

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****The Museum of Modern Art**For Immediate Release  
February 2001**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS  
THE FIRST MAJOR U. S. EXHIBITION OF THE WORK OF  
CONTEMPORARY GERMAN ARTIST ANDREAS GURSKY****Includes Recent Photographs Never Before Seen in the U.S.***Andreas Gursky*  
**March 4-May 15, 2001**

The first major United States exhibition of the work of contemporary German artist Andreas Gursky opens at The Museum of Modern Art on March 4, 2001. **Andreas Gursky** presents some 45 photographs dating from 1984 to the present, with an emphasis on work since 1990, when Gursky began to focus on distinctly contemporary themes - and invented equally contemporary ways of picturing them. Organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, the exhibition includes many works never before seen in this country, including several pictures made within the past year. The exhibition is accompanied by a large-format book that includes 59 color plates, generous details, and a richly illustrated essay by Mr. Galassi offering the first in-depth study of Gursky's art. **Andreas Gursky** is on view on the Third Floor of the Museum through May 15, 2001. The exhibition will travel to the Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago.

From Tokyo to New York, Paris to Brasília, Cairo, Shanghai, Los Angeles, Stockholm, Bonn, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, Gursky has sought out signs of our times - vast hotel lobbies, apartment buildings, warehouses, sporting championships, parliaments, international stock exchanges, and massive techno-music raves. His large photographs, some as wide as 16 feet, saturated with color and detail, present a stunning image of a world transformed by high-tech industry, global markets, easy travel, and slick commerce. Mr. Galassi states, "Gursky's bold, alluring, surprising pictures have won him widespread recognition as one of the most original artists of his generation, and with good reason. For his commanding signature style has arisen from a risky process of experiment that draws upon a great diversity of images, ideas, and methods."

Andreas Gursky was born in 1955 in Leipzig and grew up in Düsseldorf, where he was introduced to photography at a young age by his father, a successful commercial photographer. In the late 1970s, he studied at the Folkwangschule in Essen, which Otto Steinert had established as West Germany's leading school of traditional photography. In the early 1980s, he entered the class of Bernd Becher at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, where he earned the distinction *Meisterschüler*, or master student, in 1987.

Beginning in the late 1950s, Bernd and Hilla Becher had developed a distinctive photographic aesthetic, devoted to the anonymous, neglected

architecture of heavy industry. Their systematic, impersonal approach was alien to Steinert's Subjective Photography movement, but in the 1960s their work was embraced by adherents of the new Minimal and Conceptual art movements. Their rising prominence in the art world won Bernd Becher a professorship at the Kunstakademie in 1976. Thanks to Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, and others, the Kunstakademie had become the focal point of Germany's postwar avant-garde, and there the Bechers soon began to shape a new generation of artist-photographers.

Gursky at first adopted a style and method closely modeled on the work of the Bechers, except that he worked only in color. His most successful student project, for example, was an extended series of sober, uniformly composed photographs of security guards in the lobbies of office buildings. In 1984, however, Gursky began to free himself from the strict Becher model. He reverted to the unstructured method of spontaneous observation that he had pursued at the Folkwangschule, making a series of pictures of hikers, swimmers, tourists, and other groups at leisure. Stylistically, Gursky's pristine, light-filled vistas, such as *Klausenpass* (1984), drew upon the recent work of Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, and other young Americans, whose detailed views of ordinary places had helped to launch a lively movement of color photography in the 1970s.

Even as the new American color work helped Gursky to chart a path away from the Bechers, their lessons persisted through his adherence to an unvarying pictorial type - a broad prospect populated by tiny figures who are surveyed by a godlike eye that is everywhere and nowhere at once. As Gursky repeated this pattern of artistic development in the years to come, responding to a widening range of imagery and ideas without wholly abandoning his earlier attachments, the resilient core of his work became more and more his own.

Toward the end of the 1980s, Gursky's hikers and tourists tended to dwindle in number to one or just a few, and so the viewer's detached scrutiny of a remote crowd was transformed into sympathetic identification with a solitary being. Pictures such as *Ruhr Valley* (1989), in which a lone figure is dwarfed by his surroundings, thus evoke the stirring emotion of landscapes by Caspar David Friedrich and other masters of German Romanticism. But Gursky's crisply focused color photographs of familiar scenes also recall cheap picture postcards. His hybrid art welcomes associations with both the grand and the ordinary, tapping the reservoir of images that we all carry in our heads.

As it had in 1984, Gursky's work took a decisive turn in 1990 when, on a trip to Japan to participate in an exhibition, he made a photograph of the Tokyo Stock Exchange. The picture was modeled in part on a newspaper photograph that Gursky had noticed before leaving Düsseldorf. Henceforth the habit of spontaneous observation, associated with Gursky's schooling at Essen, took second place to elaborate advance planning for a preconceived image, designed to embody a concept, such as the global financial market. The new approach was closer to the calculated methods of the Bechers - and of commercial photographers such as Gursky's father - than to the prevailing conventions of documentary photography. In fact, before 1987, when a stipend from the Kunstakademie freed him to concentrate on his own work, Gursky had executed a number of commercial assignments himself. His professional skill - and his mastery of the slick vocabulary of advertising photography - served him well as he began to define his vision of the contemporary zeitgeist.

