Possible Tales is the first exhibition to offer such a comprehensive overview of Jeff Wall's work in Spain. 35 photographic *tableaux*, drawn from the body of work created by the Canadian artist since 1978, reveal an extraordinary diversity of subjects, formats, tonalities and registers, between documentary description and fiction, or possible tales.

Jeff Wall

POSSIBLE TALES

24.05 – 13.10.2024

Ajuntament de Barcelona

[LA VIRREINA] CENTRE DE LA IMATGE

The Thinker (detail), 1986.
Transparency on lightbox.
© Jeff Wall.

Belying the notion of photography as a prolific art form, Jeff Wall has produced «only» two hundred images since 1978 (the date of the picture he now considers his first): an average of four or five a year. He has always worked piece by piece, emphasizing the autonomy of the *tableau* form. Each new image adds to an increasing complex open network of subjects, motifs and figures, enriched by the interplay of echoes and analogies. Between the two poles of what he terms «cinematographic» and «documentary», a network of mise-en-scènes and motifs has formed, crisscrossing the iconographic repertoires and genres of the pictorial tradition.

To varying degrees, any photographic picture can be both a fragment and a world in itself. Simply by being isolated as an autonomous picture, a fragment already has a certain degree of self-sufficiency, though not as «complete» as an accomplished composition; it resembles a *morceau de peinture* [piece of painting], albeit one that has been torn from the visual continuity of an actual environment.

Diagonal Composition (1993) is a life-size image, at the scale of the viewer. It is a smaller picture, 40 × 46 cm, because the motif, the corner of a sink, is itself small in size. It is treated both as something seen and as a three-dimensional readymade (composition-construction). The title identifies the subject of the image with its geometry, that is, its structure, and not with the place it represents, in this case, a corner of the artist's studio.

At this point in Wall's career, his work was largely dominated by cinema-inspired images depicting scenes of action or, more accurately, interaction. Following the photographic

picture that marked the beginning of his work, *The Destroyed Room* (1978), Wall set about exploring the premises and practical effects that cinema has had, or might have had, on creating static images, both paintings and photographs. Meanwhile, in parallel, he also began to build up a significant number of descriptive images, some more documentary in nature than others. The first of these images, *Steves Farm, Steveston* (1980), is shown in Room 3.

We have placed *Diagonal Composition* at the start of the exhibition to highlight the issue of composition as *construction*, a concept that runs throughout his work, often combined with the register of the picturesque (which, as quoted below, Wall described as «so akin to the spirit of photography»). Two other small-format images bear the same title (Wall rarely works in series, and only then on descriptive themes): one is of another dirty sink; the other features the props (bucket and mop) for a cleaning job. This final photograph is on display in the penultimate room of the show, echoing the small assemblage of objects on the floor in *Morning Cleaning* (a view of the inside of the Mies van der Rohe pavilion in Barcelona, 1999; Room 7); the same geometric layout can also been seen in the flooded grave shown in the final picture in the exhibition.

Diagonal Composition shares Room 1 with a recent, almost monochrome image, *Trap set* (2021), a close-up of undergrowth, where we can make out an object that turns out to be a trap for small animals. The image clearly plays on the idea of depiction or composition as a trap for the eye, linked to a picturesque corner of nature. The trap is an artefact, a small—one might add «human»—construction akin to *Odradek* (1994; Room 6). Its proximity to *Diagonal Composition* suggests the principle of a pictorial typology of the artefact.

In Room 2, *Diagonal Composition no. 2* (1998) is hung in such a way so as to echo the structure of the picture in the exhibition space: as we move from the first room to the second,

Diagonal Composition, 1993.
Transparency on lightbox, 40 x 46 cm.
© Jeff Wall.

