



# Vancouver to Paris

by Adele Freedman

Jeff Wall's career traces a determined path from a tree fort in Vancouver to the uppermost echelons of the international art world

A crazy-eyed insomniac under the kitchen table. Dead Russian soldiers in conversation on the hills of Afghanistan. A nondescript man in coveralls at work untangling an absurdly baroque heap of rope. Two girls in pyjamas bewitched by yellow jello. A motley crew in a spotlight forest clearing, some sucking each other's blood, others just sitting back, drinking it all in. A couple of hunters off to bag game on the curb of a new subdivision. These are some of the photographs produced by the Vancouver artist Jeff Wall in the nineties. In Paris, on the balmy night of October ninth, it seemed as if *tout* the international artworld had turned up at the Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries to see them.

On the eve of the opening, while fine-tuning the installation of nineteen recent works, Wall was receiving. He is tall, thin, thin-lipped, thick-haired, sharp-nosed, baby-faced. His draw is his intelligence, ever greased and cocked — "I always lived in my head" — and his manner is gracious and sharp. German television was expected momentarily. Standing by were Wall's New York dealer Marian Goodman; his Munich dealer Rüdiger Schöttle; the exhibition's joint organizers Catherine David and Richard Francis — she the commissioner of the 1997 *Documenta* at Kassel, he the chief curator of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where the show kicked off; Tuula Arkio, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki, next stop after Paris; various critics, including Thierry de Duve, who's written what he calls "a very bizarre essay" about Wall for a new Phaidon book; and Wall's gregarious wife Jeannette, whose pet name for this high-powered milieu is "the snakepit."

*Untangling* 1994  
Transparency in light box  
74 x 92 in.  
Edition of two: Private collection, San Francisco; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg  
Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



*Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* 1992  
Transparency in light box  
90 x 164 in.  
Collection: Mr. David N. Pincus, Philadelphia

*A Hunting Scene* 1994  
Transparency in light box  
66 x 93 in.  
Edition of two: Fundacio Caixa de Pensiones, Barcelona; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg  
Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York



By opening night, the walls of the five upstairs galleries at the Jeu de Paume are aglow with Walls. There are landscapes, interiors, still lifes, and tableaux vivants. Lit from behind, the transparencies are intense and enthralling, some as big as billboards. Wall is famous for his bold way with the banal, apparently inartistic format that advertises common goods and services. He's made of it a medium for creating scenes of modern life as he understands it to be. In the eighties, that meant slick depictions of pain, violence, exploitation, conflict, and repression — agitprop in reverse — intended “to show something of the dirt and ugliness of the way we have to live,” as he said in a 1989 interview. In the nineties, as visitors to the Jeu de Paume could discern in his picnicking vampires, his haunted kitchens and hallways, Wall has ventured into the grotesque, the irrational, and the sublime. In a way, he's lightened up.

Some things haven't changed, though. Most of Wall's pictures are total productions — posed, not captured — drawing on the full range of movie-making fakery: actors, costumes, sets, locations, props. Art historian as well as artist, he borrows compositions from Caravaggio, Velázquez, and Manet, true to his credo that art of the pictorial kind, the kind that principally interests him, doesn't have to be reinvented every morning and can still be avant garde.

In light of all the activity that takes place behind the scenes of Wall's scenes, it's striking that nothing much seems to be happening onstage. When they're not crazed or dazed, his new characters tend to be vacant, absorbed, clueless, or *pleins de tristesse* — sometimes all at once, like the girls in the kitchen who can't connect with their jello. The question that keeps being posed is not “What does this mean?” but “Why doesn't this mean anything?” Wall has provided the images. Bring your own frame.

By the time the exhibition closes at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London this May, preparations for a Jeff Wall retrospective to be mounted in 1997 by The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles should be well underway. Yet Wall hasn't had a one-man show in Canada since 1990. He hasn't had a dealer in this country since The Ydessa Gallery closed in 1988. He's never had a dealer in Vancouver. His take on the art scene in Vancouver is that there isn't one, nor has there ever been. “Unless you have impressive types, you don't have a scene,” is how he puts it. In Wall's estimation, the late Alvin Balkind constituted Vancouver's one and only impressive type. Other impressive types have been instrumental in his storied career, most importantly the New York artist Dan Graham, introducer and kingmaker. Wall's parents weren't exactly unimpressive, either.

It was Wall's mother Eudelle who introduced him to Balkind in the mid-fifties. She took him round to the New Design Gallery founded by Balkind and Abraham Rogatnick to acquaint Vancouver with modern art. There Wall saw paintings by Jack Shadbolt and Don Jarvis. “I was old enough to appreciate them,” he says. He was ten.

