

Jeff Wall

To the Spectator

**in: Installation of Faking Death (1977), The Destroyed Room (1978), Young Workers (1978), Picture for Women (1979) (Kat. Ausst. The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Vancouver 1979), Vancouver 1979
o.P.**

TO THE SPECTATOR

I am interested primarily in subject-matter, in an art of subjects. The fluorescent-backlit Cibachrome transparencies I've had made are used as a delivery system of these subjects. Within the structure of the delivery system are constructed the meanings, significations, or patterns of reading of the subject. In production, everything is organized for this form of delivery. Within the art world economy based, still, on the unique object, these transparencies are among the most expensive means of producing a picture. Advertisers, the main users of the technique, reduce unit costs greatly by mass reproduction and, often, by inferior quality. The average production cost of pieces in this exhibition is \$ 1500. This expense, combined with the difficulties of the necessarily elaborate installations, exerts a stern discipline on the development of subject-matter. Some common area of interest in it must exist independently of my own fantasies, and generally recognized social forms of literacy must be engaged, exploited and criticized if the pictures are going to attract enough serious attention to lay the economic foundation for my further artistic development.

In 1963, Dan Flavin recognized the significance of the institution of fluorescent lighting in his program of making (abstract) art out of the medium which today provides the basic, or at least the most pervasive, conditions for visibility. From this recognition, Flavin was able to make his art by repositioning and recontextualizing both the materials which constitute our conventional social spaces and the behavior identified with them.

Advertising people recognize the fluorescent system too, and in the last twenty years or so most signwork has become organized in its terms. The use of photo-transparencies in public signs is part of the system.

In our architecture the even diffusion of conventional overhead fluorescent lighting eliminates shadows and their dramatic, baroque imbalances and axialities, traditionally so rich in implications and meanings drawn from a theological aesthetic of nature and a "metaphysics of light". The fluorescent system renders every part of an illuminated space equivalent because equally visible and thereby institutes quantifiability and facticity as the terms of its mode of production of visibility. In other words, for the vestiges of a dramatic metaphysics of light there is substituted a theatrical materialism based on the agitated orderliness of Production. But simultaneously, ceilings lined with fluorescent diffusion tubes attempt to imitate the sky or "daylight" and so to present social spaces as "natural" and not as corresponding to a specific historical mode of production. Unfortunately, cost-effective technology and the spectral complexity of natural light (which incandescent lighting was never able to claim to duplicate) appear to be contradictory terms. The rendition of "natural" or "daylight" color is a traditional industry problem. The fact that fluorescent light is made, in a Frankensteinian manner, of inert gases pretending to be alive through a constant injection of electricity, makes its relationship to organic tones, particularly flesh tones, and therefore to the representation of the body, an amusing

one. The more the ideology of the “natural” is pursued, the more theatrical the conditions must become. This dialectic is of course familiar to students of the history of modernism. Both Flavin and the advertising people have shown clearly how the repositioning of the apparatus – from the position of factory, theatre, or movie floodlighting (ceiling) to that of the traditionally self-conscious picture, window, screen or mirror surface (wall) – creates conditions for its critical reappréhension within the context of art.

Add to this repositioning process the physically unstable character of fluorescent lighting, the vibratory, irritating character which makes it so difficult to work or rest under, and its possibilities as art are apparent. The light almost projects: its 60-cycle oscillations gains access to conscious-

ness in ways difficult to control or articulate. I’m bothered by and interested in the kind of restless passivity induced in people by overhead fluorescent-lit spaces. These states correspond to the roles the same people are required and encouraged to play by the institutions which illuminate their precincts in this way. I’m thinking of factories, offices and schools, but also of kitchens and bathrooms, public and private, the stages on which “nature takes its course”.

Restless passivity also roughly describes the condition of audiences in front of entertainment, whether “live” or on movies or TV. Technically, architecturally and ideologically, TV seems to form a sort of unity with fluorescent lighting systems. This is explicit in surveillance control TV, veiled in home entertainment control TV. Pictures on TV are backlit, fluorescent and dematerialized; they oscillate and “shine forth” (Hegel), and they illuminate physically the space they fill with signification, the space they dominate ideologically. Although the ideological domination of audiences by spectacles is not simply the result of the structure of the image involved, but rather of the social relationships of production of the representation as a whole, this domination is exerted within the levels of access which the image opens in the spectator, and holds open like a gap during the experience, and on into the memory. If some of my pictures are reminiscent of stills of movie sets, the structure of the delivery system makes them more like movies made for TV. This is especially so since, like TV, the pictures are on all day or night when exhibited.

All my work, I think, depends on discovering the specific conditions of photography implied by the things I’m interested in, the specific theatricality of them, from the position of the camera. Everything begins from the position of the camera. Sets are built out to its established frame. All pictures in this exhibition were conceived for and executed with large-format plate cameras, cameras which, by their unwieldiness and fixity, impose rigid terms on what can be successfully posed in front of them. Only certain forms of performance can be recorded in this way.

Generally, things must be still. This stillness is not that of snapshot photography or movie stills (“interrupted motion”), but that of painting and sculpture – or, I suppose, of forms of photography which imitate the effects of painting, like a lot of studio portraiture, or of forms which parody and manipulate those effects, such as advertising and fashion. This mode of photography finds itself always in a profound relationship with the history of painting and sculpture. All still production does so, but more inadvertently than this.

Although I’m not really an art historian, I continue to study seriously in this field. I think of the field in terms of the theoretical issues posed by the historical development of the means of production of representation and signification. My work depends upon this continuous study. The pictures are like the bright, beautiful slides of art I’ve shown for years in art history lectures. The

necessity to appropriate or at least to come into serious productive contact with generally used social systems of signification such as fluorescent lighting, TV and movies, or advertising, has to be understood as part of art itself, or what used to be called “high” art. Obviously, the social order of the mass entertainment, marketing and population control media – that is, of “show business” generally – has repositioned the history of pictorial or visual art and the discourse engendered by it. This repositioning brushes aside the old concepts of literacy and illiteracy upon which traditional vanguardism in art rested. High art and show business are antagonistically unified and are articulated in each other’s terms. Pictures in the art context are necessarily open to, and constructed out of, elements, texts, or readings generated across the horizon of common or popular as well as academic forms of literacy. The source of reference material I’ve provided in this catalogue for each of the pictures is aimed at helping to locate such reading activity.

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