The Thinker (detail), 1986.
Transparency on lightbox.
© Jeff Wall.

we effectively follow a diagonal line from one picture to the other. And there is also a second, face to face relationship between *Trap set* and another woodland image. *Forest* (2001), black-and-white, is the first action image in the show. Wall has often depicted dramatic incidents («dramatic» in the original sense of the term: relating to the theatrical or narrative nature of «drama»). Here, a woman, seen from behind, is leaving the site of a makeshift camp. This figure—the first human being we have seen—is as enigmatic as the unwritten storyline in which she is playing a part. *Forest* describes and magnifies the typical location, the rhetorical topos of a dramatic incident (or anecdote).

Rooms 3 and 4 explore the idea of mobility in relation to the urban and suburban, or peri-urban, landscape (*After 'Landscape Manual'*, 1969/2003, and *Steves Farm, Steveston*). Mobility here refers to a *flâneur* who, in North American cities, travels by car. Wall has repeatedly explored his native Vancouver in this way.

Rear view, open air theatre (2006) depicts the rear (the back) of a small open-air theatre, monumentalised by the image; *Morning Cleaning* is at the other end of the sequence of the following four rooms. The two images in Room 4, *Siphoning fuel* and *Men move an engine block*, both from 2008, stress the importance of the car as an object in urban scenes. Both suggest a strong physical presence of the machine, analogous to the powerful architectural presence in *Rear view*. They are also the first two pictures in the exhibition to feature clearly depicted figures, and in which the image is clearly built on a relationship between figures, place and action. In each case, the subject is an isolated moment in an explicit yet enigmatic activity. In *Siphoning fuel*, why is a man siphoning petrol from a tank and what is that little girl doing sitting there on the grass (waiting, getting bored)? Perhaps what the image conjures up, its centre of dramatic interest, is the contrast between the child's frail body and the huge cars looming overhead. Everything is played out between bodies and machines. In *Men move an*

engine block, the engine being lugged in a tarpaulin evokes a body being carried in a shroud.

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Room 5, the largest space, brings together a series of images that play on the relationship between near and far, a key aspect when shooting photographs. The grouping of the four images is a way of questioning the dual orientation, cinematographic and monumental, of dramatic composition. The four situations depicted bear witness to the muted violence of social relations as manifested on a daily basis in the urban space of the metropolis. Inspired by a project for a monument designed and engraved by Dürer, *The Thinker* (1986) corresponds to a particularly elaborate (unwritten) setting, since the idea was to use photography to produce a second-degree monument. According to Wall, *The Thinker* was «*an imaginary monument to disenchantment*»: the man, stabbed in the back, is an old labourer, distantly related to the rebellious German peasants of the sixteenth century who were denounced by Luther and violently put down. This sort of monumental short-circuitry, possibly sparked by allegorical imagination, is a recurring feature in Wall's work and has recently made a spectacular comeback. It returns in the second part of the exhibition, in Room 11, with *Two eat from bag* (2008), in a rather realistic mode, and, above all, in the 2023 figure of a woman wondering whether to mend a sock.

This new fictional project for a monument shares a similar conception of allegorical realism with the 1986 picture. The choice of setting and the conception of the figure recall how, in all of Wall's work, the idea of the monument is filtered through the lens of the everyday and undergoes a kind of reduction. This is evident in *The Thinker*. While the landscape leads the eye into the distance, to the towers of downtown Vancouver, the figure in the foreground is set there like a sculpture. Wall describes the composition of its base as «a tree stump, a piece of curbstone, and a cinder

block. There's the forest which was there to begin with, the roads which are bordered with curbs, and the blocks out of which the buildings are made.»[1] The relationship between near and far is also the relationship between (manufactured) object and landscape.

