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The Luminist

By ARTHUR LUBOW

On a damp winter morning, 20 weather-beaten men waited at a bleak corner in east Vancouver. You can find scenes like this in most cities: places where laborers gather, hoping that a van will pull up with an employer offering cash in return for a day's work. This scene, however, was riddled with curious anomalies, starting with the middle-aged figure dressed in black who stood behind a tripod-mounted camera and patiently watched the men wait. And what were the men waiting for? Not a job. That they already had, courtesy of the photographer, Jeff Wall, who had hired them at the actual "cash corner" where they normally congregated and then bused them to this spot he preferred a half-hour's drive away. No, they were waiting for Wall to determine that the rain had become too heavy or the light had grown too bright or the prevailing mood had turned too restless for him to obtain the feeling of suspended activity and diffused expectancy that he sought in the picture. He was prepared to come here, day after day, for several weeks. On any given morning, typically after three hours elapsed, he would adjourn until the next day, authorizing the men to receive their paychecks of 82 Canadian dollars and get back into the bus. Until then, all of us — the men, Wall and I — waited for something to happen that lay outside our control.

Photography has always involved waiting. When the technology was young, slow-acting emulsions required both photographer and subject to wait motionless for the image to register. The introduction of fast film changed the way a photographer must wait. In the tradition of documentary photography that arose, the photographer is understood to be waiting for the right convergence of subject, lighting and frame before clicking the shutter — waiting for what a master of the genre, Henri Cartier-Bresson, famously called "the decisive moment." Lee Friedlander, another great street photographer, compared this anticipatory state to the hunting alertness of a "one-eyed cat." The metaphor of the hunt has seeped into the essential language of photography. You don't click, press or squeeze a picture; you shoot one. Walker Evans wrote of his "subway series," the portraits of unaware New York train passengers that he began in the late 1930s: "I am stalking, as in the hunt. What a bagful to be taken home." And Diane Arbus's friend and mentor Marvin Israel said after her death in 1971: "The photograph is like her trophy — it's what she received as the reward for this adventure."

One thing that Wall knew for certain when he took up the profession in the late 1970s is that he would not become a photojournalistic hunter. Educated as an art historian, he aspired instead to make photographs that could be constructed and experienced the way paintings are. "Most photographs cannot get looked at very often," he told me. "They get exhausted. Great photographers have done it on the fly. It doesn't happen that often. I just wasn't interested in doing that. I didn't want to spend my time running around trying to find an event that could be made into a picture that would be good." He also disliked the way photographs were typically exhibited as small prints. "I don't like the traditional 8 by 10," he said. "They were done that size as displays for prints to run in books. It's too shrunken, too compressed. When you're making things to go on a wall, as I do, that seems too small." The art that he liked best, from the full-length portraits of Velázquez and Manet to the drip paintings of [Jackson Pollock](#) and the floor pieces of Carl Andre, engaged the viewer on a lifelike human scale. They could be walked up to (or, in Andre's case,

onto) and moved away from. They held their own, on a wall or in a room. "If painting can be that scale and be effective, then a photograph ought to be effective at that size, too," he concluded.

However, judging from the record of his three decades of work, which is the subject of an exhibition opening today at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (and traveling later to the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) and the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#)), I suspect that what Wall found most unsatisfying about photography when he took up a camera was its marginal position in the art world and in art history. There was an established roster of great photographers and classic photographs, which embraced, among other things, the uncannily empty Paris streetscapes of Atget, the formally inventive New York skylines of Alfred Stieglitz and the austere Hale County studies of Walker Evans. The canon led right up to the street photography of Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander. "I couldn't get into '60s art photography — Friedlander, Arbus and Winogrand and Stephen Shore," Wall says. "These guys were in a photo ghetto. They were into their own world, with photo galleries and their own photo books." Ambition also colored his thinking. For an energetic young man, what appeal was there in a genre whose practitioners seemed to have already taken their best shots?

Wall thought big. When he emerged in 1978 as a fully formed artist, he presented photographs that demanded equal status with paintings. In sheer size, they were measured in feet, not inches. He produced them as unique objects, not in editions, and their aura was heightened by the mode of display: enormous transparencies lit from behind by fluorescent bulbs, a "light box" format that was typically used for advertising. Like a commercial light box, a Wall photograph grabbed you with its glowing presence, but then, unlike an advertisement, it held your gaze with the richness of its detail and the harmony of its arrangement. You could study it with the attention you devoted to a Flemish altarpiece in a church, and you could surrender yourself to its spell as if you were in a movie theater.

