wall added: "For me it was crystallized down through photography."25

The mode of photography consonant with the counter-tradition does not fit securely within either the abstraction of modernism or the materiality of realism. For in the climate of late capitalism, neither modernism nor realism seem entirely appropriate to the cultural situation. Various strategies employing critical realism, typologies, and figuration find a renewed relevance in the years following 1968. In the postmodern era, it is through a return to figuration that realism becomes the means by which modernism itself might be renewed.26

Pictures such as Jeff Wall's Mimic (1982), Milk (1984), and Diatribe (1985) or, more recently, A View from an Apartment (2004–05) are compositions intended to convey typical figures whose interpretation relies on the dramatic structure of social meaning. As viewers, we search for the motives which, stemming from the interior world of the subject, have become embodied as recognizable physical gestures. As well, we look to the exterior world portrayed in the picture to see what role these gestures will play in the constitution of the public world. In each case, the picture, composed of actors posing on location, is an artificial construction of fragments which appears as a dramatic, novelistic unity while the camera, with its indexical relationship to the real, inevitably confirms an element of objective reality. A similar range of strategies is employed in Ian Wallace's picture The Studio (1977), or Ken Lum's Mounties and Indians (1986). Because the social subjects portrayed in the work are staged and directed, we can see that the use of typology approximates a theatrical, cinematic mode. But they are actors deprived of the ability to speak, frozen in arrested motion.

My reference to typology is intended to reinforce the understanding that this art admits to a certain degree of faith in representation. This faith is suggested by the theoretical premises which guide artistic production, and confirmed in the photography itself. In these pictures, however, the attempt to address public culture is also marked by a refusal to continue working within an older, more established tradition of painting or documentary photography. That is to say, the faith in representation demonstrated by this type of art also admits to a process of self-imposed

Mediation. One way to explain this might be to say that the transgressions against the institution of art inaugurated by conceptualism carried the Marxist project of ideology critique into an ostensibly postmodern era. After experimenting with various critical strategies—such as photo-conceptualism—some artists would come to believe that the critique of ideology need not be iconophbic; that is, it need not push the critique of representation to the limit of complete refusal. This is one way to interpret the resurgence of theatrical conventions occurring in the visual arts since the 1970s.

The debate around theatricality was, of course, inadvertently inaugurated by American critic and art historian Michael Fried. In his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," Fried relied on the notion of theatricality to mount an impassioned attack on that strain of contemporary art which he called "literalist." Defending the artistic conventions of modernism as "art," Fried pointed to the emerging tendency of "objecthood," which he complained, "amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre, and theatre is now the negation of art."27 At the time, Fried was referring to minimalist sculpture, but for Douglas Crimp, writing a decade or so later, theatricality was a logic that could bleed into, and reconstitute, all the modes and formats employed by contemporary art. Writing in October magazine in 1979, Crimp reflected on his acclaimed exhibition, Pictures, which featured the work of Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Longo, among others. While Fried's "Art and Objecthood" essay did not expressly address media-based arts, Crimp emphasized that the construction of pictures could not be excluded from the concerns of theatricality. Referring to contemporary, photo-based artwork, Crimp pointed out that the "the theatrical dimensions of [the art] have been transformed and, quite unexpectedly, reinvited in the pictorial image."28

Crimp's address of "theatrical" pictures is in some ways consonant with concurrent ideas, including the "directional mode" in photography or the artistic turn toward "fabricated" photographs. Writing in Artforum in 1976, the critic A.D. Coleman drew attention to what he called a newly emergent directional mode in art photography. He sketches out the artist's relation to photography as a continuum: at one end is the documentary mode, which remains committed to maintaining the apparent truth of the photo; in the middle of the continuum is responsive photography, which allows for the expression of the sensibility of the photographer; and on the far end, posed opposite that of documentary, is the directional mode, in which "the photographer consciously and intentionally creates events for the express purpose of making images."29 The staged reality characteristic of the directional mode is a result of photographers intervening in a particular real-life situation, staging dramatic tableaux explicitly for the camera, or arranging objects or still-life subjects in the studio. In this mode, the faith in photography as a source of documentary evidence is turned deliberately against itself.
Anne Hoy's 1987 book, Fabrications: Staged, Altered, and Appropriated Photographs, also confirmed the growing number of photographers turning to fabrication during the 1970s and 80s. Fabricated photos, as Hoy defines them, have been "openly staged for the camera and/or manipulated in the darkroom." Because these photos document fake situations that nonetheless took place, they are neither true nor false: "Theatre is their model—with its surrogate reality, narrative continuity, and emotional charge—and the studio is their stage." Artists creating these kinds of narrative tableaux depend on a mode of production that requires a wide range of skills. At the same time, their pictorial format is also driven by the speed and efficiency offered by technological innovation. They are not just photographers but also directors, set designers, costumers, and casting agents, and, similar to the cinema, they rely on actors, props, and constructed settings.

