

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

February 28, 2007

The Body and The Wall

Filed under: [goof,quotes](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:32 am



Official portrait of former MN Gov. Jesse 'the Body' Ventura ([more info here](#))

There has been a lot of chatter online about the recent [NYTimes profile](#) of Jeff Wall ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)), but I'm the first to make this connection:

- You have to forget about the idea of the spirit of the place. It's one of the big, consoling myths of people who live nowhere. **Jeff Wall**

- Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers. **Jesse Ventura**
- I'm a more affectionate person than I thought I was. I like trees or I like people's faces. That's one reason I think my work has changed. I realized I wasn't interested in filtering my affection for things through certain levels of mediation. **Jeff Wall**
- If I could be reincarnated as a fabric, I would come back as a 38 double-D bra. **Jesse Ventura**
- The aesthetic norm of fragmentation implies that the avant-garde movements made a fundamental and irreversible break with the past. The art of the past is defined as "organically unified," art that does not want to recognize its own contingent character, its own fragile illusionism. It wants to revel in the illusionism, for its own sake and for the sake of its audience, and it wants to seem to be inevitable and complete, the creation of magicians. This is what is called the "genius ideology." Tearing apart the organic work of art was the accomplishment of the avant-garde, which revealed the inner mechanics of traditional illusionistic art, the stagecraft of the masterpiece. To a great extent, I agree with that process, and I like a lot of avant-garde art very much; it's very important to me. But I feel that it's an unfree way of relating to it to erect it as an absolute standard, against the aspects of the unified work which I like. I like the idea of the unified work because I like pictures, and there is always a sense in which a picture exists as [such] through its unification, [through] its precisely pictorial unification. I think the art of the past is not as unified as the avant-garde polemic needed for it to be, or [made it] appear to be. There are always acknowledgments of contingency and a sense of alternatives in good work from earlier times, probably very far back in time. So, firstly, there probably is no completely unified work, outside some very specific limits, at least, none in the tradition that we've been talking about. But there is the phenomenon of unity in a work, the way it might be experienced as a unity, even if, when you look closer at it, it displays or at least indicates, or hints at, its own contingency. That phenomenon, that moment of appearance, that moment of the experience of the work's unity, remains important. That moment, that instant, will always be there when we experience good art, even if we are experiencing a work which rejects the whole idea of unity, like in radical avant-garde or neo-avant-garde art. So, I see the unity of the work of art as an unavoidable moment of the making and of the experiencing of any work. There is a dialectic in all of this, not two antithetical forms, each complete in themselves, one coming after the other in time and rendering the first one "obsolete"—a favorite polemical term of the proponents of the new orthodoxy. And, just an aside, I would say that it was always my experience that the criticisms aimed against so-called pre-Modern art were not terribly accurate, and they were tendentious, in that by trying so hard to break away from the past, a lot of avant-garde artists and writers, critics let's say, exaggerated the flaws or weaknesses of the art of the past so that they could get away from it. That's just a rhetoric of the avant-garde, and the times made it necessary; OK., but let's

not live under that as some kind of law now. You look at so-called pre-modern art—I say ‘so-called’ because I don’t really think it’s un-modern’whether it’s Caravaggio or Botticelli or Durer, it’s not as unified as those writers made it out to be. The antithesis between avant-garde art and “museum art” is less pronounced than the avant-garde wanted it to be. Older art is much richer and more nuanced than a lot of the arguments give it credit for being. It’s kind of obvious by now, how adolescent a lot of avant-gardist attitudes were- the “burn the museum” attitude from the 20’s, from Dada through the 60’s. **Jeff Wall**

- I asked him [Dalai Lama] the most important question that I think you could ask – if he had ever seen Caddy Shack. **Jesse Ventura**

35 Comments

1. If you are interested in the subtle, Wall-esque symbolism hidden in the Ventura painting, [read this](#).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [2:07 am](#)

2. You might also want to check out Steve Strong's [first portrait of Ventura](#). If that isn't enough, here is a whole page devoted to [wrestler artists](#).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [2:15 am](#)

3. Ah yes, the Dalai Lama dialogue in Caddyshack is a great film moment. For those who haven't seen it, Bill Murray relates an anecdote where he caddied for the big DL in a Tibetan game of golf. He motions for a tip. "Oh, there won't be any money, but when you die, on your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness." This must be why established photographers caddy for the big publications.