In his methodology, Wall sidestepped altogether the central challenge preoccupying the street photographers, of how to impose a satisfying formal composition on a subject captured instantaneously. Rather than hunt for material to photograph, he manufactured his subject matter in the studio. He was creating what he depicted, not merely the depiction itself. His first cataloged photograph, "The Destroyed Room," shows a strewn heap of women's clothing in a ransacked room that a careful observer can detect (and is meant to detect) was constructed as a set for the photo shoot. Equally clear, in this tableau of violence directed against a woman's possessions, is the tip of the artist's hat to the feminist art criticism of that time. However, what even a well-educated viewer might have missed, without Wall's printed exegesis, is the reference the photographer was making to a great 19th-century painting, "The Death of Sardanapalus," by Delacroix, in which an Assyrian king, his armies defeated, languidly commands the pre-emptive destruction of his court and harem. As significant as any of these allusions is Wall's insistence that you recognize them. He was pushing his claim to belong to the great tradition of Western art as hard as he could.

How things have changed. Photography no longer needs to clamor for a place at the table; at times, it seems to be hogging the meal. One of the great shifts in Western art over the last three decades is photography's move from a subsidiary position, akin to the one still occupied by drawings and prints, to a central place alongside painting and sculpture. Literally, it has ascended. Anne Tucker, curator of photography at the [Museum of Fine Arts](#), Houston, recalls that in the '70s, photos were found "on the way to the restroom or the restaurant in every museum." She adds: "We've left the basement."

The commercial arena has also registered photography's elevated status. Last year, an Edward Steichen

moonlit pond from 1904 set a record for a photograph at auction when it fetched \$2.9 million at a Sotheby's sale. Even in the context of the art-world bubble, that was eye-popping. Denise Bethel points out that in 1990, when she came to the Sotheby's photographs department she now runs, the record at auction for a painting was held by a [van Gogh](#) portrait of Dr. Gachet, which sold that year for \$82.5 million, and for a photograph by an Edward Weston study of a nautilus shell, which brought \$115,000 in 1989. What has occurred since? "The record for a painting at auction today is [Picasso](#)'s 'Boy With a Pipe,' for \$104 million," she says. "Over 15 years, you have gone from \$82.5 million to \$104 million, which could just be inflation. In photographs, the record was set here at Sotheby's with \$2.9 million for a Steichen photograph. In 15 years, from \$115,000 to \$2.9 million — that's not inflation. That gives you some idea of the explosion in photography." The explosion continues: Earlier this month, Sotheby's London set a new record by selling Andreas Gursky's giant diptych of a 99-cent discount store for \$3.3 million.

Whatever his rueful ambivalence about the art-world sales mania, Wall can take some credit for the recognition of photography as a full-fledged art form. (As for his own prices: While a large Wall photograph infrequently appears at auction, his dealer's price — and remember, a gallery generally charges much less than an auction resale brings — is about a million dollars. The typical buyer is a museum or a major private collector.) "His best pictures are so good and so original and so fabulous, nothing else today looks like them," says Peter Galassi, chief curator of photography at [MoMA](#), who has curated the current exhibition with Neal Benezra, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Singular as Wall's achievement may be, his ambition has inspired a wave of younger photographers. You can see the influence of his huge images and studied compositions on the Düsseldorf group led by Gursky, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer. (Gursky has cited Wall as "a great model for me.") You can see it as well in the man-in-the-street pictures of Philip-Lorca diCorcia — done with a large-format camera, strobes and unwitting passers-by — which continue Wall's reworking of the documentary tradition. The recent staged portraits of derelicts by an older photographer, Boris Mikhailov, in which the unfortunate actors are playing themselves, also owe a debt to Wall. Gregory Crewdson's elaborately staged tableaux of overwrought small-town Americana are a mannered extension of Wall's cinematographic use of performers and sets. The list could go on indefinitely. Wall doesn't like the work of all of these photographers. He is critical of pictures that are unthinkingly big merely for the sake of being big, of sensational subject matter that is "too remarkable and too interesting" and of photographers who "want to nail something" and "hit it square on and make it impressive," where he himself would "rather miss the nail and leave it crooked." But he likes the notion that he has extended the possibilities of photography — and of art.

One of three children born to a physician father and a homemaker mother, Wall, who is 60, grew up in a comfortable neighborhood in south Vancouver, where his parents encouraged his early ambition to be an artist. Although all four of his grandparents were Jewish immigrants from the Ukrainian city of Odessa, and he has produced two photographs set in a Jewish cemetery, he says that his parents "weren't religious, weren't very observant of anything," and that Judaism "is not a subject that I'm that obsessed or fascinated by." An intense, clever boy who loved to read, Wall especially enjoyed perusing art publications. Magazines and books were the way the best contemporary art could be seen in Vancouver. Wall remembers his first view of important abstract paintings at the Seattle World's Fair of 1962 as an "overwhelming" experience. "I came back and painted 18-foot canvases," he says. Later, studying art history at the University of British Columbia, he continued to make art.