Exhibited in the same room, *Approach* and *Listener*, from 2014 and 2015, echo *Man with a rifle* (2000). The term «approach» is commonly used to describe the regulated, cautious procedure followed in an investigation, photographic or otherwise; it is also used in relation to the first steps we might tentatively take when assessing whether to make contact. The man with the imaginary gun may be hallucinating his target. Just as we can't see what he is aiming at, neither can we share the experience of the listener or follow in the footsteps of the figure approaching the cardboard shelter. We can, however, begin to approach an interpretation by identifying iconographic aspects. Faced with an enigmatic image, the viewer becomes an investigator. However, only those who find aesthetic pleasure in it can really take part in the game: «What we look for and respect in art is not an original expression, or the interest of an audience, but the process of figuration itself, when it aims to produce an image that is quite simply apt; an aptness which in itself has a formative value in the experience of the world.»[2]

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Jeff Wall's pictures seem to take up just about every genre and mode of the figurative pictorial tradition, to which he adds innovations—notably the snapshot—generally attributed to photography. This tradition is based on a respect for verisimilitude, with its rhetorical conventions, its repertoire of themes, figures and commonplaces. But it has always been the occasion for another kind of figurative work, in which we recognise the mechanisms of condensation and displacement of dreamlike imagination potentially relayed by literature. «In 1994,» Wall says, «I went to Prague to

hunt for Odradek, I was fortunate to be able to get a shot of him in an old building there.»

Odradek, Táboritská 8, Prague, 18 July 1994, inspired by a short story by Kafka, depicts a young girl descending the staircase in an old building in Prague (the address and date are given in the title). In the corridor on the ground floor, beneath the staircase, we can make out a small shape: Odradek. The German title of the story, *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* [The Cares of a Family Man], conveys the idea of a home: the father in the family is also, and above all, the master of the house, troubled by the presence, in his own home, of an extraordinary being, composite, hybrid and monstrously persistent.

Odradek is both a doll and a prodigy fallen from heaven, an earthly angel, a microcosm and a figure of disparity. Kafka writes:

> At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, they are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. But it is not only a spool, for a small wooden crossbar sticks out of the middle of the star, and another small rod is joined to that at a right angle. By means of this latter rod on one side and one of the points of the star on the other, the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs.[3]

To illustrate the text, Wall made a model of the little hybrid being, confused and enigmatic.

Apart from the fact that it also depicts *an interior with a figure* (unlike all the large pictures in the previous rooms, which depict urban or peri-urban outdoor spaces), *Morning Cleaning* may seem in every other way to be the opposite of *Odradek*. Yet the two pictures are closely linked: they have been joined in Barcelona in 1999, the same year that *Morning Cleaning* was created. This large image (3.51 m wide) is

essentially a view of the replica, built between 1983 and 1986, of the pavilion designed by German architect Mies van der Rohe for the 1929 International Exhibition. Rebuilt identically on its original site in Montjuïc Park, the steel, glass and marble pavilion is a monument to modern architecture, extolling openness and transparency. This is confirmed in the image. The morning light distinguishes the planes by illuminating the marble surfaces and the pale travertine floor, blued by the reflection of the outer wall. A man is cleaning a glass-panelled wall.

Here, as elsewhere in Wall's work, transparency and cleanliness go hand in hand. They call for meticulous maintenance. But a small additional motif, rather unexpected in the ambient clearness, lies on the floor near the cleaner. Although closer inspection reveals it to be a combination of two functional elements—a window squeegee and a cloth—at first sight it looks like a piece of rubbish or some strange parasitic assemblage in the architectural setting.

Like Dan Graham (1942–2022), with whom he had a close relationship, Wall took a keen interest in the utopia of the glass house, eager to reveal its excesses, contradictory resonances and fantastical content. While he was working on *Morning Cleaning*, he made an important contribution to this critical corpus by bringing the image of Odradek in Prague, together with the accompanying small sculpture, to the pavilion in Montjuïc. Thus, for a time, Odradek was sheltered by the pavilion's majestic red curtain; thanks to Wall, he had moved from the hollow of the stairs in an old building in Prague to the luminous space of a glass house—a shift that linked the two opposite poles of modernity.