Speaking as an adult Vancouverite, Wall characterizes as an eastern preoccupation what he calls “Canadian artness.” He's never thought of his work in terms of nationality or nationalism. “I never felt I had to be anti-American like Greg Curnoe, or anti-German,” he says. Speaking as an art historian in one of his finely calibrated tones of dispassion, he voices something like an identification with Fred Varley, painter of people: “He's the anomaly, he's the important figure.” In a roundabout way, he confesses to something akin to sympathy for Alex Colville, too. “Europeans,” according to Wall, “don't understand the lure of solitude for Canadians. That kind of solitude and cut-offness, as not a fate but an

*Insomnia* 1994  
Transparency in light box  
68 x 84 in.  
Edition of two: Private collection, London; Kunsthalle Hamburg  
Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Galerie Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne





*Coastal Motifs* 1989  
Transparency in light box  
47 x 58 in.  
Edition of three

experimental aim, is a very powerful part of America, which is Canada, too. It was the whole aim of the Protestant movement in North America. People don't yet know how lonely they can become. The desire for atomization — the aversion of one for the other — is most powerfully expressed in crowds. Colville's art is based on aversion. I don't like it — it's frosty — but he does have his finger on something."

**B**roadly read and politically astute, Wall knew that Vancouver, his hometown and laboratory, had worldly implications — that people in cities around the globe could see themselves in its regional landscape and social dynamics. "It's a very provincial environment," he says, "but it's a new environment — something fresh — which hadn't been looked at. The city is being developed for the first time. The developments are predictable, but it's futurist. There are a lot of edges."

Wall, born in 1946, grew up on one — Granville Street and 49th Avenue. Back in the fifties it was a new neighbourhood bordered by bush, where young Jeff kept a treehouse. His perch was felled to make way for a mall. He had a liberal Jewish upbringing. His late father Maurice was a doctor; his mother — "she has an artistic sense" — opened a decorating business after her three children graduated from high school. "We always had art in the house," says Wall. "Mother bought a few pictures she liked." Wall married young; he made up his mind early to become an artist. He started painting when he was twelve. "Some parents would have been upset. Mine

weren't," he says. Dr. Wall fixed up his toolshed so Jeff could have a studio — "and it was a good little spot," he says, still appreciative.

The Seattle World's Fair of 1962 was "an inspiration" — an opportunity to encounter first-hand the work of American artists familiar only from magazines — Franz Kline, Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman. "That had an enormous influence on a lot of people — huge! It was a chance to see..." University offered the opportunity for reflection. Wall studied art history, first at the University of British Columbia, where Balkind, having closed the New Design Gallery, ran the UBC Fine Arts Gallery and taught a course that "all the artists took — everyone I could think of," says Wall. He recalls a literate and cosmopolitan environment, American dissidents, and visits to Vancouver by the leading-edge likes of Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Robert Smithson.

Jeff and Jeannette spent the years between 1970 and 1973 in London, where the couple's two sons Sam and Jamie were born. Wall took courses at the Courtauld Institute of Art. He read aesthetic theory, political economy, film theory — Marx, Kant, Benjamin, Adorno — and interested himself in photography: "A lot of artists became interested in photography like I did, through Pop and Conceptual art. They started something new. There were a lot of things in photography that still remained to be actualized."

Wall refers to these years as "a hiatus, a secret time — there were a lot of things to think about." In 1974, he moved with his family to Halifax, where he taught nineteenth and



*Jell-O* 1995  
Transparency in light box  
56 x 71 in.  
Edition of two: Goetz Collection, Munich; Setagaya Museum, Tokyo  
Courtesy: Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Galerie Johnen & Schöttle, Cologne

*The Giant* 1992  
Transparency in light box  
15 x 19 in.  
Edition of eight  
Courtesy: Patrick Painter Editions, Vancouver



twentieth-century art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He impressed Dennis Young, the department chair, as “one of the most convivial of men.” Wall didn’t like Halifax — “too cold, too small” — but it was there he met Kasper König, an impressive type who would include him in *Westkunst*, a now legendary survey of art from 1939 onwards staged at the Rheinhalten Messengelände in Cologne in 1981.

In 1975, when Wall returned to Vancouver, he was still struggling “to find my way back to making things.” An illumination occurred during a vacation in 1977, when he and the family were returning to London from Spain by bus. He had just been looking at Velázquez in the Prado. “I remember seeing a lighted bus sign,” says Wall. “There was just a little click there.” Wall had found his format. As he told Dutch curator Els Barents: “It was not photography, it was not cinema, it was not painting, it was not propaganda, but it has strong associations with them all.”

