



Exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie

Thomas Demand, Berlin, 2009. Photograph by Annette Kising. Courtesy of Caruso St. John Architects

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Starting in the year 2000 the artist Thomas Demand and the architecture office of Adam Caruso and Peter St John developed a fruitful collaboration that saw the London based architects design a number of exhibitions for and with the artist in difficult and charged spaces. Arguably, this collaboration culminated in 2009 with Demand's retrospective show at Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin –itself a building generated as an experiment with exhibition architecture. In this project, with its fascinating display of giant curtains and floating images, each layer is an exercise in framing and representing both objects and space. Demand's paper constructions, his photographs, the architects' display architecture and the building that houses the exhibition, all nested within each other, speak to us of a repetitious approach to the act of framing. This fascinating sequence is captured in the stunning photographs that document the show, which cut across the different layers of a multidimensional conversation between authors and media. In its unique complexity of concentric voices and crossed echoes, this project offers us a fascinating record of an intense and unprecedented mode of influence in which architecture and photography reveal themselves as constructed by each other, accelerating their conversation and generating in the process a new and highly charged universe.

keywords Thomas Demand, Caruso St John, Constructed photography, Realism, Abstraction

the artist

Thomas Demand (Schäftlarn, 1964) began his formal training in 1987 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where he studied interior design¹. His education there focused on theater and church design, with his student projects revolving mostly around architectural settings, décor and scenographic models. From 1989 to 1992, Demand attended the Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, where he studied under Professor Fritz Schwegler, a sculptor who also mentored artists such as Katharina Fritz and Thomas Shütte. Under Schwegler, work was advanced through the production of models, an approach that contributed to shape Demand's working method, which was based on the construction of precise paper mock-ups that reconstituted parts of the built environment.

Paper was not only a readily available material and easy to work with; it was also inexpensive enough that his student work could be photographed and then disposed of, avoiding the need to store the bulk of his sculptures in his apartment². It was precisely in the process of documenting his work that Demand found that he was unable to photograph the models without certain distortion preventing his photographs from looking like the original³. At this point, Demand approached the photography professors Bernd and Hilla Becher and asked them if he could learn photography with them. The Bechers replied that he would need to study the technical foundations of photography for at least three years before they could actually teach him something, which convinced Demand to abandon the idea⁴.

Interestingly then, despite the fact that Demand is customarily referred to as a disciple of the Bechers, he was actually never their student⁵. This, however, does not invalidate the fact that Demand learnt photography during his stay at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf while in close contact with some of the disciples of the Bechers. Andreas Gursky, for instance provided one of the first cameras that Demand used⁶. Similarly, the method that Demand employs systematically for printing his large images on Plexiglas –the Diasec process– is the same process used by Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth⁷.

By the time Demand left the Kunstakademie in 1992, he had already established a clear working method, one that he has continued to use throughout his career until today⁸. Most of the works that have brought international recognition to the artist respond to the same *modus operandi*. First, an image in the media is identified that is of some significance to Demand. Next follows a phase of research, where he finds out as much as possible about the image and the objects or space within it. Then, a large paper model is made that reproduces these space and objects, sometimes even at a scale of 1/1. The model is then photographed with a Swiss Sinar camera employing large-format color negatives. The model is finally destroyed and the final image –usually just one per model– is enlarged into a Plexiglas panel and exhibited without a frame.

the architects

Adam Caruso (Montreal, 1962) and Peter St John (London, 1959) formed their partnership in London in 1990⁹. They were part of an alternative scene of young British architects who sought to position themselves as inheritors and followers of Alison and Peter Smithson, in response to the dominance of high-tech and late postmodern corporate practices. In this context, the features that characterized the early work of the firm of Caruso St John were an enhanced attention to site, a careful and creative use of construction materials and a sense of historic continuity, which manifested itself in the attempt to revitalize and update the architectural project of Alison and Peter Smithson.

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These features and influences are evident in their first built works: the conversion of a barn into a house in the Island of Wight (1992), a private residence in Lincolnshire (1993), and the Studio House in North London (1993). These projects, through their formal restraint, their attention to the history of the site and their emphasis on the materiality of ordinary construction materials, present us with an overlap or identification between their radical reduction, derived from an aesthetic consideration, and their asceticism understood as a political statement of resistance to market forces.

In the following decade, this link between political and aesthetic considerations was gradually loosened as their career evolved through an increasing exploration of the expressive potential of construction materials and details, which became more and more a topic of interest in its own right, and perceived as sufficient to ground the work in an ethos of realism. With this increased richness came also an emphasis in the qualities of the interior spaces of the projects. In order to develop and visualize these interior designs, the architects worked with large interior models in which they tried to simulate the colors and textures of the foreseen construction materials, including scaled furniture, to better convey a sense of size and proportion. The models were then carefully photographed, with the camera simulating an eye-level view, in order to create an image as realistic and immersive as possible in an effort to anticipate the actual experience of the building.

