Photographer’s Ideas and Constructed Social Reality:
Conceptual Photography of Jeff Wall

Name: Zhang, Junkai
Student no.: S1712721
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Leiden University
Supervisor: Dr. H.F. Westgeest
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It is the contradiction between the unavoidable process of depicting appearances, and the equally unavoidable process of making objects, that permits photography to become a model of an art whose subject matter is the idea of art.

—— Jeff Wall, “Marks of Indifference”: Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art

Introduction

The photographic image is a kind of language and “what matters now is who uses that language for what purpose”. A language has been always in the state of the changes on account of the needs of times. After each change, the ontological characteristics and language of photography tend to be richer and more mature similar to the maturity and development of society and the change of the corresponding social environment. This change has existed ever since the advent of photography. Around two hundred years ago when the invention of photography was even not officially announced, there were already some ideas and experiments related to it. At that time, people attempted to make stable images mainly for capturing time and some fleeting visual sensations. It is what Geoffrey Batchen calls desire, which he believes to be one of the key factors that promoted the advent of photography. Henry Fox Talbot and Louis Daguerre, the two pioneers in the field of photography, both claimed that time was the most primary subject of photography. Quite similar to developments in interest in collective memories in society, photography is not only the embodiment of people’s desire to stop time or capture a certain space, but became a medium that can

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make reappear social events, bridge different cultures, and even construct the human society. In the 19th century, people particularly valued photography’s instrumental and commercial utility, which corresponded with the overwhelming industrial revolution. By the 1890s, people began to pay attention to photography’s artistic value, which was probably the result of the fast growth of the bourgeoisie. In the two world wars, photography not only witnessed the catastrophes but also provided later generations a chance to see this period of history visually. In modern times, photographs have been used to serve social power and social arrangement (like ID card). At the same time, people also can make use of photography to protest and express their demands. No matter what, since its origin, photography has never been separated from the social environment. This is why Batchen suggests that the photographic history must be embedded into the social history.

Photography, which is the combination of optics, chemistry, and individual creativity, already becomes a part of the social life. It is a means of interaction between the artistic expression and the social reality. With images as mediation, it affects human being’s life through its unique artistic charm. In the society of information, photography plays the role of communication tool, and to some extent it rewrites the concept of human beings knowing the world. It uses the camera lens to record things in the world, keeping the unstoppable time and infinite space in real life into finite frames, which makes people obtain wider field of vision to perceive and observe the real world. At the same time, it is inevitable that the human emotion,

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moral standards and aesthetic orientation are imbedded into the pictures. It contains the spirit of realism, which is close to the real life and it reflects personality under the support of technical development. However, “reappearance” or “depiction” is not the only or the highest pursuit of photography, as the Canadian photographer Jeff Wall suggests, “dragging its heavy burden of depiction, photography could not only follow pure, or linguistic, Conceptualism all the way to the frontier.” From the artistic perspective, the process of creation of the photography has a duality. On the one hand, photographers take full advantage of the recording function of camera to reflect and emphasize the realistic world. On the other hand, the photographer aesthetically constructs an idealistic concept according to both reality and his own intention. There is no right or wrong between these two aspects, but I believe the latter one might be closer to the ontological language of photography. When aesthetic form and symbolic content of photographs influence people's emotions and thoughts through photographic transmission, the formal beauty of the image itself is not the only standard on the basis of which people judge the value of photography, and have interest in the significance of photograph or the meaning of the depicted objects. This is how people can appreciate photographs and the prerequisite for that audience to join the process of the interpretation of photographic art. The problems are how the significance of a photograph is created and how it is delivered to the audience. In the processes of making photographs and delivering information, both the photographer and the audience play important roles. The photographer can partly decide what

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information and ideas are going to convey and how to convey, while the audience’s perception and understanding will be influenced by his own backgrounds. It means that what the photographer does in the process of making photography is not only pressing the shutter, so the creation of photograph is absolutely not a thoroughly natural process.

Whether the photograph is natural or cultural is always a hot topic that has been discussed already about a hundred years. Andre Bazin once mentioned that photography and cinematography were natural processes of registration and were pre-cultural or a-cultural. Also, he believes the destiny of photography is to copy the world in “its own direct image”. AndRoland Barthes seems to reach an agreement with Bazin on this point. He suggested that only the unintentional parts of a photograph could shock him or touch him, and the deliberate arrangement by photographer might make him feel aversive. However, I am inclined to echo Batchen’s opinion that photography is neither culture nor nature, but encompasses both. This thesis does not focus on the nature of photography, but the basic knowledge about photography’s cultural and social essence help to understand the relationships among photographer, photograph and audience, which is helpful to solve the question how constructed photographs reflect social reality. The cultural side of photography indicates that the human intervention cannot be separated from its creation, and at the same time provides the basic condition that photography can be regarded as art. To answer my

7 Peter Wollen, “‘Ontology’ and ‘Materialism’ in Film”, Screen. Spring 1976, 7-8.
main question, I will focus on so-called ‘concept photography’, and as my main objects of research, some constructed photographs by Jeff Wall will be analyzed.

Jeff Wall was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1946. In the early 1970s, he studied art history in the Courtauld Institute, and his doctoral thesis was on the Dadaism Campaign. It was a campaign that doomed his future artistic path, which always had an immediate relationship with art history. Wall was the first person to use a light box to create photography as a form of art. The prestigious American MoMA presented an exhibition of his work and collected several of his works.

Jeff Wall is also a pioneer in the exploration of staged photography. He makes great efforts to break the idea that photography is only the “light and shadow” of “instant” images. The main reason why I have chosen Wall’s works as my research objects is because Wall himself is not only a big advocate but also an enthusiastic practitioner of conceptual photography, and his special means of making photographs displays the process of the creation of conceptual photography. Most photographs of Wall, and especially those prestigious works, such as *Picture for Woman* (1979), *Mimic* (1982), *Dead Troop Talks* (1986), *Morning Cleaning* (1999), *A View from an Apartment* (2004-5) and so on, are all the results of Wall’s meticulous arrangement, and a lot of them are created in his studio. Although many critics disdain Wall’s ways of making photographs, he insists on it all the time. His means of producing photographs reminds me of Sol Lewitt’s definition of conceptual art: “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a
conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”

To look at Wall’s works from Lewitt’s perspective, it will not be hard to understand why Wall insists on his staging photographs: it provides Wall huge convenience to inject his concepts or intentions into his arts and then convey to his audiences.

Another reason why I chose Wall’s works as my research objects is that they probably provide us some new perspectives to look at documentary photography. Of course, Jeff Wall’s works are not typical documentary photographs, and even Wall himself does not call them documentaries. However, he calls some of his works (about everyday topics) “near documentaries”, which indicates that Wall does not deny the documentary attribute of his staged photographs. Within the frame that I am discussing photography here, documentary seems to be an especially controversial genre. May photographers intervene into the production of documentary photographs? To what extent may the photographer add aesthetic embellishment or his own intentions to his work? Of course, in this thesis I dare not to claim to solve these essential problems that relate to the nature of documentary photography. I will just apply the concept of conceptual photography to Jeff Wall’s “near documentary” to find out how Wall constructs works to document not only superficial reality but also fundamental truth, which finally might show us some new points of view to look at

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documentary photography.

The whole thesis will consist of three chapters. In the first chapter, I will mainly explore what conceptual art and conceptual photography are, and why the form of conceptual art fits for photographic expression. In the second chapter, I will mainly analyze Wall’s work *Picture for Women* to show why it is a conceptual photograph and how Wall constructs his photographs to convey concepts and ideas. Furthermore, I am going to discuss how Wall applies his conceptual means to documentary photography by discussing *A View From an Apartment*. In the last chapter, based on the analysis on Wall’s work *Mimic*, I will discuss how Wall endows his works with more sense of social responsibility and at the same time keeps their aesthetic values as beautiful pieces of visual art. Finally, I will try to prove that conceptual photographs created through construction can better reflect how the world could be than common documentary photographs are able to.
Chapter 1: What is Conceptual Photography?

To explore how the constructed photography or conceptual photography could represent reality and reflect how the world could be, we must learn about the core element, which is conceptual photography. In the first part of this chapter, I will give a brief introduction of conceptual art and conceptual photography and discuss some characteristics of them. In the second part, I will try to answer the question why photography is the best carrier of conceptual art through discussing the relationship between conceptual art and photography, which will involve a little bit history of conceptual art and quite a few analyses of photography’s own conceptual characteristics.

1.1 Conceptual Art and Conceptual Photography

The term conceptual photography derives from conceptual art, and the term “conceptual art” or, actually “concept art”, was coined by Henry Flynt in 1961 and appeared in his article that used the term as its title. As the name suggests, the core element of both conceptual photography and art is the concept. It questions the common assumption that the role of an artist is to make artistic material objects.

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When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman. It is the objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator...13

As one of the earliest essays discussing about the notion of conceptual art, Lewitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) helps us to acquire a general understanding about what conceptual art is. There are two key notions of conceptual art. The first one is that conceptual art emphasizes ideas or concepts instead of a physical product. As Lewitt wrote about the latter in his essay: “The idea itself, even if it is not made visual, is as much of a work of art as any finished product.”14 The second one is that the artist must deliberately devise the idea or concept of a conceptual artwork beforehand and then makes it visible through making the physical artwork. This point is very important for the discussion of conceptual art in the field of photography, because it is the key factor that makes conceptual photography, to a great extent, the opposite of photojournalism and documentary style photography. (It is noteworthy that Lewitt’s description of conceptual art seems to be a little bit problematic. He suggested that conceptual art was purposeless, which is obviously

contradictory with the ultimate mission of conceptual art—conveying ideas or concepts. Conveying ideas and concepts is the definite purpose of any conceptual art.

There is a very confusing point in conceptual art. When people emphasize the importance of ideas or concepts, they likely neglect the physical form of art. When Lewitt said, “The idea itself, even if it is not made visual, is as much of a work of art as any finished product,” did he mean that the idea itself is the art? I believe no. Lewitt just wanted to emphasize the core status of idea in conceptual art rather than to disvalue the physical form of art. Following Lucy Lippard, we may say, “the actual works of art are ideas”, but it is improper to say that only the idea is art. From the perspective of interpretation of art, the idea cannot be art without the physical form. The physical form bridges the artist’s idea and the audience. How the idea can be clearly transmitted to the audience much depends on the form of the artwork. At the same time, the form also can decide how convincing and impressive the conveyed idea is. In some cases, the idea itself might not be convincing, but it could become persuasive when it was displayed with a specific form. (This often happens in advertisements.) If the idea alone can be art, what is the significance of the art that nobody can see or perceive? Therefore, it is not problematic at all to say the core of conceptual art is the idea, but it is totally improper to say that the idea is more important than the physical form to make a work be art. In fact, to some extent the idea and the physical form of the conceptual art are equally important. The emphasis

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on the idea or concept does not mean they can be art by themselves, but it indicates that, in conceptual art, the physical form made by the artist’s skill need to serve for the conveyance of the idea or concept. So when conceptual artists are going to make artworks, the ideas should have precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns.