## Everything started to click.

In 1978, Wall made *The Destroyed Room*, a sumptuous still life à la Delacroix of some woman’s trashed bedroom; and the first of a series of *Young Workers*, heads and shoulders of multi-racial youth gazing heroically upwards. In 1979 came *Picture for Women*, a remake of Manet’s iconic painting *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*; *Movie Audience*, three panels of ordinary folk, including a little boy, fascinated by something we can’t see; and *Double Self-Portrait*, two Walls simultaneously within the same walls, each differently clad.

“There were years of showing the work when it was hard to get anyone in Canada to look, let alone elsewhere,” says Willard Holmes, former Director of the Vancouver Art Gallery, now Deputy Director of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. But in the hindsight of a stranger, Wall’s rise seems swift enough. Holmes selected him for inclusion in *Pluralities*, the 1980 survey mounted at the National Gallery of Canada, then located in an office building in downtown Ottawa. Wall hung his *Young Workers* in the lobby, above the elevators. One year later, his *Movie Audience* journeyed to *Westkunst*. Jean-Christophe Ammann, an impressive type who was there, noticed Wall’s “stupendous faculty for creating extrapolation.”

Catherine David is of similar mind. Swathed in black Miyake, she paused for comment at the end of a celebratory lunch hosted by Marian Goodman the day after the Paris opening. A few metres away, in the Place de la Bastille, striking public service workers were massing for a demonstration. “Nice soundtrack,” said Wall. Talking about Wall, David was effusive: “Even if you know about the light box, the actors, the art history — beyond that, it’s a special way of making art,” she said. “The images are condensations of many, many heterogeneous explanations. It’s never-ending. I feel I can look at these images for a long time. All the *sous-entendus* are important for me.”

Some of Wall’s images resound with implication. *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, actually created in 1990, is a monumental evocation of words we cannot hear. What we see is twelve children at a birthday party. They’re gathered in the living room, a period setting toned in vintage shades of red, brown, green, and cream, and illuminated from within by a couple of lamps with ribbed shades — “*Comme Vermeer!*” exclaimed a woman on opening night. Some are sitting on bulky armchairs, others kneel, a few stand. Their spellbound gaze is fixed on a big, scary doll that a woman — could it be Mother? — is holding on her lap. The dummy’s got auburn curls à la Shakespeare, an Elizabethan ruff, a Cyrano nose, and a mouthful of teeth. It looks to be talking up a storm. But what is being said — and by whom?

We can only speculate. Pictures can be seen but not heard. That interests Wall, who deems speech “the thing that’s forever escaping — the fugitive.” This being October, 1947, its sense is even harder to capture. Wall explicated that *sous-entendu* during a talk he gave at the Jeu de Paume. “It’s the last moment before television, which finished off the old spectacles,” he said. The space that television would soon invade is for now occupied by a different kind of box — a large wooden case that houses Wall’s pint-sized bard, a storyteller from a time that predates even the mass spectacles of the modernist era.

From the family photos on the mantel to the bric-à-brac and balloons, the details illustrate the lengths to which Wall will go to set a scene. Though it seems a scouted location, the interior was custom built. “I was just getting into the idea of making things,” says Wall. “Artists make things.” He imagined the house to have been constructed circa 1938 or 1940, but imagined the furniture to be about ten years older: “It might have been brought from their old house.” He wanted “a West Coast look, too — the California plaster thing — and I wanted it to be scary: ‘What is that doll saying to those kids?’” It took six months just to design and fabricate the *guignol*. Wall did the drawings, leaving construction to “the skilled people behind me” who also made the furniture. Even some of the articles of clothing — puffy-sleeved dresses for the girls, full-legged trousers for the boys — were specially sewn.

Why go to all this trouble? As we see, he doesn’t have to. The 1992 tableau titled *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* is a straight shot. “It was his last drawing in the lab. He was leaving. I thought I should do something,” offers Wall. Seated before a desk, surrounded by the clutter of his trade — books, binders, crayons, Windex, a gooseneck lamp, a roll of toilet paper — Adrian Walker is contemplating a sepia drawing-in-process propped up on his lap. On the desk, to the right of his own right arm, is his subject — a wizened arm. The picture is a symphony of *sous-entendus*, a photograph of a man hand-drawing a hand, even as life-drawing (or is it death-drawing?) is being supplanted



*A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* 1990  
Transparency in light box  
90 x 139 in.  
Collection: J.P. Berghmanns, Lhoist, Brussels

Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver 1992  
Transparency in light box  
47 x 65 in.  
Edition of three





*The Stumbling Block* 1991  
Transparency in light box  
90 x 130 in.  
Collection: Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto

by photography. It's as good as anything Wall has cast and directed.