Morning Cleaning was exhibited in Barcelona in 2000, in an exhibition entitled *Architecture without Shadow*. At the time, Wall said:

> I've realised that over the past few years I've made a number of pictures on or somehow related to the theme of cleaning, washing or of housework. There is much to say about dirt and washing. It is an opposition like «the

> raw and the cooked». I like things to be clean and neat. A serenely well cared for place can be very beautiful, like the garden at the Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, or my darkroom when everything has been washed and put in perfect order. But I also like dirty sinks, the soggy abandoned clothes I see in the alley behind my studio all the time, crusted dried pools of liquid and all the other picturesque things so akin to the spirit of photography.[4]

The reference to dirty sinks is an allusion to *Diagonal Composition*, the small picture that opens the exhibition.

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After the two rooms devoted to *Odradek* and *Morning Cleaning*, the exhibition leads on to other places more or less related to *Approach*'s cardboard shelters. *Burrow* (2004) shows the entrance to a shelter dug into the ground on wasteland. This matte, grey, black-and-white view, with its strict documentary sobriety, is the antithesis of the set created in 1999–2000, after Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*; it did suggest the existence of another «invisible man» living underground.

Taking refuge in his illuminated lair, Ellison's character is presumably engaged in some underground literary activity. His posture mirrors the anatomical copying exercise of apprentice artist Adrian Walker (Room 7). He has built himself a «hole», an underground grotto in Harlem, Manhattan, where, Wall tells us:

> The ceiling is covered with 1369 light bulbs, which the invisible man has scavenged, hung and wired, connecting them illegally. He says, «My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway.»

There is nothing like this in *Burrow*. None of that exuberance. But the black-and-white image does link invisibility

to absence and secrecy. The title evokes a short story by Kafka, *Der Bau* [The Burrow]. We can grasp what it is about, without being tempted to tell ourselves a story. Stripped of picturesqueness and pathos, the image simply depicts the junction, or the narrow gap, between survival and disappearance, between living and being buried.

Room 9, the last room in the first part of the exhibition, takes up the theme of approaching the invisible. *Just Washed* (2007) recalls the paradigm of cleanliness, associated here with the small, familiar, shapeless object of a clearly well-used and still somewhat soiled cloth being taken out of the washing machine. In *A woman with a covered tray*, the white cloth covering a tray catches the light on a rainy day. Here, the rag has been replaced by the regular shape of an immaculate tea towel. The woman, seen from behind with the tray in her hands, is perfectly framed but is heading out of frame. She is crossing a threshold, or about to. The slightly high-angle view suggests an out-of-frame gaze from a house. This inclusion of a gaze—and hence the viewer—in the structure of the image accentuates the analogy between the invisible face and the covered tray. Here we find the mechanism of the picture as a trap for the gaze, as imaginary capture. The protagonist in *A man with a rifle* was aiming at an invisible target with an absent weapon. But a visible object can also have a spectral presence. It is a question of perspective and lighting (or illumination).

Like *Burrow*, albeit in its own way, *Dawn* (2001) is a typical image of a place without a figure, where the absence of human beings evokes an invisible, spectral presence. The image conveys the mystery of a street corner at dawn. Wall had initially transformed the place (the elusive street) into the setting for nocturnal urban business. In the end, however, he decided to dispense with the narrative element in order to play down the image and bring out the effect of light, particularly on the piece of rock. The rock then took on an additional presence, like the pieces of fabric in the other two images.

We might also think of how the theatre in *Rear view, open air theatre* is turned into a grey lantern by the light shining through the small windows. And the statue by Georg Kolbe that adorns the Mies van der Rohe pavilion happens to be an allegory of dawn, to which the figure introduced by Wall acts as a counter-figure.