Comment by [rob](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [6:06 am](#)

4. Does anyone know – has the Dalai Lama seen Caddyshack?

Comment by [colin](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [8:54 am](#)

5. Until Mr. Wall has hunted man, he hasn't hunted yet.

Comment by [sean](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [8:57 am](#)

6. Sean, you are a genius. Not only is that one of the best Ventura quotes, it is a perfect usage.

For more quotes, [here](#) is random Ventura quote generator.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [9:06 am](#)

7. lots of hidden stuff in the portraits of gov's. wish the ventura portrait was done while i was still doing the statesmen project!

Comment by [Sybil Miller](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [9:43 am](#)

8. Colin. As recorded in the transcript of the [Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Trade of the House Committee on Ways and Means Field Hearing in Bloomington, Minnesota, on the Benefits of Trade to the Medical Technology and Agriculture Sectors](#), no he has not.

Comment by [Jesse](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [11:43 am](#)

9. Wow – the internet is a wonderful thing. Any relation to the guy in the picture, Jesse?

Comment by [colin](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [12:01 pm](#)

10. I don't have time to bleed

Comment by [Jesse](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [12:19 pm](#)

11. I could see Wall doing a backyard wrestling scene in one of his big light-boxes or maybe even a Ventura style wrestling match.

Comment by [Harlan Erskine](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [1:40 pm](#)

12. When Jeff goes on (and on) about unification, that bit from James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* about "Integritas" came back to me and I had to dig it up again... "the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as selfbounded and selfcontained upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as one thing. You see is as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness." And who else but Joseph Campbell does a long spiel about Joyce and this particular classical approach for looking at art pieces.

Elsewhere, Joseph Campbell wrote: "We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us." And then Jesse Ventura said, "We have to become willing to admit as a nation that our war against drugs has failed. And we have to start looking for other solutions."

Clearly, Jeff loves the Body.

Comment by [Michael](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [3:13 pm](#)

13. Crossing the Body and the Wall in one week, you got some balls there Soth...

There should be a poll on the blog, who would win in a wrestling match...

Three person cage match between you, Jeff Wall, and Jesse Ventura.

Comment by [Chad](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [5:48 pm](#)

14. Harlan, you are onto something. One possibility [here](#).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [6:00 pm](#)

15. jeff wall is getting killed here.

Comment by [john k.](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [6:11 pm](#)

16. Alec, thats some great photoshopping work, I nearly fell of my chair. thanks for the laugh. Maybe we can cash in here. if you'll sign it I will put that image in mini light boxes and sell them out side of next year's art base miami beach!-we'll make a killing!

Comment by [Harlan Erskine](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [8:09 pm](#)

17. This is possibly the greatest post ever.

Comment by [Zoe Strauss](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [11:18 pm](#)

18. happy happy joy joy

Comment by [john k.](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [11:29 pm](#)

19. Thanks Zoe, but nobody can touch your [Conservapedia post](#).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — February 28, 2007 @ [11:43 pm](#)

20. Who says you Americans are not big on irony?? My euro-brain is spinning, don't know WHAT to make of this! I like the long Wall quote, though: "I'd like to be avant garde, but I still really like *pictures*, you know?" Maybe he spotted that the avant garde tend to make their reputation (and, um, money) after they're dead.

Comment by Vinegar Tom — March 1, 2007 @ [4:08 am](#)

21. Alec,

OMG WTF!

Come quick!

Look what you have done...

<http://www.chadmuthard.com/jeffwalldominateswoman.html>

(They seem like they mean business, I wouldn't take the situation lightly)

Comment by [Chad](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [7:22 am](#)

22. Wow...

We must have that Steve Strong painting. Do you think it is still at the Mansion?

