

Destruction of Vanity: Domesticity and Violence

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes contemporary photographer Jeff Wall and his representations of cultural memory and domesticity. Wall both references and mimics historically and culturally significant symbols of canonical painting to comment on the role of art in contemporary society. In the coming chapters, this thesis places two of Wall's photographs in conversation with paintings by Édouard Manet, Tintoretto, and Willem de Kooning to examine how Wall deploys representation of domestic spaces to comment on the entwinement of female bodies, sexuality, and economic exchange.

Wall's photographs addressed in this thesis construct complex visual narratives that reflect upon the challenges to representational norms and conventions that were carried out by Manet, and deKooning in their own historical moments. Rather than offering a chronological account of Jeff Wall's artistic trajectory, the thesis examines Wall's critique of ingrained societal perceptions of women and the experience of womanhood itself through case studies of *A View From an Apartment* and *The Destroyed Room* and relevant paintings by Manet, Tintoretto, and deKooning. This thesis analyzes these photographs and paintings in their respective historical and cultural contexts to emphasize the parallels that Wall draws between violence and ideas of women as capital.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this achievement to my family for their unwavering support throughout my education. No effort on my part will be enough to thank you for the sacrifices you have made on my behalf.

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## INTRODUCTION

The contemporary photographer Jeff Wall is a widely renowned photographer who has received recognition in both the United States and Canada. Born in 1946 in Vancouver, Canada, Wall began capturing photographs in the 1960s. In the decades that have followed, Wall achieved increasing recognition in the artworld for his larger-than-life, elaborate constructions of scenes and montages that represent modern existence. The sheer scale of his photographs are reminiscent of painterly genres including those introduced in this thesis: academic history painting, impressionism, and Abstract Expressionism. Having earned a Master's degree in Art History himself from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 1970, Wall is both an artist and an art historian. The influence of Wall's education is seen in his references to canonical artists and artworks.

When Wall first began photographing in the 1960s, Conceptual art<sup>1</sup> was at its peak; in addition to his consistent explorations the generative protentional of interdisciplinarity, the influence of Conceptual art movement is evident in Wall's work throughout his career. Underlying themes in his early work of gender, labor, and capitalism resonated with audiences. In particular, Wall's aforementioned abilities to intersect multiple disciplines and ideas allowed him to comment effectively upon societal

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<sup>1</sup> "The conceptual photographer strives to bring a message to the viewer. It might be a political statement, a social commentary, or, in the case of the work I often do, the portrayal of a psychological idea about people, relationships, and emotions. The viewers' task is to figure out what the message is."

Suler, "Illustrating Ideas with Digital Images: Insights from Contemporary Conceptual Photography," 103.

perceptions regarding women and advertising. In this thesis, I argue that Wall's work contributes to critical discourse regarding the transformation of women into capital.

Wall's photographs are elaborate constructions and montages, often presented in incredibly large-scale lightboxes. Wall's ability to take over the space with his larger than life, cinema like "billboards" make both his photographs and ideas hard to miss. In his exhibitions, these backlit images fill the space of a museum or gallery, which makes for an absorptive, immersive experience to the viewer.

These backlit, life-scale images are often feature themes of advertising, cinema, and publicity. Situated in the space of a gallery, Wall's other lightbox displayed works are all distinctly 'frontal' pictures that foreground the presence of the camera that records them.

They take up spectatorship as a subject matter and refer explicitly to the expectations and conventions of looking at photographs. Indeed, for an exhibition of Wall's works provides a greater framework for further discourse regarding violence and stereotypical vanity that is closely associated with womanhood.

These photographs become a type of billboard and form of marketing that Wall has simultaneously critiques and uses to his advantage and recreated it within his photographs by providing a framework for a larger discourse regarding the nature of capitalism and women's issues.

Wall often makes direct reference to artists such Édouard Manet (1832-1883) in his compositions that depict the struggle of modern life: more specifically, the depiction of women, women's sexuality, and the economic exchange of women themselves.



Rather than presenting a comprehensive or chronological account of Wall's photographic practice, this thesis examines Wall's critique of ingrained societal perceptions of women and the experience of womanhood itself through case studies of *A View From an Apartment* (2004-5) and *The Destroyed Room* (1978). Although these photographs alludes to multiple historical moments, events, and culturally significant pieces of art, I will focus on their connections to Manet's *Un Bar des Folies-Bergère* (1881) and *Nana* (1877), Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), Tintoretto's *Susanna and the Elder*, (1555-56), and Willem de Kooning's *Woman I* (1950-52), *Woman II* (1952), and *Woman III* (1953).

Additionally, I will consider how Wall's use of technological systems comment on the impact of technology in production and consumption in contemporary society.

Relating to my claim that Wall's photography critiques the transformation of women into objects of capital, I propose that his representation of female figures works to blur the line between sexuality and consumption, and imply that these women he represents will undergo a transformation into capital themselves.

His cultural allusions to norms and conventions associated with femininity provide a framework for one of his main points of discussion: that his depictions of women deconstruct and reconstruct historical connotations of femininity of vanity.

In addition, in my analysis of other artists and photographers, I show parallels between Wall's work and the way women have been associated with violence historically in paintings and photographs.

Among the artists that will be considered in relation to Wall's work will be Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Tintoretto (1518-1594), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997).

These will all be considered in light of the sexualization of women, themes of domesticity, and a reconstruction of vanity justifying violence.

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1 Suler, John. "Illustrating Ideas with Digital Images: Insights from Contemporary Conceptual Photography." *International journal of applied psychoanalytic studies* 8, no. 1 (2011): 103.

## CHAPTER 1

### A VIEW FROM AN APARTMENT (2004-5): Wall, Manet, and Tintoretto

In the first chapter of my thesis, I examine Wall's *A View From an Apartment* (2004-5) [Figure 1] as a case study of how Wall's *A View From an Apartment* prompts a reconsideration about class and women's issues as well as technology and gender. My own project is speculative and takes into account that Wall's intentions for his photographs his views of the place of women in the domestic sphere are not necessarily congruent with my interpretive framework.

