

On or around June 3, 1976, James Welling, then in his mid-twenties and a recent graduate of CalArts (M.F.A. 1974), placed a Polaroid camera on a tripod and took a number of photographs of objects in his Venice, California, studio.¹ This was the beginning, not exactly of his involvement in photography (he had made photos as a student and after), but of taking himself seriously as a photographer, which is to say of realizing that it was to be in and through the medium of photography that he was likely to discover his vocation as an artist. Among the works that resulted from that early exercise is *Lock*, a picture of a wooden two-by-four leaning against a wall. According to Welling, the two-by-four normally served as a kind of improvised lock to his studio door (hence the title); the top would be wedged under the doorknob, the bottom would rest on the floor (the plank itself tilted at an angle), where a strip of wood attached to the floor would keep it from slipping. None of this is clear from the photograph, which in effect removes the plank from its everyday context and isolates it as an object for aesthetic contemplation (leaving open for the moment the question of exactly what that means).

Not the least interest of *Lock* for the student of Welling's work is that it offers ready access to some of his deepest and most constant concerns. Take, for a start, the plainness of the basic set-up. On the one hand, it belongs to a particular moment in his evolution, expressing as it does a desire to begin as simply as possible: with the barest of objects, positioned with an absolute minimum of artifice, and more or less centered within the pictorial field. On the other hand, the desire for simplicity, for plainness and directness, makes itself felt throughout Welling's career (the velvet and phyllo dough photographs, or drapes, of 1981 and the Richardson series of 1988–94 are cases in point), where, as here, it is typically associated with the use of a tripod. Not that *Lock* unmistakably declares the nature of its supporting apparatus (can a photograph do this other than by the use of a mirror?); but the steadiness of the camera's gaze, the patience with which it scrutinizes the leaning two-by-four and the wall behind it, evoke that apparatus along

with the artistic stance, of concentrated intentionality, that characteristically accompanies it.

In any case, *Lock* is without any suggestion of instantaneousness, of a scene captured, as if on the run. (This is true of all of Welling's work; no photographer has ever been less interested in the "decisive moment" or a snapshot aesthetic.) Instead—to try again to find words for something that seems perfectly obvious and yet is not entirely so—Welling appears to have wanted to make a truly elementary photograph, and my suggestion is that something like that desire, that impulse to ground his practice in first principles (though not necessarily the *same* first principles), makes itself felt again and again in the course of his career. On the second page of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein writes: "That philosophical concept of meaning [the one he finds in Augustine's *Confessions* and wants to dispute or at least fiercely complicate, according to which words are more or less simply matched with the objects they designate] has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours....The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language."² Or, slightly altered, as a possible mode of photographic practice. The *Investigations* was much in the air in avant-garde artistic circles in the mid-1970s; whether or not Welling had it in mind, *Lock* invites being seen as a gloss on a passage like the above.

And yet: the feeling of simplicity or primitivism is crossed or countered or thickened by the conspicuously dark tonality of the image as a whole. We may feel that there is something surprising in finding this preference so strongly

1. Throughout this essay I have made use of information gleaned from two long conversations (May 28 and September 4, 1999) with James Welling in his former studio on Greene Street in New York City.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1958), p. 3, par. 2.



LOCK, 1976

marked in the work of a beginner, especially in a picture that in other respects (such as those just discussed) has the deliberate character of an initiating statement. But Welling in 1976 was not exactly a newcomer to the thought of photography; on the contrary, he already had a grasp of its history, and he already admired certain major practitioners, notably Walker Evans and Paul Strand. The dark tonality of *Lock* is a tribute to Strand, whose work Welling knew both from publications and from the retrospective exhibition that opened in Philadelphia in late 1971 and in 1973 traveled to Los Angeles. And that is to say that for all its ostensible roughness *Lock* is a highly aestheticized picture, one that positively declares its identity as a work of art; far from being accidental, the darkness of the image was sought by the artist, who used a camera that allowed him to control the time of exposure (he took several otherwise identical shots of the plank, trying for exactly the right darkish value for the picture as a whole). Experientially, the darkness forces the viewer's attention, makes him or her strain to see, to look closely, as if through a dense medium or heavy atmosphere—but not at all, it seems to me, as if under dim lighting; the viewer intuits, it's hard to say precisely how, that a shortage of ambient light wasn't the decisive factor. Rather, the dark tonality is the result of carefully controlled underexposure; and if the viewer remains uncertain as to how the effect was achieved, the sense of mystery is less important than the impression of technical and artistic command. Thereafter in Welling's oeuvre a dark tonality, one of the formal leitmotifs of his art, will be achieved in and by the process of printing, which is to say that it will be associated—mysteriously, chiasmatically—with an excess of light, as if the darkening were a function of a special sensitivity in the recording surface rather than being inherent in the photographed scene. This is nowhere more palpable than in some of the *Light Sources* photographs, for example those in which glowing fluorescent bulbs and other light-bodies are pictured surrounded by darkness, as if the latter radiated from the former, and it receives a further twist in the *New Abstractions*, in which the dark elements were originally blank forms where the photographic paper was not exposed to light (i.e., photograms), the finished works being essentially negative prints of the original images. As for the larger issue of Welling's aestheticism, the *Los Angeles Architecture* photographs, 1976–78, that he began shortly after making the early Polaroids may be seen as a tribute to Evans (and Moholy-Nagy) in their unembarrassed pursuit of a marriage of total-field compositional refinement with the most sensuous imaginable juxtaposition of lights and darks. And following those, Welling embarked on one of

