THOMAS DEMAND

Parkett 62 – 2001

Memoryscapes

ANDREAS RUBY

At first it looks like a perfectly real scene that has been photographed and hung on the wall. The gaze basks in the security of a motif that is casual to the extreme. A sink full of dishwater, nothing special. We are about to look away because there is n o t m o r e to see. But then we take another look after all. There seems to be something in the picture that we cannot see. It is as if it were looking back at us. After a while this gaze out of nothing is almost embarrassing. We begin to fight back—by studying the picture, listening to it, and sniffing it out like a bloodhound. There must be something somewhere that betrays the staged scene—if that's what it is. Odd, the polished cleanliness of the chrome sink. So clean, in fact, that it looks as if it had never seen a drop of water. Instead, these curiously sharp edges. Why they occasionally form these dark, thick joints is inexplicable. Maybe the sink isn't… but the cups and glasses are quite… except that the blue handle is so angular… and everything else so thin…

And then something clicks. Doubt spreads like wildfire as, piece by piece, the inner life of the picture proves to be a paper landscape. Immense disillusion, the room that was just beginning to feel familiar implodes before our very eyes. Oddly jumbled feelings ensue: a mixture of incomprehension (why this hide-and-seek?), disenchantment (because we've been tricked), and also admiration (for the superbly executed artifice). Slightly dazed after successfully surviving the initiation, we turn to the other pictures ready to take a now conscious look at their transformation. Having seen through the mental manipulation, the viewer has once again become the confident, active and acting subject, capable of enjoying the drama, like watching a slow-motion instant replay on TV. One is tempted to succumb to imperceptibly growing awareness, to indulge in the fun of self-manipulation. Standing at the levers of the reality mixing board, we knowingly check the fade from illusion to reality (and back again). As DJs of our own experience, we decide how to fade from one track to another. In STALL (Stable, 2000), we can poke around in the straw to our heart's content without feeling threatened by illusion. It's as easy as turning the prince back into a frog: we need only glance at the (wall)paper glued to the wall in the upper right-hand corner to realign our worldview.

As in real DJ-ing, the most fascinating bits are the ones in which both tracks are audible and superimposed, causing mutual interference. The beat gets out of kilter and becomes syncopated; different keys rub off on each other and generate spaces. For instance, in ARCHIV (Archive, 1995) both levels are present at once: emanating from a stack of boxes is a perfectly credible aura of bureaucratic order and the pallid lighting inevitably transports the viewer into deep underground archives. But signs of a paper world are equally visible: the papered edge on the cheek of the ladder and the glued patches on the front of the shelves have just enough presence to hint at the actual quality of the materials used to evoke the scene.

Ambiguity

These synchronous levels of reality lend Thomas Demand's pictures an ambiguity that prevents the discrete spectacle of their transformation from fizzling out after the first time. Since the effect of the pictures thus endures, doubts about their ontologi-

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ANDREAS RUBY, based in Cologne, Germany, writes on contemporary art and architecture.

cal status are never fully allayed. We are buffeted back and forth between interpretations. What if they're actually real after all? It is a pleasure to surrender to their seductive promise of reality and to take the immaculate smoothness of their surfaces at face, or rather fake value, as plastered walls, sheet aluminum, plastic coating, plush, wood, glass—rather than paper and cardboard. Nietzsche thinks we cannot bear reality and therefore prefer to deceive ourselves by kneading and molding the world until it suits our fancy.

Simulation / Play

But the last thing Demand wants to do is simulate reality. His pictures have no intention of deceiving viewers; rather, they give them the choice of taking part in the illusion themselves. Illusion is not an act of deception; it is play, as Baudrillard realized late in life, having abandoned the theory of simulation. The Latin verb, *illudere*, means "to mock" or "to play on" something. Play compels reality to surrender the dogma of its unconditional validity in order to flirt with possibility. In the case of Demand's pictures, it acquires diversity by ceaselessly commuting between the imitation and the construction of reality. You can never quite tell what kind of reality prevails in these pictures: that of the represented? or the representation itself? or both at once?