Between 2004 and 2005, Wall meticulously photographed an apartment in which a lone woman he rented for this woman for the purposes of this project. Oftentimes, Wall's installation projects and photographs are years in the making due to the extensive work required of creating his "staged realities."<sup>1</sup> Wall rented this apartment, provided the woman with a budget, and allowed the woman he rented the apartment to have a budget and instructed her to furnish the home and make it her own.

Over a series of months, Wall installed a video camera to constantly tape her day-to-day life. Wall directed her to ignore the videotape and to simply live her life as she would in the main living area of the home. Given the long duration of this project, Wall underwent extensive editing to construct the final scene. His decision to only photograph one room, the main living area, was a decision made for both the woman's privacy and because the living room that would be the most active room in the home. Wall captured hundreds of photographs during this time and digitally layered them to create his final image. His decision to rent to a single woman addresses the implications and themes of

domesticity and societal perceptions of women as homemakers by situating her in the space that women have occupied for generations.

In *A View From an Apartment*, Wall has captured the main living area with two women. One woman, is standing an in motion whereas the other woman is seated on the couch, immersed in a magazine. The apartment is chaotic with a large amount of various items scattered haphazardly around it. The two women maintain a psycho-sexual order of the household. The mess around them rings of excess and vanity that pertain to my thematization of women as capital and the violence of vanity. The woman's environment is full of stereotypically, feminized items such as laundry, clothing, and knickknacks. The chaotic mess speaks to a cultural economy of subliminal desire in which their sexuality must be present but unspoken. The electronics in the apartment, including televisions and radios, further imply that the women themselves are enveloped in forms and processes of branding that dominate contemporary society.

Completed in 2005, Wall's work allows new definitions and perceptions of sexuality and domesticity to come forward. The initial chaos of the scene and the disarray of the woman's apartment lead the viewer to consider the implications of the chaos in light of received notions of domesticity.

At almost six feet tall, *A View From an Apartment* depicts two women in a Vancouver apartment. Both women are reading, one seated and one standing upright. The apartment is disorderly; dozens of magazines are scattered over a coffee table. Unfolded laundry is in a laundry basket directly in front of the television and an ironing board stands against a wall in the kitchen. Clothes are strewn across furniture and the shelves are so cluttered one can barely see their surfaces. Wall utilizes the magic of marketing to

transform tools of everyday, mundane chores into a quasi-pornographic visual display due to the sheer mass of materials, emblemized by the clothing, ironing board and iron.

The standing woman appears to be in motion and in the midst of folding a cloth napkin. Given the almost life-like scale of the piece, she appears as if she could stroll out of the photograph. One of the most significant features in this piece is the large picture window at the center of the scene. This window challenges the flatness of the photograph by extending the interior space into the broad view of the outdoor harbor in Vancouver. Here, Wall has framed city life as an exterior space. Art historically, the history of glass, reflections and windows carry an array of implications that will be further explored in greater detail within this chapter.

Culturally, the 1990s triggered a wave of alternative photographic practices and ideals. Scholar Lucy Soutter observes:

Like all contemporary art, the 1990s wave of narrative photography is given its meaning by the institutions and rhetorical framework in which it appears...For the most part they [artists] draw from three different strands of postwar photographic practice: first, the subjectivized approach to the documentary tradition championed by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) under John Szarkowski and embodied in the 1967 "New Documents" show of work by Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand; second, the conceptual photographic activities...and third, the postmodern appropriation and staging by artists including Richard Prince, Sherman and Jeff Wall.<sup>2</sup>

As Soutter outlines in her scholarship, Wall creates staged realities and manipulates them to produce his photographs. In *A View from An Apartment*, Wall videotaped and captured hundreds of still images. The narratives he creates are not accidental and include multidimensional meaning and critiques for his audiences.

His commentary on the experiences of womanhood, domesticity, and postmodern suburban life lay the groundwork for his artistic allusions. Wall's artistic allusions provoke further thinking about and production of new discourses about artists' and photographers' influence and what is said about the female form.

The allusions that begin in the next section of this thesis are drawn, in part, due to Wall's extensive interest in art history. His photograph, *A View from An Apartment* speaks to a broader conversation involving the representation of women by male artists and pre-conceived societal expectations about the female figure and roles of women. It is in Wall's representations that his deconstruction of vanity and vanity justifying violence begins to emerge.

*Un Bar des Folies-Bergère* and *Nana*

In this first Chapter, I examine the distinct characteristics that are reminiscent of Édouard Manet's *Un Bar des Folies-Bergère* (1881), [Figure 3], found within Wall's *A View From an Apartment*.

The French painter, Édouard Manet (1832-1883), pushed the boundaries of art in various directions in the late 19th century. One of these avenues was his representation of female figures in his paintings. Manet challenged traditional femininity in a shocking manner for his time period. Through the bodies of his female figures, he constructed an alternative narrative of women and femininity that had previously been uncommon. In Manet's case, he subtly opposes this representation of women and offers an alternative approach. Manet's paintings of unidealized female figures that challenged the viewer with their direct gazes put forward an alternative perspective for gender representation that generated controversy during Manet's time period.

In Manet's *Un Bar des Folies-Bergère*, a modern working woman stands at the center of the composition. She is surrounded by mirrors and holds a gaze with the viewer that is extremely direct and a deviation from typical art historical female subjects. Often, women had been pictured with an averted gaze. However, this barmaid offers no amiability towards the viewer. Moreover, the painting offers insight into class and the idea of women as capital due to her profession, which is presumably prostitution.<sup>3</sup> She is the central figure in the space of the painting, accompanied by a male figure outlined in profile; the viewer is offered a glimpse into her world with the assistance of the wall of mirrors behind her.

