

A Matter of Cleaning up: Treating History in the Work of Allan Sekula and Jeff Wall

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This contribution considers two ways of artistically approaching photography today. Comparing a selection of examples from the work of Allan Sekula with some of Jeff Wall's pictures, it looks at different methods to treat the relationship between the photograph and its caption(s). Furthermore, it investigates diverging attitudes towards the pictorial aspects of the medium. Also, whereas both artists are very much engaged in art critical writing, one can conclude that the interaction between their essays and photoworks is very much opposed. Finally, departing from the analysis of that selective body of images by both artists, which are addressing what can be named an 'iconography of cleaning up', two diverging world views and modes of treating history are traced.

Keywords: *Allan Sekula (b. 1951), Jeff Wall (b. 1946), photography and pictorial autonomy, photographs and captions, portrait photography, photography and art criticism, photography in contemporary art, photographic realism*

The invisible image and the larger montage

Consider a photograph by Allan Sekula that is part of his sequence *Titanic's Wake* (1998/2000) (figure 1).¹ *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul* shows an image of a man who is holding a shovel, and who, at first sight, might appear—yet for no obvious reason—to be deepening a channel running through a very badly maintained quay. Alongside, a heavily listing and half-sunken freighter has been stranded. The worker, however, occupied as he is with sweeping mud and stones in front of him, seems not to notice the tragedy of the wreckage that has taken place right behind him. Immersed as he is in his own laborious activity, the ship appears to be slowly but very certainly sinking into unnoticed yet irretrievable depths. When observed in this way, as a single picture, it is quite unclear what this image is all about. The message it communicates when one looks at it as an autonomous work, is highly misleading. For, as I need to clarify, the interpretation I just gave of this photograph is largely wrong.

In 2005 Allan Sekula exhibited a monumental photographic series entitled *Shipwreck and Workers* in two outdoor public locations, first in front of the buildings of the Vienna Chamber of Labour and immediately afterwards around STUK Arts Centre in Leuven. The opening sequence of the billboard installation is a triptych displaying different viewpoints on the very same wrecked ship (figures 2, 3). The Leuven version is accompanied by a written

1 – The sequence has been published in two quite different versions: first—and substantially shorter—in *Art Journal*, 60:2 (Summer 2001), 29-37; and secondly, in Sekula's book bearing the same title, *Titanic's wake*, Paris: Le Point du jour 2003, 45-84.



Figure 1. Allan Sekula, *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul*, part of *Titanic's Wake*, 1998/2000.



Figure 3. Allan Sekula, *Shipwreck and Workers, Version 2 for Leuven*, 2005.



Figure 2. Allan Sekula, *Shipwreck and Workers*, Vienna Chamber of Labour, 2005.

statement, mentioning in very small typescript at the lower right the title *Shipwreck, Istanbul (triptych)* and the dates 1998–1999. Thus, even though presented at different occasions and times, and in variable presentation contexts, we are obviously dealing with images of the same situation and setting: a shipwreck in Istanbul sometime between 1998 and 1999. Although the worker does not figure on either one of those three images, it is clear now that the man was not deepening a channel but was instead trying to clean up a huge heap of debris, probably caused by the ship's bumping into the quay, which partially destroyed it.

For anyone who reads Sekula's texts, this shifting of the image's meaning when considered as part of a broader entity of photographs and written statements, comes as no surprise. To Debra Risberg, Sekula has stated that in his entire artistic output, 'there is a larger montage principle at work than that internal to any single work, or even book. Any retrospective look allows for that larger montage to emerge'.² Sekula thus encourages us to consider his complete artistic project as a totality or a whole, filled with cross-references and meaningful links to invisible but recoverable images. The introductory statement to his book *Titanic's Wake* also points out: 'Since photographic books are often opened from the middle or the back, it may be pointless to suggest an "optimal" way of reading or looking'.³ As Allan Sekula is highly sceptical concerning the possibility of universal legibility of the individual image, he presents his work as a combination of written text and photography and employs principles of presentation that widely exceed the individual picture. In the folder accompanying the Vienna installation of *Shipwreck and Workers* three statements by the artist are included. The second, indicated as 'B', reads significantly: 'Build a sequence based on another picture that is not part of the sequence'.⁴

2 – Debra Risberg, 'Imaginary economies. An Interview with Allan Sekula', in A. Sekula, *Dismal Science. Photo Works 1972–1996*, Normal, Illinois: University Galleries of Illinois State University 1999, 238.