The resurgence of theatrical strategies in art photography is tied to the discourse of postmodernism, which reached its zenith during the 1970s and 80s. It is thus unsurprising to find Jeff Wall's work, Double Self Portrait (1979) and Picture for Women (1979), making an appearance in the celebrated Difference exhibition (1984). Organized by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, many of the artists included in Difference—Barbara Kruger, Victor Burgin, Hans Haacke, Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler—are, by now, classic representatives of the postmodern deconstruction of representation. Discussing the landmark role played by the Difference exhibition, British art historian Griselda Pollock explained that the show operated as an emblem of 1970s cultural politics in the more conservative climate of the 1980s, which was witness to a revival of traditionalist and expressive styles of painting. The Canadian exhibition, Subjects and Subject Matter (1985) at the London Regional Art Gallery, also served to position Wall's work in the context of deconstruction. Subjects exhibited photo-based works which relied on appropriation, deconstruction, and quotation in order to strategically engage the limits of mass media imagery. In her catalogue essay, curator Elke Town argued for an affinity between Wall and Barbara Kruger, on the grounds that both artists are "engaged in an enterprise that projects a stance directly critical of ... capitalist society." A consideration of the curatorial imagination of the mid-80s confirms that the reception of Wall's art was, at a certain historical moment, strongly associated with the theoretical "crisis of representation" and its framing in postmodernism.

We can also see that the arguments made by Crimp, Coleman, and Hoy, in drawing attention to the emergent practices of theatrical and cinematic photography, confirm that the kinds of questions being asked in Vancouver since the late 1970s belong to a much wider turn toward pictorial narrativity. Wall's understanding of art, and by extension his definition of the Vancouver counter-tradition, is embedded in a form of cultural politics which takes a great deal from both the historical avant-garde and the critical postmodernism that championed theatricality.

What remains uncertain is how the recent turn to narrative photography, this massive renaissance of theatricality, addresses its contemporary audience. In a 2002 essay, T. J. Clark wrestled with changing modes of spectatorship in art and society, an issue deeply entwined with the historical transition between modernism and postmodernism. Given that modernism, as an artistic paradigm, was attuned to the facts and possibilities offered by the everyday life of modernity, Clark wondered whether we have recently entered into an era so different (postmodernity) that it has demanded another paradigm of artistic production (postmodernism). This depends on whether the conditions of modernity have been so drastically reconfigured during the past thirty or forty years that they are on the verge of something new. Clark's grounding in modernism lends him a sceptical eye.

The advent of the mass media image, and in particular, television, signifies a level of technological advance that has transformed the social fabric. "If there is any technological watershed of the postmodern, it lies here," Perry Anderson argued, apropos of the advent, in the early 1970s, of colour TV. Whereas modernism was produced in response to the machine, postmodernism responds to "a machinery of images." Modern technologies, which restructured and improved the efficiency of industry and domestic life, also offered a generative matrix inside which the modernist imaginary grew into being. Twentieth-century modernists recognized that technology posed a vast threat, both in terms of the possibility of complete annihilation and through the insidious power of its mundane rationality. By contrast, postmodern machines deal not in production but in reproduction, generating an unprecedented volume of images, a technical environment overwhelmed by this new density. Unlike the modern machine, the current regime of the image has turned social experience into what Anderson termed a "perpetual emotion machine." This is the context which makes sense of the recent resurgence of theatrical practices in art production. Art is an index of the dramatic shift that has occurred in the relationship between advanced technology and the popular imaginary.

Given that the visual arts represent a long history of engaging with the structure and meaning of images, it remains to be seen whether the renewed proximity of the visual arts to the dominant regime of the image poses a degree of opportunity or a genuine limitation to critical artistic production. In some respects, this new regime—what Anderson claimed is the basis of postmodernity—has inevitably come to stand for art's affirmation of contemporary culture, and the industries on which it relies to produce its socialized subjects. Yet it is precisely this new degree of identification which has made it difficult for artists to discover modes of artistic form capable of grasping, rather than being folded into, the dominant cultural imaginary. From the vantage point of modernism, contemporary artists have yet to carry through on the lessons of scepticism and negation established in response to the historical era of modernity.
I am sympathetic to this critical reading of the current moment, that is, to the hesitation voiced by someone as invested in modernism as T.J. Clark. Another way of approaching this dilemma might be to say that artists have turned to the staged, mediated image in order to engage the tenets of dominant visuality, and in a manner which does not entirely contradict the modernist imaginary. This is the critical value of positioning the Vancouver counter-tradition within the larger discourse of theatricality that has emerged in recent decades.

Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes,
The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters
(El Sueño de la Razon Produce Monstruos),
plate 43 of Los Caprichos (second edition), ca. 1809
etching and aquatint
Courtesy of Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art,
Cornell University.
Membership Purchase Fund

The shape of modern subjectivity has long been determined by the theatre of representation. It is not difficult to see how deeply recent thoughts on theatricality, or the "society of spectacle," delve into the long history of debates over the ways in which modern representation shapes human agency and well-being. Influential essays from the Enlightenment period—by Rousseau, Diderot, and Schiller—attest to the threat, as well as the opportunity, which theatre was thought to present to public life. That there is a formal identity between theatrical and political stages has been remarked upon since the revolutionary period in France, and it has always been a fundamental condition in the machinery of state formation. Representative democracy and modern theatricality are, according to one recent account, "conceptual siblings." The old struggle between festival and spectacle, then, remains one of the fundamental conflicts of modernity. If there are any meaningful claims to be staked out in the contemporary return to the dramatic picture, their significance is deeply attached to socio-political arguments about the cultural value of representation.

Cinematic photography, by virtue of its large format as well as its realist style, offers the viewer an occasion to ponder the meaning conveyed by the dramatic gesture. In a 1994 picture by Jeff Wall, for instance, the viewer is invited to witness a solitary middle-aged man lying uncomfortably on the floor of a kitchen. The man's hair is unwashed, his pallor pale,
and his skin clammy with sweat. His impassive gaze addresses us from underneath the modest table which he has taken as his improvised and miserable shelter. The surfaces of the kitchen, like the figure himself, look grimy. Through the window we see that it is night time, and that the only source of light is the cold fluorescent tube mounted on the ceiling. The title of this work, insomonia, serves to reinforce a suggestion of the hidden and interior dimensions of this man’s unhappy state.

One way to consider this picture is to suppose that insomonia represents a shift in modern subjectivity. Setting it against a much earlier image, Goya’s The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (1799), from the series Los Caprichos, offers a tentative scaffolding for interpretation. This etching also shows a single male figure who seems to be having trouble sleeping. It was completed in the revolutionary era at the close of the eighteenth century, when the social world surrounding Goya supported the conviction that the progress of human reason would guarantee enlightenment and banish the monsters of darkness.

Insomonia serves to remind us of the long span between ourselves and the ideals of the Enlightenment; a post-Enlightenment illumination, as it were. Resisting established conventions of portraiture, this generic subject remains unknown; an unimportant man. Perhaps tortured by inner demons, the contemporary subject remains in a state of sleeplessness. He cannot sleep, which is also to suppose that he cannot feel what it means to be fully awake. Lying conscious under artificial light, there is no secure means by which this man can discern between the light of reason and the darkness of private fantasy. Wall’s picture has immobilized the dynamic tension between light and darkness. This figure is surrounded not by the creatures of darkness or light, but by the adequate comfort of mass-produced goods, which are utilitarian rather than transcendental. Vacant of the kind of light that acts as an allegorical guide to truth, the picture reinforces the notion that industrially manufactured fluorescence must suffice, as it has become the only kind of illumination readily available today. Bathed in such light, it is difficult to dream.

This picture addresses a valuable element of self-reflexivity. It is, perhaps, a story about the function of contemporary art in relation to the imagination of significant political action. We might suppose that the figure observed in the picture—alone and immobile, lying on the kitchen floor—is that of the artist. As such, what we are looking at is the fate of modern art itself. Within this framework, insomnia is also a picture that brings us back to the historical moment of the counter-tradition, in 1978 or 1979, which is the irresolute cusp of modern and postmodern. "Modernity comes to an end when it loses any antonym," as Perry Anderson observed, "the possibility of other social orders was an essential horizon of modernism." It is the transition from counter-culture to counter-tradition which has placed Vancouver on the map of the global art world. I trust that this transition has not obscured our view of the horizon.

This essay is based on ideas developed in my doctoral dissertation, "Cinematic Photography: Theatricality, Spectacle: The Art of Jeff Wall," Simon Fraser University, 2003.


This history has been made available in recent years through notable initiatives such as the exhibition Robert Smithson in Vancouver (2004) curated by Grant Arnold at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

This is a claim that Simpson had already made in an editorial for the Vancouver Sun. See "Art and Media," "Conceptual Imagery: Art and Media in the City of the Sea," C Magazine 49 (Spring 1986): 22.


Deborah Campbell, "In the Studio with Ian Wallace," Canadian Art 22 (Winter 2004): 63.


Ian Wallace, "A Note on the Film in Progress (Script III)," February 1974, Unpublished (Ian Wallace Archives, Vancouver).


Ian Wallace, personal interview (2003). Wallace has indicated that this film remains in his archive and has not been viewed publicly. Wall has not acknowledged this film as part of his artistic oeuvre. The standard chronology of Graham's work states: Graham, Wallace, and Wall receiving funding from the Canada Council for the Arts toward the production of a film. Inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's Marnie (1964), the film is intended as a "structuralist take on Hitchcock" with a female kleptomaniac as the central character.


Wall, "Traditions and Counter-Traditions in Vancouver Art," 75.