

JEFF WALL

“on photo-conceptualism”

interview by ALEXIS DAHAN

In 1995, Jeff Wall published: “Marks of Indifference.” More than Twenty years later, the essay is still considered by generations of artists and critics as a reference in photo-conceptualism theory. Analyzing the use of photography by the conceptual artists of the 60s and 70s, Wall examined two directions: “The first involves the rethinking and ‘re-functioning’ of reportage, the dominant type of art photography as it existed in the beginning of the 1960s. The second is related to the first, and to a certain extent emerges from it. This is the issue of the de-skilling and re-skilling of the artist in a context defined by the culture history, and made controversial by aspects of Pop art.” For Purple, Jeff Wall, the theoretician, looks back at his essay and tell us where he stands.

ALEXIS DAHAN – Nowadays the term “conceptual” has become a cool marketing tool for artists: everything is said to be “conceptual.” If there were one artist I would want to talk to about the implication of this term in the field of photography, that would be you!

JW – When I wrote that essay in 1995, it was written about work that was then already 20 or 30 years old. So the relation between conceptual art and photography had already changed and I was writing with hindsight.

AD – How did people react?

JW – I got a lot of criticism because people thought I was justifying and explaining my own position.

AD – What was your defense?

JW – If that was the way I envisioned the relationship between conceptual art and photography then why would I not, as an artist, have followed this direction myself?

AD – How about now?

JW –The immediate problems of the relation between photography and conceptual art are quite historic now. They don’t seem to be of extreme urgency. Like you said, the word “conceptual” has really changed and its meaning has spread and mutated. I would rather use the term “post-conceptual” for the kind of art that has become popular since.

AD – In the essay you talked a lot about “de-skilling”, does that have something to do with what you call “post-conceptual” today?

JW – The “de-skilling” issue (which is also “re-skilling”) affects everything that is being presented in art exhibitions today because by now most survey exhibitions of contemporary art aren’t primarily concerned with painting, sculpture or photography. Most of the works are in various hybrid forms. Those are what we can call the post-conceptual forms of art. They are the ones that don’t conform to what was considered to constitute the visual arts up until around 1960. And since then they’ve become dominant in contemporary art.

Today the de-skilling (or re-skilling) phenomenon has become generalized and is not necessarily that much focused on photography, whereas it might have been in the 60’s when photography was the practice where a lot of things were experimented with more intensely than in painting for example--even though of course it was happening with painting and sculpture too. Photography is not the focus of post-conceptual thinking anymore, though its still important in the ‘re-skilling’ process, mainly because of hand-held device phones and the internet. Everyone has now become a photographer and even a photojournalist. It’s almost like we’ve all been given a new social responsibility. iPhone photography is probably the central form of re-skilled photography now, along with the apparently unavoidable obligation to distribute images globally, instantly and all the time. However I don’t know if the kind of photography you see on Instagram is having that much of an effect in the way photographers practice photography.

AD – Are you on Instagram ?

JW – No. I have no reason to be. I’m not interested in having my pictures distributed instantly.

AD – You are known to exhibit large scaled, extremely detailed photographs shot with large format cameras. However in your exhibition at the Fondation Cartier Bresson entitled Smaller Pictures, we can see recent photos that are printed small and were taken using your cellphone. What does that say about the role of the medium in your work? Has something changed? Is this a form of de-skilling?

JW – I don't think the device you use to photograph is decisive. I'll use any camera that seems appropriate for a particular project. I made a few photographs with my old Nokia mobile phone just like everyone else does. I ended up liking a few of those, and so I have printed editions of them just as I've done with other smaller images. The essence of the artistic act of photography has really nothing to do with its distribution. Traditionally people think what is interesting with photography is its reproducibility and its ability to be rapidly circulated. But for my practice that has almost no relevance. Still, on the other hand, I'm happy to have been able to get something good with that equipment in those circumstances, which are different from the way I work most of the time.

AD – How about the way photography is displayed? You have been a longtime user of transparencies and light boxes and now all the photographs we see on a daily basis are shown on the backlit screens of our phones and computers.