the most sheerly aesthetic projects of his career, the crinkled aluminum foil pictures of 1980–81, which in their restraint of means and Mallarméan metaphoric expansiveness defy the viewer to read back from the scintillating, almost impossibly finely detailed images to the original motif. The early abstract tile photographs, the *Degradés*, the velvet and phyllo dough photographs, and the recent abstractions are also cases in point. Altogether, Welling has always been an unabashedly aesthetic photographer, a fact that needs stressing only because his art has sometimes erroneously been understood as conducting a critique of photography rather than as mobilizing its resources, often traditional not to say old-fashioned ones, in wholly unironic albeit remarkably sophisticated pursuit of quintessentially photographic ends.

But the double stress on simplicity and aestheticism, while correct as far as it goes, doesn't exhaust the interest of *Lock* for the student of Welling's art. For nothing could be more striking than the way both of these are accompanied by a singularly powerful evocation of the material specificity of just this artifact, this far from pristine two-by-four, leaning at a shallow angle against a wall; the photograph, I want to say, not only represents but foregrounds and expresses the scuffed and dented plank, which in turn may be seen in this context as foregrounding and expressing its own material basis—wood, probably pine. (We are now in the general territory of Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art.") This too turns out to be a basic feature of Welling's photographic imagination: so for example the Richardson series contains pictures that aspire to the character of the massive, worked stone blocks that the great American architect H. H. Richardson (1838–86) used so forcefully; the original and moving *Diary/Landscape* series of 1977–86 captures with extraordinary directness the texture and absorbency of fine nineteenth-century paper, not to mention the fluidity of the ink and the precision of the pen moving across the page (the diary was kept by Welling's great-great grandparents, Elizabeth and James Dixon, during their European honeymoon in 1840–41); and the wonderful velvet and phyllo dough photographs render the heft and feel of the cloth almost as if the latter were under our hand. The velvet and phyllo dough pictures also evoke the particular stiffness of men's clothing in nineteenth-century portrait photographs by Nadar, Carjat, *et al.*, another instance of Welling's readiness to summon the history of his medium and with it the atmosphere, the aura, of a bygone world. There is something of this as well in the *Railroad Photographs* of 1987–94, which pay their respects

to the modern version of a technology that originally was contemporary with the invention of photography and that for all its updating and streamlining inevitably evokes the nineteenth century.³ More broadly, a recurrent theme in Welling's art involves a concern with objects and materials, not merely or primarily as they are in themselves, but as they are revealed photographically, as they exist *within* photography or are made manifest *by* photography, which since its inception has functioned in part as a technology for the revelation of reality, of reaches or aspects of the world that were otherwise unknown or at least unseeable in precisely those terms, even as its most sophisticated practitioners have been aware that what it made visible was not precisely reality as such. The height of refinement in this direction is perhaps achieved by the lace-making photographs of 1993 (taken in a factory in Calais, France), which alone in Welling's oeuvre depict not the finished artifact but, in a number of pictures, the process of manufacture. (They also depict the highly photogenic mechanical instruments—rollers, looms, bobbins—and bright, seemingly magically luminous thread involved in the process. And in one lyrical picture, *Quality Control*, a human being makes a rare cameo appearance in Welling's photography, resembling nothing so much as an entranced emanation from the sheets of lace.)