3 – Sekula, *Titanic's wake*, 2.

4 – Allan Sekula, as quoted in B. Huck, 'Allan Sekula. Shipwreck and Workers', non-paginated brochure accompanying the exhibition *Shipwreck and workers*, Vienna, Museum in progress, 2005. See also <http://www.mip.at/en/werke/640.html> (2 February 2006).

5 – Ibid.

When trying to capture Sekula's methodology, this is a highly revealing starting point. Allan Sekula deliberately works with diptychs and triptychs, double and triple motifs that 'slightly shift the content' of the pictures, as Brigitte Huck argues.⁵ Thus, photographs that are absent from one exhibition or presentation context are nevertheless part of the original horizon of thought of the artist and contribute to determining the conceptual framework of a specific installation or constellation of images. A crucial, though not always readily available link in this respect, is provided by the titles of the images. Through its singular title, *Shipwreck and worker* becomes a 'pars pro toto' for the entire outdoor sequence—in the plural—*Shipwreck and Workers*. And, beyond the artist's production, *Shipwreck and Workers* testifies to all shipwrecks having taken place and to all workers who have suffered from those tragedies.

6 – Rosalind Krauss, 'Reinventing the Medium', *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999), 294.

In Allan Sekula's work, images and titles never bear a one-to-one relationship. As they are often hidden or, when found, quite obviously refer to other captions and other images that are part of his larger visual system, they do not readily fix the meaning of the image. In this respect Sekula's images, while clearly being part of postconceptualist photography, continue to play with, or at least try to rethink, what Rosalind Krauss—following Roland Barthes—described as one of the 'major gambits of photoconceptual practice', namely the 'inherently hybrid structure' of the photographic image.⁶ Although Barthes made his argument on several different occasions, it is interesting to bring to mind his somewhat lesser known study called *The fashion system* (1967), where Barthes clearly argued—while referring to the systematic use of captions accompanying press and fashion photographs—that it is language that attributes one single meaning to an image that, as such, would enhance an infinite amount of interpretative possibilities. Barthes affirms: 'The image freezes an endless number of possibilities; words determine a single certainty'. And he adds in footnote: 'That is why all news photographs are captioned'.⁷ Words, Barthes says, are able to immobilize our perception of an image that, without it, is much more diffuse. Specific captions in that sense heighten our knowledge of images as much as they confine it. In addition, they emphasize certain meaningful elements of an image rather than others, and by so doing structure its meaning. Yet, whereas this is a useful way of working in fashion and press photography, Barthes warns us that the words accompanying a given image can be disappointing in respect to the initial fascination it aroused to our perceiving eye: when combined, Barthes concludes, speech serves to '*disappoint*' [*décevoir*] the image'.⁸

7 – Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, transl. M. Ward and R. Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1983, 13.8 – Barthes, *Fashion System*, 17.

Highly aware of that, Allan Sekula subtly conceals his captions. They do not readily come with the image. As a result, meaning in Sekula's work is not so much to be encountered in the immediately captive relationship between the image and its title. For, in fact, the titles also serve as tools to refer to other images, or to other of his essays. Thanks to this complex, yet all the more fascinating, interplay between text and image, Sekula allows for the images themselves to engage in a confrontational dialogue. It is from looking at the triptych that one knows what to make of the hidden image that is not part of the sequence on display. It is only then that one sees that the worker is not deepening a drain but instead cleaning up debris stemming forth from an uncertain source—the shipwreck?