Reconstruction

To a certain extent Demand's art might be described as reconstruction. It shows spatial situations that once existed as such. We are often ignorant of their origin—geographical or otherwise. Sometimes they are a product of the artist's memory, but they are more frequently based on photographs. Photographs that were often taken to document a situation. The scene of a crime, for example. Through the "reconstruction" of this "photographic evidence" in large-scale models made of paper and cardboard, the photographic impetus of "testifying" spills over into Demand's pictures—the *ça a été* (that happened), declared by Roland Barthes to be the fundamental message of any photograph. Regarding the will to reconstruct, Demand's pictures even outdo the photograph inasmuch as they are not content to deal only

THOMAS DEMAND, BADEZIMMER / BATHROOM, 1997,
C-Print Diasec, 160 x 122 cm / 63 x 48".

in surface depiction but actually reconstruct their referent in three dimensions. At the same time Demand subverts this laboriously reconstructed reality by presenting his models only in large-format photographs (albeit in full scale). This concatenation of reproductions systematically leads the longing to restore reality *ad absurdum*—which is undoubtedly one of photography's most popular motivations. Demand has definitively deconstructed photography as the dominant visual medium of modernism. The fact that he does so by using the medium itself is not a contradiction but indeed a condition of deconstruction. The act of physically building a model of a room after a photograph and then re-photographing the reconstruction obstructs the link between represented and

THOMAS DEMAND, STUDIO, 1997, C-Print Diasec, 183,5 x 349,5 cm / 72$^{1}/_{4}$ x 137$^{5}/_{8}$".

representation to the point of stopping the tide of signals that emanate from signs. Only one thing is certain: these pictures no longer prove anything.

Representation of Representation

Despite Demand's palpable distance from the traditionally mimetic function of art, his pictures cannot be described as having no subject matter. They do have one, only it is not represented directly and as such, but rather as the outcome of several linked representations. The distinction between signifier and signified is thus also driven to extremes, as in the heyday of semiotics. Think of Jean-Luc Godard's Film *Weekend* (1968), in which the red paint used for blood is intentionally shown to be red paint. Similarly Demand's use of paper to represent all manner of things is equally undisguised. Interestingly this chameleon-like exploitation of the material is so alienated in his work that even where it is meant to represent paper, it looks odd and implausible. This applies, for example, to ZEICHENSAAL (Drafting Room, 1996), although the blueprint hanging on the wall radiates its papery materiality with intoxicating sensuality.

Story / No Story

Given the manner in which the reconstruction fades, Demand's agenda might also be found to address the question of the representation itself. However, the many historical references, resulting from the artist's choice of source photographs, contradict that hypothesis. Even though the titles do not reveal the stories behind the pictures, Demand can rest assured that his audience will not miss the point. In some of his works, he references icons of recent history such as the tunnel at Pont de l'Alma in Paris, the scene of Princess Diana's fatal accident. In BADE-ZIMMER (BEAU RIVAGE) / Bathroom (Beau Rivage), 1997, viewers from Germany will no doubt be reminded of the famous photograph in the magazine, *Stern*, of the German politician Barschel found dead in the bathtub, while STUDIO (1997) brings back to life countless showings of *Was bin ich?* (German version of *What's My Line?*).