Through his interest in contemporary art, Wall awoke to the possibilities of photography — realizing, like

many other young artists, that photography offered a way out of the cul-de-sac in which painting had lost itself. The Modernist credo that the artist must not indulge in illusionism but should instead call attention to his bag of tricks — which for a painter included the support of the canvas, the surface of the paint and the two-dimensional flatness of the image — had led to the monochrome paintings of Minimalism. “I had done monochromes to the point where I was painting on the walls with transparent varnish,” Wall recalls. “Some would have a little bit of gold in them, so it would glitter in the sunlight. There was a clear surface of shiny nothing. There was no place you could go beyond that.” The only plausible next step — and this is where the art world had moved — was to renounce the physicality of art entirely in favor of conceptualism. Committed to political and artistic radicalism, most conceptual artists sought to avoid making artworks that might function as commodities, mystifications or palliatives that helped sustain the status quo. In its purest form, conceptual art shunned the baggage-encumbered media of paint or wood and instead manipulated language. “As soon as it was clear that a piece of paper that said it was an artwork was art, then anything was an artwork,” Wall says.

It was under the cloak of conceptual art that photography in the 1970s emerged from the photo ghetto and entered mainstream art galleries. Photoconceptualism often took the form of documentation — either of workaday urban structures and other undistinguished sites (typically accompanied by deadpan, off-kilter texts) or of ephemeral performances. The perfection of the image and the print, so crucial to traditional photography, no longer mattered. The photographic image had been reduced to a kind of thought-illustration, and the artists taking the pictures regarded themselves not as photographers but as artists using photography. Wall himself scored a precocious success as a conceptual artist in 1970, when his cheaply produced booklet, “Landscape Manual,” of nondescript Vancouver places that he photographed from a car was included in “Information,” a hallmark conceptual art exhibition held at MoMA in New York. Still, this was not what had drawn him to art, and it did not hold him for long.

In 1970, Wall stopped making art. With his wife, Jeannette, a native of England whom he had met as a student in Vancouver, and their two young sons, he moved to London to study art history at the Courtauld Institute of Art. Wall spent much of his three years in London watching movies and reading critical theory. After the family returned to Vancouver in 1973, he earned a living as an instructor; while teaching studio art and art theory, he wrote screenplays and fantasized about becoming a filmmaker like the auteurs he admired — Hitchcock, Bresson, Fassbinder and [Jean-Marie Straub](#) and Danièle Huillet. Friends warned him off. “I kept saying to Jeff, knowing he was a control freak, ‘Hitchcock was able to have a lot of control over the images in his work, but you won’t be able to go to Hollywood and have that kind of detailed control in a movie,’ ” recalls his early mentor and close friend, Ian Wallace, a postconceptual artist who has had a long and interesting career combining photography and monochrome painting. What apparently cured Wall of the filmmaking bug was the experience of collaborating on a failed movie with Wallace and a mutual friend, Rodney Graham, who has since gained a reputation of his own as both an artist and a musician. The Hitchcock-influenced film followed a woman who steals clothes as she shops. “Jeff was a powerful personality and had all these ideas,” Graham says. “It ended up being totally his film.” Actually, it ended up being no film at all. Wall was unhappy with it and ditched the project, leaving Wallace to salvage stills as large blowups.

The art that Wallace was creating on his own, Wall says, seemed more successful. Wallace produced very large photomontages that he would cut up and paste, rephotograph and hand-color. Sometimes he would stage modern-dress versions of classic paintings, in which his friends would assume one or — with the benefit of montage — several parts. (When I asked Wall whom he played in Wallace’s rendition of

Caravaggio's "Calling of St. Matthew," he replied: "Jesus. I probably wouldn't have settled for any other role.") In the way that a calorie counter might admire a gourmand friend, the finicky Wall respected Wallace's loosely constructed images. "They looked really good, really rough too," Wall says. "He was very free. There were no precedents."

As he well knows, that's not quite true. The history of photography is stocked with precedents, dating back to its earliest days. You think there is something new about seamless photomontages? In the 1850s, Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson made elaborate composites from multiple negatives. Or staged tableaux? Hippolyte Bayard depicted himself as a drowned man in 1840, and photographers have been staging such shots ever since, with F. Holland Day's hammy impersonation of Christ at the end of the 19th century anteceding Wall's more restrained performance in the role. Yet the use of photomontage and the staged tableau seemed fresh to Wall, Wallace and their friends because they were using these techniques in the self-reflexive Modernist spirit of their age. Their versions were patent contrivances, calling attention to their artificiality.