The artist-critic and the artist/critic

In a relatively recent interview, Benjamin Buchloh and Allan Sekula discuss the montage principles at work in the artist's production. Both agree, correctly in my opinion, that Sekula is one of those rare Titans trying to abolish—or at least question—the separation between the labour of artist and critic. This is a way

of working—they insist—which has become very difficult today. Radical conceptualism, and especially conceptual photography's strategy of pseudo-reportage and amateurization of the image, has already once lost that fight. For it has been unable to surmount the firmly installed institutional divisions in which this cleavage of specializations between the work of the artist on the one hand and that of the critic on the other hand is grounded, with all the consequences this entails for both professions today. From there, Buchloh sets out to distinguish the way Sekula treats the relationship between an artist's self-written critical essay and his own artistic images and the activities of other post-conceptual artists, such as Victor Burgin or Jeff Wall, who have built up a similar enterprise over the past twenty years. All three of them have been engaged in finding ways to reinvent the photo-narrative. Yet, Sekula insists, despite an early common dialogue with western Marxism and despite the fact that both Burgin and Wall are active in the domains of art making and of art criticism or theory at the same time, their ways of 'storytelling' have come to diverge largely from his own.⁹

In the context of the present essay, I want to focus on a comparison between Jeff Wall's and Allan Sekula's critical and artistic production. First, it is interesting to look more closely at how Sekula himself perceives his own way of working in respect to Wall's methods. As he explains to Buchloh, the main difference between them is that Sekula does not draw a line between the presentational context of his critical texts and that of his images: whether he makes a book or an exhibition, both are always intermingled. Apart from his initial, late conceptualist pieces of the early 1970s, which combined the visual and the verbal, Jeff Wall—as a general rule—does not exhibit his pictures together with his critical essays. Despite a few notable exceptions, both usually circulate in different contexts or subsystems of the art world: the texts are published in catalogues or art magazines, the photographs are first and foremost meant to be exhibited in museums or galleries. Thus, Sekula specifies to Buchloh, Wall's work 'has the immense appeal in the current climate of appearing to be unencumbered by the annoying textual residues of conceptualism'.

Both Buchloh and Sekula ascribe this to the fact that Wall has more or less accepted the schism between the communicative channels for bringing out art criticism and those for showing art. As such, Sekula believes, Wall's way of working—despite his heroic Januslike efforts to combine both identities and although he is extremely eloquent at both—reconfirms that division of labour. It succumbs thus to the paradigmatic belief that the visual autonomy of an art photograph can only be established because of the fact that somewhere, in another subsystem of the art institutional framework, critical and historical arguments are being developed that legitimize that supposed—yet paradoxical, for it is mythological—independence. The difficulties Sekula distinguishes in Wall's working method are, first, that the photograph, as a singularly operating (neo-)auratic work of art, ends up in a discursive realm where its meaning first and foremost depends on the fixation of the image's contents through its accompanying caption only. The critical-textual information that the artist has provided, circulates—at least at first sight—in a different discursive system. Nevertheless, and this is the second problem, Sekula concludes, 'the text actually operates, Oz-like, from behind the curtain, as it continues to do for most contemporary art'. What Sekula means by that is clarified right afterwards, while referring to Wall's famous argumentation in his catalogue essay for the 1995 MoCA exhibition *Reconsidering the Object of Art*: 'Wall is [...] a master of constructing highly tendentious historical arguments that chart a path that leads implicitly only to his own work'. It is not a problem at all for an

9 – 'Conversation between Allan Sekula and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh', in *Allan Sekula. Performance under Working Conditions*, ed. S. Breitwieser, Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003, 41. All quotations immediately hereafter are on the same page.

artist to recommend, contextualise or create a discourse around his own work, but why not rather come out for it straight away, Sekula seems to suggest here.

In a recent discussion with Carles Guerra, Sekula has further clarified his methodology, which aspires to abolish the discursive schism between the critical essay and the artwork:

[A]s soon as you create a relay between a text and an image, you undermine any purist claims for either text or image. Neither element is foundational. The image is no longer the truth upon which the text is a commentary or subjective gloss, nor is the text a pinning down of a truth that is otherwise elusive in the image'.¹⁰

10 – *Conversations with photographers. Allan Sekula speaks with Carles Guerra*, Madrid: La Fábrica and Fundación Telefonica (2005), 20–21.