Many of Demand's pictures do not entail such a prominent iconography; they are anonymous. What

*THOMAS DEMAND, TREPPENHAUS / STAIRCASE, 1995,
C-Print Diasec, 150 x 118 cm / 59 x 46^1/$_2$".*

fined reality into "I saw that" (or heard it, experienced it, etc.). What matters is no longer that something happened but that I remember it. This aspect of memory substantially influences our approach to the pictures, especially those that are not furnished with an iconographic eye-catcher. We inevitably project the act of remembering inspired by the pictures with "prominent" motives onto the other pictures as well. These garages, walls of buildings, escalators could all be "important" places; we just don't have the necessary background information. Often enough they really are important as in SCHEUNE (Barn, 1997), which is derived from a photograph of Jackson Pollock's studio in Long Island. But deciphering the pictures and exposing their secrets is not the main concern. It is far more incisive to engage that other form of memory generated by the encounter between the pictures and our curiosity. A memory that does not reconstruct stories but actually produces them (because they are no longer or not yet there, in contrast to the room in which they potentially could have happened or will happen). This makes COPYSHOP (1999) a forever open-ended picture because it offers our imagination endless leeway and stimulation for reconstructing the events that have taken or might take place in this room with its enigmatic ordinariness.

Memoryscapes

In another series of pictures, Demand fictionalizes the pictorial space by adding an abstract aura to his representations. In the architectural pictures in particular there are hardly any details. The buildings become pure volume, schematically outlined by light and shadow. Some of the pictures, like LABOR (Laboratory, 2000), PARKGARAGE (Car Park, 1996), or BALKONE (Balconies, 1997), could almost be paintings. We stand in front of them, wanting so badly to believe that they represent built models, but simply unable to. This lack of belief lends the pictures a highly idiosyncratic sense of reality. Demand is not interested in photography as such; he is engaged in a kind of medial cross-dressing. The photograph is the final form the works take but they often obey laws entirely different from those of photography. Often we aren't even aware of the photograph as such because

then is the function of pictorial recourse to the *fait divers* from the daily press and television? The main concern is hardly the content of the evoked anecdotes; the use of them is too understated (and sometimes only discovered fortuitously, for example by reading secondary literature). Their significance must lie elsewhere. In view of Demand's deconstruction of photography, one might plausibly argue that the themes of his pictures primarily serve as catalysts of memory. Not the memory of a specific event but memory as a technique of conjuring world, which offers an alternative to the above-mentioned cultural practice of photography as a reality check. (As a recent commercial puts it, "a vacation without photos is like an event without a memory.") The paradigma of memory turns the *ça a été* of a photographically de-

we are so involved in deciphering the room that it depicts. There is no denying that Demand started out as a sculptor. In fact, photography did not play a role in his work until he ran out of room for his proliferating installations. A shortage of space finally made him engage photography as a spatial medium. The fact that his more recent works, such as TUNNEL (1999) or ROLLTREPPE (Escalator, 2000), move on from photography to film does not mean that his artistic discourse has switched to another medium; rather, the principles underlying his endeavors have become even more focussed. Again, Demand is not primarily interested in the film medium as such, but in the stimulation of memory, which happens in this case to be activated by the moving picture. In TUNNEL, Lady Diana's last ride through subterranean Paris is presented as a televised re-enactment. The real-world source of ROLLTREPPE remains as enigmatic as the oddly monotone movement of the filmed representation. The "film" actually consists of 24 single pictures of an escalator that Demand built, with a slight shift in the position of the steps in each picture. The single pictures were then mounted as a moving sequence with a computer program that creates the illusion of movement—a technique that is used in both traditional animated films and in the latest Hollywood flicks to create those parts of reality that are not available in nature. The flowing movement of motion pictures, which is of course completely synthetic, serves to enhance the reality effect of Demand's work even more. The filmic injection of motion automatically seems to lend the images an aura of credibility and pulls the ground out from under any attempt to question their truth (at least if one embraces Popper's principle that truth is what cannot be falsified). Viewers of Demand's pictorial spaces ultimately find themselves facing the same situation as in the photograph at the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow up:* should they believe what they see, or do they see what they believe?

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

THOMAS DEMAND, ZEICHENSAAL / DRAFTING ROOM, 1996, C-Print Diasec, 183,5 x 285 cm / 72¹/₄ x 112¹/₅".

