



THOMAS DEMAND.
PHOTO ALBRECHT FUCHS

HIDE-AND-SEEK

Thomas Demand creates achingly familiar space through the use of construction paper and photography.

Text **Katya Tylevich** / Photos **Thomas Demand**



OFFICE, 1995, C-PRINT / DIASEC, 183.5 X 240 CM, © THOMAS DEMAND, VG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2009.

‘I DON'T
THINK I NEED
TO TELL
YOU WHAT
THIS IS’

– Thomas Demand –

The audience responds with a noiseless ‘Say what?’ This is good stuff. You can practically hear all ears in the auditorium prick up. ‘It’s full of me,’ Thomas Demand has just said from stage. ‘Everything I look at – I see me, me, me, everywhere.’ There’s some laughter, but Demand may not be joking. The Munich-born, Berlin-based artist is anticipating a question often thrown at him. Why are there no people in your photographs?

‘There’s no competing for other people,’ he says, laughing a bit himself.

Later in the evening, this time with a straight face, he adds: ‘My authorship is all over the thing. What I’m saying is that I don’t feel an absence of people in my work. There’s one person everywhere: me. And then there’s the viewer. Without him, the whole thing is nothing.’

My tape recorder actually picks up a rustling at this point – the sound of a bunch of heads nodding. The audience reacts with a nonverbal touché. Demand’s public conversation with film theorist Tom Gunning at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles is much »



COPYSHOP, 1999, C-PRINT / DIASEC,
183.5 X 300 CM, © THOMAS DEMAND,
VG BILD-KUNST, BONN / PICTORIGHT,
AMSTERDAM.

ARCHIVE, 1995, C-PRINT/ DIASEC,
183.5 X 233 CM, © THOMAS DEMAND,
VG BILD-KUNST, BONN / PICTORIGHT,
AMSTERDAM.

‘I DON’T
DEAL
IN TERMS OF
EMOTIVE;
THAT’S UP
TO YOU AND
THE REST
OF MY
AUDIENCE’

- Thomas Demand -



BATHROOM, 1997, C-PRINT / DIASEC,
160 X 122 CM, © THOMAS DEMAND, VG
BILD-KUNST, BONN.

‘I DON’T
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– Thomas Demand –

like Demand’s work: highly interactive, an intentional give-and-take between Demand and everyone who’s not Demand. A subtle game, a quiet one.

But before we go there, I have to make a retraction. I shouldn’t have called Demand an artist. That’s not right. After all, this is a man who tells me: ‘I don’t think of myself as an artist, an architect or anything else.’ Nor can I call Demand a photographer and stop there. A sculptor? Wrong again. It’s not that he isn’t an artist, a photographer or a sculptor. Rather he’s all of these things. Demand is best known for his evocative photographs of (mostly) life-sized 3D models – impressionistic ‘reverse mock-ups’ that he builds from construction paper, highly visible media references, and scraps of both personal and collective memory.

Precious few of Demand’s photographed ‘faux’ spaces are instantly recognizable. *The Oval Office*, for instance, is a series commissioned by *The New York Times* in 2008. ‘I don’t think I would have chosen the Oval Office,’ Demand tells me in the Hammer auditorium, after the audience has cleared. ‘It’s too bland for me, too obvious a choice. But it was a commission. It has a reason to be in the world, and that doesn’t come from me.’

Indeed, signature Demand spaces are not at all obvious, but they are achingly familiar, like a forgotten word on the tip of one’s tongue, hard to enunciate, lodged deep in the folds of the brain. It’s clear that all of Demand’s spaces belong in the world, but why and where, and in whose world, exactly? Demand’s images require legwork on the part of the viewer who wants to know details and specifics.

Take, *Office* (1995), for example, which was part of Demand’s recent solo show, *Nationalgalerie*, at (yes) the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It is a ‘retelling’ (a word I borrow from Demand) of the 1990 raid on abandoned Stasi offices by East Germans looking for their personal files. But how is one to understand the story by looking at the image? There are few literal clues in the photograph and none to speak of in its title. And don’t look to Demand for help: ‘When someone asks, “What is this?” I say, “I don’t think I need to tell you.”’

Don’t know the reference?

‘That’s not a mistake on your part,’ Demand says to his audience in LA. ‘But it isn’t a mistake on my part, either.’

Perhaps it is not as important to recognize *what* happened in a space portrayed by Demand as it is to recognize that something might have happened there, or that something might yet happen. Space is not background noise in Demand’s photographs, but rather the most pressing reason to eavesdrop on the hushed conversation.

I ask Demand if he chooses his subjects on the basis of personal aesthetic preferences. ‘No,’ he answers. ‘I have the feeling »



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that a simple generic corridor is something I share with you on the level of simple knowledge.’ I take that to mean that space need not be easy on the eyes to be seductive. I say nothing of my interpretation to Demand, of course – it isn’t as if he’d tell me whether I’m right or wrong. When I call his spaces ‘emotive’, he says: ‘I don’t deal in terms of emotive. That’s something you and the rest of my audience bring to it.’

That Demand’s work crosses over into the meatiest parts of architecture (the psychological resonance and potential of space, the malleability of four rigid walls) goes without saying. Of late, Demand has also made more literal steps in this direction. ‘As a matter of fact, we’re proposing two houses in Zurich,’ he says of his ongoing collaboration with London-based Caruso St John Architects. ‘Permanent structures,’ Demand clarifies, and not without reason. He destroys his 3D models once he’s photographed them. The project is called Nagelhaus (Stubborn Nail in English), a reference to a situation in China where private owners refused to leave their homes as developers swooped in. Demand is also working on the signage system and titling of Munich’s Lenbachhaus Museum extension by Foster + Partners.

After his talk, Demand and I sit house-right in the seats of the empty theatre. I admit that after staring so long at his work, the world now looks like cardboard to me. I can only imagine what the work has done to his psyche.

‘The thing is, you realize the world is not that complex,’ he says. ‘It’s always interested me that the man-made world is quite a simple construction in most cases. The vocabulary of a staircase is absolutely zero.’

‘Does that mean it’s weak?’ I ask.

‘No. But interpretation about how our surroundings should be is a very temporary agreement.’ He adds that ‘90 degrees is an agreement’ and that ‘you can make a circle not 360 degrees, but 10,000 degrees – or 5 degrees’.

‘Somebody cuts the music in the auditorium.’

‘Space has a lot of character,’ Demand says, with a nod to the now-vacant, now-silent surroundings. ‘This space has a lot of character. Maybe not my character and not your character, but it has a lot of character. And that’s where things get interesting.’ «

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