Conceptual photography derives from conceptual art, and their births kind of overlap with each other. The photographers have started to demonstrate an idea or concept in their works since the invention of the camera, and the picture *Self Portrait of a Drowned Man* (1840) made by Hippolyte Bayard is commonly regarded to be one of the earliest conceptual photographs, but the term “conceptual photograph” has not been used until the 1960s when artists and theorists began the early exploration of conceptual art. Also, some people believe that it is in this historical period that the conceptualism helped to put photography on an equal position with painting and sculpture. Therefore the definition of conceptual art to a great extent tells what conceptual photography is. As Stephen Petersen suggests, conceptual photography is not about the objects or the emotions of the objects in the photo but regards the expression of the idea delivered by the objects or their emotions.

Conceptual photography is very commonly applied to propaganda and advertisement (in fact, advertisement can be regarded to be a kind of propaganda). It

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is not hard to understand why it is like this: the purpose of any propaganda is to convey clear and convincing ideas to a certain group of audiences. Some advertising pictures are typical conceptual photographs and can clearly exemplify what a conceptual photograph looks like, for instance, like some advertising pictures printed on cigarette cases.

It is a very interesting phenomenon that most of the tobacco companies in the European continent have to print some horrified images on the cases of their products to remind their customers of the harm of smoking. How could these companies stop their customers to buy their goods? Of course, it is not their own intention, but the regulation that they have to obey. It is one of the proofs that the government or the authority has taken advantage of photography to serve for their own administration and the society. The government hopes to control the sale of the tobacco to protect the citizens’ health with the help of photography, because it has been proved that “graphic design elements in cigarette packaging convey meaning to adult smokers about the products’ characteristics, which can influence consumer behaviors.” The characteristics, of course, include the harm that the products possibly cause.

The two photographs that I selected both show the health damages that smoking could cause, and they show it from different perspectives. [Figure 1] The left one indicates that smoking could damage the respiratory system, especially the throat. The

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right one implies that smoking could cause the vascular obstruction, which might lead to the rot of body. Besides these two examples, there are various other horrified images printed on cigarette packets, for examples, an open mouth filled with black and yellow teeth suggests that smoking could cause dental disease and oral disease, a dead women with a pale face suggests that smoking could hasten your death, and a crying baby surrounded by smoke suggests that smoking could influence others and is especially bad for children. These photographs are horrified and kind of exaggerated. They are not documentary or realistic photography, but created through staging and digital manipulation. Before starting making them, the authors were already clear with the concepts they were going to convey though these photographs and the ideas of how to make them so that the concepts can be clearly expressed and delivered. And finally, they indeed convey a clear idea to their audiences including but not limited to the customers of these cigarettes.

The photograph *FOX Sports* (2015) created by American conceptual photographer Dean West is another textbook case of conceptual photograph. [Figure 2] *FOX Sports* is an advertising photograph that serves for FOX College Football Program. It is obvious that this photograph is the result of digital manipulation. It depicts that a man, on the lower left, lies on a sofa stretching out his left hand to reach a TV remote, and at the middle of the image three god-like men and five angle-like men of smaller size sit in a container that looks like a half football, and one of the god-like men is passing the remote to the man on the sofa. On the right side of the
image, two angle-like men held the logo of “FOX COLLEGE FOOTBALL”. The man on the sofa in a casual T-shirt and shorts, with a satisfied smile, looks toward the man who is passing the remote. There is a bowl of popcorn on his right hand. The smile on the man’s face, his relaxing lying posture and the popcorn all tell us the man is immersed in his leisure time with huge enjoyment. The half-football-shape container, the dressings of those “gods” and “angels” and the TV remote imply that the enjoyment is from watching football games on TV. Moreover, it is very obvious that FOX Sports imitates the famous fresco painting The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo. The frame of the photograph and the gestures of the subjects indicate that this imitation cannot be accidental but resulted from the photographer’s deliberate plan. The Creation of Adam illustrates the Genesis creation narrative in which God grants life to Adam. Therefore, the imitation does not only create interest and sense of familiarity, which make audiences be more willing to accept the ideas conveyed by the photograph, but also implies another idea, that FOX sports program will bring audiences totally new and lively user experiences. It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, the imitation or reproduction of The Creation of Adam is the embodiment of the visible physical form of FOX Sports, and on the other hand, it is also the photographer’s idea of how to make the photograph FOX Sports. It shows that the idea, which has been emphasized in conceptual art/photography, does not only mean the idea conveyed by the artwork, but also refers to the artist’ idea of how to make the artwork. Both kinds of idea should be very important conceptualist concerns.
It is plausible to say that both cases of the cigarette advertisements and *FOX Sports* involve symbolization, which is another important and common element in conceptual photography. The hole on the throat symbolizes the harm on the breathing system and the rotted foot symbolizes the damage on the artery. In *FOX Sports*, the lying gesture might symbolize the subject’s relaxed condition, the popcorn could symbolize the leisure time and the smile symbolizes the enjoyment. As Jeff Wall suggested, the photographers could use symbols to represent moods, movements, ideas and anything else in the message with the purpose of better conveying the idea in conceptual photographs.\(^{19}\) Especially considering that photography “cannot dispense with depiction,”\(^{20}\) symbolization becomes a vital tool for the photographer to convey the idea. In fact, some of the examples above cannot be called symbolizations (or typical symbolizations), because the relationship between their symbols and their meanings could be too plain or too direct. Emeraldiris’s *Deceptively Yours* (2009) is a conceptual photograph that uses a very typical symbolization to convey an idea. [Figure 3] The first time I looked at it, I immediately felt something deeper under the surface of the image, and this feeling pushed me to think what the thing under the surface is. It depicts a puppet play, but there is no real puppet. The woman plays the role of puppet and the man is the controller. It spontaneously reminds me of the problem of feminism. The two strings between two subjects symbolize the relationship between men and women in reality. The


relationship between the puppet and the controller probably metaphorizes the phenomena that the man often controls the woman and the female is the subordinate to the male. I have thought my speculation was pretty good until I suddenly found out the writer’s text description of the work. It writes, “Love is a fool's game, and I'm your puppet on a string.” This text indicates that the author’s original intention is to present the unequal relationship between lovers. When I carried the author’s idea in my mind and reviewed the photograph, I found it was still a good symbolization, which means the puppet-play installation indeed symbolizes what the author wanted to convey. Now, what puzzles me is that my speculation deviates from the author’s intention, but they are both tenable and logical. So, who should be right? Actually, it is not a simple right-or-wrong question. It is a problem of perception and interpretation. Conceptualists always like to leave some space for their audiences to think by themselves, so the audiences to some extent can interpret works according to their own backgrounds. It could partly explain why conceptualist artists often reject the third party such as museums and galleries as defining authorities. To create the thinking space for audiences, the use of symbolization is an effective way. The problem is that the symbol could lead to deviations of understanding. There are mainly two reasons that cause the deviations. The first one is that the same symbol in different cultural circumstances could have various meanings. In some cases, one symbol could make sense in some cultural environments but cannot be recognized at
all in other circumstances. The second reason is the divergence between the artist’s conveyance and the audience’s perception, especially when one symbol can be understood in different ways to acquire different meanings, which is just like what happened to my understanding of *Deceptively Yours*. For the traditional art, the deviation could be a very serious problem. However, for conceptual photography it could be the other way around. To some extent, the conceptual photography is more glamorous because of this deviation. In the first case, an unfamiliar symbol is the bait that stimulates the audience’s curiosity to step into a totally new culture. In the second case, the divergence between the artist’s conveyance and the audience’s perception is not mistaken but acceptable. As Lewitt suggested, in conceptual art some plans require millions of variations and some plans may require a limited number, but no matter how, it is finite. Without plans, the number of possibilities would be infinite.\(^\text{23}\)

The symbolization is the plan of the artist, which could make finite possibilities of understanding. Moreover, the deviance is a sign that the space provided by the photographer indeed triggers audiences to think, and audiences take part in the interpretation of art, which embodies the spirit of post-modern visual art.\(^\text{24}\)

### 1.2 Photography: the Best Carrier of Conceptual Art

No photograph can be seen without a carrier. The carrier can be a piece of paper, the screen of a smart phone, or a wall. At the same time, photography per se is a kind of

\(^23\) Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Arfforum*, 80.
vehicle that carries not only the photographic subjects but also emotions, significances and ideas. Because of this, photography seems to be born with potential of being conceptual art. In fact, the so-called conceptual photography indeed derived from conceptual art. To scrutinize conceptual photography, it is necessary to take a brief look at the origin of conceptual art. According to Wall, the conceptual art was born because of the wave of the reductivism in 1960s. This wave brought the possibility of the birth of conceptual art through making people to reevaluate the values of all kinds of art. “Painters and sculptors worked their way into this problem by scrutinizing and repudiating—if only experimentally—their own abilities, the special capacities that had historically distinguished them from other people—non-artists, unskilled or untalented people.” This act of repudiation implies that the manual labor in the creative process of artworks are not as important as before, instead the process that involves mental work is of great importance. In other words, the meaning of an artwork becomes important, while the appearance and the means of making art are of limited importance. Like other visual arts, photography demands the skill, workmanship, imagination and creativity of its practitioners. However, it is also distinctive from others.