Wallace's work was strongly in Wall's mind when he took his family on a trip to Europe and Morocco in the summer of 1977 and first visited the great collection in the Prado in Madrid. As he has sometimes recounted the story, the impression made on him by the Velázquez paintings in the Prado reverberated with the advertising light boxes that he encountered on the side of bus kiosks as he traveled, setting off an explosive artistic reaction when he got back to Vancouver. "I saw the Velázquez, Goya, Titian — I loved it and wanted to be part of it somehow," he told me. "Every time the bus stopped, you were looking out the window, and there was a sign in a light box. I began to think, It's luminous, Velázquez was luminous, I'll try it. I thought, It has a certain vulgar quality, a rough quality, a slightly uncivilized air they brought to high painting." The paintings in the Prado exerted a galvanizing impact a century earlier on Manet, one of Wall's heroes; the parallels must have been irresistible. Even before these bus-stop epiphanies, however, Wall had been considering light boxes as a way of avoiding the distressing deterioration of photographs over time. "I was always interested in permanence," he says. "It's really important to me that art gets old." Far more than most oil paintings, color photographs degenerate. Cibachrome printing, which uses metallic rather than organic dyes, is more durable than the alternatives. Unfortunately, the dyes are embedded in a shiny paper that Wall loathed. By printing the pictures as transparencies in light boxes, he avoided that drawback.

When he came home, Wall started working at a furious pace on the light-box transparencies that inaugurated and continue to characterize his mature artistic career. It was a turbulent period: Jeannette had left him, an estrangement that lasted a dozen years. "I did a lot of work between '78 and '79," he says now, with the uninflected tone and ruminative evenhandedness that are features of his conversation. "Even though I wasn't that pleased about the situation, I wasn't that displeased on another level." He was ready in late 1978 for his first one-man show, which took place at the Nova Gallery, a small exhibition space devoted to photography that Claudia Beck, an art historian, and Andrew Gruft, an architecture professor, opened in Vancouver two years earlier. Wall interviewed them before agreeing to the exhibition, to make sure they were versed in the latest art discourse. "His attitude was, 'I don't want to show with you if you don't have the right ideas about things,'" Beck recalls. Soft-spoken and exceedingly polite in his normal interactions, Wall has a razor-sharp mind that can slash through artists and critics he disdains.

Presenting his exhibition as an "installation" rather than as a photography show, he placed "The Destroyed Room" in the storefront window of the Nova Gallery, enclosing it in a plasterboard wall. You could see it only from outside, where, especially after dark, it resembled an actual vandalized room. "Cars would jam

their brakes on at night,” Gruft says. “I think we had a few near misses.” Before the show closed, the piece was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada, a rousing send-off to a young artist’s career.

Although Wall’s early light boxes reflected what was happening elsewhere in the art world, some of the resemblances were superficial. By using himself as a model, he was playing with the idea of performance that photographer-artists as diverse as Urs Lüthi, David LaMelas, Hannah Wilke and the just-emerging Cindy Sherman were exploring; yet unlike these artists, he didn’t care to make points about social role-playing or identity formation. His use of a light-box format that is derived from advertising suggested a radical analysis of the spectacle of consumer culture, but in what may be revisionist hindsight, he maintains today that when he chose to make Cibachrome transparencies, “I was not especially interested in doing a critique of advertising — it was an accident.” His fastidious concern with the physical beauty of his images also set him apart from most of the contemporary avant-garde photographers and closer to the painters he revered.

For, attuned as he was to the ideas that preoccupied conceptual artists, Wall cared more about the pictorial issues that have historically governed painting. In the contemporary painter’s crisis, he found an opportunity. He thought photographers could undertake the mission that many painters were neglecting: the depiction of how contemporary people talk, dress, work, quarrel and play. He understood just how strange it would be for an artist with Modernist credentials to resuscitate ambitions that had been largely moribund since the passing of Manet. Nevertheless, there are qualities specific to photography that might prove advantageous to the depiction of quotidian reality. Where a painter must employ tricks of foreshortening and tonal gradation to simulate what the eye perceives, a photographer need only point the lens to have everything emerge in instant perspective. Although a smooth photographic surface may be less tactilely pleasurable than a textured layer of paint, it arrives unburdened by the weight of art history. “There’s just a whole lot of problems that photography doesn’t have to engage with,” says Michael Fried, a prominent critic and art historian who has championed Wall’s work. “The photograph shifts the register to a different place. The missing ingredient is everything to do with touch and sensuous surface. It’s a big price, but by paying that price there’s a lot that is sidestepped.”

But staging a street scene and then photographing it as if it had “really” occurred: Wasn’t that a pretense that betrayed the honest parameters of photography? Shouldn’t a photograph be a document of things the photographer found in the world? Not necessarily, Wall thought. “What an artist could do with photography wasn’t bounded by the documentary impulse — but that other part was underdeveloped,” he told me. “Painting could be topographical realism or it could be angels — in the same medium. Why couldn’t photography do the same?” Many earlier photographers, like Brassai and Bill Brandt, occasionally set up shots that appeared to be candid. Unlike them, Wall and his like-minded colleagues, including Sherman and diCorcia, were unashamed of their fakery. For them, it was one mark of their artistry.