In *Lock*, to return to our exemplary work, the darkness of the picture underscores what might be called the thingness of the plank, forcing the issue of the plank's density, its weight, its roughness to the touch (along the edges at any rate), and evoking a corresponding mood in the photographer/viewer (serious, thoughtful, concentrated). Meditating on the question of thingness in this context, I was led to revisit the notion of objecthood as it appears in my 1967 essay, "Art and Objecthood," where it is associated with a

pejorative notion of theatricality.⁴ Briefly, I argued that the Minimalist (or, the term I preferred, Literalist) enterprise involved the projection of objecthood, characteristically in the form of a more or less simple three-dimensional shape or gestalt (at the limit a hollow cube), as a means of bringing about a particular sort of open-ended yet also rigorously controlled relationship among the work in question, the embodied viewer, and the gallery space in which the encounter between the first two was arranged to take place. Without rehearsing those arguments here, I want to speculate that Welling's interest in a simple two-by-four in 1976 may well have been influenced, however indirectly, by the Minimalist intervention; indeed it is possible to see his plank as a real-world analogue to the California Minimalist (or post-Minimalist) John McCracken's high-gloss, "abstract" planks leaning against gallery walls that were a feature of the avant-garde scene in the late 1960s and 1970s. (In point of fact the examples of Robert Morris, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson were more important for Welling personally.) But the concern in Welling's photograph with the specificity of this particular two-by-four, with its individual history and identifying nicks and blemishes, comes out the other side of Minimalism or Literalism into the world of real and not "generic" objects, to use a philosophical distinction that has the virtue of locating the issue of theatricality within a larger problematic of philosophical skepticism.⁵ (From this point of view, the trouble with Donald Judd's Specific Objects was that they were never specific enough.) Another way of characterizing Welling's focus on the two-by-four might be to speak of an interest in real as opposed to abstract literalness or even in "good" as distinct from "bad" objecthood, understanding by the first term in both oppositions qualities pertaining to objects that can only be revealed or manifested in and by the art of photography (no "good" objecthood *tout court*).⁶ Further proof

3. The railroad-camera association is noted by Ulrich Loock, "Photography and Non-Portrayability—James Welling," in *James Welling*, exhib. cat., Kunstmuseum Luzern (February 7–March 22, 1998), pp. 47–48. For Loock, the consistent "self-reflexivity" (not a term I like) of Welling's photographs tends either to "place the infrastructure of the medium so firmly in the foreground as to wipe out any other subject matter" or to "adapt other cultural and historical 'writing' to the extent that the subject matter is subjugated by some foreign, adopted point of view [e.g. Strand's, Evans's, Nadar's, Carjat's—M.F.]. This form of self-reflexivity is part of an approach, where a photographic 'discourse of the world' [Welling's phrase—M.F.] is accompanied by an awareness of the structures that determine this discourse, independent of the reality of

that same world" (p. 48). I think this goes much too far: both the artist's concern with his medium and his interest in making "complicated photographs that [play] with time" (Welling, quoted in Carol Squiers, "A Slice of Light," *Artforum* 36, no. 5 [January 1998], p. 77) are in practice repeatedly made to yield pictures in which a "discourse of the world" is emphatically in evidence (as I am about to argue). Any of the more complex *Railroad Photographs—East Pennsboro, PA, 1992*, for example—makes this crystal-clear: the wealth of detail, the sheer multiplicity of contingent but, we are led to feel, aesthetically and semantically significant relationships, far exceed the force of the general analogy between railroads and photography. For a different argument, focusing on the question of surfaces, to roughly the same effect, see the

important essay by Walter Benn Michaels, "The Photographic Surface," in *James Welling: Photographs 1977–90*, exhib. cat. (Kunststalle Bern, May 12–June 24, 1990), pp. 102–13, esp. pp. 104–05.

4. See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 148–72.

5. For the notion of "generic" objects see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford and New York, 1979), p. 53ff. My thanks to Norton Batkin for suggesting the relevance of that notion to my arguments about objecthood and theatricality as well as for the provocation to connect those arguments more explicitly to

Cavell's examination of philosophical skepticism in *The Claim of Reason* and elsewhere (in "The Situation of Painting," a paper given at a session on "The Situation of Painting after Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood*" at the 57th annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Washington, D.C., October 30, 1999). The session was organized by Stephen Melville; the other participants were Richard Moran and Howard Singerman.