Photography constitutes a depiction not by the accumulation of individual marks, but by the instantaneous operation of an integrated mechanism. All the rays permitted to pass

through the lens form an image immediately, and the lens, by definition, creates a focused image at its correct focal length. Depiction is the only possible result of the camera system, and the kind of image formed by a lens is the only image possible in photography. Thus, no matter how impressed photographers may have been by the analytical rigor of modernist critical discourse, they could not participate in it directly in their practice because the specificities of their medium did not permit it.²⁸

Wall’s saying distinguishes photography from other art forms from two perspectives. The first one is that “unlike the old arts, it cannot dispense with depiction.”²⁹ Because of this, photography is a kind of art that has to emphasize more on the connotation. For example, painting seems to have better ability to express artists’ thoughts and ideas. A painter can draw whatever he or she wants, such as a dream, some kind of illusion or even just imaginations. It could be more difficult for a photograph to present such things because photography cannot dispense with depiction. However, photography still can do it. Painters can depict these things directly, while photographers need to transfer these ethereal things to concrete ideas or concepts and then materialize and convey them through condensing them into photographs. The second one is that photography depends more on tools than any other traditional arts. On the one hand, a photographer cannot create a photograph as whatever he wants because he has to accept the fact that what he photographs to a great extent is what the camera can record. In other words, a photographer cannot

create a work from “nothing”. However, a painter is possible to do it. (“Nothing” here does not really mean nothing. A painter can create a painting either in the light of the real world or thoroughly according to his or her own imagination or illusion, while a photographer can only create a photograph according the objects or events in front of the camera. Some people might say some photographers can do that with the help of software like Photoshop. However, normally these people are called graphic designers rather than photographers, and it is very controversial to call their works photographs.) On the other hand, a photographic artist seemingly does not need as much skill as a traditional artist, such as a painter, a sculptor, or a singer does. Anyone who has a camera in hand can press the shutter to make a photograph. It seems like the camera is more important than the photographer’s skill. This characteristic of photography coincides with the core concept of the trend of reductivism, which makes photography one of the best choices of conceptual art, “an art whose content was none other than its own idea of itself.”30 These two characteristics make me believe that photography is probably superior to other art forms to be the carrier of conceptual art. Moreover, there is another especially important characteristic of photography endowing it with potential to be so: “flatness”.

Since its advent until now, photography has always been a very “flat” art form. With the word “flat”, I want to express two meanings: (in photography) the space is flat and the time is flat. In the case of the space, there are two factors that cause the flatness of photography. Firstly, the conventional carriers of photography are always

30 Wall, Jeff Wall : Selected Essays and Interviews, 40.
flat, such as papers, screens of phones and laptops. In other words, in most cases photographs are displayed on two-dimensional flat planes. You even can feel the uneven pigments on a drying oil painting, but you can feel nothing more than a dreary flat plane when touching the surface of a photograph. Secondly, no matter how huge a photograph is, the space displayed must be limited and audiences cannot see the outside of the frame. Besides, normally one single photograph can only show the audience one given viewing angle. The time displayed by photography is flat because the camera can only catch a fleeting moment and audience cannot see before or after that moment. This point becomes so obvious when comparing photography to film. In a film, time is continuous. All events happen in a film can be connected by time, and the timeline can provide audiences a key to the logic of the film (normally it is the cause-and-effect logic) so that they can clearly know what happened, what is going on and might guess what will happen in the future. In photography, time is not continuous but stopped or unchangeable. In some cases, the flatness of time could make the photograph abstract and hard to understand, or even mislead its audiences. (I will explicate this point later.)

The form of photography seems to be too simple because of the flatness mentioned above and its lack of tactile experiences. No matter how big one photograph is and no matter how many details it contain, almost no viewer would observe it more than ten minutes, and most photographs can only caught viewers’ eyes no more than one minute. In this case, photography seems to be a very boring
medium, and it is very important for a photographer to show what they can see and what they cannot see. To be more specific, the photographer should not only create an image as faultless as possible to display his or her audiences what they can see within the frame but also to provide audiences a sub-space or sub-scope to see what they cannot see in the limited photographic frame. This is like what Ernst Van Alphen suggested, art can really shock the audiences and make them to think when it “opens a space for the not yet known.”31 All in all, because of photography’s flatness, the significance and idea carried by the photograph, which endow this flat medium with an extra depth, become especially important to catch audience’s attention. “What cannot be seen” also has two meanings. One is the space, object, scene or event that are outside of the given photographic frame, which do exit but cannot be seen by audiences. Audiences might (or might not) infer, guess or imagine their existences. Another so-called “what audiences cannot see” is the significance and idea carried by a photograph, which cannot be seen only with eyes but can be seen after thinking with knowledge and intelligence.

To some extent, the photography’s flatness indeed limits this medium. However, at the same time it also brings photography more potential possibilities. Or more precisely, it provides the photographer more opportunities to take part in the process of creation of photograph. In this way, photography provides big convenience for artists to imbed their intentions into artworks to convey their ideas. This is why I

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believe photography is born to be a form of conceptual art. However, the possibility provided by the flatness is a double-edged sword. On the bad side, the flatness could make photographic works abstract and opaque, which might cause trouble for the audience to understand. Further more, the photographer can utilize it to do something bad. As I mentioned before, the flatness of time makes audiences only see the single moment but not see what happened before and what will happen later, and the flatness of space limit audiences’ point of view with a fixed viewing angle. Let me take the famous photograph *Tank Man* (1989) as example to elaborate this point. [Figure 4]

*Tank Man* was taken by the photographer Jeff Widener during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989. It depicts an unknown protester who stood in front of a column of tanks to stop their marching. This photograph has two conspicuous subjects: the little man at the lower left and the huge steal war machines at the middle center of the photograph. The confrontation and contrast between these two subjects, the huge power gap between them and the tense atmosphere altogether convey a very clear idea: the weak struggle against the powerful ruling class to appeal for justice and democracy. It was spread all over the world soon and becomes “a symbol of resistance to unjust regimes everywhere,” and the unknown man became the worldwide hero. The Communist government then also reported this event as big domestic news, but they displayed a short video instead of this photograph. The video seems to give out a more complete story than the photograph. The video showed the

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32 Even now the fate or the identity of the man is still unknown.
man stood in front of the tank and raised up his right hand as a stop sign while the tanks were marching slowly. Then the tanks stopped and the head tank tried many times to bypass the man, but the man frequently shifted his positions to block the tank’s paths. In the voiceover of the video the man and other protesters were called “mobs”, and a woman said with a seemingly righteous voice, “these mobs want to cause chaos, harm the national security and break the stabilization of the society.

Look! The man who stood in front of the tanks wanted to stop the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, but our soldiers restrained themselves as much as they can. Although he is our enemy who attempted to ruin peace and our just causes, our army still treated him politely and gently and tried not to hurt him…”

Both the photograph and the video depict the same event, but neither of them give audiences a complete story. We only see this man and the tanks in front of him but we do not see a lot of other protesters standing up, blocking other more tanks. Most importantly, they both fail to give audiences a result of the event and the tank man, and this is what most audiences are concerned about. Beyond that, another thought-provoking point is that both the photograph and the video focus on the same specific scene that happened in the event, whereas the stories they tell are totally different, and the meanings they want to convey are exactly opposite to each other. Here my discussion has nothing to do with this politics event per se. I neither blame the government’s cruelty nor the

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34 I got this information from my grandparents who watched the news just right after the event in 1989. The Tiananmen Square Protests, which is also called June Fourth Incident, is still an extremely sensitive topic in China. Almost no information can be found in China because of strict censorship. I do not have chance to watch it by myself, but I watched the video footage without voiceover before on YouTube.

western and Chinese media’s lack of neutrality or objectivity. What I want to point out is that to achieve some specific goals, photographers could easily take advantage of the flatness of photography to speak what they want audiences to hear, which could mislead audiences and even cover the truth, because as I stated before, the flatness leaves huge space for artists’ operation. It might be the most catastrophic thing that could ever happen to photography, because it does not represent reality with an absolute certainty, which is widely regarded to be the inherent nature of photography,\textsuperscript{36} but on the contrary it distorts the truth (for a bad purpose).

On the good side, the flatness of photography endows this medium with huge potential with the help of what cannot be seen. On the one hand, it is also because the flatness leaves space for artist’s operation. On the other hand, it is because the flatness triggers audiences’ curiosity and leaves space for audiences to think. Let us get back to the photograph \textit{Tank Man} and previously mentioned video. It is no doubt that the video relatively tells a more complete story than the photograph. However, does it mean the seemingly complete video is more convincing than the photograph? At least for me, the answer is no. From the government’s strict censorship on this event and all the information about this incident that I can get, I am inclined to stand with Jeff Widener and believe the government tried to distort the truth. The didactic voiceover of the video does not persuade me, instead makes me feel they want to conceal something. Although there is not any introductory word or any instructive information that can guide audiences’ apprehension about the photograph, but this singular

\textsuperscript{36} Roland Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida}, 76-91.
photograph is shocking and convincing enough. The flatness of the photograph does not affect its infectivity. The significance carried by the photograph has compensated its flatness of time and space. Widener is the one who take advantage of the flatness to give the image the significance. He did this through his meticulous framing, which could be considered as a particular form of arrangement. He chose to frame two very representative subjects to display what was happening in Beijing rather than giving audiences a panorama of the incident. Only this single protester appears in his image alone, which makes him look lonely and helpless. It also can be understood as installations of symbolization. The man symbolizes the powerless Chinese people and the Tank symbolize the autocratic government. The Widener put the little tank man at the left lower corner of frame, which makes the man look even smaller. The huge machine looks especially large at the middle of the frame. Through this way, the contrast between the weak and the powerful becomes stronger. Through the choice of subjects, the shooting angle and the composition of the image, Widener explicitly emphasized the idea he wants to convey. This is why it caught the attention of the world at once.\(^{37}\)

Another interesting thing is that the hottest topic in the world after the protest is not how much democracy Chinese people got, or how the incident itself developed, but what the tank man’s fate was. Some people say he was executed, some people

\(^{37}\) There are some other photographs depicting this protest incident, but none of them is as well known as Widener’s. For example Stuart Franklin took a wider shot to record the story between the tank man and the tanks. Franklin’s photo provides much more information and audiences can see many more tanks and more protesters on the Tiananmen Square, and some burning traces. However, still Widener’s photograph is deemed to be the only pictorial symbol of the incident, and it overshadows all other photographs.
think he was arrested and is still in the prison, some people believe the government also could not identify him so he is still free and live in the main land of China, and some people guess he escaped from China to the western world, but none of these gossips is proven. The discussion of the tank man’s fate even became litterateurs and artists’ topic to develop their works. For example, the 2000 novel *The Bear and the Dragon* written by Tom Clancy depicts a sad story that the government caught and then executed tank man. English rock band’s music video *Club Foot* (2004) depicts a similar fate of tank man.\textsuperscript{38} In the 2013 play *Chimerica*, British playwright Lucy Kirkwood wrote about the fates of both the tank man and the tank driver.\textsuperscript{39} All of these creations derived from the flatness of the photograph *Tank Man*. Because of the flatness, it could not give audiences a specific outcome of the tank man, and other photographs neither. However, it is also the “what cannot be seen” triggers people’s curiosity and arouses artists’ creative inspirations.

The photograph *Tank Man* is the window through which the world could take a look at the Tiananmen Square protests. At the same time it has become an epitome of the incident itself. Indeed, it is a very impressive masterwork. It clearly exemplifies how the flatness of photography makes it one of the most effective media to convey ideas and concepts, which means if photography is regarded to be art it is one of the best conceptual art forms.