This practice was first introduced by the firm as early as in the project for the New Art Gallery in Walsall (1995-2000), and was likely derived from the type of models made in exhibition design –not so different from those made in scenography– since the focus on Walsall was on the interaction of the rather small art pieces in the collection and the large spaces of the building. After the completion of Walsall, with projects such as the Sport Theatre in Arosa (2000) and the renovation of the Barbican Concert Hall in London (2000), this type of scenographic model became the prime tool for design and visualization in the Caruso St John office, coinciding with the adoption of colored cardstock as the main material for their realization. This particular fine tuning of their model making and model photography techniques was indeed influenced by the work of Thomas Demand who the architects met precisely that year¹⁰.

the exhibitions

The collaboration between Thomas Demand and Caruso St John came about in 2000 when Demand was offered a solo show at Fondation Cartier in Paris. The exhibition space at Fondation Cartier, a building by Jean Nouvel, is a completely transparent glass prism with no opaque walls. Faced with the necessity to generate a framework to display his prints in this problematic space, Demand first considered creating his own exhibition architecture, but then realized that anything he could produce would become the focus of the exhibition, eclipsing his prints. This, of course, was unacceptable for an artist who destroys his own sculptures, which we can only encounter as photographs. Demand then realized that an architect could be a valid mediating figure that would present his work, acting as “a host, like in a talk show”¹¹. Accordingly, he contacted the architectural offices of Kühn, Malvezzi and Böhm in Cologne, Brandlhuber, Knies and Partners in Berlin and Caruso St John in London to ask for proposals for the show¹².

While the proposals from the two German offices proved to be difficult to implement, Demand found that Caruso St John's project solved the problems posed by the building with great simplicity and remained within the limitations and budget imposed by the institution. Their proposal, adopted by Demand, was composed of seven thin walls placed in the large hall perpendicular to the long facades¹³. This simple solution preserved the transparency of the building to the garden in the back, retaining its immaterial quality from a frontal view while achieving a sequential and cinematic experience from the oblique, when walking or driving along the main elevation towards Boulevard Raspail.



f1_Exhibition at Fondation Cartier

Thomas Demand, Paris, 2000. Photographs by Nic Tenwigenhorn. Courtesy of Caruso St. John Architects

The screens –thin single-profile plasterboard walls– were then covered with wallpaper of different colors. For this purpose, Demand contacted the company that had manufactured Le Corbusier's wallpaper for the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille and convinced them to produce it again for this show¹⁴. Each side of each screen was assigned a single color, arranged so that drivers on the large Boulevard would see faded or whitish colors on their way into the city during the morning commute, while the same drivers returning home in the evening when the building is illuminated would see strong, pure colors¹⁵. The project thus became a careful and sometimes difficult dialogue between the colors in the wallpaper and the colors in the photographs, which was paralleled by a secondary rhythmic dialogue between the pictures and a series of similarly sized openings in the thin walls (**f1**).

Excited by the success of their first collaboration, Demand again called on Caruso St John for his show at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence in 2001. The exhibition was to be mounted in an equally problematic space: the former apartments of King Vittorio-Emmanuelle II, a set of highly ornate spaces including a ballroom of cubic proportions¹⁶. Since it was not possible to intervene in the walls, the architects designed a set of furniture pieces in the fashion of a table, a secretaire or an altar. The prints were then placed on panels resting on the furniture. The pieces designed by Caruso St John were veneered in two tones of dark wood, and featured sizes and proportions that specifically responded to the awkward architecture of the King's apartments, serving as anchors for the works in the rooms (**f2**).

After the Pitti show, Demand continued to rely consistently on Caruso St John for his exhibition designs, first for an installation part of the artist's *Phototropy* exhibition in Kunsthau Bregenz, in 2004, and later for his show *L'esprit d'escalier* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2006¹⁷. The fifth and most relevant exhibition project in which Demand and Caruso St John collaborated was Demand's 2009 retrospective show at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin¹⁸. This was an especially important show for the artist and the institution since it coincided with the 60th anniversary of Western Germany, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the 40th anniversary of the building by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and its inaugural exhibition of paintings by Paul Klee¹⁹.

Highly concerned with the significance of the show, Demand selected a group of thirty works that reflected on the history of Germany after the war. He also researched every single exhibition held at the gallery in a search for the best way to display his work in such an idiosyncratic space, producing a detailed file that he then shared with the architects²⁰. Demand initially proposed exhibiting his prints by simply hanging them from the ceiling, as was Mies' original design for the Klee show, but found this to be technically

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f2_ Exhibition at Palazzo Pitti

Thomas Demand, Florence, 2001. Photographs by Nic Tenwigenhorn. Courtesy of Caruso St. John Architects

impossible. Apparently, because of temperature gradients between interior and exterior, the horizontal structure of the building expands and contracts to produce oscillations of up to 10 centimeters in the vertical axis, which would have caused the hanging panels to tilt in different directions during the day²¹.