In Sekula's visual system, an image is always part of the larger montage that is made up by the non-totalitarian totality—to employ a Deleuzian term—of his photographic archive. As a matter of fact, Sekula's texts serve to contextualise and at times even go as far as to 'promote' the work: they offer the reader an insight in the artist's view about what is going on in the pieces. A free transposition of William J. T. Mitchell's important distinction in his landmark book *Picture Theory* (1994) between an image-text and an image/text could make us conclude: Jeff Wall takes up the role of the artist who at the same time excels as a critic, but he continues to separate strongly both functions. In that sense he is an artist/critic. Allan Sekula is an artist so much involved in criticism and a critic so much involved in art that, in his artistic project, the distinction between both *métiers* is at the verge of evanescence. Both activities have equal importance, with all the risks this might entail, as Sekula has asserted to Carles Guerra:

'Most of my differences with Wall have to do less with his pictures, than with the historical teleology he constructs in his writing, which leads inexorably to his own work, and of course ultimately to a positive reception of same by [Michael] Fried. It's a "winner take all" attitude, subliminally underscored in Wall's many pictures of people sweeping or mopping up. If you are vain and stupid enough to style yourself as both an artist and a critical historian of art, as both Wall and I apparently are, you had best follow each path to its own separate conclusions, and not expect the one enterprise to justify the other. In fact, you best anticipate the likelihood that one role might well assassinate the other'.¹¹

11 – *Ibid.*, 36.

The Pictorial Paradigm

In the above-mentioned interview, Benjamin Buchloh takes the discussion one step further, while specifically focussing on Allan Sekula's refusal to participate in those post-conceptualist practices that return to 'the single image aesthetic'.¹² 'With increasing intensity', Buchloh argues:

[T]he large-scale, colour photographic image has been pictorialised to such a degree that it has effectively taken the place of painting. So, the radical void created by conceptual art and by the inevitable demise of painting has now been massively filled with enlarged photographs, single image colour prints or single image transparencies.¹³

13 – *Ibid.*

Sekula fully agrees with this analysis, adding that to him, it is 'as if the pictorialism of early art photography ha[s] somehow returned despite the rupture achieved by the modernism of the late teens and early twenties'. Again, Sekula implicitly refers to Jeff Wall, namely to his "'restoration" of the "concept of the Picture"'.¹⁴ Yet, it needs to be stressed that Sekula has clearly insisted to Benjamin Buchloh that his differences with Jeff Wall do not have to do so much with Wall's pictures themselves. To Carles Guerra, he has repeated that it is a misunderstanding to think that his work is entirely opposed to

14 – Breitwieser, *Allan Sekula*, 41.

pictorial autonomy. It all comes down to what you understand by that. Talking to Guerra, Sekula distinguishes his work from ‘the current expanded sense of the pictorial, which continues to extol a dependence on the history and presumed autonomy of painting, of the tableau in the sense first articulated in a radical way by Diderot’.¹⁵ He continues that we should remember ‘that this was an aesthetically conservative ideology for photographers through most of the twentieth century’.

15 – *Conversations with photographers*, 33.

Yet, Sekula admits that he is ‘always thinking about what sort of picture—or pictorial approach, if you want—might work well in a given context’.¹⁶ Giving the example of his important photosequence from 1973, *Aerospace Folktales*, he states that ‘certain images in *Aerospace* achieve the pictorial resolution that could allow them to stand as autonomous works if that were the point’. ‘Others’, he continues, ‘only “work” within their sequential context’. To conclude, Sekula makes a very important issue when he adds: ‘If anything I’ve become more committed to pictorial rigor over time, especially with *Fish Story*, and now especially as I return to work with video, which makes me all the more conscious of the stillness of the still image’. Whereupon, the discussion continues:

16 – *Ibid.*, 34.

Carles Guerra (CG): I was expecting you to give me a more negative answer towards the idea of pictorial influence in your work.

Allan Sekula (AS): You mean that I’m seen as somewhat indifferent to pictorial concerns?

CG: Yes. The recent panorama has been so oversimplified by dividing post-modern photography between the pictorial and the other photographic traditions. If we are to believe some critics, on one side there would be Jeff Wall, and on the other side, Allan Sekula, both representing excluding paradigms, both in the genealogy and practice of photography.