Wall's photographs offer parallels between Manet in more than instance.<sup>4</sup> Wall refers to Manet in order to reflect upon the time period in which working and class were enormous factors in Manet's painting and a similar parallel may be drawn about Wall's photographs.

Within Manet's *Un Bar des Folies-Bergère*, there are alcoholic drinks and a vase of flowers directly in front of the barmaid, Suzon, with one flower pinned on the front of her dress. Suzon is adorned in a full-length dress with a low neckline, a cameo necklace, and a gold bracelet. Her hair is tied up and at first glance, she seems to be simply working her job as a barmaid, but she has actively become a symbol of a modern working woman.

In addition to Suzon's attire, her direct gaze is an essential part of Manet's construction of body language that challenges traditional femininity. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, she looks straight forward, in a detached, unflinching manner. As Ruth Iskin notes, Suzon's gaze is not one that is overtly sexualized; rather, her gaze is distant and one of "neutrality."<sup>5</sup>

Another important aspect of the composition is Suzon's scale. In addition to her frontal position and straight-ahead gaze, her stance and scale convey a sense of taking up space unapologetically. The secondary male figure to the left would notionally shift her scale, as he is looking down at her. However, she is not subject to his gaze as she stares straight ahead and stands upright, with her shoulders back, solidly grounded in this position with little sense of the vulnerability that is a common trope in representations of women at the time.

Manet has challenged the trope of the vulnerable female figure in this complex scene. Overall, when one takes a glimpse beneath the surface, the complexities of her



attire, direct gaze, and scale take form and one is able to see how Manet's interpreters deconstructs her overall presence.

In a similar way to Suzon in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, in his painting *Nana* (1877), [Figure 4], the female figure is also not a secondary character in her environment. Rather, Nana looks directly at the viewer with an assertive gaze. Also, while she is standing upright, there is a bourgeois gentleman seated in the corner and almost entirely out of the painting. *Nana* was rejected from the 1877 Salon, the year it was completed, due to controversy surrounding what was deemed as its shocking nature.

Manet's identification as a painter of modern life<sup>6</sup> was due in part to his display of prostitution so directly and unashamedly. In a similar way to Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, *Nana* is not looking away from us. In fact, *Nana* has turned and twisted her posture and her body in order to face us and engage in direct eye contact. As stated earlier, her posture is straight and her feet are planted firmly into the floor and this sort of direct eye contact is once again seen as improper for a young woman. She seems to be caught in a state of undress, or perhaps dressing again.

She is clad primarily in undergarments, her hair is tied up, and she looks at the viewer as if she were expecting them to come in and see her. She has turned away from her mirror and her lips are turned up in a slight smirk. In a sharp juxtaposition, the aforementioned gentleman to her right is fully dressed in garments appropriate for a bourgeois gentleman and is wearing a top hat. Nana's state of undress contrasted with his state of being fully dressed emphasizes the potential transaction that may have just taken place or is about to take place in this scene.

In a comparison to the distanced comportment of the barmaid Suzon in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, *Nana* engages with the viewer emotionally. Whereas Suzon's gaze is detached in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* *Nana* is attempting to connect with the viewer in this emotional manner; her attempts to face us by twisting her torso and her slight smile imply a welcoming of who she is looking towards.

The attire, direct gaze, and scale that Manet constructs for both *Nana* and *Suzon* is reflective of new ideas surrounding societal perceptions of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although completed five years apart from one another, both reflect the shifting presence of women social and urban landscape, and offer valuable insights into Paris during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that can inform the role of women in Wall's 20<sup>th</sup> century and for today as well.

As Manet was influenced by cultural and society shifting values, so was Wall. When Wall began photographing men and women in his installation projects in the 1960s and 1970s, a multitude of movements were at their peak. Up until this point, womanhood, family, and the domestic sphere were closely intertwined. In *A View From an Apartment*, Wall creates a space where these ideas may be considered separately and consider the implications of considering women themselves as capital.

Sheena Wagstaff describes the time in which Wall produced *A View from An Apartment*, as period of "identity crisis"<sup>7</sup> in the field of photography. This certainly rings true in Wall's piece. For instance, the inclusion of the large picture window at the center of the photograph allows the viewer to consider the woman in the apartment and the outside world around her.

Wall's photographic light boxes present a further challenge to assumptions about the nature of photography. His chosen medium and display methods quickly made Wall distinguishable in museum and gallery spaces. *A View from an Apartment* prompts the viewer to consider cultural and historical factors such as the beginnings of the Feminist Movement. If viewers considered the photograph in a feminist light, they might see the ideas reflected in the process and composition that Millner examines.

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1 Felix, Zdenek., Andreas. Vowinckel, Michael Köhler, and Michael Köhler. *Constructed Realities: the Art of Staged Photography*. Zurich, Switzerland: Edition Stemmler, 1995: 16.

2 Soutter, Lucy. "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s." *Afterimage* 27, no. 4 (2000): 50.

3 Iskin, Ruth E. "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère." *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 26.

4 Iskin, Ruth E. "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère." *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 26.

5 Iskin, Ruth E. "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère." *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (1995): 26.

6 Clark, Timothy J. "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of 'Olympia'." *Screen* 21, no. 1 (1980): 18-41.

7 Wagstaff, Sheena., and Jeff Wall. *Jeff Wall: Photographs 1978-2004*. London: Tate Publishing, 2005, 17.

Jeff Wall and Tintoretto

Taking a step to the aforementioned windows that Jeff Wall utilizes in his work, one may be reminded of the *Susanna and the Elders*, painted in 1610 by Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti, 1518-1594), [Figure 5]. This piece presents the female subject in a garden, rather than a domestic interior, and symbolically references the construction of ideal feminine morality, the male gaze, desire, and lust.

The painting depicts Susanna, a young woman sitting at the edge of a small pool where she is unknowingly watched by two older men. In this painting, Susanna, an Old Testament figure known for her beauty and strength in the face of sexual violence, intently gazes into her own reflection through a small mirror on the ground directly in front of her.