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{38} Kasabian, “Club Foot feat. Dinara Drukarova”, From https://vimeo.com/91923534


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However, I am struggling with the fact that *Tank Man* cannot be counted as a typical conceptual photograph, which is the main focus of this thesis. As Sol Lewitt suggests, the most important aspect of a conceptual work is its idea or concept. What makes me so confused is why in the conventional sense it is not a conceptual photograph since *Tank Man* conveys such a clear idea. Taken by the journalist Jeff Widener and posted on the Associated Press, of course it belongs to photojournalism. Also, it would not be problematic at all if you call it a documentary photograph. Nevertheless it would be very disputed if you call it a conceptual photograph, even though it carries a clear idea and strongly express the idea, and also uses symbolization. Conceptual photography derived from conceptual art, however it is impossible to call photojournalism art, and whether documentary is art or not is also a long-lasting arguable issue. It seems like that conceptual photography is born to be conflicting with photojournalism and documentary. Is the conflict between art and documentary/photojournalism the final solution to my confusion? Not really. It just tells me what it is (the fact that the contradiction exists), but not why it is like this. When thinking about it more deeply, I find that what makes people unwilling to call *Tank Man* a conceptual photograph might be the fact that it was not designed by Widener and the photographer did not preconceive the idea the photograph conveyed. What Widener did is just pressing the shutter as a journalist when he saw what was happening in front of his eyes. Of course, Widener did the right thing because neutrality is the ideal status for the photojournalism, which means if his role was a journalist (actually he was), Widener was not supposed to tell his standpoints or
opinions through his photograph, let alone to make photographs according to his own preconceived ideas. However, as analyzed before, audiences can easily feel the clear idea and the strong ironic sense carried by the photograph. So what makes Tank Man not a typical conceptual photograph is that the photograph “passively” or “involuntarily” conveys the idea. On the contrary, the real conceptual photography should convey the idea “actively” or “deliberately”.

Anyway, Tank Man is not a (typical) conceptual photograph, but it strongly suggests the potential of photography as conceptual art. The text above already shows us what a conceptual photograph is and elaborates why photography is one of the best carriers of conceptual art. In reverse, we cannot ignore the fact that conceptual art, to some extent, remedies photography’s limitation. “In conceptual art, the representation at work can generally be seen as semantic rather than illustrative.”40 That is to say, if photography is taken as conceptual art, it may acquire the power to get rid of the “curse” that it cannot dispense from depiction: it would be able to convey a specific idea, concept or meaning rather than depict an object, scene, or event. In the next chapter, Jeff Wall’s deliberately constructed photographs might show us how conceptual photography breaks that curse, and how to make typical conceptual photographs with beforehand plans, which at the same time can represent everyday life.

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Chapter 2: Jeff Wall’s Conceptual Means of Creating Constructed Photographs

2.1 Jeff Wall’s Hesitation: Contradiction between Depiction and Photographer’s Intention

“There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture... You must know with intuition when to click the camera. Once you miss it, it is gone forever.”\(^{41}\)

Adam Bernstein’s words, on the one hand, indicate that a good photographer should have sharp eyes and needs to be prepared all the time. On the other hand, it implies that the creation of photograph sometimes depends on luck, which makes photographing seem like an uncontrollable act. According to Bernstein, this uncontrollability seems to be destined. However, the special ways that Jeff Wall makes photographs seem to provide a possible approach to overcome this uncontrollability.

Quite similar to how Bernstein looks at photography, many photographers choose to make photographing a very easy process. They come across a scene that makes them feel it is worth of a piece of photographic paper, and then they select what to include and what to exclude, and finally they choose an angle and press the shutter, and a photograph is done. However, Jeff Wall chooses a thoroughly different and

much more complicated way to make a photograph. The way that Wall makes photographs is more like the way of making a film. As I know, the vast majority of Wall’s works are the productions of cast, sets, crews and digital manipulations, and he seldom walks out of his studios to make photographs outdoors. Wall has been famous for his backlit Tableau-form Cibachrome photographs.\textsuperscript{42} One second is enough for taking a photograph, but Wall may take months or even years to finish the production of one single photograph. Another noteworthy characteristic of Wall’s works is that quite a few of them refer to classical paintings. The characteristics of Wall’s photographic works and the ways that he makes his works, which I just mentioned above, all indicate that Wall takes photography as an artistic practice. Nevertheless, many of these works present social realities, which means he never gives up the concern of social issues. Therefore, Wall’s ways of making photographs per se are the exploration of the relationship between the reality/truth and the so-called depictive art (photography), and the exploration of the boundaries and flexibility of the reality and authenticity in photography. However, not only some critics but also Wall himself felt confusing about his styles of making photographs. He said in an interview, “I still don’t know why I slithered away from painting to photography and I have never been able to figure that out... Not regretful because I love photography and am still excited by it, but I’m still haunted by the idea that it was a misstep and all that followed has just been a big mistake.”\textsuperscript{43} The reason why Wall said so is because he has been

\textsuperscript{42} Tableau form photographs are large-scale photographic forms that are designed and produced for the wall, which attempts to make photography more art and give photography the prestige of painting.

\textsuperscript{43} Sean O'Hagan, “Jeff Wall: ‘I’m Haunted by the Idea That My Photography Was All a Big Mistake’”, \textit{The guardian}, 2015, Retrieved on 28 November 2017, from
“accused of being afraid to go out into the world to take pictures, like a so-called ‘real’ photographer does,” and he has been accused of “making art with a capital A – as if that, too, was a crime.” Wall’s confusion or predicament, in the final analysis, takes us back to the conflict that has been mentioned several times in this thesis, the conflict between the photography’s nature of depiction and the conveyance of intentions of photographers as artists. (In a sense, it can be understood as the conflict between photography’s non-art nature and art nature.) This conflict even influenced Wall’s view on conceptual art. In Wall’s “Conceptual, Postconceptual, Nonconceptual: Photography and the Deceptive Arts”, he discard his previous viewpoint in “Marks of Indifference” that “photography played some central role in the elaboration of conceptual art.” On the contrary he claimed, “Photography had nothing to do with the success of conceptual art… The most rigorous conceptual artists had little or nothing to do with photography because they had no need for it and recognized that, as depiction, it could contribute nothing to the reduction they were seeking to establish.” Wall’s statement seems to be plausible, but cannot really convince me.

Firstly, according to Wall, what contests the conceptual reduction of not only photography, but also any other deceptive art is the fact that “the intellectual and critical content of the depictive arts is strictly dependent on them being autonomous

https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/03/jeff-wall-photography-marian-goodman-gallery-show

art subject to aesthetic judgment.” It implies that it is hard for audiences not to pay attention to the physical form and visual beauty of a deceptive art, which deviates from the principle of conceptual art: ignoring the art as a physical object and focusing on the idea as the intellectual content. Therefore, photography seems not be able to contribute to the success of conceptual art. However, the reduction is not only embodied in the content or the physical form of art, but also in the means of creation of art. Its dependence on the camera to a great extent repudiates the artists’ special abilities that had historically distinguished them from the non-artists, which means the visual aesthetic value largely depends on the devices but not the artists’ ability. Therefore what is really essential and attracts the audiences is not the visual content or physical character of a photograph, but the meaning contained in the photograph and the idea devised by the photographer, and this coincides with the notion of conceptual art perfectly.

Secondly, even though as Wall said, “as depiction, it [photography] could contribute nothing to the reduction”, it is arbitrary to conclude that photography had nothing to do with the success of conceptual art. Deductivism indeed played a very important role in the origin of conceptual art, but it does not mean the reduction is the only gist of conceptualism. As I have analyzed in the first chapter, some characteristics of photography make it fit for the conceptual form and their combination can create huge potential for both of them.

Thirdly, Wall might neglect the point that photography cannot be equalized with depiction. Or put it another way, because of its incomparable recording ability, photography is born to be an excellent deceptive art form, but it does not mean it can only be a deceptive art. Again I want to emphasize that depiction or representation is not the only nature of photography. First, photography is a multidisciplinary field that includes disciplines such as chemistry, optics, social science, art, humanity and so on, so we have to look upon it from diversified perspectives. Then, too much emphasis on the representative or depictive power of photography could limit its creativity and possibility. Last, the depiction of pure reality and truth never exists but only a utopian desire of people. That being the case, why do we use the depiction to limit the possibility of photography as conceptual art? Photography can never thoroughly escape from the depiction but it may bypass its limitation.

When a photographer presses the button and puts the scene in front of the lens into his or her camera, we probably can say it is a one hundred percent depiction, no matter whether it involves the photographer’s intentional choices or not. What if we reappear the scene first with some means like posing the scene, making a paper model according to the original scene, or taking a photo of the scene (taking a photo of a scene could be very different from taking a photo of the photograph of the scene), and then photograph the reappearances? It would not be an absolute depiction anymore. Of course it can be a one hundred percent depiction of the reappearance, but not a depiction of the original scene. However, the ideas that it is about to convey must be
based on both the original scene and the reappearance. Thomas Demand’s “recurrent type” provides us a typical example of this reappearance.

Demand, who was a sculptor, makes photographs in a very special way. He firstly makes a life-size paper model by himself according to the scene that exists or once existed in the real world, and then takes a photograph of the ectypal scene. There are three main characteristics of Demand’s recurrent type. The first one is that his source materials almost come from media such as newspapers, TV reports or the Internet. Most of them depict the places where either news events or historical incidents happened. The second one is that the viewers’ two-stage response to these photographs — the viewer firstly experiences something abstract and then sense something wrong and gradually recognize, from various clues, the reconstruction of the scene in the image. The third one, which is related to but still different from the second point, is that the paper world of Demand could make a “paradoxical impression” on audiences. The constructed space does not provide the depth or the hint of the circumstance out of it, therefore the abstract and unrealistic world cause the “indeterminacy” that makes audiences question themselves: what is it about and what should I get from this photograph? Demand’s works are like a comprehensive photographic study, which concerns various elements and aspects of photography: time, space, depiction, media feature of photography, author’s intentions, the relationship between subjects and the conveyance of author’s ideas, the confrontation between reality and construction, the relation between expression and perception, the

48 Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, 263-266.
influence upon perception caused by (real-world or made-up) contexts and so on.

