

Thomas Demand : [brochure] March 4- May 30, 2005, the Museum of Modern Art

[text by Roxana Marcoci]

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THOMAS DEMAND

March 4–May 30, 2005 **The Museum of Modern Art**



2. *Studio* (detail), 1997. Chromogenic color print, 6' 3/4" x 11' 5 1/2" (183.5 x 349.5 cm). Collection the artist

The German photographer Thomas Demand is widely recognized as one of the most innovative artists of his generation. Born in 1964, the son of two painters and the grandson of an architect, Demand studied at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf and at Goldsmiths College in London. Initially trained as a sculptor, he took up photography to record his ephemeral paper constructions. In 1993, he turned the tables, henceforth making constructions for the sole purpose of photographing them. Demand begins with an image, usually, although not exclusively, culled from the media, which he translates into a three-dimensional, life-size paper model. He uses colored paper and cardboard to recreate entire rooms, parking lots, facades, and hallways, and to simulate such diverse materials as wood, plastic, metal, and cloth. His handcrafted facsimiles of architectural spaces and natural environments are built in the image of other images. Once they have been photographed, the models are destroyed. The resulting pictures are at once convincingly real and strangely artificial.

Devoid of human presence, the places Demand depicts are historically significant, although he provides few clues that would allow for easy identification. For instance, *Room* of 1994, an image of a space where the furniture, windows, and even the ceiling have been blown to bits, is based on a photograph of Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg, East Prussia, after it was bombed by a member of the German resistance on July 20, 1944. The scene is meticulously ordered to mimic disorder. Contrasting the chaos of *Room* is *Archive* of 1995, inscribed by a sense of order.

The identical gray stacks comprising two hundred fifteen cardboard boxes have their point of reference in the film archives of the German filmmaker and propagandist Leni Riefenstahl. The Minimalist alignment of boxes elliptically gestures to the regimented spectacle of athletic bodies in Riefenstahl's *Olympia—Feast of the Nations and Festival of Beauty*, a two-part work on the Berlin Olympics of 1936. Demand suggests that Nazi Germany was, to a degree, a product created by the persuasiveness of the mass media and the film industry.

In a country filled with Third Reich buildings, the postwar period in which Demand grew up held the promise of reconstruction. Themes of reconstruction, therefore, inform many of his works, among them *Staircase* of 1995 (front cover). This image recreates the Bauhaus-style stairway of Demand's secondary art school, built in the 1950s. *Staircase* especially recalls Oskar Schlemmer's 1932 painting *Bauhaus Stairway*, which depicts the *Machinenstil* (machine-age) vision of Walter Gropius's architecture in Dessau. Schlemmer selected this work as part of his first solo exhibition, which was shut down a few days later as a result of a heinous review in a Nazi newspaper. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., asked Philip Johnson to acquire the painting as a future gift to The Museum of Modern Art "to spite the Nazis just after they had closed [Schlemmer's] exhibition." What Demand's *Staircase* does is to bring together the interlaced narratives of these two stories: the Nazi vilification of Bauhaus art and architecture and the rehabilitation of its modernist principles during the reconstruction period of the 1950s.



3. *Trick*, 2004. 35mm film loop, 59 seconds. Collection the artist

Addressing Fascism's ominous take on modernism, Demand, in 2000, produced *Model*, a constructed photograph of Albert Speer's architectural design for the 1937 International Exposition in Paris. The artist made the work the same year that the questionable nature of building national pavilions at world fairs was raised during Expo 2000 in Hanover, Germany.

Not all of Demand's photographs derive from episodes in German history. Some refer to the process of image-making, such as *Studio* of 1997 (fig. 2), which depicts the set of the first German quiz show *What's My Line?*, from the 1950s—its brightly colored, striped background replicating television color bars. Another, *Barn*, of 1997, is based on Jackson Pollock's studio in East Hampton as it appeared in photographs taken by Hans Namuth in 1950. Namuth's classic pictures of the "shaman's" workshop, in which base material of car enamels and radiator paint were transformed into expressive abstraction, contributed to the growth of Pollock's worldwide fame. By blotting out any traces of paint cans, brushes, sticks, and cigarette butts on the floor, Demand's image has just the opposite effect. It estranges the space of Pollock's presence, allowing it to retain a stripped-down, bare-bones aspect.

Among Demand's photographs of contemporary events is *Poll* of 2001 (fig. 4), which reconstitutes scenes from the havoc of the 2000 American presidential election and the media's attempts to report the results of the voting in Florida's Palm Beach County. Selected from a group of electronic pictures issued by Reuters, *Poll* shows rows of desks topped by numberless telephones, uniform memo pads, and blank paper ballots carefully sorted into piles. The laborious process of manually recounting thousands of votes is echoed by Demand's meticulous reconstruction of the scene in paper. What Demand seems to say here is that this paper world is just another record of the fables of democracy.