Author Robert Hahn zeroes in on this mirror and its meaning as a central symbol in this painting. Hahn asserts that Susanna's vanity is presented as condemnable in this painting.<sup>7</sup> This criticism is an instance of male hypocrisy because the men in this painting also only value her as an object of lust, which is in turn linked to vanity. Hahn calls upon John Berger's book, *Ways of Seeing*, to expand on the implications of Susanna's gaze at herself in the mirror. She becomes a spectator of herself, as the men are.

In *A View From an Apartment*, the viewer feels almost like an intruder, similar, perhaps, to the men gazing lustfully at Susanna in Tintoretto's painting. While the women are not outwardly looking to the window or at us, we are looking towards her. *A View From an Apartment* simultaneously critiques current societal perspectives and offers a glimpse into the outside world through the picture window. The sizable window that allows for reflection in more ways than one. It allows for potential; an alternative

definition of vanity. In Wall's photograph, there are no men. The two women in his photograph define their own experience and identity in their own rite through the magazines scattered over the apartment, going about their own lives without the male gaze.

The picture window is a perspective that reaches beyond the confines of the apartment instead of closing off the apartment and creating a fully enclosed "private" space, which is often part of representations of the domestic sphere. Wall initiates a conversation of this idea of a world beyond, which we see through the picture window, and the world of the magazines they peer into. In so doing, he creates points of access and also points of separation.

This is also seen with Susanna shows - her space is being encroached upon. In *Suzanna and the Elders*, Susanna's world is shrinking as a result of the violence of the male gaze, the woman occupies her own space comfortably.

Moving away from the theme of vanity, Wall's photograph moves into a more independent representation of women. While these two women pictured are situated in a domestic setting, they are representative of the outside possibilities by not only the aforementioned window, but also with the technology present.

This case study of *A View from an Apartment* sheds light on the larger framework that is so common in Wall's work. Wall's reconsideration of Tintoretto and Manet within the constraints of contemporary society and art illuminates the struggles of modern life by looking to the past to consider the definition of the future.

As these non-classical references such as *Susanna* draws into question sexuality and the question of the gaze, Wall's photograph address these questions as well. The

female form, its implications, and situation the women in his photographs draw into question women and sexuality again. The “viewer” that is the camera and the viewer of the photograph are both implicated here but the critique lies in sexuality because Wall creates a domestic space where all aspects of the domestic are present, including sexuality, daily life, and widely accepted perceptions and expectations of marriage and love.

Despite the lack of a male presence in the room, Wall implies a sexuality to the piece. In Wall’s photograph, the standing woman’s day-to-day activities are monitored. The camera acts as surveillance, as a form of implicit control, and of being watched. We can infer that the standing woman is the hostess because she is up and moving and doing tasks while the seated woman is relaxed and immersed in entertainment.

Moving towards the implied sexuality of Wall’s photograph, in *A View From an Apartment* the two women maintain the aforementioned psycho-sexual order of the household. Their sexuality is implied. Implied because there is a lack of male presence in the scene. The ideas of sexuality and chastity contrasting with one another in both Wall’s and Manet’s work provide a larger framework for discussion for the female subjects regarding normative meanings for how women may express their sexuality in a spoken yet unspoken manner.

While the standing woman has created a space for herself and is the primary figure in the composition, Wall has made her both appear in the scene and disappear within it. She blends into the background and disappears into her role. As Wall directed her to, the standing woman doesn’t acknowledge the camera deployed to capture the

scene. She appears to be extremely focused on her tasks at hand, most of which involve traditional female roles.

The transformation of these women into capital is implicit in their engrossment in representations of women as capital in the multiple magazines strewn across the apartment. The magazines challenge the viewer to consider the influence of branding and marketing. Not only are these magazines present in the scene, but the seated woman is also actively engrossed reading one. Although we can see the actual pictures within the magazine, the way the woman is completely immersed speaks volumes. Women's magazines represent ego-ideals—the women in these magazines are also commodified objects of desire.

Unachievable ego-ideals can at least be emulated by taking on the persona of the happy, pretty housewife, as represented by the standing women performing household chores with a look of indifference. In Manet's piece and Wall's, both are indifferent for different purposes. Each holds a gaze but the gaze in Wall's piece is mediated and amplified by his ever-presence of the camera. The surveillance is constant.

## CHAPTER 2

### DESTRUCTION OF VANITY: WALL, DE KOONING, AND DELACROIX

In the second chapter of my thesis, I examine Wall's *The Destroyed Room* (1978), [Figure 2], and its role in deconstructing themes of vanity, women as capital, and domesticity. In a similar manner to *A View From an Apartment*, *The Destroyed Room* is presented in an electronic light box and stands at almost five feet tall. This almost life-sized work is vibrantly red in color and the space is completely ransacked.

Wall's artistic references to canonical painters such as Édouard Manet, Willem De Kooning, & Eugène Delacroix create a basis for modern representations of women. In *The Destroyed Room*, Wall is attempting to convey a criticism of the gross vanity that exists in modern society. Wall ultimately draws parallel with women, advertising, and violence. The violence in this photograph is subtle and allows for another dimension of interpretation within Wall's piece.

In a more violent manner than *A View From an Apartment*, Wall creates a space that displays the detrimental and potential effects of vanity justifying violence. Further, Wall's artistic references engage with art historical discourses concerning womanhood and vanity. Wall represents these issues in his decision to include women's cosmetics, accessories, the ballerina figurine, and the almost obscene amount of clothes and shoes in his piece.

Similarly, to *A View from an Apartment*, there are no male figures in his work—indeed, it is absent of any human figures. In *The Destroyed Room*, he chooses to depict what one can infer is a typically feminine bedroom due to the array of cosmetics, accessories, shoes, and clothing typically worn by women. As we will see, while de



Kooning's work evidences direct violence to the female figure, Wall's photograph, despite the absent of the female figure, nevertheless implies violence done to women.