In his early work, Wall self-consciously emphasized how weirdly hybrid his enterprise was. He overlaid allusions to great 19th-century painting and to current feminist art criticism in studio pictures that showed off their artificial construction. For example, in “Picture for Women” (1979), he reconceived Manet’s masterpiece “A Bar at the Folies-Bergère” by changing the setting to a photographer’s studio. In Manet’s painting, the central figure, a barmaid with downcast eyes, is visibly the object of a male gaze, emanating from a customer who is seen reflected in the mirror behind her and who is located in a perspectively impossible position that approximates the one occupied by the viewer of the painting. When he composed his photograph, Wall set his camera, seen (like Manet’s gentleman client) as a mirror reflection, at the center; an attractive young woman stands at the left, coolly contemplating the camera

and the photographer beside it, who is none other than Wall himself. In a clever inversion, the camera and its operator have become the central subject of the picture and the object of feminine scrutiny. If it were merely a didactic exercise, "Picture for Women" would hold limited interest. However, the beauty of the seven-foot-long glowing image enralls even viewers unfamiliar with the art-historical allusions. If you do recognize how Wall converted the receding globe lights of the Folies-Bergère bar into regularly positioned overhead bulbs, deepening the pictorial space in his photograph as Manet did in his painting — well, so much the better. But your enjoyment of the picture doesn't depend on it.

Over the course of Wall's career, which numbers only about 130 pictures, he has restlessly resisted repeating himself. Very soon he moved out of the studio, where he often spent months on a picture, to photograph landscapes and street scenes. "I tried to open several paths at once, knowing there were several you could follow," he says. For landscapes, his main challenge was locating places he thought were worth photographing. The pictorial tradition of Vancouver rests on sublime scenery, either celebrating its majesty or deploring its destruction. Artists of Wall's generation shied away from that. "We're all interested in the fissures and cracks in the city, not in the romantic, beautiful notion of the city," says Christos Dikeakos, a photographer. "Sometimes, we like to think of ourselves as National Geographic photographers who have gone off assignment." Although residents of Vancouver who see Wall's photographs will recognize their city, with its distinctive overhead electric wires and encircling mountains, Wall asserts that the sites he seeks are the generic nondescript ones. "This is a drab strip, I love it," he said one gray morning as we drove down a commercial thoroughfare, coming back from the day-laborers shoot in an eastern suburb. "It has a lot of potential."

Having chosen not to live in an art capital like New York or London, Wall professes that he could just as easily have lived anywhere, with little effect on his work. "One thing I hate with small cities is the myth of their specialness," he says. "It's like in Europe, everywhere has its own ham, its own wine, its own cheese, and they're all nice, but it doesn't interest me." He is after "the indeterminate American look," which he says he can find by not looking for anything in particular. "You have to forget about the idea of the spirit of the place," he says. "It's one of the big, consoling myths of people who live nowhere." Starting in 1980 with "Steves Farm, Steveston," in which he photographed a subdivision marching onto agricultural land, Wall has, in his landscapes, zeroed in on an equipoise between the natural and the man-made. In a Wall picture, the industrial structures that inhabit a harbor or the lofty pine that has survived suburban sprawl is no more or less "natural" than the other aspects of the scene.

While no impediment to shooting landscape pictures, the laborious setup of a large-format camera on a tripod loomed as a critical constraint in the genre of street photography, which is traditionally done by a quick-moving lensman toting a lightweight 35-millimeter Leica. Beginning in 1982, through the re-creations that he calls "cinematographic photography," Wall circumvented the problem. Typically, he would see something, often a small event with compressed human drama and political overtones: two working-class women absorbed in a heated conversation; a man making a racist gesture to an Asian passer-by; a dejected Vietnamese man standing beneath a tree. Rather than snap it, he would go home, think about this glimpse of everyday life or popular culture and then, if he wanted to proceed, hire performers to re-enact the scene. He argues that the sharpness of his resulting image comes close to what the ever-adjusting and -compensating eye perceives, a precision that usually eludes the documentary photographer. We have grown so accustomed to the grainy, blurry pictures of Robert Frank, Weegee, Cartier-Bresson and other great documentary photographers that we extol the deficits — the lack of clarity and detail, the patches that are too bright or too dark — as the hallmarks of authenticity. "You'd have

some loss, and that would be interpreted as life escaping film," Wall told me. His pictures display a different loss. "You have to accept the fact that it is not a snapshot and can't have those qualities," he said. "It is a semblance of life occurring on the fly, but it is a semblance. A semblance has its own value." He pointed out that in the visual arts only photographers and cinematographers are criticized for staging rather than directly recording scenes, since the other arts can never offer anything other than re-creations of the outside world.

