

JEFF WALL

PHOTOGRAPHS 1978 – 2004

April 30 to September 25, 2005

MEDIA INFORMATION

Schaulager's third exhibition is dedicated to the work of the Canadian artist Jeff Wall (born 1946). Since 1978, Jeff Wall has produced around one hundred and twenty photographs, which is not an especially large number for a photographer. In Basel approximately seventy of these works will be shown, from all phases of his creative life. Several of these works are already icons of contemporary photography. Others are rarely exhibited and little known. And several are exhibited for the first time ever.

Jeff Wall. Photographs 1978–2004 is the largest exhibition of this artist's work thus far. It presents the first opportunity to experience the full range and distinctiveness of the artist's creative work produced over a period of many years. The exhibition shows how his oeuvre has for years – apart from the technical advances – given form to a pictorial concept that Jeff Wall has called, in allusion to Charles Baudelaire's dictum on Manet, the 'painting of modern life'. It is a pictorial concept, however, that was developed a hundred years later, under completely different circumstances, using the formal language of photography.

Jeff Wall's colour photographs are not presented like traditional photographs, but like large, luminous images. His work consists of large-format colour transparencies, mounted in aluminium boxes and illuminated from behind; since 1996, the artist has also produced large black-and-white photographs. The direct effect of the lighting in combination with the scale accounts for the almost magical presence of Jeff Wall's images. Only gradually does it become apparent that – in contrast to the promise of the illuminated surfaces – the subject matter often consists of unspectacular scenes, most of them from ordinary urban life. They are photographs of urgent realism and atmospheric density that have contributed decisively to a re-evaluation of the medium as an artistic genre on a par with painting and sculpture.

The focus on representing scenes of contemporary everyday life places Wall's oeuvre in the context of a tradition initiated over one hundred years ago by both painting and photography. Photography in particular claimed to show an unfiltered representation of the present, which, in those days, meant industrialised society and its effect on the life of the individual.

Similarly, Wall chooses to concentrate on the everyday life he encounters, exploring it with a very specific, intensely casual way. His native city, Vancouver, the capital of the Canadian province of British Columbia, ideally illustrates – in comparison to major cities like Paris, Berlin and New York – the ‘new presence’ of a late industrial and multicultural society. Against this background, Jeff Wall’s investigation of the history and conventions of photography as medium of depiction makes perfect sense, as does his study of film and nineteenth-century painting, especially Manet, who pioneered the *peinture de la vie moderne* prior to the advent of photography.

On this basis Jeff Wall constructs his new, contemporary pictorial concept. He experiments with the means offered by painting and photography. His search for a credible means of representing everyday life has led to a visual idiom in an open balance between the twin possibilities of the documentary photograph and the cinematographic staging. In the mid-nineties, the emphasis shifted from cinematographic photography to documentary or faux-documentary photography.

Whether cinematographic or documentary, the attitude that informs all of his photographs with increasing clarity is the same: They have no moral pretensions; indeed, they do not communicate a fixed meaning, but rather emphasise its ambiguity. For all their visual perfection and saturated presence, they are in essence fragments that leave things open. What makes them so fascinating is that each picture seems to tell a very special and unique story, but one that remains alien for all its familiarity.

The exhibition was organised by Schaulager, and after being shown in Basel it will be exhibited, in reduced form, at the Tate Modern in London. A catalogue raisonné is being published on the occasion of the exhibition that will illustrate and comment on all of Jeff Wall’s work since 1978 (Steidl Verlag, Göttingen).