6. Cf. Heidegger's ontological distinction between the thing and the (mere) object, crucially thematized by the difficult-to-think "nearness" of the former, in Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), pp. 165–82.

of Welling's non-Literalist stance is provided by the fact that we are shown only part of the two-by-four, as against the Literalist ideal of projecting gestalts or wholes against which the necessarily partial and aspectual data of embodied vision are implicitly contrasted. For Welling, in *Lock* as throughout his career, the world comprises *only* parts and aspects, never wholes and gestalts: this is the lesson of the *Los Angeles Architecture* photographs which invariably make inspired cuts into a larger field of vision, of the *Diary/Landscape* series with its close-up, all-over, often angled and shadowed depictions of bound pages of difficult to read if not actually unreadable writing, of the Richardson series which in its preference for partial views at once courts and repudiates an analogy with the documentary stance of the Bechers (a documentary approach naturally favoring wholes over parts),⁷ of the *Railroad* series with its tracks leading out of picture after picture, and of one of his autograph motifs, the telephone wires that intersect numerous photographs of outdoor scenes but are never contained by them.—Am I suggesting that *Lock* therefore belongs to the modernist tradition of the abstract painting and sculpture championed against Minimalism in “Art and Objecthood”? No and yes. No, in the sense that Welling's first serious works belong to a distinctly post-Minimal (and post-Conceptual) moment, one when photography emerged as a vehicle of avant-garde ambition as perhaps never before, even as it was faced as never before with the problem of how to deal with the canonical photographic achievements of the past. And yes, in the sense that *Lock* implies a rejection not only of the Literalist stance toward objecthood but also of an entire set of attitudes associated with postmodernism that would grant to artistic activity only the roles of performance, appropriation, demystification, critique.⁸

One other feature of *Lock* has yet to be mentioned: the reflection of light (from a skylight) toward the top end of the plank, calling our attention to the eyelike knot and revealing the difference in reflectiveness in the different portions of

the grain of the wood. This is an early instance of Welling's continuing interest in reflecting surfaces—metal, glass, water, aluminum foil, lace, etc.—and more broadly in effects of light. And of darkness: for Welling, as I have already suggested, the two are more than usually inseparable, a feature of his visual poetics that lies at the heart of many of his most memorable pictures. I will only add that in *Lock* the pointed indication of a light source beyond the limits of the photograph is one more example of the non-holistic character of his vision. It also helps account for the viewer's sense, mentioned earlier, that the dark tonality is not the result of insufficient illumination.

Finally, something should be said about the wall behind the plank. Near the right-hand edge of the picture we see a narrow dark vertical gap which I take to belong to the doorjamb. (Welling could easily have avoided including this in his image; that he did not do so is still further evidence of his insistence on partialness.) And on the wall itself, to the left of the plank, there are drawn lines that are easy to overlook but, once noted, are inexplicable in terms of the rest of the picture. According to Welling, the lines were based on the motif of “word rivers,” channels of blankness that can accidentally result when a page is set in type and which practiced typesetters seek to avoid or to eliminate when they turn up; on a previous occasion Welling had drawn them on the wall, as part of an “environmental” project that went nowhere. Or did it? Welling had been raised in Connecticut, where his father worked for Connecticut Printers, a firm that among other books printed the photographic reproduction and textual transcription of the original manuscript of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1971. The pencil lines alluding to “word rivers” on the wall behind the plank in *Lock* may thus be seen both as hinting at the groundedness of Welling's art in a family context and as looking forward to the *Diary/Landscape* series, in which the photographing of writing would become the basis of some of his most compelling works.

7. Michaels observes that the Richardson pictures “almost invariably are of parts of buildings; they deliberately exclude most of what a viewer would see” (“The Photographic Surface,” p. 109). This belongs to a larger argument to the effect that Welling's photographs “eliminate the position of the subject; it makes no sense to think of them as pictures of what you would see if you were there. But, since they are pictures of something, another way to put it is to say that they insist upon the position of the camera; if it makes no sense to think of them as pictures of what you

would see if you had been there, it also makes no sense not to think of them as pictures of something that was there” (ibid.). Michaels also notes that the *Diary* photographs “tend also to be of parts of pages” and that “with their heightened use of contrast and their internal variation in focus, make individual words identifiable as writing without making the writing, as such, readable” (ibid.). For a sensitive discussion of the Richardson series see also Janet Abrams, “The Solid Geometry of Sight,” in exhib. cat., *James Welling: Architectural Photographs: Buildings by H. H.*

Richardson (1838–86), 1988–94, The Arts Club of Chicago (March 16–April 23, 1994), unpaginated.

8. One of Michaels's points is the extent to which Welling's work is at odds with standard accounts of postmodernism's relation to photography (“The Photographic Surface,” pp. 103–04).

© 2000 Michael Fried.