JW – You can make that analogy although I don't find it that compelling. I am making pictures as objects—as what we normally call a tableau. A tableau is a picture that is an autonomous object that has to be experienced physically, immediately, hanging on a wall in a room of some kind. For me the light box element was an amplification of the tableau form but nothing more. In that sense, I guess I am a traditional visual artist.

AD – Visual Arts !

JW – It's funny—the term sounds so archaic. Sometimes I call it “pictorial art” even though not all of it is strictly pictorial. Sometimes I call it “canonical art” because it is based on the canons of our tradition. Whatever you want to call it, for that type of art, the way it is distributed around the world is quite secondary. I am quite content with having my pictures hanging in a gallery, public or private, and for it to be seen in this kind of slow way. That seems to be perfectly adequate and in many ways very desirable.

AD – How does this position apply to your definition of post-conceptualism?

JW – This post-conceptual condition is more and more involving itself with this acceleration of distribution.

AD – And the photographers?

JW –I don't think that the de-skilling issue plays much of a role. They are still acting very much as skilled photographers working in a tradition of interesting technique or innovating with technique.

This is the case with, say, Wolfgang Tillmans, or Zoe Leonard, or Christopher Williams, and any number of others. The de-skilling has really gone elsewhere.

AD –In Marks of Indifference you also emphasize on the predominant use of the reportage and photo-documentation techniques by conceptual artists in order to convey the content of their work. Today, we still see artists widely using photography to document their performances, or their temporary interventions. What is left and what is shown is a photograph of the proposition.

JW – Yes that has sort of stabilized. If one does performance now, for the most part, the issue of documentation is the heart of the project. However there are interesting exceptions like Tino Sehgal, who refuses any documentation. His approach might be the most suggestive now, given the fact that it has become so conventional, so institutionalized, to photograph or film the performance.

AD – On the other end there is also a kind of visual constipation. Look at Michael Heizer who is building a city in the middle of the desert with absolutely no images of it.

JW –Maybe by now, we're seeing an interest in escaping the inevitable and routine recording process, an interest in a free space where the media and the internet don't immediately absorb it all. The digital world, cyber space, whatever you want to call it, is already becoming tired, commercialized and grindingly obligatory.

AD – Like Carl Andre who said: “that people quite unconsciously are driven to make works which look like pages of magazines – not even like photographs, but works that will look good in a photograph.”

JW – Yeah, a kind of drop-out feeling...why not? But, at the same time, there are no rules for good art. Just because Carl Andre doesn't like it doesn't mean its not valid for someone else who can prove its validity by making good works in a different way, a way that contradicts Carl. I'm sure he'd agree.

AD – To quote you back in your 1995 essay: “Conceptual art’s essential achievements are either created in the forms of photographs or are otherwise mediated by them.” How does a form of art that praised itself to be mostly intelligible rather than sensible ended up depending so much on the physical nature of photography?

JW – I was wrong about that. I now think that the essence of conceptual art entirely escapes photography. In my view, the essential achievement of conceptual art is to have shown how a bare written statement claiming the status of a work of art for itself had to be accepted. That is all conceptual art really accomplished. I call it the “conceptual reduction”. Once that happens, the ‘project’ of conceptual art is complete. After this moment, all conceptual art can do is to reiterate the presenting and proving of that claim. If you do anything else with it, you have entered the post-conceptual condition. That insists that, because there is no inherent form to art objects, and because if a bare statement can be accepted as a work of art, then any number of other things must be accepted. And as we have seen over the past three decades or so, there is an infinite number of other things that have claimed the status of an work of art and we have no means, no concept, no criterion, to deny that claim.

AD – Where do you locate photography in all that?

JW – Going from what I just said, it should be obvious that the important claims of conceptual art have nothing to do with photography. Photography played an interesting role in working this out, but really, conceptual art did not need photography in any way. Therefore there can’t be any such thing as ‘photo-conceptualism’. Photography was just along for the ride in the process of reductionism.

AD – The word “reduction” is a term used in phenomenology, are you borrowing it from this type of philosophy?