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The second part of the exhibition is given over mainly to recent images, although the final rooms (13–15) feature three older works on lightboxes: *Insomnia* (1994), *Diagonal Composition no. 3* (2000) and *The Flooded Grave* (1998–2000). Since 2007, the date of his first colour images on paper, Wall has made no more images on lightboxes. He had already begun to make large black-and-white images on paper, the first of which he presented in 1997 as part of Documenta X in Kassel. By abandoning the lightbox, he was making it clear that the advertising image-object had ceased to be a reference for him. He had initially opted for an approach to the image that enabled him to produce a reciprocal critique between painting and photography. In the 1980s he sought to produce what he called «a specific opposite to painting».[5] Twenty years later, this option took a back seat. It was now a matter of allowing a wider spectrum of images to come into play, incorporating a form of historical continuity. Applied in particular to the borderless realm of the everyday, photography made it possible to recapture the fine art tradition centred on the practice of depiction.

We have not tried to establish a chronology or to trace any evolution in his work. We have incorporated the Barcelona context by following *Morning Cleaning*'s trail to *Odradek* and to the character of the man in the basement (*Burrow*). For the rest, we have followed the threads that link the images together and which draw lines of transformation between them.

The second part of the exhibition gets under way in Room 10 with a 2019 image, *Man at a mirror*, from where *Two eat from bag* can be seen in the next room. Wall likes titles that are limited to literal indications and which seem to eschew interpretation, or at least keep it at bay. Sometimes, the precise indication of the place photographed underscores a documentary intention or the documentary content of a fiction; this is the case, for example, with *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver* (1992).

The long title of *Maquette...* forms a short allegorical poem

Maquette for a monument
to the contemplation
of the possibility of mending
a hole in a sock

In contrast, *Man at a mirror* limits itself to a literal statement, providing a minimum (or less than a minimum) of information: a simple indication that forces the viewer to question the image, just as the character scrutinises the message in the mirror. This strongly suggested idea of a *message* is as decisive here as the notion of the *copy* was in *Adrian Walker*. The conventional comfort and glamour of the hotel room is a typical setting for a TV series. But here everything revolves around the scrutinising of the mirror. *Man at a mirror* reveals the intrusion of the fantastical into the lingua franca of kitsch.

The ancient science of mirrors, or catoptrics, has always encouraged speculation on the mysteries of image and likeness. As a medium for an incessant formation of ephemeral images, a mirror can literally become a medium for inscription. Here, the image heightens the clarity of the mirror. The figure has just appeared in the setting of the hotel room and discovers, written in white letters on the mirror (with the small bar of soap we see on the table), a message that is probably addressed to him, a message that assigns him a role in some intrigue. We, the viewers,

cannot read the inscription. It is a powerful topos in Christian theology that the view perceived in the mirror—indirectly, «in enigmatic form»—is the only possible doorway to the transcendent. Here, the invisible merges with the indecipherable.

Unlike a picture, a mirror, as an object, fades away in favour of the image it temporarily holds. This is borne out in Rooms 13 and 14, with *Changing room* (2014) and *Mask maker* (2015). A changing room is essentially a room of mirrors. But this one is different, since the fourth wall has been replaced by a camera (the curtain may also evoke a photo booth). For the protagonist of *Mask maker*, a shop window acts as a mirror. This attests to the expansive power of the catoptric mechanism.

One major fact remains: the mirror, hung on a wall, remains the exemplary vector of illusionist space, implemented in the instant photographic *tableau*.

It is also true that the instant photographic *tableau* is the result of a recording technique that is not a (fleeting) reproduction in a mirror. In Rooms 12 and 13, *Boy falls from tree* (2010) and *In the Legion* (2022) depict an accidental event. The child falling from a tree at the bottom of the garden and the amateur acrobat are related. Obviously, a somersault is not a fall but rather its opposite, but the man clearly lacked the necessary momentum: he was overconfident in his ability to overcome the earth's attraction.

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Rooms 12, 13 and 14 form a continuous sequence on the recurring theme of gravity. If the *tableau-picture* presents (and seems to achieve) a form of permanence, distinct from the fleeting nature of the specular image, it is because, like all bodies, it cannot resist the earth's attraction.