This Chapter will examine how vanity and violence are integral subjects within the tropes of womanhood and women's' experiences. While women are often negatively associated with vanity, as in the case of Tintoretto's Susanna, Wall initiates a conversation about these patterns of representation of women. Wall engages these ideas in his decision to include women's cosmetics, accessories, and the almost obscene amount of clothes and shoes in his photograph entitled *The Destroyed Room*. The aggressions implicit in the room's destruction is indicative of a violent scene occurring involving a woman.

As previously discussed, Wall's photographs become a type of billboard and form of marketing that Wall has simultaneously critiqued and recreated it within his photographs. There is a chaotic element to the quiet that unravels within Wall's photograph. Art historian Michael Newman asserts that in *The Destroyed Room*, "Wall picks up on in his version, apart from the diagonal composition and the sexual sadism, is the simultaneity of the display and destruction of goods...Wall tried out a shop-window type display for *The Destroyed Room* itself, using a gallery shop-front."<sup>8</sup> Wall's complete destruction of his staged photograph creates exactly this environment of violence as Newman discusses.

In his photograph, Wall establishes a direct reference to *La Mort de Sardanapale* (*The Death of Sardanapalus*), [Figure 6], painted by Eugène Delacroix in 1827. This piece depicts an Assyrian<sup>9</sup> king named Sardanapalus. Nestled at the center of the chaos of the painting, the main figure, the King, is lounging on his bed. According to the ancient

Greek story, the King's territory was invaded and the King refused to surrender. Rather, the King opted to commit suicide, destroy, and murder all his prized possessions. This would include prostitutes, servants, animals, and anything of monetary value. By carrying this out these violent acts, the King was attempting to ensure that his material possessions would never be enjoyed by anyone but himself after he committed suicide.

Wall mimics the vibrant red and pink tones of Delacroix's piece not only to establish the connection to the original painting, but to also create an atmosphere of uneasiness. Wall's piece contains no human life, only material objects typically associated with vanity and capital such as the clothing, makeup, shoes, etc.. Wall's piece appears to focus on the aftermath of destruction whereas Delacroix's piece portrays destruction in real time.

Art historian Michael Newman further outlines and parallels these ideas of capital in both Wall's photograph and Delacroix's painting. Newman supports the assertion of the presence of gross capitalism in his claim that:

What is evoked in Wall's *Destroyed Room* - as perhaps already in Delacroix - is a 'destruction of capital' where the genitive is both subjective and objective: the destructive, abstracting power of commodification and exchange; and a fantasized apocalyptic destruction of capitalism itself, displayed in the very site where the consumer desire of commodity fetishism is produced, the shop window. In that respect, The *Destroyed Room* is Janus-faced: it looks back to the failure of the student revolutions of the 1960s, where the desire for total social transformation gets turned inwards; and it looks forward to a critical restoration of the

picture as tableau, in a way that combines the positive resources of a pictorial tradition that is already coming to a close with Delacroix with the critical capacity of a reflection on the modes of production of pictorial illusion that is at once Brechtian and Duchampian, that displays the means with an 'alienation effect' while at the same time discomforting gendered spectatorship.<sup>10</sup>

Newman points to an integral piece of Wall's photograph: the complete destruction of capital. Nestled within the context of a woman's bedroom, Wall's photograph infers an additional dimension of the destruction of vanity itself. This "power of commodification" is essential when considering Wall's photograph and its complexities.

Wall's *The Destroyed Room* contains an empty environment within the initial chaos. Wall has prompted the viewer to consider themes of violence that exist within domesticity amongst this quietness due to the lack of human figures. Themes of silence and violence, initially appearing to be contrasting ideas, come together within Wall's photograph. This juxtaposition and the solitude within the aftermath of violence will be discussed further within this chapter.

While considering these themes, Newman asserts that *The Destroyed Room* is a "fantasized apocalyptic destruction of capitalism itself, displayed in the very site where the desire of commodity fetishism is produced, the shop window." Newman explores this idea of sexuality and violence in regard to the representation of women that Wall has incorporated into his piece.

Since Wall's photograph is completely empty and bereft of human life, there are stark differences between Wall and Delacroix. Newman recalls that *The Destroyed Room*

came about during a “time of proliferation in the second half of the nineteenth century, stereoscopes were praised for having overcome a limitation with dioramas and panoramas, that the illusion of reality was destroyed when they were seen from close up: it is precisely that which is close that stereoscopes make seem most real.”<sup>11</sup> Because Wall’s photograph reflects the aftermath of destruction, it may serve as a warning in the sense of what may follow violence.

Wall’s staging of the room reveals the ways in which how violence is embedded within domesticity. Within a few areas of *The Destroyed Room*, the walls are so damaged that support beams appear to be the only object holding the room together. This potentially refers to the precarious nature of current societal perceptions of vanity for the viewers.

Moving towards the narrative Wall weaves surrounding artistic movements, author Jacqueline Millner describes these movements in her research as “by shrugging off the mantle of modernist avant-gardism and insisting upon the relevance and legitimacy of hitherto ‘non-art’ subjects, embodies research methods, materials, forms, processes, and spaces, feminism has hiked to transform the ecology of contemporary art to better reflect the ethical objectives of artists and their audiences.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Millner has pointed to how greatly these movements influenced photographers in both idea and practice, Wall included. At this point in time, audiences craved art that held a strong narrative and held different forms and values than what had previously been seen.

Art historian Michael Kohler asserts that the representation of women in Wall’s work establishes a simultaneous appearance and disappearance of women. Their existence is conditional on their marketing value. What Kohler describes as the “doll-

house format” is a staged fairy tale wherein a “post-modern allegory” begins to emerge. The women themselves are situated in a typical domestic home. Kohler explores the implications that they take on a commercial role and ultimately, a commercial value. This allegory, discussed extensively by Kohler’s, challenges the symbolism of a still image and its influence on cultural perceptions of the role of women. Wall utilizes staged photography as the basis for his exploration of the “postmodern allegory.”