Demand himself said, “Essentially, I’m not interested in the act itself, but rather the photo of the act as a type… I want to know how far you can abstract something without the work losing its autonomy.” As Regis Durand commented on Demand’s work, “Rather than looking for references to minimal art here, we need to realize that this saturation, this slightly suffocating dullness, is at the heart of the artist’s intentions.” Demand’s intentions create a huge space for audiences and scholars to think about the elusive natures of photography, this is why his works and his ways of photographing have an irreplaceable position in the field of photographic study. Most importantly, Demand’s works largely impact the traditional ways of photographing especially through overthrowing the conservative notion that photography is just a depictive art. One more point is worth emphasizing: the concept Demand wants to convey through his photographs, which involves the self-reflexivity of the photography as a medium, is abstract and intangible. Therefore, the self-reflexivity cannot be realized through photographic depiction. However, the conceptual photography, like Demand’s works, could be the best (if not only) choice for photography to achieve its self-reflexivity.

2.2 Jeff Wall’s Insistence on Conceptual Photograph: Picture for Women as

50 Francesco Bonami & Regis Durand & Thomas Demand, Thomas Demand, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, 87. The saturation here means Demands does not provide the depth of the spaces or the hint of anything outside of the frames, therefore it seems that he does not give audiences an opportunity to relate the constructed scenes with the real scenes but merely an alienated looking.
Example

Wall is a “stubborn” photographic artist. Many people do not understand his ways of making photographs, and he said it might be a mistake to slither away from painting to photography, but he still feels excited about photography and insists on his own style. Although Wall would like to abandon his previous thoughts, and claimed, “photography had nothing to do with the success of conceptual art,” he never really gives up the conceptual ways of making photographs. Even though Wall himself never officially asserted that his works are conceptual photographs, he neither never claimed they were not. The fact is that most of his pictures indeed possess the representative characteristics of conceptualism. *Picture for Women* (1979), [Figure 5] one of his most prestigious photographs, probably can show us the indelible conceptual features in his photographs and how he imbeds his ideas into his works by a conceptual way.

*Picture for Women* is one of the earliest representative works of Wall’s lightbox tableaux form. It is one hundred and fifty centimeters high by two hundred and thirty four centimeters wide, which is far larger than his previous works. It depicts a very interesting and meaningful mirrored scene. A woman stands on the left side of the frame and puts her hands on the table. She puts her right hand on the top of left one, (It looks like that her left hand is on the top of her right hand, but because the scene is the reflection in the mirror, so it should be the other way around.) and her upper body is a little tilted, which makes me feel a bit sense of embarrassment. The photographer,
Jeff Wall himself, also appeared in this photograph standing on the right side. Wall was taking a remote shutter of the camera, which connected with the camera by a cable. There are two erected thin steel sticks between the woman and Wall, and each stick is quite close to each of them. The sticks seem like the supports commonly used in photographic studios and there are several big cables lying on the floor behind the woman. Between the two sticks and two people, and at the exact center of the frame, there is the camera that is posited on the tripod. About ten incandescent bulbs hanging on the ceiling are illuminating. With careful observation, it is not hard to find out that the woman is staring at the reflected camera lens in the mirror, although the reflected woman in the mirror seems like looking at me (audiences), while the actual photographer, not the reflected one is looking at the reflected woman in the mirror.

*Picture for a Women* is a typical conceptual photograph mainly for it contains three main characteristics of conceptualism. Firstly, it conveys abundant ideas and concepts. For me, for any photographic scholar, *Picture for a Woman* is not just a masterpiece of photograph. It is like a thick photographic book referring to the nature of photography. The arrangement of the whole scene implies that this photograph is a discussion about photography itself, and every detail could promote audiences to think and come up with a lot of questions. It involves all basic elements of photography: the photographer, the camera, the subject, and even the audience. In this photograph, these elements to some extent overlap. The camera and the photographer also play the role of subjects. Also, it is reasonable to regard the photographer and the
model woman (or even the camera) as the audiences. This arrangement pushes audiences to think about the flexible or possibly interchangeable relationships among the photographer, subject and audience. The gazes of the model and the photographer (the model gazes at the camera lens and the photographer gazes the model) show us how commonly a photograph is taken. Moreover, the background, the bulbs, the steal sticks, the camera and the cables all indicate that the scene in the photograph is a photographic studio. In most cases, if a photograph is made in a studio, the photographer would like to hide the traces of the studio as much as possible. However, in Picture for Women, Wall does not cover the traces but on the contrary strengthens them. It implies the message Wall wants to convey: this is a photograph about photography. The mirror is another genius trick, and it reminds me of the frequently discussed topic of the behavior of a subject in front of a camera. Susan Sontag once came up with a very interesting idea that “there is something on people’s faces when they don’t know they are being observed that never appears when they do.”51 Roland Barthes resonated with Sontag and stated, “In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.”52 In Wall’s work, he joined the discussion by using the reflection of the mirror. The female model, as the subject, can see how she looks like in the mirror. So Wall seems to raise new questions about this topic: what could be on people’s faces if they are observing themselves? Would the subject pretend to be the one he or she wants others to see? Or

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52 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 13.
would the subject act according to the photographer’s preferences? Besides, we can perceive many more possible ideas and concepts imbedded in the photograph. For examples, the mirror might symbolize the plane of painting, which could trigger the contemplation about the relation between painting and photography; placing the camera at the exact center of the frame probably implies the deduction of artists’ skills in conceptualism; the two steal sticks that divide the frame into three roughly equal parts seem to allude the rule of thirds about composing visual images. As David Campany suggests, *Pictures for Women* is a depiction of “relations between men and women; the relation of photography to painting, film, theatre and cinema; and the role of the spectator in the making of meaning.”53 Indeed, as I have analyzed, it contains abundant ideas and concepts.

Secondly, *Picture for Women* is absolutely not a candid or improvisational photograph but the result of Wall’s ingenious conception, which means before making this photograph, in his mind, Wall had generally come up with not only the ideas and concepts that would be contained in it, but also how to present these ideas. Those concepts and ideas that I just discussed above and even more ideas I did not mention cannot be just a coincidence. Although Wall has not declared that all these ideas were his intentional preparations before the creation of this photograph (if he had, the piece of work, as art, would lose much attraction and charm. Art doesn’t work like this, a proposal of an artwork might), he explained some of his ideas. It is

hard for an audience to notice the fact that *Picture for Women* was printed on two separated pieces of film at first, and then Wall combined them into one with clear tape. Wall explained, “The join between the two pictures brings your eye up to the surface again and creates a dialectic that I always enjoyed and learned from painting ... a dialectic between depth and flatness. Sometimes I hide it, sometimes I don’t.”

Besides, another proof of Wall’s intentional conception is *Picture for Women’s* obvious response or reference to French painter Édouard Manet’s painting *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* (1882), which is a point that many critics have mentioned. Its reference to a classical modern painting, on the one hand indicates the pictorial ambitions of this work, and on the other hand, it coincides with the tableaux form. The strongest proof of the fact that Wall had made the planning and decisions beforehand is that *Picture for Women* is one of the earliest works of Wall that establishes the central themes and motifs that could be found in many of his later works. It means Wall planned beforehand not only for *Picture for Women*, but also for his whole career.

The last but not least conceptual characteristic of *Picture for Women* is its obvious self-reflexivity, which complies with Joseph Kosuth’s suggestion that conceptual art should question its own nature. Photography, no matter as art or media, is born to be self-reflexive. After the announcement of the invention of

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Daguerreotype, Daguerre claims, “The Daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.” In *Picture for Women*, Wall uses the mirror to symbolize the depictive power of photography, and at the same time visually display how photography could reproduce herself. Besides, my analyses above have proven that many aspects of *Picture for Women* display the discussions about photographic nature. For examples, the gazes of the photographer and model, the position of the camera, the photographic studio background, the reference to Manet’s painting and so on. All of these make *Picture for Women* a photograph of the moment that the photograph was being taken, and also a photograph of photography. Actually, it is a notion of modern art that any art should be self-reflexive and more or less examine its own nature. The examination or discussion of the nature of any art per se is conceptualist, so the self-reflexivity of any art probably needs to resort to conceptualism. However, it only could happen in conceptual art that using a conceptual form to reflect the nature of conceptual art, which means only the conceptual art could achieve purest self-reflexivity. Conversely, any art that involves self-reflection must be conceptual to some extent. Therefore, it seems that self-reflexivity is a more remarkable characteristic for conceptual art than any other art genre. So, whether Wall from the beginning wanted to make a piece of conceptual art on purpose, or never thought about conceptualism but just wanted to make a work reflecting the nature of photography, it does not influence the fact that *Picture for

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*Women* is a conceptual photograph bearing the concept of self-reflexivity.

There is one seemingly problematic point that is worth explaining. The expressive forms like large-scale frame, the hanging-on-wall style, the back-lit transparency, and the reference to a painting did not only show up in *Picture for Women*, but also were frequently applied to most of Wall’s later photographic works and have become prominent characteristics of his works. These characteristics all indicate Wall’s meticulous pursuit of the physical form of art, which on the surface seems to be conflicting with conceptualism’s emphasis on mental concept and reduction of material concerns. However, you probably find out it is a misperception after answering the question: what are these physical forms in *Picture for Women* for? Actually, they serve for the expression of concepts. The audiences can perceive the concepts contained in *Picture for Women* because Wall materializes them through the so-called formalization. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in conceptual art or conceptual photography, there is no doubt that the idea or concept is the core, but it does not mean that the physical form of art is unimportant. Without these forms, ideas and concepts cannot be materialized or conveyed. At the same time, the emphasized idea in conceptual art does not only mean the idea conveyed, but also the artist’s idea of how to make the art. The expressive forms in *Picture for Women* are exactly the embodiments of Wall’s ideas of how to make this photograph. Moreover, as a famous and productive photographer, Wall’s frequently used expressive forms have become the characteristics of his works. When appreciating the conceptual works of Wall, the
audiences who are familiar with these characteristics could access Wall’s intentions more easily.

The ways that Wall produces photographs make most of his works conceptual artworks. *Picture for Women* is just one of them. There are still some special cases in these works. These works obviously have conceptual characteristics, and at the same time possess the features of documentary. With the last part of this chapter, I will try to explore how Wall handles the seemingly contradictory situation.

### 2.3 Wall’s Conceptual “Near Documentary”

Within the scope of conceptual photography, documentary seems to be a genre that is especially worth discussing. Is it possible for a documentary photograph, at the same time to be a conceptual photograph, since the documentary photography chases after the revelation of “things the way they are”, but the conceptual photography serves for the artists’ intentions and ideas? At least it is possible theoretically and logically. When the photographer uses a conceptual way to make reappear “things the way they are” under the premise that his or her intentions or ideas do not alter the integrity of reality, the contradiction might be solved. However, the question is: how to make sure that subjective intentions do not affect the integrity of reality? It seems to be unanswerable. This is why Wall calls some of his conceptual photographs “near-documentaries” but not documentaries, although they really look like authentic

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documentary photographs. Considering that any documentary image only can record and present things or events from the limited viewpoints and awareness of the photographer or film maker, and it can only display the reality that the author has recognized (the author might not know the integrated reality, or even nobody knows), it is reasonable to assert that the explorative process of reality is closer to the integrated reality than the displayed reality per se. Therefore, no matter whether Wall’s conceptual means of making “near-documentaries” can reach the integrated reality or not, it provides us a disputable possibility of documentary photography, and at the same time some new viewing experiences.