The weight of bodies and the presence of the ground have always been closely linked in Wall's conception of the *tableau-picture*. An image from 1994, *Insomnia* (Room 13),

recalls a vein of fantastical realism, which dialogues here with the burlesque theme of *In the Legion*.

In the first part of the exhibition, the materiality of the ground was already strongly felt, with the views of undergrowth, with *Burrow* or *Siphoning fuel*. With a different selection of works, we might have followed the thread of what Wall called «the utopia of the luncheon on the grass», in reference to Manet. Here at La Virreina, the insomniac has found a new home. In 1994 he slipped under the kitchen table, unwittingly helping to create a new «diagonal composition». Today the picture can be seen alongside more playful works. Like a time capsule, it has retained its strange imaginary heaviness, largely due to the jostling perspective created by the decor. The elongated female body in *Changing room* obviously contrasts with the man lying on the floor. But bringing the two images together creates an analogy. Basically, like an aptly named changing room, a kitchen can be a place of transformation. By leaving his bed and reaching for the floor under the kitchen table, the man suffering from insomnia is perhaps also trying to change.

Among the recent images, *Weightlifter* (2015; Room 14), in black and white, ostensibly demonstrates the role of gravity in the stature and visual presence of the isolated figure. We usually associate the presence of a figure with the «weight» of the corresponding image. Here, the weightlifter's effort is diffused into the surrounding space, into the monumental geometry of the training room, but also into the materiality of the surfaces and signs of use. We might fear that the large scale would dilute the tactile quality of the prints, but this is not the case. Wall uses black and white to transpose textures into shades of grey.

With *Boy falls from tree*, which crystallises the theme of gravity, Room 12 is also a space where the discursive links between the images can seem more relaxed, even accidental. In fact, the four images brought together here (including the two parts of a diptych) coexist above all thanks to a similar

attention to the effects of light and texture. In *Boy falls from tree* we can appreciate the nuances of colour in the vegetation, the vibrant glow of the tree reflected on the boy and the fence. This shift in light is repeated in the black-and-white images, accentuated by the attention paid to values, regardless of colour. In *Rock surface* (2006) there is a shift in gaze, which moves across the surface of the rock, shifting the frame of the shot. Added to the image of the ground as a terrain for action and a point of support (for one figure or another) is the experience of a tactile material revealed by the light.

This dimension is amply evidenced in the contrasts and carefully arranged nuances of lighting in *A woman with a necklace* (2021). The young woman gazes at the sparkling necklace she has probably taken out of the small box open on the coffee table in the foreground. The mystery of the picture is condensed in her questioning contemplation. The necklace hanging above the couch could serve as an intermediary motif between the two figures of *instant suspense*: the fall (*Boy falls from tree*) and the somersault (*In the Legion*). But the young woman herself is illuminated in a way that suggests another source of light. The light is stronger on her legs (and on the end of the couch) than on her bust and her face, which, by contrast, appear to be in shadow. This other, secondary, untimely and fleeting light suggests an invisible exterior. Ultimately, the apparent harmony of the bourgeois decor is a construction, a delusion, much like the kitchen in *Insomnia*.

The final image in the exhibition, *The Flooded Grave*, is another diagonal composition. It is also a hole in the ground, a double landscape, realistic and visionary, among many other things. A hybrid composition that combines view and sight, observation and hallucination.

Wall suggests that we might imagine someone walking through the graveyard on a rainy afternoon and stopping in front of a freshly dug grave that has filled with water, only to have a vision of the ocean. When it was shown for the first time, in the United States, the image was greeted with

A Woman with a necklace (detail), 2021.
Silver gelatine print.
© Jeff Wall.

The Flooded Grave (detail), 1998-2000.
Transparency on lightbox.
© Jeff Wall.

surprise and great enthusiasm. Some interpreted it as a symbolic, even symbolist, inspiration. Above all, it deals with a powerful commonplace: the association of death with the oceanic feeling—the idea of death as a return to the great prenatal bath. The value of this image lies not in its pathos but in its poetic aptness. The combination of the realistic part (the graveyard) and the imaginary part (the mental vision) is perfectly balanced.