AS: Maybe the opposition it is not so absolute. There must be people somewhere who like or dislike us both at the same time for reasons that are perfectly logical within their own systems of judgement. But if you are to believe Jeff Wall’s greatest defender, Jean-François Chevrier, I’m not even an artist. (Anyone who takes on the role of deciding who is in or out of the artworld’s court is living before 1789, infatuated with pulling the strings of Thomas Paine’s “puppet show of aristocracy.”) Chevrier’s position is so extreme that—like a good underdog—I take it as a compliment. And poor Jeff Wall has somehow failed to convince at least two very serious critics, Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalind Krauss, that his project is worthwhile, one of whom, Buchloh, has been a steady defender of my work over the years. And I have great respect for the work of Michael Fried, who has come recently to see Wall as probably the most important contemporary photographer, and who appears to share the widespread view that the documentary tradition in photography is exhausted.¹⁷

17 – *Ibid.*, 34–36.

In a recent essay, Michael Fried has indeed made an eloquent case in point in favour of the work of Jeff Wall. A long and brilliant analysis of Wall’s *Morning Cleaning*, *Mies Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* of 1999 (figure 4) allows Fried to argue—convincingly, I believe—that Wall’s work restores a strong pictorial tradition of absorption that can be traced back to the eighteenth-century paintings of Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin. The window-cleaner, Fried argues, is separated as much as possible from the spectator not only through his being physically removed from the foreground of the image but also because of the fact that he finds himself in the shadow zone of the work. Yet, it is important to note that Fried at the same time reads *Morning Cleaning* as a quite exceptionally successful picture in Wall’s body of work. Starting his argument with an analysis of Wall’s *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* of 1992 (figure 5), Fried rather places this work in that line of contemporary picture-making that he has—in earlier publica-



Figure 4. Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning*, Mies Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona, 1999.



Figure 8. Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978



Figure 5. Jeff Wall, *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1992.*

tions—traced back to the painting of Edouard Manet. On this occasion, he also links *Adrian Walker* to Gerhard Richter's *Lesende* of 1994. Both pieces, Fried argues, show us a way of working that explicitly thematizes an absorptive painterly tradition in crisis, in that sense that it has become very difficult to deny the fact that paintings are 'meant to be looked at'.¹⁸ The characters depicted in *Adrian Walker* and *Lesende*, however absorbed they might seem at first sight, appear aware of the presence of the artist making the work and, by displacement, also of the spectator. Achieving totally oblivious absorption, as it is the case in such a composed image as *Morning Cleaning*, is the exception rather than the rule in contemporary picture-making, Fried concludes.

The Iconography of Cleaning Up

Thanks to a work such as *Morning Cleaning*, *Mies Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* of 1996, Michael Fried argues convincingly, Jeff Wall appears to come to the foreground as the artist continuing today the modernist 'antitheatrical ideal' in pictorial art.¹⁹ To a certain extent, *Morning Cleaning* goes as far as trying to repair it or at least offering us a "restoration" of the "concept of the Picture" as Wall himself has argued in his best-known critical essay.²⁰ Yet, in other pieces such as *Adrian Walker*, he rather comes close to those artists that are preoccupied with the crisis of this painterly tradition, without deliberately aspiring to restore or continue it as such. They rather appear to be trying to rethink it. I believe that Allan Sekula's body of work, just as much as Gerhard Richter's paintings or some of Wall's pieces, is also part of

18 – Michael Fried, 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein et le quotidien', *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 92 (Summer 2005), 7.

19 – Fried, 'Jeff Wall', 11.

20 – Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art', in A. Goldstein and A. Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art 1995, 266.

that line of thinking. I want to clarify this point by returning to the *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul*. Just as much as *Adrian Walker*, or arguably even a little more, this worker is immersed in an activity that renders him completely oblivious to everything else taking place around him. He does so in a mode that comes close to the obliviousness of the window-cleaner in *Morning Cleaning*, as Michael Fried has described it when writing that ‘the spectator is summoned to feel that the man bent on his instrument is even unconscious of the unique great event (emblematic of the everyday) represented in *Morning Cleaning*, I mean the flow of warm morning light’.²¹

21 – Fried, ‘Jeff Wall’, 18.