Wall’s “near documentaries” display his intentions with respect to the art of everyday. As Wall himself explained,

They are pictures whose subjects were suggested by my direct experience, and ones in which I tried to recollect that experience, as precisely as I could, and to reconstruct and represent it precisely and accurately. Although the pictures with figures are done with the collaboration of the people who appear in them, I want them to feel as if they easily could be documentary photographs.

With his everyday or near-documentary topic, Wall implants rich concepts into his works: not only the presentation of everyday life, but also the attempt to explore that to what extent the photographer could intervene the creation of documentaries. A View from an Apartment (2004-2005) is a work that I want to take as an example to

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59 Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, 64.
60 Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, 66.
show how Wall embeds his concepts into documentary photographs through his conceptual means. [Figure 6]

*A View from an Apartment*, as many other Wall’s works, is a large-scale photograph mounted on a lightbox. It depicts a daily scene of a sort of messy apartment with two young women. At the very left of the frame, there is a kind of old-fashioned television on a cabinet. Something looks like CDs were put in the cabinet messily. Two layers of ledge are above the TV, and there are some books, CDs and plants on the pledges. In front of the TV there is a laundry basket. Behind the basket, a young woman in grey stoking is walking across the room. The walking woman takes something like a cleaning cloth in her both hands, and she abstractedly looked toward her lower right where the laundry basket is. On her right-back side, there is an ironing table with an iron on it. It seems like that she just finished her ironing work. At the far right of the frame, a lamp stands at the corner of the room. Another woman idly reclines on the sofa and crosses her legs reading a magazine. Between the two women, there are a glass end table and two reclining chairs. Unwashed clothes, some magazines, several cups, a mobile phone, a bunch of flowers, several dirty dishes with leftover food, scattered untidily on the table and chairs. There are two windows in the apartment, which are behind the walking girl. The tree outside much blocks the field of vision of the left window, and only a corner of a parking lot can be seen from it. Through the right window, which is much bigger than the left one and partly covered by the tree, a harbor in the far distance can be seen.
There are sea, cranes, and freighters. One freighter is painted with letters “Hanjin” on its left side. “Hanjin” is the name of a Korean shipping company. Beyond the harbor, the skyscrapers go up and down under the skyline.

The large-scale form seems to be especially important for Wall’s intentional expression in *A View from an Apartment*. Because of the large scale, this photograph can contain a wealth of tiny detail that makes sense for the conveyance of concepts and ideas. If the size was reduced, (for example, when it is displayed in a book) a lot of key information would be lost and both the content and the meaning of the photograph could be significantly influenced. Firstly, reduced size cannot make the sense of confrontation, but the life size is good at. The sense of confrontation can enhance the realistic viewing experience that is a gist Wall pursued in his every topic. Secondly, the large scale enables the display of many tiny details, which is crucial for the conveyance of the ideas and concepts in *A View from an Apartment*. In this photograph, Wall set up a lot of gadgets like the cell phone, the CDs, the magazines, the plants, the leftover food, the unwashed dishes and etc. to serve for his everyday topic. If these stuffs could not be seen clearly enough, Wall’s expression would become vague. Another example is the letters on the freight, which indicates its identity as an international ship. Together with television and the cell phone, they seem to symbolize the globalized industrial world, and the two women, the apartment, the harbor, the Vancouver city and Canada all are a part of it.

Besides, there are a lot of other possible concepts or ideas Wall intended to
convey in *A View from an Apartment*. For example, the sort of messy room and the whole setting indicate Wall’s ambition to depict the everyday life; the walking woman’s vague gaze and another woman’s idle gesture indicates their pretended absorption, which could suggest the naturalness and anti-theatricality; the big window is like frame and the view through the window is like the content of a photograph, so it is like a photograph in a photograph; the window as a photograph and the reflections of the lights in the window glass together probably refer to Wall’s lightbox style itself, which was called “the self-referential aspect of Wall’s photograph” by Michael Fried.61 *A View from an Apartment* per se is a connotative photograph that contains many interesting concepts and ideas, and the process of its creation is even more significant.

Wall made *A View from an Apartment* in his hometown Vancouver, which is a place frequently shown up in his works. Vancouver is a seaport with a beautiful harbor. A long period of time before making this photograph, Wall had generated an idea of making a photograph based on the scenery of the harbor. It took Wall more than two years to put his ideas into practice. First, Wall spent a long time driving around his city to look for a suitable apartment that could provide a view of the harbor he expected. Then he held some tryouts to select the model that suited for the image he already had in mind, and finally he chose the young woman who was an art student (the woman who was walking in the picture). He talked with the woman and explained her all his ideas and purposes of making this photograph. Wall gave her

money to furnish the apartment according to her own preferences, and then asked her to invite a friend to live with her (the one sitting on the sofa in the picture). Wall encouraged both of the model and her friend to spend as much time as possible in the apartment and both of them did. Then, Wall used about two weeks to decide what kind of scenario to photograph, including the inner illumination, the handling of the light, in which time period of a day, and especially what activities the women should engage in. In the two weeks, Wall and the models spent much time repeating many of those alternative activities again and again and finally Wall decided the contents in the photograph as it now stands, which was most suited for the kind of picture Wall had in his mind. After all of these preparations, the final image was made through multiple shots and then digital combinations. It is noticeable that Wall shot the scene inside of the apartment and the scene outside separately and then combined and reconciled them with the help of digital manipulation to get rid of the mismatch between the interior illumination and the natural light from outside.

The process of making *A View from an Apartment* reminds me of *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), which is regarded to be a milestone in the history of documentary film. Although they are different documentary forms, they have some obvious similarities. Comparing these two documentaries probably provides us a shortcut to understand Wall’s conceptual near-documentaries.

*Chronicle of a Summer* is a documentary film directed by sociologist Edgar Morin and anthropologist Jean Rouch. Although it is naturally regarded to be a model
of documentary-film study nowadays, nobody called it a documentary at the beginning. Even the director Morin himself suggested that this film was not a documentary but a research. Through this film, two directors wanted to present the real life of the most ordinary people in Paris, reveal their inner world, and explore the relationships among these people. They indeed decided to use the documentary form to achieve their goals in their early planning stages, but they applied the Cinéma-Vérité style that was normally used in fictional films to *Chronicle of a Summer*. Because of this pioneering attempt, it became disputable to call this film a documentary at that time. Cinéma-Vérité literally means “film truth”. It is also called participatory mode by Bill Nichols. With this mode, the filmmakers participated in or intervened the creation of the documentary. It is no doubt that the filmmakers’ participation must have directly influenced what happened in the documentary, which means some scenes appeared or events happened in the *Chronicle of a Summer* should never have happened or been seen by the audiences without the two directors’ intervention. For examples, two directors introduced their ideas about this film to some characters and discussed with them how to behave natural in front of a camera; some characters in *Chronicle of a Summer* did not know each other but Morin and Rouch make them meet; two directors often organized some activities such as a party to gather these people together to create chances for their communications, but without the directors’ organizations their lives rarely or never

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intersected… Of course, to a certain degree these interventions of directors have
broken the neutral rule of documentary: the film did not really reveal the originally
existed reality but rather presents the reality constructed by the authors. However, it
seems that the Cinéma-Vériété style is the only way to reveal the truths about feelings
and emotions deeply hidden in people’s spiritual world, because the only way to reach
people’s inner world is letting them open their hearts and express themselves.

It is necessary to mention the four obvious similarities between the
real-life-depicted photograph *A View from an Apartment* (later to be called ‘a
documentary photograph’ by me) and the documentary film *Chronicle of a Summer*.
Firstly, both of their authors at the beginning wanted to make a documentary or at
least a quasi-documentary, but at last they dared not call their works documentaries.
Secondly, both works attempt to reveal reality through recording the realistic daily
life of the ordinary people in a specific city (Vancouver and Paris). Thirdly, Wall also
used the “photographic Cinéma-Vériété” in *A View from an Apartment*. The creative
process of the photograph introduced before has shown how Wall intervened in the
creation of this work: selecting the model according to his expectation,
communicating with his model, constructing the living environment for his model,
and asking the model to act according to the image he had in mind. Wall’s
interventions are exactly like Morin and Rouch’s in *Chronicle of a Summer*. Although
the “Cinéma-Vériété” is a cinematic term, I suggest it is decent to apply it to some of
Wall’s photographs, because he describes some of his own works as
“‘cinematographic’ re-creations of everyday moments.” Therefore, I describe Wall’s interventions in *A View From an Apartment* as photographic Cinéma-Vérité.

Fourthly, the interventions in *Chronicle of a Summer* and *A View from an Apartment* both serves for the pursuit of reality. In *Chronicle of a Summer*, directors created chances for characters to communicate and to express themselves for the exploration of inner reality. As Morin stated, these scenes or events organized by directors were the results of filmmakers’ direct interventions, but they actually happen again and again in the character’s daily lives. While in *A View from an Apartment*, Wall selected an ordinary apartment, asked the model to furnish it according to her own taste and economical condition, and made her live in the apartment for more than a year just because he wanted to make everything as realistic as possible. Lastly, as how Morin regarded *Chronicle of a Summer, A View from an Apartment* also can be understood as a research. *Chronicle of a Summer* on the one hand displays how Morin and Rouch struggled to look for the truth and reality in people’s daily life and their inner worlds, on the other hand it displays the whole process of the production of this film, which means it is a film about film. So it is a research about truth, and at the same time a research about documentary film. From this perspective, *A View from an Apartment* is also a brave attempt by Wall to explore how much a photographer can intervene the creation of a documentary photograph and how to make a documentary photograph in a conceptual way. It could be a kind of documentary that allows the

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66 Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, 263.
co-existence of the presentation of realistic daily life and the author’s intentions.

Since both *Chronicle of a Summer* and *A View from an Apartment* are researches, then what are the research results? As Morin said, “At the end of the film, the difficulties of truth, which had not been a problem in the beginning, became apparent to me…Now I realize that if we achieved anything, it was to present the problem of the truth.” As what Morin said, it is hard to conclude whether *Chronicle*, as a research about truth, has captured the integrate truth and reality that directors expected before making the film. However, Morin’s words imply that as a research about documentary film, *Chronicle* might be successful. Anyway, time already gave us an answer. More than sixty years have passed since the release of *Chronicle*, it has been accepted by most people as a classical groundbreaking documentary film. One day, probably not merely *A View from an Apartment*, but Wall’s all conceptual near-documentaries will be widely accepted as out-and-out documentaries. They together show us that in a documentary the explorative process of reality could be closer to the so-called integrated reality than the reality asserted by the author.