That vision developed rapidly after 1991, when Gursky was invited to participate in an ambitious photographic project sponsored by the German industrial giant Siemens. Many of the Siemens factories he visited struck him as old-fashioned, and it is revealing of Gursky's growing confidence that pictures such as *Siemens, Karlsruhe* (1991), despite their wealth of detail, are not so much earnest documents as artful refinements of an idealized fiction of technological wonderment.

During the early 1990s, Gursky traveled ever more widely in search of up-to-date subjects - huge office and apartment buildings, trading floors, airports, major sporting events - in which the anonymous individual, overwhelmed by the impersonal environment, is but one among many. Summarized in words, Gursky's themes of the 1990s are as familiar as our term - "globalization" - for the process that has created a seamless realm of abundant goods, inescapable brand names, massive gatherings, regimented grids, and sparkling surfaces. Moreover, thanks to our relentless image industry, we know the fabricated look of this round-the-clock environment all too well. Gursky's originality lies in the vividness with which he has distilled striking and inventive pictures from the plenitude of our commercialized image-world.

It was not long before his work again took on fresh momentum - this time from a deliberate and imaginative engagement with advanced painting and sculpture. In the late 1980s, Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, and other Becher students had rapidly achieved recognition in a burgeoning art world newly responsive to photography. Their unanticipated prominence enabled them to print their photographs larger, sometimes very large, and to compete openly with painters and sculptors. In Gursky's case, that competition helped to further broaden and enrich his art.

In 1993, for example, Gursky made *Untitled I*, a photograph of the gallery floor of the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf - a radically empty picture, describing nothing more than gray carpet and the space it defines. In one sense, it was an homage to the long series of monochrome gray paintings that Richter had begun in the late 1960s. At the same time, it is quintessentially photographic - an unbroken gradient of texture, receding from bottom to top of the picture. Ever since, Gursky has progressively explored a constellation of touchstones in the history of older and more recent art - the broad landscapes of Friedrich, the allover abstractions of Jackson Pollock, and the geometric and intellectual rigors of Minimal and Conceptual art. Improbably and inventively, he has used these precedents to extend the rich but ostensibly alien tradition of photographic description. In *Autobahn, Mettman* (1993), for example, a brilliant example of postmodern wit, a Minimalist ladder of crisp aluminum strips has been superimposed upon a pastoral field of brushwork by John Constable. But the picture is also a striking record of spontaneous perception, which viscerally locates the viewer on the expressway overpass from which it was made.

By the mid-1990s Gursky's arsenal of contemporary motifs, artistic allusions, and formal strategies had reached a critical mass that fostered a network of family relationships among otherwise distinct images and themes. Thus the uninterrupted ceiling of *Brasília, General Assembly I* (1994) simultaneously echoes the allover abstraction of *Untitled I* and the geometric grid of artificial light in *Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank* (1994). The collective frenzy of *Tokyo Stock Exchange* (1990) reappears as a midnight rave in *May Day IV* (2000). *Rhine II* (1999), a sweeping hymn to the ancient river that runs through Düsseldorf, is a cousin to *Prada II* (1999), a pastel image of consumer

fetishism reduced to the bare essentials. The correspondence seems to suggest that God and Mammon each employed the same geometric template to create a realm of perfection that at once seduces and excludes us.

In the course of the 1990s, Gursky further expanded his art by incorporating digital manipulation into his working methods. He used the computer at first only as a retouching tool but soon began to redeploy the raw material of his negatives with imaginative, even flamboyant freedom. The imposing frontal symmetry of pictures such as *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993), *Untitled V* (1997), and *Shanghai* (2000) is the product of an inventive merger of straightforward description and digital invention. Nevertheless, these creations are entirely at home with works such as *Schiphol* (1994), *Engadine* (1995), and *Untitled VI* (1997), in which digital mischief plays no role at all. Taken as a whole, Gursky's work seems to demonstrate that photography never tells the truth, only so as to probe the reality quotient of its hyperbolic lies.

Gursky's formal experiments, his responsiveness to a wide variety of other images, and the powerful presence of his finished works are rewarding in themselves. They are, moreover, part and parcel of an original and compelling engagement with the here and now. As Mr. Galassi states, "It is Gursky's fiction, but it is our world."

**PUBLICATION:** The exhibition will be accompanied by a major book surveying Gursky's entire body of work to date. Full-page color plates, supplemented by generous double-page details, present more works than can be accommodated in the exhibition. An extended essay by Mr. Galassi, accompanied by an exhibition history and bibliography, offers the first in-depth study of Gursky's art, setting it in historical perspective, tracing its diverse kinships with a wide range of art and photography and analyzing the artist's complex working methods and stylistic development. Hardcover: \$65. Paper: \$35.

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