Yet, in their mutual unconsciousness of the ‘great event’ taking place, this is exactly the point where both images irrevocably part sides again. The first statement accompanying the Vienna installation of *Shipwreck and workers* reads as follows: ‘A worker shovels debris in front of a freighter blown up against the shore: the Angel of History absorbed in his task, disguised as one of Breughel’s peasants’.²² In the well-known passage from *The Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin describes the angel of history as willing to interfere into the past events, which he has come to see as a series of catastrophes and piling wreckage.²³ In Benjamin’s account, the angel wants to put everything back in order, but he cannot, for his wings are lifted above by a strong blast of wind from heaven. In *Titanic’s Wake*, Allan Sekula instead has confronted the image of *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul* with a wing-like assemblage of two severely damaged plush puppets made by coal dock workers in the port of Vancouver. In this diptych, it is as if the angel has simply landed on earth, has escaped from the storm from Paradise that is called progress. He has taken off his wings in order to start up a blinded way of working, to engage

22 – B. Huck, ‘Allan Sekula’, n.p. and <http://www.mip.at/en/werke/640.html> [February 2d, 2006].

23 – Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Id., *Illuminations*, ed. with an introduction by H. Arendt, transl. H. Zohn, New York: Schocken Books 1968, 257.



Figure 6. Jeff Wall, *Volunteer*, 1996



Figure 7. Jeff Wall, *Housekeeping*, 1996

in a labour from Sisyphus, as Brueghel has indeed demonstrated in several of his paintings. Seemingly totally oblivious to the 'pile of debris before him' growing 'skyward', he paradoxically appears all the more engaged into it.²⁴ In the Vienna and Leuven installations of *Shipwreck and Workers*, the angel was not even there. Yet, in his absence, he was all the more present, as if one could feel that he was already busy working elsewhere. He was replaced by quiet, self-conscious, working-class people who are not afraid of getting dirty. They are Sekula's response and answer to the despair of Benjamin's angel of history. It is the singular lives and experiences of individual people one can come to believe in. They are the ones that make the difference: steadily working, not fearing to get dirty or wet.

In *Morning Cleaning*, Jeff Wall also confronts us with an image representing a laborious activity: the cleaning up of a rarely-used exhibition pavilion. Compared with Sekula's *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul*, it is a completely different image of working conditions: labour here is aestheticised, obliterating the nasty part of the true working conditions of most individuals. Wall's window-cleaner has everything under control. After having repaired his tool (if that is indeed what he is doing), it will take him just a few minutes to dry up the window again and he is ready for take-off. The piece is not even dirty; it seems more as if this man is occupying himself, filling up the boredom of everyday reality. The same can be said of other of Wall's images of people mopping up, such as *Volunteer* of 1996 (figure 6). This picture seems to be engaged in nothingness, there are no stakes, and there is no obvious *work* to be done. To Carles Guerra, Sekula describes Wall's many pictures of people

24 – Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 258.

sweeping or mopping up as emblematic of his ‘winner take all’ attitude. To Sekula, the idea that the appearance of stability can make us come to believe that historical disasters can be overcome is an illusion. Programmatic in this respect now appears Wall’s *Housekeeping* (1996) (figure 7). It is strikingly an image where a woman shows up. Housecleaning traditionally being a woman’s activity, she *has* clearly worked, but the job is now done. Comparing *Housekeeping* to the 1978 *The Destroyed Room* (figure 8), Wall has confirmed Jean-François Chevrier’s remark that *Housekeeping* shows us the moment when ‘the bedroom, newly spick-and-span, is about to be frozen into an image of vacant space, an empty, lifeless interior’, where ‘all traces of having been lived in, been used, have been carefully rubbed out, effaced’ with the following response: ‘Yes, you could say it took twenty years to clean up’.²⁵