His compulsions nevertheless lie elsewhere, with the cinematic idea that "something doesn't have to exist for images of it to arise," and the ambitious idea of reconstructing the grand pictorial tradition in the media age. Besides, he gets a kick out of working the way he usually does. As he says, "I rehearse my actors until they can do what I want. It's an intimate process. I like it a lot."

By the end of the eighties, Wall was being pegged as a creator of Marxist fables with a learned eye for visual possibilities and a yen for theatrics. That's no small achievement, but something had to give. It's not that he abandoned his political position; he's still pushing his imagery "to the edge of emptiness," in the memorable phrase of the American art historian T.J. Clark, and he continues to refer to the classics as "a way

of generating tension and stress, maybe." But he opened a vein of fantasy which has given his work new flavour and an elusive new dimension.

His breakthrough into the grotesque was abetted by digital technology. The first piece to be accomplished digitally was *The Stumbling Block*, made in 1991. Though not part of the travelling exhibition, Ydessa Hendeles — an impressive type who owns ten Walls, more than any other collector — included it in *Projections*, a recent show she curated at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in Toronto.

The stumbling block is a New Age bureaucrat dressed in something like hockey gear emblazoned with the seal "Office of the Stumbling Block Works Dept." Friendly-looking and at your service, he's stretched out on a busy sidewalk in downtown Vancouver should anyone feel the need to stumble. It might be a new beginning to the rest of your life. Here comes



*A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* 1993  
Transparency in light box  
90 x 148 in.  
Collection: The Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London

someone now! Nearby on the pavement sits a businessman who, by the stunned look on his face, has already had his therapy. Nobody's looking. Everyone's moving along.

Wall shot the five figures in the foreground, stumbling block included, in the studio; the background of street, office towers, signs, and wires is a straight shot. That left the artist as free as a salon painter to drop figures in where he wanted them. "The more you use computers in picture-making," he once told an interviewer, "the more 'hand-made' the picture becomes."

On the heels of *The Stumbling Block*, but constructed down to the last hill and shred of bloody viscera, came the 1992 computer montage *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*, an epic depiction of corpses in conversation. (The Russian army, Wall decided, was the one he most wanted to see because "they would have suffered the most disillusionment of all.") In the same year, he made *The Giant*, a multiple the size of a television set wherein an elderly unclothed woman towers over the landing of a public library, holding up a piece of paper. It's like something out of science fiction: *The Invasion of the Seventy-Year-Old, Fifty-Foot-High, Bare-Naked Lady*.

Wall's pictorial preoccupations keep reforming in digital guises. The masterly montage known as *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* appeared in 1993. Four twisted figures in baroque mode — one's wearing gumboots, another's got a file folder — hold the foreground, hanging onto their hats or just looking ecstatic as the wind scatters leaves and papers across a luminous grey sky. The background is a masterfully composed post-industrial landscape — fields, a canal, and signs of settlement on a distant horizon.

He revisits the theme of the edge in *A Hunting Scene*, made in 1994. Two men with rifles are crossing a digitized street in search of prey, but in the near distance we see a housing

development. "Hunters moving across the boundary of the wild and the settled — it's a beautiful theme," says Wall. "If it strikes me the right way, it's a subject. Then I move to what it looks like. I knew it would be there. It's a real thing." He found the edge he was looking for in Richmond. "How do I find my locations? I look," he says. He didn't like the ground, so he computerized it. Likewise the sky. "The computer opens up solutions to pictorial problems. I used the computer because I wouldn't have succeeded without it. I assembled a reality into a collage. I made it appear to happen."

Garrulous *guignol*, human stumbling block, dismembered arm, gobs of jello escaping a delicately cupped hand, sudden gusts, drooling vampires, hunters patrolling a subdivision — that's quite a gathering of images, no matter how you look at it. "The only identifiable principle of variation is a scale of believability," writes Jean-François Chevrier in the exhibition catalogue. This is not convincing. In the days of CNN and MTV, an image of a tree is no more credible than a vampire. Everything is believable; nothing is believable. What's to believe?

The point is, Wall's got so many channels going at once that viewers can surf to their hearts' delight. Sandy Nairne, a long-time Wall-watcher and Director of Public and Regional Services at the Tate Gallery, believes "Jeff's work is wanting to engage in the question of 'What is public imagery? What of public imagery is usable, understandable?' It's about testing public reaction." That's one point of view. Richard Francis admires Wall's uncanny ability "to operate in the in-between" — in between photography, painting, and film-making; in between whatever's going down nowadays. In-between is a happening place to be, so that's possible. All I know is that, after some exposure, the world starts looking like scenes by Jeff Wall: humorous in a deadpan kind of way, the banal up against the weird. As Wall says, cutting through all the *sous-entendus*, "I'm just an artist. That's all." Incredible! ■