Rather than employ professional actors, Wall usually prefers to hire people like those they are portraying. It's a device he lifted from cinema. "One of the things I liked about Italian neo-realism was just using people as they were, in situations similar to their real situations," he says. "If you're interested in the actual, it's the closest to the actual." In later years he has tried to elide the distinction to the vanishing point, engaging actual art restorers in "Restoration," field anthropologists in "Fieldwork" and day laborers in "Men waiting," the picture I watched him shoot. The performers are playing themselves. However, they are also clay in the hands of the artist. The risk in these "cinematographic" pictures is that Wall will overmanipulate them, until the figures stultify into lifeless puppets. Technological progress exacerbates the danger by giving him greater powers of control.

At the beginning of the 1990s, enlisting the aid of new advances in digital technology, Wall went on holiday from the actual to explore the realm of fantasy and allegory with elaborate montages. "I thought the computer was an escape route into the unreal," he says. To deflate the grandiosity of these photographs, which he constructed as elaborately as the grandes machines of French Salon 19th-century history painters, Wall injected a sharp black humor. In his studio he staged a vampires' lawn picnic and, even more extravagantly, a conversation among resurrected Soviet soldiers slain in Afghanistan. He imported Hollywood special-effects consultants as part of his team. "I used up a lot of blood," he says. He quickly grew tired of these outlandish subjects, but computer technology remains part of his artistic arsenal. By converting his film exposures into digital files, Wall can then superimpose them invisibly and endlessly, often assembling a final image on film from many different shots. The technology freed him from the tyranny of the shutter click and allowed him to build a photograph in the way in which a painter makes daily additions and adjustments to a canvas. For an elaborate work like "A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)," depicting a group of men who react as a wind blows away papers and leaves, he used more than a hundred shots in the painstaking composition of the final 12-foot-long picture. "The historical irony," says the critic Michael Fried, "is that at the very heart of what these guys are doing when they use advanced computer technology to assemble a photograph pixel by pixel is this point-by-point labor that predates Renaissance brushwork and goes back to the earliest panel painters, where you put the paint on dot by dot." Wall has reconsidered two earlier pictures that he made before the availability of advanced digital technology and, with the agreement of their owners, revised them with material from alternate takes. "The problem in the old days when you were working with one piece of film is, it's like triage," he explained to me. "You had to take the least bad."

With computer montage, Wall can also surmount some of the stumbling blocks that bedevil photographers who want, as he does, to reproduce the way the eye sees. It is virtually impossible to photograph a room with daylight streaming in the windows unless you either underexpose what's inside or white out the exterior view. In "Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona" (1999), he was able, through seamless montage, to depict the detail of the shadowed pavilion interior and what lies outside the glass wall that a janitor is washing. He could similarly accommodate the wild variety of incandescence in "After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue," an over-the-top re-creation of the light-festooned

basement dwelling of the protagonist of Ellison's novel. The use of photomontages is invisible without being truly hidden.

In an implicit acknowledgment that the walls of the photo ghetto had fallen, around 1990, in a series of still lifes, Wall began directly engaging with photographers as he had done with painters. "He felt he had to go away from photography to build this whole castle, using cinematography, using the painting tradition of Delacroix, Manet, Velázquez," says Peter Galassi. "Now into that castle he has found a way to introduce all the photographic material he excluded originally." Although Wall is still obsessed by the longevity of his work, he no longer restricts himself to light boxes. He began making large, beautifully graduated black-and-white photographs on paper in the mid-'90s ("Men waiting" is in black and white) and ink-jet color prints more recently still. Over the last decade, he has acquired four small buildings in a convenient if drug-infested downtown district. There, with the help of two full-time assistants and others as needed, he can develop and print all of his work.

"Men Waiting," with its cast of 20, its two-week shoot and its on-the-street location, is a small-scale Wall production. Not long before, the artist devoted a full year to "In front of a nightclub" — a picture of young people standing outside a Vancouver club at night. The shoot took so long because the club Wall found, on a heavily trafficked thoroughfare, could not be photographed as he wished. There was no place for him to stand with his tripod and large-format camera. So he had the club exterior — the columns and grille-work of the facade, the gum-spotted sidewalk, the concrete curb — reconstructed in a studio. One assistant worked for six months dressing the set. "Of course, you can't see everything he did, but that doesn't matter," Wall says. "There is dirt and moss growing in the cracks where the bottom of the building is crumbling, but you can't see it. The discoloration of the sidewalk is extremely accurate, and it took many layers of application. My son and his friends came and chewed gum. That was their job for two weeks." He placed his strobes in the precise locations occupied by the street lamps and other lights that shine opposite the real nightclub. Concealed in a van with blacked-out windows, he and his assistants parked outside the actual club on several nights and, using a telephoto lens, took 300 or 400 snapshots of the kids gathered there. Wall scrutinized the photos for characters and clusterings he liked, then he hired 40 extras from a casting agency. Dividing them into two groups and giving them general directions, he photographed them over the course of a month on alternate nights. ("People's metabolism is different at night, their coloring is different," he explains.) For each group he finished with only one frame that satisfied him. "You only need one," he points out. Using digital technology, he combined the two photos of the crowd with a third one of the building into his final picture.