Comment by [jaygould](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [10:22 am](#)

23. Nice work Chad.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [12:33 pm](#)

24. Check out the new Sonic Youth b-sides album.

http://www.amazon.com/Destroyed-Room-Rarities-Sonic-Youth/dp/B000K7UH3I/sr=1-2/qid=1172773152/ref=pd_bbs_sr_2/105-0537600-1491621?ie=UTF8&s=music

Comment by [rick](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [1:20 pm](#)

25. predator= greatest movie of all time

a Soviet patrol ambushed in Afghanistan = greatest photomontage of all time

Comment by [Dan Otranto](#) — March 2, 2007 @ [12:32 am](#)

26. This struck me as a generous but not misplaced sentiment on Wall's work (not, sadly, on Wall himself):

Schjeldahl: "I don't care. I've ceased to buy whatever is being sold by the picture's maker, who seems to be engaged in special pleading as much for his right to manipulate me as for the cause of displaced Indians."

Comment by [zbs](#) — March 2, 2007 @ [10:25 am](#)

27. zbs – nice quote and comment, but i think it's a little too serious and well-considered to garner notice with most (i hope to be proven embarrassingly wrong). but it does bring up a core philosophical question about the medium: who is the picture making fighting for? and who against? is it possible to do neither?

"(not, sadly, on Wall himself)"

sounds personal, i don't know much about him, but it is remarkable for a photographer to be on the cover of the NYT magazine. is Jeff Wall the new Ansel Adams? or is that Gregory Crewdson?

Comment by john k. — March 2, 2007 @ [1:04 pm](#)

28. i meant 'picture MAKER', not 'picture MAKING' which i wrote...

Comment by john k. — March 2, 2007 @ [1:05 pm](#)

29. "a core philosophical question about the medium: who is the picture mak[er] fighting for? and who against? is it possible to do neither?"

Well, if you mean in a general way, one could admit to all of those, depending on the individual picture.

And this question (maybe because it's at the core, then) easily brings us back to the part of that old intentional-fallacy point. —One is tempted to say that photographers are always fighting for themselves in the sense that by delimiting an image, a moment, or whatever, they're making a case for that particular instant rather than all the others. And that could lead to the other argument, about primitives and professionals. How can you know the battle of anonymous, snapshot ephemera? Is supplying it part of the experience, etc.? Is it always?

Comment by zbs — March 2, 2007 @ [3:46 pm](#)

30. "Well, if you mean in a general way, one could admit to all of those, depending on the individual picture."

maybe it's better to ask is 'what' and not 'who' is the artist fighting for? or better still, is it an artists job to stand for something/anything? specific to the argument of the day, what does Wall's photography really stand for?

Comment by john k. — March 2, 2007 @ [4:48 pm](#)

31. i saw jeff wall give a joint lecture shoulder to shoulder with stephen shore at the baltimore museum of arts. what a strange pairing. at points, wall seemed nearly condescending to shore. their postures and gestures when talking told the whole story. wall is so unerringly articulate and sophisticated, right down to way he sips his water.

Comment by eric brittain — March 3, 2007 @ [4:07 am](#)

32. i found it interesting how he claimed not to be interested in the work of shore, when the truth seems to be he was very interested in the work but just didn't like it. he then goes on to say how difficult it was to work on the street, and that once you miss it, there's nothing you can do. in essence, wall seems to get his ideas the same way street photographers do, and then he cooks it up with details to bring it back equal with a good street photograph. it seems as though the self-conscious art-historical stuff is a bit superflous. then again, his base point that he was interested in pictures that you could go back to and back to over time is exactly what i love about street photography and not staged photography. is it all taste?

Comment by john k. — March 3, 2007 @ [10:04 am](#)

33. The NYTimes article has now disappeared behind pay per view. Shame on you, NYTimes.

Comment by rob — March 5, 2007 @ [2:04 pm](#)

34. [...] Well, I don't wanna be "another brick on the wall" among the recent buzz on NY Times piece of Jeff Wall. Through the navigation of an entry on Alec Soth's blog, you find it everywhere. I'll probably write something about Jeff Wall and his photographs after I get a chance to access his original works in person. But not now or any time soon. [...]

Pingback by [War on Wall? at He Speaks Good Mandarin](#) — April 2, 2007 @ [1:28 am](#)

35. Ventura/Wall comparison aside, thanks for posting that long quote from Jeff Wall. While it's a dense read (admittedly, I had to look up the word "polemic"), I found it to be rather interesting, though I am partial to the cultural theory lexicon. I got a chance to see the exhibit at NYC's MoMA this past spring and it was excellent. Great presentation.

Comment by [Andrew Nicholas](#) — September 27, 2007 @ [9:38 am](#)