Kitchen, 2004, is a sort of sequel to *Poll*. This work appears to portray a prosaic, messy kitchen, yet the image actually derives from a news photograph of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's hideaway in his hometown of Tikrit, where he took refuge during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Shot from a high-angle perspective, the crammed cooking area with its aluminum oven, pink plastic pitcher, egg carton, bowl of soup, and sundry pots reads like a scrambled Purist still life. Once again,

a mundane sight turns out to be the coded representation of a political incident.

Demand's few scenes of nature also unmoor the traditional mode through which photography represents observed reality. Among them, *Clearing* of 2003 (fig. 1), which recreates a section of the Giardini in Venice, is a tour de force. Made of 270,000 individually cut green-paper leaves, the photograph is cinematic in its panoramic scale and dramatic use of light. Playing on the nostalgia of the Romantic landscape tradition, Demand suggests that not even the natural environment should be taken as a given. In *Clearing*, the ersatz sunlight breaking through the leaves bears a suspicious resemblance to calendar photography. To achieve the effect, Demand employed an illumination device of 10,000 watts that is typically used in the film industry. As with so many of his other models, the elaborate fabrication of *Clearing* functions like a movie set, lasting only as long as the shoot.

Given the cinematic quality of Demand's photographs, it is not surprising that he decided to set some of them in motion, producing to date five 35mm films. His most recent film, *Trick*, of 2004 (fig. 3), refers back to the beginnings of cinema. Based on one of the first films of the Lumière brothers, *Turning Plates*, of 1896, Demand's *Trick* reenacts a sequence in which a performer executes a stunt by spinning a set of bowls and plates on a tabletop. What comes into view in this—as in all of Demand's works—is an afterimage of a situation, an event, or a place that continues to bewilder us with its presence long after its original manifestation has disappeared from the scene. In an era when even the most sensationalist stories have only a brief shelf life, Demand's photographs and films offer a paradigm for memory premised on a new way of looking at what is presented to us as "truth."

Roxana Marcoci



4. *Poll*, 2001. Chromogenic color print, 71" x 8' 6" (180 x 260 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fractional and promised gift of Sharon Coplan Hurowitz and Richard Hurowitz



1. *Clearing* (detail), 2003. Chromogenic color print, 6' 3 3/4" x 16' 2 1/4" (192 x 495 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Carol and David Appel in honor of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of The Museum of Modern Art

Thomas Demand: A Panel Discussion

THURSDAY, APRIL 14, 6:00 P.M., TITUS 2

An interdisciplinary panel of scholars addresses the photographic, cinematic, and architectural perspectives through which Thomas Demand's photographs capture and fabricate reality. Roxana Marcoci, curator of the exhibition, moderates a discussion among Ulrich Baer, Associate Professor of German and Comparative Literature, New York University; Wolfgang Becker, Film Director, X Filme Creative Pool, Berlin; Beatriz Colomina, Professor of History and Theory, Princeton University School of Architecture; and the artist.

Tickets are \$10, \$8 for members, \$5 for students with current ID, and can be purchased at the Information Desk in the Main Lobby of the Museum and at the Film and Media Desk, located through the doors below the piano-shaped canopy just east of the main MoMA entrance on 53 Street.

For more information on Adult and Academic Programs, please call 212.708.9781, e-mail adultprograms@moma.org, or visit www.moma.org/education/.

A Conversation with Thomas Demand

SATURDAY, APRIL 16, 3:00 P.M.

Presented at the Goethe-Institut New York in conjunction with the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, March 4–May 20, 2005.

Moderated by Roxana Marcoci

Goethe-Institut New York
1014 Fifth Avenue

Admission: \$10, \$8 for seniors and for students with current ID. Tickets can be reserved by calling 212.439.8700, and can be picked up at the Goethe-Institut New York on the day of the event.

Publication *Thomas Demand*

This comprehensive publication presents Demand's major works from 1993 to the present. Roxana Marcoci, curator of the exhibition, provides an insightful analysis of the sources, methods, and themes of the artist's striking and provocative imagery. Jeffrey Eugenides, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*, contributes at once a comic homage and an illuminating appreciation of Demand's art.

144 pages; 64 color plates and 24 black-and-white illustrations.

080. Hardcover \$39.95, members \$36.00

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Front cover: *Staircase* (detail). 1995. Chromogenic color print, 59 1/8 x 46 3/4" (150 x 118 cm). Collection the artist
All works © 2005 Thomas Demand

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