Wall enjoys going to extraordinary lengths. "The artistry of doing something is just fascinating," he told me. "If you don't like the artistry, why be an artist? It's fun." For another picture, "The Flooded Grave," he kept an oversize custom-built aquarium in his studio for more than six months. The concept of the photograph was to depict a watery world within a freshly dug grave. In his quest for verisimilitude even in this hallucinatory picture, Wall retained two marine biologists who fished out sea anemones, sea urchins and octopuses from a single offshore spot. "I wanted to make it just like a moment in time undersea, not a compendium or display," he explains. "I wanted to make it as real as I could."

While in his early pictures Wall openly displayed his contrivances, now he would rather not discuss them. "It doesn't make any difference," he says of the nightclub picture reconstruction. "Because what you are seeing here is an exact replica of the place. People get all hung up on the process, and they don't see the picture." Some critics who supported Wall at the beginning of his career say that he himself has gotten hung up on his process — seduced by the elaborateness of his techniques and the gorgeousness of his

images into abandoning the effort to make viewers think hard in a Modernist way about the gaps and distortions inherent in perception. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, a leading art historian and critic who was an important friend and backer of Wall 25 years ago, says that “Jeff’s shift into narrative representation and Pop versions of subject matter in the light boxes was a strategy to make conceptual art more communicative. It became eventually so grand and so glamorous, it aimed so much at redeeming pictorial traditions, that the original intention was lost.” In place of the former critical approach, Buchloh and like-minded commentators argue, Wall is trying to do as a 21st-century photographer what 19th-century painters like Manet and Seurat did in their elaborate depictions of contemporary life — an historically absurd undertaking. “His claim to be a new history painter is very problematic for me,” Buchloh says. “The pictures have become very overwhelmingly spectacular objects. There is a kind of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk quality. You have the set and the narrative; all we are waiting for is the sound.”

Wall himself asserts that without conceptual art’s exploration of documentation, performance and manipulated language, his career is inconceivable. Indeed, he argues that the sustained attempts by conceptual artists to expose and undermine the pictorial claims of photography ultimately opened the way for a resurgence of depictive art. “How could the iconophobia of the mid-’60s not have on the flip side of the medal someone like me?” he says. “If that phase hadn’t happened, I would be trying to be like Seurat or Manet or Cézanne, and that would be a big failure, because you can’t be someone not of your time.” Significantly, being of his time to Wall no longer entails an obligatory nod to critical art theory in his pictures, nor the need to write theoretical essays as he once very successfully did. “My love of depiction is just affectionate,” he told me. “I’m a more affectionate person than I thought I was. I like trees or I like people’s faces. That’s one reason I think my work has changed. I realized I wasn’t interested in filtering my affection for things through certain levels of mediation.” Yet the Modernist demotion of subject matter’s importance resonates for him more strongly than ever. “Believing in the specialness of what you are photographing is a disaster,” he said. “Then you think the photograph will be good because of what is in it. Cézanne taught me that that is not true. An apple is not very interesting. He expunged any attachment to the subject matter, except what he brought to it. In the painting he would bring it back to life. Only by believing that his painting it is what would enliven it could he make it happen.” Over the last 15 years, Cézanne has replaced Manet as Wall’s cynosure.

Wall is most comfortable discussing his pictures in terms of their formal composition and their broad underlying themes. “He likes being sober,” says his friend the photographer Roy Arden. “He enjoys having a clear mind.” When I asked what interested him in the subject of day laborers, Wall told me that he was fascinated by “the physical animal energy that is present on the street and waiting to be disposed of.” Yet he also, with minimal prodding, acknowledged that the subject matter of his more politically charged early pictures is linked thematically with the recent work. The germinating idea for the nightclub picture, for example, is the solitary figure of a rose seller who can be seen unobtrusively working his way through the line of young clubbers. The rose seller is a quintessential Wall character, as is the small boy who watches at the edge of the room in “A ventriloquist at a birthday party in October 1947” and the down-on-his-luck Native American standing near a dumped shipment of spoiled lettuce in “Bad Goods.” For that matter, “Men waiting” could easily have been called “Band of Outsiders.” “I think Jeff identifies with these figures,” says Wall’s friend Ian Wallace. “They become an allegory for his own sense of difference. He’s created those figures to mirror his own alienation or sense of exclusion.” When I asked Wall how he related to these marginal types, he first explained how single figures break up a formally boring clump, but then readily conceded: “My pictures are obviously related to my own life. Why would I be interested in them otherwise? I’m not a sociologist. I must identify with these figures, even though I often don’t like