A vision set in a realistic environment is, after all, what we commonly find in literature, especially since Flaubert. But hallucination might be a mere hypothesis; we can dispense with it and take the montage of the two heterogeneous shots for what it is; the hole opening onto the sea then constitutes a luminous parable on the metabolic relationship between life and death, when the visible profusion of ocean life replaces the invisible decomposition of bodies buried in the ground, when the rise of the seabed replaces the descent of the body into the grave.

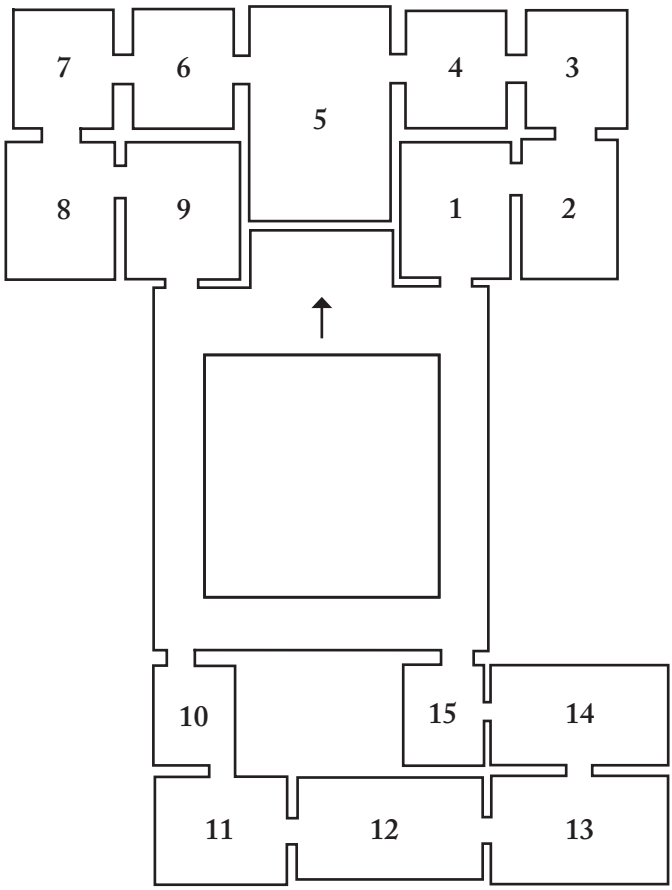
1. «At Home and Elsewhere: dialogue in Brussels between Jeff Wall and Jean-Francois Chevrier» (1998), in Jeff Wall: *Selected Essays and Interviews*. New York: MoMA, 2007.

2. Published in French in «Entretien entre Jeff Wall et Jean-François Chevrier» (2001), in *Essais et entretiens*. Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris Éditions, 2018), p. 33.

3. Franz Kafka, «The Cares of a Family Man», in *The Complete Stories*, (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir). New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

4. Jeff Wall, «A Note about Cleaning», in *Architecture without Shadow* (ed. Gloria Moure). Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2000. Reprinted in *Catalogue raisonée*, 2005, p. 393.

5. Els Barents, «Typology, Luminescence, Freedom: Selections from a Conversation with Jeff Wall», in *Jeff Wall: Transparencies*. New York: Rizzoli, 1987, p. 100 ; *Selected Essays and Interviews* (ed. Peter Galassi). New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007, p. 194.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LA VANGUARDIA

DL B 9422-2024

Text and curatorship: Jean-François Chevrier, with the assistance of Élia Pijollet

With the collaboration of:
Jeff Wall Studio, Vancouver
White Cube, London
Gagosian Gallery, New York
Frac Grand Large — Hauts-de-France, Dunkirk
Verbund Collection, Vienna
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