Wall’s lack of figures in *The Destroyed Room* is a distinct choice to further emphasize “total destruction.” One of the sole surviving objects in Wall’s piece is a small porcelain female ballerina sitting on top of the dresser. As the sole figure in the painting, this is a stark juxtaposition against Delacroix’s original piece. In regard to the figures in these pieces, Newman speculates that “the figurine in *The Destroyed Room* is also a substitute for another body, the implied body of Sardanapalus, who is represented in Eugene Delacroix's painting *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) (Fig. 45), and introduced in Byron's 1821 verse play *Sardanapalus, a Tragedy*:

*Lo, where they come! already I perceive*  
*The reeking odours of the perfumed trains,*  
*And see the bright gems of the glittering girls,*  
*At once his chorus and his council, flash*  
*Along the gallery, and amidst the damsels,*  
*As femininely garb'd, and scarce less female,*  
*The grandson of Semiramis, the man-queen.*  
*He comes!*<sup>13</sup>

Here, Byron describes the gross excess of Sardanapalus. However, in this interpretation, Newman reminds us that “Delacroix read Byron's play and was struck by the scene in which the Assyrian monarch and his favorite concubine Myrrha share their death on a pyre.”

In his massive painting now in the Louvre, Delacroix transforms this final scene - which Byron presents as quite heroic - into an apocalyptic sadistic orgy of destruction over which Sardanapalus, who is oddly reduced in scale relative to the mayhem in the foreground, presides passively, reclining on his bed in a state of ennui.”

Byron's poem speaks to complete destruction that is echoed in the complete annihilation of *The Destroyed Room*. However, in Wall's piece the viewer observes the aftermath, not the process of complete destruction. The quietness of Wall's piece serves as a sharp juxtaposition to Delacroix's painting and Byron's poem. Whereas *The Death of Sardanapalus* depicts a violence and a scene that includes the murder of women, *The Destroyed Room* reflects what this violence has left behind and what remains of the vanity and violence that was once there.

The staged destruction is one of implied chaos and implied violence. The sense of chaos persists in the silence of Wall's photograph. To situate these implications in an inferred women's bedroom leads the viewer to imagine the perceived violence that has existed or that will reappear.

## JEFF WALL AND WILLEM DE KOONING: VANITY JUSTIFYING VIOLENCE

Born in 1904 and married to Elaine Fried, Willem de Kooning was a Dutch-American abstract expressionist. In de Kooning's *Woman* series, he does more than portray an abstraction of the female form; this body he has created in his series of portraits, is one that de Kooning has annihilated. It should be added that the meaning of this destruction is still being considered and critics of today are prompting a reconsideration of de Kooning's piece as not as easily misogynistic and chauvinistic as once thought. Nevertheless, As we will see, viewing the series from the perspective of annihilation can be connected to the commodification of the female body.

The nature of the abstract female form coupled with annihilation speaks to themes that are found in both Wall and de Kooning's work. De Kooning's *Woman* series consists of a total of eight pieces spanning over the years of 1950-1961. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to the *Woman of Willendorf*, de Kooning's pieces have remained a consistently controversial topic throughout the years since its initial conception. Critics of the period deemed it almost violently sexist and grotesque while others claimed that a reconsideration of the piece must take place.

While the female nude is a representation far from new in the canon of art history, de Kooning's *Woman* series takes into consideration the culture surrounding post-war perceptions of women. His pieces, compared to Wall's, reflect women as objects that are consuming, rather than being consumed. While in *The Destroyed Room* there is an annihilation of the female figure and male gaze, in De Kooning's series, the male gaze is notionally consumed by the women.

As established, in each painting in the series, the women's bodies bear similarities to the goddess-like *Woman of Willendorf*, [Figure 7] which further call into question narratives of the meaning of a woman's body and its "use" in society. More often than not, a woman's body is depicted and represented in the canon of art to fulfill a purpose. This purpose, though differing throughout history, has largely commented on female sexuality within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. In this manner, the woman's body functions as a form of rhetoric that speaks to the period.

When considering Wall's photographs and its dimensions, it is essential to consider gender and various representations of women. The aforementioned cultural and social stereotypes of femininity transform into the abstract forms de Kooning creates.

*The Woman of Willendorf* speculated to be an early object to represent a woman's fertility is of a similar stature to that of de Kooning's figures, including *Woman I* [Figure 8]. For instance, both employ a similar use of overtly sexualized breasts and plumpness to suggest health for child-bearing purposes.

The women depicted by de Kooning can be interpreted as counter-points to popular depictions of women during the period, such as the "pin-up" figure. These representations of the female body, in relation to de Kooning's work speak to broader narratives of attitudes towards women and the environment of shifting cultural perceptions during the postwar era of modern art.

While representations of the male and female form differ wildly in that of de Kooning's work, the female forms remain the most prominent instance of his perpetuation of their commodification. While this recognition was not clearly a positive reaction, the influence remains nonetheless. De Kooning created representations of the



bodies of women. Whether their commodification as a conclusion was intentional or unintentional is rendered a secondary concern in their study. This rings true in the instances of de Kooning's differences in his representations of male versus female.

The ferocity and anger in which he created his female figures remain puzzling today. Critic James Fitzsimmons was among critics that commented on de Kooning's woman series. Fitzsimmons stated that "and I have heard at least a dozen others describe them as 'profoundly disturbing' and call *The Woman* 'a horror' and 'an evil muse' - proof, I think, that the work is of more than personal significance. I suspect that an artist who has the power to move people this deeply may be a great artist."<sup>14</sup> The years it took to create *Woman I* speak to de Kooning's torment before ultimately deciding to leave her as is.