them, I don't even feel that sympathetic to them sometimes. But I must identify with them in some way because they keep coming into pictures that I want to make." One of his less successful pictures, "The Goat," depicts four boys tormenting a fifth; it was shot in a lane near Wall's childhood home. "I don't see that as autobiographical, although I was probably an outsider kid in some way," he said. "But I wasn't the loner kid in school. I never got ostracized from anything. In 'The Goat,' I would more likely be part of the gang than the other guy, although I wouldn't be proud of it and I would probably identify with the other guy."

A more startling piece of autobiographical material lies buried (or out in plain sight) in "The Destroyed Room," the breakthrough light box that depicts a woman's brutalized bedroom. Wall made the picture in 1978, which was the year his wife, Jeannette, left him for another man. (After that relationship ended, Jeannette returned to Jeff, bringing with her a third son, whom they have raised together.) To construct the scene in the picture, Jeff used Jeannette's clothing. "I borrowed her clothes because we were still on good terms and she had the good clothes," he told me. For all the talk of allusions to Delacroix and feminist art criticism, I wondered if the most crucial piece of subtext for "The Destroyed Room" might revolve around a spurned husband's rage. "You're probably right, but it doesn't feel right to me," he said. "I don't remember feeling particularly angry at that time." He acknowledged that he "might express a feeling through a series of mediations." But the subject didn't intrigue him. "I don't find my own experiences very interesting," he said. "I find my observations interesting. Maybe that's why I'm a photographer. Maybe an observation is an experience that means more to you than other experiences."

Wall has been accused of being a control freak who smothers the life out of his pictures. He certainly is a man who likes to plan for all contingencies and command a situation. Yet he has chosen an art form that is characterized by uncontrollability; even with digital editing, accidents will occur. Sometimes they are happy accidents. In the course of shooting "Men waiting," for which he had prepared in his usual meticulous way, he changed the frame of the picture. One of the reasons he liked the location he had selected (to double for the less formally complex if admittedly authentic "cash corner") was a scraggly little tree that had shed its leaves for winter. Further down the street was another tree, a giant fir. After taking five days to find his camera position, he concluded that he couldn't eliminate the unasked-for fir from the picture, but by including only part of the trunk, he would minimize it. On one of the first days of the shoot, the rain increased, and several of the men huddled beneath the evergreen for shelter. When that happened, Wall realized that the fir had a role to play in the picture after all. He changed the camera setup to encompass the entire trunk, allowing the crowd of men to continue to the edge of the picture and, by implication, beyond. "That tree bothered me all along," he told me. "If it hadn't rained hard, I might never have noticed it. Now I'll just include it. It's stronger for it." Throughout the shoot, he would perceive undirected movements — an umbrella stuck in the mud, a hooded head lowered — and choose to keep them. Speaking softly on a walkie-talkie, he would ask his three assistants to adjust the position and behavior of the waiting men. The final picture was structured by his intelligence and artistic sense, but it was animated by the unpredictability of his living subjects. "You can't make these things up," he said.

I asked Wall about "Polishing," a photograph of a young man shining his shoes before he goes off to work. The picture had required many experiments to arrive at the correct angle and position of the camera and subject so that the hand applying the rag to the shoe looked the way Wall envisioned it. "If you want to get a photo like Garry Winogrand, you go to a shoeshine stand and you fire away, and either you get it or you don't," he said. "It's the same problem, but I get to do it over and over again until I get it right. The level at which the rendering must be done is ratcheted up. If you're in the street and you get it right, great. If

you get it almost right, that might be O.K., too.” No sooner had he said that, however, than he retracted it. “No, I don’t think that’s true. If the hand is wrong in a Winogrand, he would probably reject it.” He mused for a moment about all the pictures that the great street photographers must have missed to their frustration. Then, comparing documentary photographers of the past with the digitized, artifice-friendly practitioners of today, he said something he would never have said when he started out 30 years ago: “The more you think about it, there are fewer differences than you might think. It’s all photography.” Thanks in part to Wall’s pioneering pictures, “artists using photography” no longer feel a need to distance themselves from others in their medium. They have emerged from their clumsily confining, defensive chrysalis.

Arthur Lubow, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about the singer Thomas Quasthoff.

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