So far, we have seen how Wall makes his conceptual photographs. *Picture for Women* and *A View from an Apartment* display very different styles, but they are both good examples to show how Wall constructs his photographs through casting, staging, setting, acting, artificial lighting and digital manipulations, and at the same time to illustrate Wall’s conceptualism in his constructed photographs. These works contain rich concepts and ideas about concerns including but not limited to reflection on
social issue, documentation of daily life, discussion about media, possible nature of art, and the self-reflexivity of photography. Moreover, Wall normally conceives most of these concepts and ideas that he tries to convey in advance of the productions of his works. Before making a photograph, Wall normally have an ideal image in his mind, and he is not only clear with what to convey and what to achieve but also how to convey and how to achieve through the photograph he is about to produce. His *View from an Apartment* is a typical example of his near-documentary approach that displays his ambition to apply the notion of conceptual art to a documentary form. His attempt on the one hand provides a new perspective to look at documentary photography, and on the other hand pushes us to rethink about the problem about the so-called “integrated reality.”
Chapter 3: Conceptual Photography Reflecting How the World Could be: \textit{Mimic} as Example

Wall’s photographs mentioned above are the quintessence of conceptual photography. They discuss plenty of concepts and ideas: the relation between painting and photography, spectatorship, the relationships among photographer, subjects and audience, the framing rule in photography, the possible artistic nature of photography, the deceptive power of photography, photographic self-reflexivity, the reality and truth in documentaries and so on. However, I strongly feel that in Wall’s works there should be something else that I haven’t found in the previous analyzed works. Until now, all concepts and ideas I have emphasized in Wall’s works are about either art or media. These works do not display enough reflections on society, so they cannot made me feel that photography offers a window to view the world,\textsuperscript{67} as Talbot suggested. Actually, in both \textit{Picture for Women} and \textit{A View from an Apartment} we can see Wall’s social-issues concerns, like the relationship between women and men in \textit{Picture} and the globalization and industrialization in \textit{A View}. However, these expressions of social concerns are downplayed because social problems are not the focuses of these works. Therefore, these conceptual works cannot display Wall’s deep engagement with social issues and the artist’s social responsibility. So, to find out how Wall uses conceptual photographs to reflect on the world, we need to look for the

answer in Wall’s other works such as *Mimic* (1982), *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), and *After “Invisible Man”* by Ralph Ellison, *the Prologue* (2001). Here, I will focus on *Mimic*, [Figure 7] the work Fried thinks to be “characteristic of Wall’s engagement in his art with social issue,” to seek how Wall takes advantage of photographic conceptualism to reflect on how the world could be.

3.1 Concepts and Ideas in *Mimic*

*Mimic* depicts an Asian young man and one Caucasian couple walking on the street. They walk on the sidewalk more or less towards the camera: on the left of the frame, aside the curb of the road, a man with Asian face wearing a pair of dark gray trousers and a light grey short-sleeved shirt that looks like a work wear, and on the right, a young white man with curly hair and dark beard, wearing a red T-shirt and an open denim jacket, holding the right hand of a Caucasian woman in a midriff jacket, red shorts and brown heeled sandals. The Asian man puts his right hand into his pocket and seems to glance to his left with a weird (unreadable) facial expression. The white man, who is a little bit behind the Asian, raises up his right hand and puts his right middle finger at the corner of his eye (to mimic Asian people’s slanted eyes) while looking at the Asian without any concealment. The woman lags behind the white man and the man seems to drag the woman a little bit. The strong sunlight makes her quint and obviously she does not notice her partner’s rude gesture. It happens in a very

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common street scene. On the right side of the sidewalk, there is a row of industrial building with reflexive glass windows. On the left of the frame, a straight and sloping road, along with neatly parked cars, stretches to the horizon. Telegraph poles and street lamps stand on the two sides of the road.

Wall’s *Mimic* is one of the few photographs that he took outdoors instead of in his studio, but still it owns obvious features of Wall’s work. The subjects in the photograph behave very natural, which makes it look like a candid street photograph. However, like most of Wall’s other photographs, it is “not the product of a brilliant, athletic, split-second feat of reportage but rather was deliberately staged-cast, choreographed, rehearsed, and shot over and over again in pursuit of the perfect image.”* Mimic contains rich art concepts and ideas of Wall. Like *A View from an Apartment*, *Mimic* is another photograph Wall produced in his hometown Vancouver. It depicts a small event happened on a mediocre street with nothing special. So it also can be regarded as another piece of “near documentary” of the everyday topic. Besides, the framing and setting of *Mimic*, the positions of the subjects and the sense of confrontation between the subjects and audiences that the photograph creates suggest that *Mimic* likely allude to the famous oil painting *Paris Street; Rainy Day* (1877). *Paris Street; Rainy Day* was a work of Gustave Caillebotte, the French artist who never concealed his enthusiasm for photography, and whose “engagement with effects of movement in some cases anticipated early cinematography.”* In *Paris

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Street; Rainy Day, there are some obvious photographic characteristics: cropping of figures, the clear outlines of the subjects and the blurred background. Therefore, it is reasonable to allege that Paris Street; Rainy Day cannot be a random choice of Caillebotte but a decision after careful consideration. Wall created the connection between Mimic and a photograph-like painting to emphasize the kinship between photography and painting. Another point that is inconspicuous but worth mentioning is the “no parking” sign installed on the lamp behind the Asian man. It is inconspicuous because firstly it is very small, and secondly it is a so common traffic sign in Western modern society that nobody would pay attention to it. It is worth mentioning because this inconspicuous sign, which seemingly appears in the photograph involuntarily, is actually Wall’s intentional arrangement. Wall explained that the “no parking” sign was a visual language that suggested the prohibition, and the prohibition was ubiquitous in modern city because the city was full of regulations. So the unnoticeable sign on the one hand emphasizes Wall’s everyday topic, and on the other hand manifests Wall’s ambition to depict the modern life. It is no wonder that Mimic is called “the painting of modern life.”

Within Mimic, there is still another concept that I want to talk about. In Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, Michael Fried coined the term “to-be-seenness”, which mainly consists of two paradoxical elements: “absorption” and “awareness”. Generally speaking, to-be-seenness is the notion that the

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72 Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, 235.
73 Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before, 43.
photographic subjects pretend to be completely absorbed in what they are doing as if they do not notice the photographer or camera at all, but actually they are clearly aware of the existence of the camera, or even know and behave according to what the photographer wants them to do. In *Mimic*, three subjects all behave natural, but the appearance of the Caucasian woman perfectly illustrates the notion of “to-be-seenness”. Since the Caucasian man and the Asian man already present the problem and make clear the topic of *Mimic*, and the woman seems to completely stay out of the conflict and at the same time not be aware of the tense atmosphere at all, what does the appearance of the woman mean? Of course it is tenable to say that the woman is there like this for no purpose but just because Wall staged the original scene. However it is not the typical style of Wall. I believe as a main character in *Mimic*, the existence of the woman must serve for some purposes of Wall. The most possible purpose is emphasizing the absorption. The woman squints in the bright sunlight and looks forward blankly. It seems like that she has no idea of not only the existence of the camera but also what is happening next to her, which means she is totally absorbed in her own world. As Wall said, “In my dramatization of it for myself, I thought of it happening so quickly that nobody in the picture is really aware of it.”\(^\text{74}\) But the fact is that the woman knows everything and she just pretends to be absorbed according to Wall’s requirement. This is Fried’s “to-be-seenness”. With the “to-be-seenness”, Wall achieves the effect of naturalness. Besides, the “to-be-seenness”, as Fried suggests, makes the relationship “between the persuasive

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\(^{74}\) Wall, *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 197.
representation of absorption and the apparent consciousness of being beheld-in the context of art-is no longer simply one of opposition or antithesis…but instead allows a gliding and indeed an overlap between two."\(^75\) In this case, the acknowledgement of “to-be-seenness” might provide a way “not to succumb to theatricality.”\(^76\)

These ingenious conceptions and meticulous designs by Wall do not didactically tell audiences a doctrine or an assertive concept, but rather trigger them to think. It coincides with Ernst van Alphen’s notion about affect that art works should affect viewers rather than just tell them something didactically, and viewers are supposed to feel the work rather than only deal with the significance of the work.\(^77\) Besides, Alphen suggests that an artwork has two dimensions of meaning: one is allegorical meaning, which is the above-mentioned significance of a work, and another one is affective meaning. According to Alphen, the allegorical meaning is the meaning that can be read by audiences according to specific codes bearing conventional symbolic meanings, while the affective meaning is the result of artist’s affective operations and only can be perceived through thinking, and good art should push audiences to think and open an space for not yet known.\(^78\) In Mimic, what I have discussed above all can be deemed to be Alphen’s affective meaning. Also, there are abundant affective meanings in Picture for Women, A View form an Apartment and many others of Wall’s conceptual photographs. In the case of Mimic, what really makes it different is its allegorical meaning.

\(^76\) Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 223.
3.2 Construction in *Mimic*: Not Deceptive but Fundamentally Truthful

The allegorical meaning in *Mimic* is not like its affective meaning: it is clear and specific and there is not much space left for audiences to interpret by themselves. Almost any audience can clearly capture what issue *Mimic* wants to reveal at the first sight, and the audience needs neither to have any art background nor to think too much. Obviously, the encounter between the two different races and the rude gesture of the Caucasian man are Alphen’s so-called codes that carry specific symbolic meanings. They already pointed out the theme of the photograph—no matter it is interpreted to be racism, conflict between different cultures or non-acceptance of foreigners—it is something about racial problems. The Caucasian man’s gesture also can be understood as a symbol that Wall uses to convey his intention. As I have discussed in the first chapter, one symbol could have different meanings in different cultural environments. I did not recognize the mimic gesture at all the first time I saw *Mimic*, because until then I did not know that “slanted eyes” was a label of Asian people in Western world. However, it did not influence much my understanding of the photograph. The middle finger was a recognizable symbol for me and it made me perceive the tense atmosphere around these people with different skins. I believe this is the reason why Wall chose the middle finger but not an index finger or any other finger. On the one hand, of course the middle finger makes the confrontation even tenser. On the other hand, the middle finger as a symbol is more widely known than
the slanted eyes, which makes almost every audience could perceive the point on which Wall did not want to leave any free room for audiences to think, rather gave an explicit message.

