



The first level is the formal level. The 'denotations' in other terminology. What I am referring to is the specific meaning that is commonly applied to a thing or word. For example a classic and unambiguous denotation of the word home is a building made of brick and stone compared to the *connotation* of the word home which is a place of warmth, familiarity and comfort. It tends to strip things of their poetry and operates on facts and functionality. For this image I see a kitchen, denoted by the cooker, fridge freezer and table and chairs. That much is communicated clearly by the use of props. However what we miss in the denotation is the connotation of the type of kitchen that it is. The cold colours of the cupboards and the starkness of the scene, the harsh lighting and the hotspots, give a kind of eerie feel. It connotes a place of discomfort; of coldness and unease which we can sense even though we cannot actually be in that kitchen. This information has been delivered to us via a series of signs and signifiers carefully selected and utilised by the photographer. Which brings me to my personal reading of this image. When I was pregnant I went through a period of insomnia, I was a frequenter of my

kitchen at night. The open cupboards to the left of the still scene allude to the frenetic activity of searching for an unfound snack to satisfy some unmet desire. Although I didn't attempt to sleep on the floor, I can certainly empathise with this man's frustration.

In another part of my brain it reminds me of a kitchen in a basement I used to walk past often in Oxford at night. (I like looking through people's windows...) The light always seemed to be on but no-one was in. It reminded me of this scene, a kind of psychological state of unrest.

Then I must position this work in the context of the wider canon of art, literature and film to gain a fuller understanding. We know from his writings that Wall places an importance on creating a dialogue between his works and those of other historical and contemporary artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Diane Arbus, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, Dan Graham, Thomas Struth and Andreas Gurski among others. He makes overt references to other artists in other works, (like 'A sudden gust of wind, After Hokusai') so we must recognise this deliberate intertextuality. So what does *Insomnia* refer to?

Shakespeare used insomnia and madness in correlation to portray guilt and a sense of regret, for example Macbeth and Henry IV. Perhaps we are to wonder what wrong this man has committed or in a more innocent manner what has been committed against him? Insomnia seems to be a modern anxiety, with the pressures of work, stress and financial collapse. Perhaps it's tapping into the zeitgeist and remains a statement of our times? Or perhaps he was simply an artist sharing in the age old connection between insomnia and the creative process.

In real life this image is big. Approx 2m x 1.75m so Wall is clearly asking for our attention. He says this image was made in response to the saying *When a prince doesn't sleep well, a nation doesn't either*. He wondered what happened when people of no importance undergo the same torments. Although he doesn't attempt to answer the question this work was made as part of the desire to depict unimportant people in his images and in doing so he makes the narrative transcend culture, class and success. He speaks to us all.

There, that was over 500 words. Perhaps you could keep going to 1000. Or as an optional bonus assignment you could write a blog post of 1000 words on your favourite image or pick an image that appeals and see where it takes you. If you do, I'd love to read them so perhaps you could post a link in the comments. Of course David Company went one further and wrote a whole book about one of Wall's pictures.

For more like this keep an eye on Judith Williamson's 'On Advertising' section which appears each issue in Source. She deconstructs a current advertising image and always has something unHINGING and insightful to bring.