Art critic Hess takes into account that perhaps de Kooning's *Woman* series is a jarring rebuttal for the "entrance of the pinup image into American high art."<sup>15</sup> If one accepts this interpretation offered up by Hess, de Kooning has "turned these pristine objects of desire inside out with his smashing brushwork and the blatant sexuality of their enormous breasts and fierce smiles". This particular interpretation of the piece, however, has certain drawbacks. The blatant sexualization that I explored above points to the latter of the potential interpretations. The degree of aggression that exists within the *Woman* series is one that suggests the aforementioned misogynistic interpretation of de Kooning.

However, as de Kooning's pieces are taken into reconsideration, the abstract female form may be interpreted in a quite literal fashion. The stereotypical "pin-up" appearance is literally breaking free of that form and demands the viewer's attention.

Whether or not de Kooning aimed for this type of interpretation is rendered a secondary concern with the Feminist Movement on the horizons during the 1960s.

Given these similarities and their consonance with the stereotypical representation of womanhood, *Woman I* is representative of the emerging era of bodily commodification during the 1950s. Women's bodies, in Europe and America, became an abstract form to comment on political turmoil. While the representation of turmoil in art is far from groundbreaking, the commodification of women's bodies through this abstract form spoke to modernist influences that contributed to a hostile commodification environment during the time period.

In regard to the other images in de Kooning's *Woman* series, *Woman II and Woman III*, [Figures 9 and 10] illustrate a similar level of aggression that points toward an emerging bodily commodification of women and the violence behind it. Right from the conception of these pieces, de Kooning introduces the ferocity in them.

Historians Harriet Janis and Rudi Blesh emphasized de Kooning's attack on the woman's image as he struggled to come to terms with it; 'Perhaps never before has an artist placed an image on the canvas in order to attack it physically. Van Gogh and Soutine painted violently but their paintings were momentary releases from the battles they waged with themselves. De Kooning, attacking the canvas, attacked himself.'"<sup>16</sup> In this manner, the seemingly grotesque figure that de Kooning creates with *Woman I, II, and III* are a mere shadow of the gender they represent.

This disfiguration de Kooning ensures manifests herself into an object for consumption. More specifically, an object subject to the male gaze in a manner that is not unfamiliar within the canon of art, especially in the post-modern era.

Harry Gaugh describes de Kooning's representations of women as "The women are battlegrounds of abstract brushwork and figurative drawing where imagery undergoes a violent metamorphosis."<sup>17</sup> However, in this interpretation, the implications of the suggestion that woman can be transformed into an object of consumption are apparent in a great deal of de Kooning's *Woman* series. These implications bring about ideas of the experience of womanhood and stereotypical, prehistoric notions of femininity. In this way, de Kooning's work functions simultaneously as a piece of misogyny as well as having feminist tendencies. The woman is quite literally breaking free of her preconceived form.

It would be an understatement to assert that de Kooning's work is marked with confusion. Wall and de Kooning's both have a resounding constant embedded in their work: the representation of women. Yet, de Kooning "declares the endurance of woman as icon [in his *Woman* series] That the image could suffer such drastic dissection and yet prevail!"<sup>18</sup> With this interpretation, it is difficult to distinguish between that of de Kooning's own chauvinistic and misogynistic tendencies and a representation of the ideals of a changing society in both Europe and the United States, specifically Paris and New York.

The cultural impact of this change of perception began to take shape in the United States during the period in, especially in New York. This started in WWII, however, added cultural tensions of suburban life began to take form as well. This stereotype of women, domestic housewives, began to manifest itself culturally in the post-war period.

Advertisements targeted women in the home and during World War II, women were encouraged to look after the home while also taking the place of their husbands in the workforce. However, after the men returned, the women were expected to leave this earned place of work and return to the previously known domestic stereotype. De Kooning's portrayals of women, in turn, emphasized their changing roles and perceptions. Cultural reception of his pieces was harsh and wildly critical. Given the cultural climate, this was less than surprising of his critique and overall opinion.

Wall's photographs re-enact past representations of women by a variety of canonical artists in order to make sense of the future. The viewer can interpret Wall's references to painters like Manet as jumping-off points to consider other artists and the ways in which women have been portrayed in association with violence, domesticity, and themes of domestic violence in the modern world.

Wall's commentary on the domestic sphere sheds light on the violence that exists within the space of a home. Newman refers to this phenomenon of historical, cultural, and artists allusions within Wall's work as:

Neither a simple return to the past, nor a simple representation of present reality, whatever that would mean; indeed, his constructed tableaux are at pains to show how neither of those choices is plausible. On the one hand, painting is available as a tradition, but it is outmoded. The entire history of modernism – and especially the fact of modernism's becoming historical – means that Wall cannot simply be a painter if he wants to represent contemporary life. On the other hand, he cannot simply be a photographer either

for reasons I have alluded to. There is no priority of medium; neither painting nor photography have the capacity to ‘make statements about the world’ in any straightforward sense. It is only by imitating the painting of the past that Wall can convincingly photograph the present, thereby enacting a double mediation. The mediation is simultaneously temporal and material: past and present, painting and photography.<sup>19</sup>

Between Manet, Picasso, De Kooning, and the other painters that may be associated with Wall’s work, one point cannot be overstated; while Wall refers to these historical and artists allusions, his work stands alone as a statement on modern life, and specifically modern women.

The subtle violence that exists within Wall’s work provides a much larger framework on ideas of vanity justifying violence that has been established. When Newman asserts above that “it is only by imitating the painting of the past that Wall can convincingly photograph the present,” he is emphasizing the importance of this allusion. By photographing the past, Wall establishes a strong connection between him, the canon of art history, and the viewer themselves.

He establishes this connection to the viewer by creating an atmosphere of familiarity. When the viewer look at Wall’s photograph, they are reminded both cosmetically and theoretically of pieces prior to his. Wall’s photograph simultaneously blends in and stands out within the canon of art in representations of women. This connection is then essential in considering the rest of his pieces.