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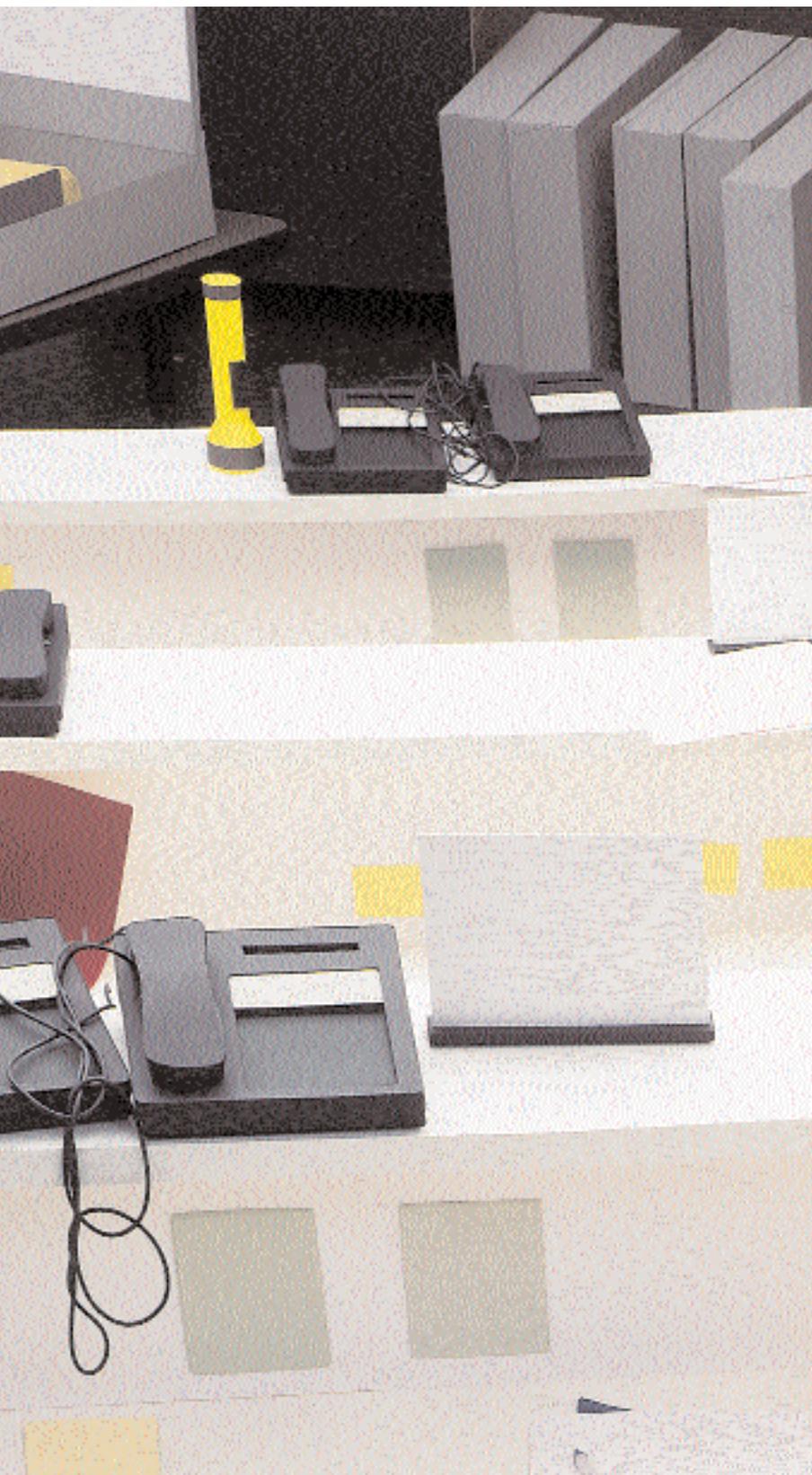
THOMAS DEMAND, POLL / AUSZÄHLUNG, 2001, C-Print Diasec, 165 x 275 cm / 65 x 108¹/₄".