Van Alphen suggests that it is necessary for a good art to possess affective meaning, but he never asserts that the affective meaning is superior to the allegorical meaning. On the contrary, he suggests that in post-modern art the affective meaning and the allegorical meaning are both indispensable.79 Besides, he claims, “affective reading and reading for meaning (allegorical reading) should not be seen as separate from each other, let alone opposed and hierarchized, but as an interplay in which one substantiates the other.”80 In *Mimic*, the large-scale size, the notion of near documentary, the reference to *Paris Street; Rainy Day*, Wall’s deliberate expression of modern life and the natural depiction of everyday life all are Wall’s affective operations that provide audiences spacious room to contemplate, while the encounter between the Asian man and the Caucasian couple and the rude gesture are where the allegorical meaning locates. This allegorical meaning catches audiences’ attentions at the beginning through showing its concern about a social problem that most people care about and can easily understand. It is the allegorical meaning that reifies the social responsibility embedded in *Mimic*. However, is it legitimate to use a depiction of a staged scene to represent a social problem? Put it another way: is it legitimate to use the conceptual way to reflect the social reality?

To answer the above questions, let’s first look at the means that Wall used to produce Mimic. As most of Wall’s works, the scene in Mimic was constructed, and almost every detail in Mimic was choreographed. To some extent, it is indeed deceptive because Wall depicted a staged “social problem” within it. It could easily arouse a sense of aversion, as Edwin Martin said, “I have been disappointed to learn that photographs I admired had been arranged by the photographer and were not the description of life I had thought.”\(^{81}\) Roland Barthes also showed his aversion to photographer’s deliberate arrangement in Camera Lucida. He wrote, “When Bruce Gilden photographs a nun and some drag queens together (New Orleans, 1973), the deliberate contrast produces no effect on me, except perhaps one of irritation. Hence the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so.”\(^{82}\) However, it is exactly the deliberate staging in Mimic that endows it with more significance. In the first place, it is necessary to clarify that Wall never deceived his audiences. In Mimic, Wall did not conceal his staging, but on the contrary he frankly admit it. He said in an interview, “In Mimic I presented something which I saw happening. It happened right in front of me and I noticed it. Since I’m an artist, I thought that this event, which drew my attention, excited me because it enabled me to create a picture... I enjoy a certain freedom to approach the event in different ways, to let it brew, even alter it slightly.”\(^{83}\) In fact, even though Wall did not have an oral explanation, we still can see his confession in the photograph. To

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82 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 47.
83 Ellie Armon Azoulay, “Jeff Wall Photographs the Memory Rather than the Moment: An Interview”, Haaretz, Gallery Supplement, 26 November 2010.
achieve his confession, Wall adds a “duality” in his work. The duality is kind of similar to the “to-be-seenness” discussed just now. With the duality, I mean the two steps to perceive this work. What audiences perceive firstly is the naturalness. In *Mimic*, the subjects pretend to be totally absorbed in their own worlds and seemingly do not notice the existence of the camera, the photographer or the audience at all. The perfect naturalness of *Mimic* implies that Wall intended to make *Mimic* look like a candid photograph. Nevertheless, any viewer who carefully observes *Mimic* should question its naturalness: how could a candid street photograph have such a good composition and lighting? How could the photographer make the perfect focus on the subjects and the blurred effect on the background in a fleeting moment? How could the subjects not be aware of the existence of the camera in such a short distance? Therefore, what audiences secondly perceive is that *Mimic* “is too good to be real.” 84

Actually, the duality in *Mimic* form an obvious paradox that indicates the fact that this photograph could not be candid, but has to be the result of Wall’s deliberate arrangement. The duality is Wall’s deliberate design to confess his construction of his photograph. In fact, the duality is obvious not only in *Mimic*, but in many Wall’s staged or constructed photographs such as *Adrian Walker* (1992), *Morning Cleaning* (1999), *A View from an Apartment, After “Spring Snow” by Yukio Mishiba, chapter 34* (2000-05), etc. The duality has become a characteristic of Wall’s works and it is a proof of Wall’s confession of his deliberate constructions, which makes his constructed photographs dispense with deception.

Wall’s constructions in his conceptual photographs do not make them deceptive, but on the contrary, it provides photography with a possibility to overcome its one weakness. When David Hockney compared photography to painting, he wrote, “the photographer has to be present; the painter does not. I could paint a picture of the Eiffel tower right here where I sit if I wanted to, but I could not photograph the tower here.”

Hockney’s words indicate the weakness of photography that it cannot break the limit of space. Besides, he pointed out the limit of time. When he talked about Picasso’s painting *Massacre in Korea* (1951), he said, “In my reading of it Picasso is telling us of difficulties of depiction that the critics of the time could not or would not see. In the painting we see something is about to happen. Soldiers are about to murder women and children…let me point out that a photograph could not depict this scene as the painting depicts it, because the photographer would have had to be allied with the soldiers.”

In other words, the photographer cannot do that because he cannot be there when the event is happening. Compared to the limitation of space, the limitation of time seems to be a more complicated problem, especially when you want to use a photograph to reflect on a social problem through depicting a social event. As Hockney said, he could go to Paris to photograph the Eiffel tower if he wanted, but how could he capture an event that had happened? However, Wall’s conceptual means of creating photographs through construction provide a possible way to break the limits of both time and space. As Sharla Sava said, “And, in every situation in every country you have that - a centre that thinks that they own the place, and nobody

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else can do it. But Jeff [Wall] understood that he could manipulate the discourse from here, from Vancouver, to show them that from here you can think about modernity just as well.”

One of Wall’s purposes of creating his “near documentary” style and everyday topic — to explore “what the events depicted are like, or were like, when they passed without being photographed” — indicates that the breakthrough is also Wall’s intentional plan in his constructed photographs. *Mimic* as one of them has already showed how to achieve the breakthrough. The incident happens in *Mimic* once happened right in front of Wall but he did not capture it at that moment and that place, and then he reappeared, or more accurately, reconstructed the incident with a certain artistic freedom.

Through the reconstruction, the limits of time and space are broken.

Because what happens in *Mimic* is constructed, it is meaningless if it is viewed as a single isolated event. It even cannot be regarded to be a depiction of reality. The incident in *Mimic* is significant when we regard it to be the carrier of Wall’s concepts and ideas. As Wall himself talked about the incident, “I don’t think it’s accidental; it’s determined by the social totality, but it has to come out of an individual body.” To look at *Mimic* in this way, it would help to understand Russell Ferguson’s comment on Wall that “part of his achievement is to allow the viewer to understand that the scene is not authentic in the traditional sense of street photography yet at the same

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88 Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 86.
89 Azoulay, “Jeff Wall Photographs the Memory Rather than the Moment: An Interview”
90 Wall, *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews*, 197.
time to accept it as fundamentally truthful nevertheless. The so-called fundamental truth indicates that what is really meaningful within *Mimic* is the social significance carried by the incident when it is viewed as the epitome of a social phenomenon or social problem. Besides, Wall’s concepts and ideas as discussed in relationship with the abovementioned photographs are also significant.

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91 Brougher & Ferguson, *Open City: Street Photographs since 1950*, 16.
Conclusion

Photography is a multidisciplinary discipline that involves science, aesthetics, humanities, sociology and so on. Although it has been widely accepted as an art, its powerful depictive ability still constrains people’s perspectives on photography. Conceptual means of making photographs might provide a way to expand people’s horizon of viewing photography, because it could embed artists’ intentions into photographs and these intentions enable them to convey rich concepts and ideas.

Photography plays an important role in both the birth and development of conceptual art. Some characteristics of photography itself make it born to be the carrier of conceptual art. On the one hand, photography’s dependence on photographic devices helps it to achieve conceptual reduction. On the other hand, the fact that photography cannot dispense with depiction makes its connotation more significant than its exterior appearance. Besides, the time and space flatness of photography provide a room for audiences to think and a room for photographers to operate.

Jeff Wall likes to create photographs through construction. The way he makes his constructed photographs in fact is the process of making conceptual photographs. He normally comes up with ideas and concepts in his mind before the creation of a photograph, and the decisions and planning of how to make the photograph also are made beforehand. Then, according to the image in his mind, Wall creates the physical visual entity of the art through casting, staging, setting, acting, artificial lighting,
digital manipulations, etc. All of these deliberate arrangements make Wall’s works possess gorgeous appearances. However it does not mean that Wall has put more emphasis on the traditional aesthetic, technical, or material concerns. The physical forms of these works in fact serve for the expression and conveyance of Wall’s ideas and concepts, and the ideas and concepts are still the core of Wall’s artworks. Wall even attempts to apply conceptual means to the production of documentary photographs. This attempt on the one hand provides a new possible perspective to look at documentary photography, and on the other hand pushes us to think about the reality in documentary. Besides, quite a few of Wall’s works display the concept of self-reflexivity, which is not a necessary requirement to be a conceptual photograph but a remarkable characteristic of conceptual art. Besides the artistic concepts, what makes Wall’s works fundamentally meaningful is the social significances they contain. Different from the majority of photographers that like using realistic depictions to reflect social problems, Wall applies his conceptual means to the reflection of social concerns. *Mimic*, one of his best-known photographs, displays how the conceptual means, or the construction, endows his photographs with both allegorical meaning and affective meaning. It is very important to notice that because of Wall’s affective operations, his conceptual photographs never just illustratively tell audiences a concept or idea but promote audiences to think to perceive the concept or idea. After exploring on Wall’s works, I might finally understand why Sol Lewitt suggested that conceptual art should not be “theoretical or illustrative”.\footnote{Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art”, *Artforum*, 79.} The way
that Wall creates photographs endows photography with more potential to reflect how the world is. Wall’s arrangement of duality helps his works to dispense with deception. His construction creates possibilities for photography to break the limitation of time and space, which provides him huge convenience to engage with social problems. Also because of the construction, Wall keeps aesthetic value, various concepts and ideas, and at the same time fundamental truth with social significance in his photographs. Through the conceptual means of making constructed photographs, Wall seemingly fails to present how the world is, but eventually reflects how the world could be, as Susan Sontag suggested, “The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say ‘There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.’”93

Figures

![Figure 1](image1.png)
Taken by the Author. *Cigarette Packs*, 2017

![Figure 2](image2.png)
Dean West. *FOX Sports*, 2015
Figure 3  Emerald Iris. *Deceptively Yours*, 2009

Figure 4  Jeff Widener. *Tank Man*, 1989
Figure 5  

Figure 6  
Jeff Wall. *A View from an Apartment*, 2004-5.
Figure 7  Jeff Wall. *Mimic*, 1982.
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