When comparing De Kooning's representations of women and their aggression and violence to Wall's *The Destroyed Room*, his lack of the female form assists in creating a foundation for the violence that exists within vanity. Wall gives a foundation for the aftermath of violence in the destruction of *The Destroyed Room*. Wall channels this into a societal perception regarding women and the normative roles that are held within domesticity.

Wall gives a foundation for the aftermath of violence in the destruction of *The Destroyed Room*. Wall channels this into a societal perception regarding women and the normative roles that are held within domesticity.

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7 Hahn, Robert. "Caught in the Act: Looking at Tintoretto's Susanna." *The Massachusetts review* 45, no. 4 (2004): 644.

8 Newman, Michael. "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp." *Oxford art journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 93.

9 Fraser, Elisabeth A. "Delacroix's Sardanapalus: The Life and Death of the Royal Body." *French historical studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): 315–349.

10 Newman, Michael. "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp." *Oxford art journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 81–100.

11 Newman, Michael. "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp." *Oxford art journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 96.

12 Millner, Jacqueline, and Catriona Moore. *Contemporary Art and Feminism*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021, 39.

13 Newman, Michael. "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp." *Oxford art journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 92

14 Yard, Sally., and Willem De Kooning. *Willem de Kooning* New York: Rizzoli, 1997, 56.

15 De Kooning, Willem, Jean Dubuffet, and Mildred Glimcher. *Willem De Kooning, Jean Dubuffet : The Women : November 30, 1990-January 5, 1991*. New York: Pace Gallery, 1990, 25.

16 Gaugh, Harry F., and Willem De Kooning. *Willem de Kooning* 1st ed. New York: Abbeville Press, 1983. 49.

17 Gaugh, Harry F., and Willem De Kooning. *Willem de Kooning* 1st ed. New York: Abbeville Press, 1983. 49.

18 Gaugh, Harry F., and Willem De Kooning. *Willem de Kooning* 1st ed. New York: Abbeville Press, 1983. 81.

19 Newman, Michael. "Towards the Reinvigoration of the 'Western Tableau': Some Notes on Jeff Wall and Duchamp." *Oxford art journal* 30, no. 1 (2007): 94.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in the beginning of this thesis, this research is far from a comprehensive timeline of the work of Jeff Wall and his influences. Rather, it examines Wall's critique of ingrained societal perceptions of women and the experience of womanhood itself through case studies of *A View From an Apartment* (2004-5) and *The Destroyed Room* (1978). This thesis has analyzed relevant historical and cultural context and emphasize the parallels that Wall draws between violence and ideas of women as capital.

By looking towards the past, one is able to analyze Wall's work on a more diverse scope. His representations, or lack thereof, of women speak to a larger discourse surrounding the overall role of women in society and how that role is consistently changing and shifting based on societal perceptions.

His allusions to the past were essential in understanding Wall's work. Not only because Wall's photographs share certain characteristics with the paintings he is compared to. But taking other artists into consideration prompts a reconsideration of Wall's photographs and the overall experience of womanhood that he may be referring to.

The violence that is seen within Jeff Wall's work is one that is not unfamiliar in the canon of art history. His historical and artistic allusions that Wall draws shed light on a pattern of violence and its connection to vanity in the representation of women. By considering the relationship between vanity and violence, one is able to see the reconsideration that Wall's is attempting to convey in his work.



In Wall's work, it was essential to consider the gaze. More specifically, the male gaze and what it is accomplishing in his work. The gaze that exists in his work is also work as an annihilation of the male gaze. In *The Destroyed Room*, the gaze has been completely destroyed and taken out of the photograph. Wall has created a space where violence was overtaken completely.

Alternatively, in *A View from An Apartment*, Wall has prompted the view in a variety of ways. Our view on the women, the videotapes constant surveillance, etc. This simultaneous existence and disappearance in Wall's work speaks to a broader narrative on women as existing for consumption, male consumption.

Wall has pushed the boundary on intersecting disciplines and in doing so, creates a framework for vanity justifying violence. Vanity, a closely connoted characteristic of women, is seen within Wall's work and by analyzing modern influences that came prior to Wall, one is able observe the complexities that exists within Wall's *A View From an Apartment* (2004 -5) and *The Destroyed Room* (1978).

As discussed historically, Wall first began photographing in the 1960s when Conceptual art was at its peak. Because of this influence, the multi-dimensional ideas and societal issues that exists within Wall's photographs became largely complex to their audiences.

Wall's chosen method of displaying his work within electronic light boxes shed both a metaphorical and literal light on the complexities of his piece. The billboard like presence that Wall's work has within the space of a museum and gallery illuminated his work while also equating his photographs to a capitalist venture. The lightboxes

themselves spoke to the all-consuming nature of capitalism and the mesmerizing effect that it had on people.

Billboards, cinema, and the modes of marketing that has been discussed, especially women's magazines, have all had an outstanding effect on domesticity. Wall and the artists that have been considered worked off of these considerations.

For instance, Wall created an environment where the women themselves became a mode of marketing. No longer were they being marketed towards. Rather, they underwent a transformation where the women became a marketing tool.

Due to Wall's extensive historical allusions and implied commentary, the viewer is able to consider these themes of violence and domesticity. Further, the deconstruction of vanity and what justifies this. By considering the aforementioned new wave of 1990s photography, Wall's work provides a new dimension as to what he may have been attempting to accomplish in the photographs discussed.

As established, Wall's photographs are often elaborate constructions and montages, that are produced at a life-sized scale. His work was hard to miss and became intersected in the museum and the viewer themselves. His lightboxes were groundbreaking and allowed for new perspectives when considering his work and what they represented.

The artists that were considered in relation to Wall's work and the representation of women were Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Tintoretto (1518-1594), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997).

These artists and their works speak volumes surrounding the overt and gross sexualization of women, themes of domesticity, and the complete destruction and reconstruction of vanity justifying violence. Their representations of women speak to the overall conceptions and opinions that were held in their respective time periods.

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