JW – No, I am more taking it from the art criticism of the 60s around Clement Greenberg. But it’s possible that he could have been informed about the thought current you are mentioning. He explained that art historically tended to reduce itself to the inescapable elements of its medium. Conceptual art took that reductionism to an ultimate limit, one that can’t be surpassed.

AD – You wrote: “The two reigning myths of photography: the one that claims that photographs are “true” and the one that claims they are not”. With the advance of digital post-production, would you now say that the only myth left is that photographs are not true?

JW – No, I don’t think that digital has had that effect at all. There are very strict rules in the press for the use of photographs today. No alteration of press photographs is permitted. The idea of manipulating photographs to obscure the reality of the recording has really not played much of a part—at least not yet, and not in democratic, constitutional societies. I believe it has rather migrated to a more creative use of photography whether it is commercial, like fashion, or art. The real effect of the digitalization of photographs is what we were talking about earlier: the accelerated distribution.

AD – Is what you do a challenge to the practice of reportage?

JW – Emphatically not—I have never contested the dominance or centrality of the reportage idea of photography. I only argued (maybe primarily with myself) in the 70s and 80s that there are other dimensions of photography that could be explored, ones that have to do with artifice and what I call ‘cinematography’. The point was—and maybe still is—that these aspects are of equal artistic validity, though likely not of equal social importance. They are as likely to lead to positive artistic results as any other approach to photography, including the most strict forms of reportage. I’ve made quite a few pictures I call ‘near-documentary’. By that I mean pictures that most often begin from me having seen something and not photographed it directly; and then having by various means reconstructed or re-enacted that occurrence with the aim of making it resemble an act of reportage without being one. Those of my pictures that resemble reportage do so because I want them to. They are my contemplation on how reportage looks.

AD – This behavior is similar to the Robert Smithson’s Monuments of Passaic or Dan Graham’s Homes for America as you described in Marks of Indifference.

JW – Yes, their work was really important for me and has a lot to do with my sense of ‘near-documentary’.

In the 80s for example, when people like Cindy Sherman and I began to be known, a lot of people thought we were doing ‘fiction’ and that was one side of photography, and then there was more traditional work that dealt in ‘fact’; and that there were now two completely different approaches to photography as art. That was a very inadequate way of looking at the situation, and there are still a lot of people who see it in such rigid binary terms. The significant thing was the rethinking of the relation between reportage and artifice inside of what photography does as a medium, and the recognition that both of these elements are equally inherent in it. That complexity is one of the most interesting aspects of what emerged in the 70s. The parody of reportage in Smithson, Graham, and Ruscha I talked about in my essay really helped set that process in motion

AD – At the end of the essay you wrote that “photo-conceptualism was then the last moment of the pre-history of photography as art”, where are we now?

JW – Well, I guess we must be in the history period! Some times you write these kinds of statements because you are in the flow of writing an essay and it sounds right, even though it is probably hyperbole. Still, when you read it back to me it sounds interesting in the sense that up until this moment there was a kind of orthodoxy about what photography could be as art. It was based on Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, or Atget--the document as an aesthetic entity, which is perfectly valid and remains perfectly valid, but it didn't include the possibilities we have just been discussing. I think there was a turning point in the way that photography was understood as art.

AD – What was that turning point?

JW – In the 20s, the idea that photography could be another art like painting or literature was considered a reactionary way of thinking because the interesting thing about photography was that it was new and that, if it was 'art' at all, it was going to be art in a completely new way. That was the avant-garde notion of photography. But that idea had become pretty tired by the 60s. It seemed to me that if photography is an image making process then there is no way it cannot be art like the other arts because art is an image making activity. Therefore I think the idea of photography being a radically and unequivocally a new art was itself a symptom of its newness and a valid expression of the excitement created by this newness. But by 1970, photography was not new anymore. And so this sense of it became an obstacle to seeing it accurately and to renewing it. Suddenly, it appeared that the characteristics photography shares with the other arts became more interesting than the things that distinguished it from the other arts. At that point, the thought changed to: how could photography **not** be art?