To clean up what? Although Wall’s and Sekula’s images are engaged in the same iconographical subject, the narrative meanings they create are paradigmatically divergent. *Morning Cleaning* tells a story of mastery, of a mastered universe. There is no threat and nothing to fear. The background pond is peaceful, the motionless water sweet. The political resonances of this picture, Michael Fried argues coherently, are those of restoration and repair. Mies van der Rohe constructed the Barcelona pavilion for a Weimar regime that wished to make up for the disasters of World War I. Constructed in 1928–29 as the German national pavilion for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition, it was demolished in 1930, only to be rebuilt long afterwards entirely true to its original model (it was opened in 1986). Because of its ‘recent construction’, Fried argues, it is clear that—‘at least to a certain measure’—the Barcelona pavilion is ‘the product of an effort to ‘repair’ history’.²⁶ And so is, by metaphorical displacement, *Morning Cleaning* the result of a programmatic effort to make up for an artistic tradition that has been in crisis since the 1860s and seemingly been thrown overboard in the late 1960s.

Before being engaged with the problems of this world, Wall’s pieces are first and foremost engaged with the internal problems of that artistic tradition. *Morning Cleaning* is a factographic reconstruction of the historical *tableau*, the isolated painting. That is exactly the point where Allan Sekula departs from Wall’s single-image aesthetic. To Benjamin Buchloh, he confirms: ‘the key question for me is whether the meaning structure of the work spirals inward toward the art-system or outward toward the world’.²⁷ Thus, while both artists are reflecting on a longstanding pictorial tradition, the stakes are highly diverse: Sekula neither wants to repair that lost tradition nor does he wish to display an image of history that makes us believe that it is possible to rebuild things in order to make the disasters of their previous destruction undone. When using or appropriating historical references, Sekula makes them part of a deliberate montage that comes out as a ‘disassembled movie’, as he has stated to Carles Guerra, in the already mentioned interview.²⁸

Realism as a Style or as a Project for Art

In Jeff Wall’s work, Sekula explains to Guerra, the historical references one encounters are first and foremost ‘canonical’.²⁹ That is, they refer not only to what has happened inside the art historical tradition but they also express a belief that this tradition is alive today *as never before*. Allan Sekula does not share that conviction. To him, photography today can also be something other than an updated version of the ‘Western Picture’. It can be an instrument to construct a visual language upon the ruins of an artistic tradition without having to restore it. Sekula believes that the impact of twentieth-century avant-garde art and thinking cannot be overcome by a ‘Neo-Realist strand’ of

25 – ‘A Painter of Modern Life. An Interview between Jeff Wall and Jean-François Chevrier’, in R. Lauter (ed.), *Jeff Wall. Figures & Places: Selected Works from 1978-2000*, Munich: Prestel 2001, 181–182.

26 – Fried, ‘Jeff Wall’, 12.

27 – Breitwieser, *Allan Sekula*, 41.

28 – *Conversations with photographers*, 2006, 12.

29 – *Ibid.*, 26.

working, as Jeff Wall has described his more recent work.³⁰ To Sekula, as he has explained to Carles Guerra, a realist way of working has not so much to do with a style but with finding an accurate methodology ‘to invent rhetorical devices (or text-image configurations) that (a)re *socially convincing*’.³¹

Jeff Wall’s linear or teleological notion of history understands realism—or the iconic aspect—as an ontological element of the photographic image. His pictures thus do not only represent a given reality, they also construct one, as if by natural necessity. Sekula, on the other hand, appears rather to be confronting us with a Nietzschean concept of history: as an eternal return of the same or as the ‘vicious circle’ Pierre Klossowski has distinguished in Nietzsche’s vision of history.³² As William J. T. Mitchell has recently argued, while praising Sekula’s work, what we need now—in an age of the omnipresent digital image—is not an ontological but a philosophical realism. This is a realism that hints at “‘the Real’” itself, that ‘gets at the foundations of the real world today’.³³ Realism nowadays, Mitchell insists, is first and foremost ‘a project for photography, not something that belongs to it by nature’.

30– ‘The Hole Truth. Jan Tumlir talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*’, *Artforum*, XXXIX, 7 (March 2001), 117.

31– *Conversations with photographers*, 2006, 21.

32– See P. Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, transl. D. W. Smith, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998.

33– W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Realism and the Digital Image’, in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art. Around Allan Sekula’s Photography*, ed. Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens, Leuven: University Press 2006, 25. The following quotation is on the same page.