The architects then came up with a design that was reminiscent of Mies' original exhibition concept, but also of his installations with Lilly Reich for the *Velvet and Silk Cafe* during the 1920s, the first of which was held in Berlin in the Exposition de la Mode of 1927²². Inspired by Mies and Reich's use of textiles in these shows, Caruso St John and Demand proposed to intervene in the Nationalgalerie with a series of hanging curtains that rearranged the open plan of the building into a series of connected "room-like" spaces (f3). The woolen curtains featured a palette of dull colors that related to the work of Demand but contrasted with its gloss finish. Arranged at two different heights, the curtains disrupted the dominant symmetry of the building, in a polite but strong transformation of Mies' space²³. Another example of the subtlety and intentionality of this disruption is the use of a series of wooden walls that echo the materiality of the two existing communication cores in the building which are in turn partially concealed by the position of the curtains.

The exhibition design was then complemented with a series of vitrines designed by the architects in the guise of pieces of furniture. Each of these objects, which quoted Demand's models in their gray color and lack of detail, contained two open books with English and German captions referring to the works on display that were written specifically for the show by German playwright Boto Strauss²⁴. As in the Palazzo Pitti, these pieces of furniture were larger-than-life, as were the books inside, which were actually enlarged versions of the exhibition catalogue (f4). This monumentalization of the books, the furniture and the curtains was then contradicted by the chosen range of dull colors and "dusty" textures, inducing a soft feeling of domesticity that contrasted with the cool aesthetic of Mies' building, creating a shocking and captivating atmosphere²⁵.

Looking at the photographs of the Berlin show it is hard not to question if we are looking at a photograph of an exhibition by Demand, or a photograph of one of his models, whether the whole thing is a mock up with miniature prints in it, or a real life construction. I would like to argue here that these photographs of the exhibition, and not the show

itself, are indeed the “work”, or at least its more pure manifestation, that it takes this final translation from three to two dimensions to condense and culminate the intense and repetitive game of constructing and framing which is at play in this collaboration²⁶.



f3_Exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie

Thomas Demand, Berlin, 2009. Photograph by Annette Kislung. Courtesy of Caruso St John Architects

a few thoughts

Because of his very particular work methodology, Demand's work has become inextricably linked to the media images from which he obtains his motifs, and so interpretations of his work customarily revolve around the political and social signification of the original photographs²⁷. The fact that Demand's images are devoid of detail and presented to the public without the support of extended captions or additional explanations –as if cleaned from the information we would need to understand them– seems to underline the importance of each original photograph through its absence. I argue, on the other hand, that Demand's work is not so much about each of the original images and the story behind them but a more general comment instead on the phenomenon of multiplied circulating images and on its difficult relationship to the notion of knowledge and truth.

"I'm at the end of an entire chain of worlds of images that present themselves to me. All my experience, everything I essentially am, is largely the upshot of things passed on to me. We all know that. I endeavour to put myself in a position in which I can actually add something to the chain. When something comes to me, as trivial as it may sound, it always has a history, a history of how it has been received. A piece of lawn seems initially to be just that. But the image of the lawn comes to me by any manner of paths, be it through ads, a film, or whatever. And sometimes I deliberately make things which are so empty that they no longer transport a truth, but offer at most sincerity or a certain faithfulness, as it were. When I make a piece of art I'm not yet at the point where I can say what its meaning should be. Initially I am simply amazed"²⁸.

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An even more important consideration comes to the foreground then, when we think of what it takes to achieve this “emptying” of the image. In his self-described search for “faithfulness” Demand is forced to build his sets from scratch, deciding personally upon every single detail as he painstakingly reconstructs the pieces in his studio, selectively editing information out in each step, necessarily taking full ownership of the small universes that he creates²⁹. Demand’s simplification of the world entails a level of abstraction and idealization that in many cases results in its beautification, a view that the artist strongly rejects. Interestingly for us, in defending himself from such notion, Demand sees it as necessary to distinguish his works from architectural mockups, identifying his interest instead with the idea of experimental models in scientific research:

“The interesting thing about this for me is how the conceptual model functions as a source of insight. [...] In my works, the models that I continually attempt to create are related to experiments, not to any notion of minimalization, pettiness or likeness to god. Normally an architect creates a model of a building, and you can imagine what the building will eventually look like based on this and then form an opinion about it. [...] The models submitted to architectural competitions are fascinating; They are always attractive; I’ve never seen a building that looked horrible as a model. Despite this, there’s an unbelievable number of horrible buildings that used to be models. So I guess the beauty of the models is transformed into banality somewhere along the way. But this is only one common use of models. The other, as I have already mentioned is to gain insight – a type of conceptual model or a system of parameters that represents a test assembly or a learning environment”³⁰.



f4_Exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie

Thomas Demand, Berlin, 2009. Photograph by Annette Kislung. Courtesy of Caruso St John Architects

We will not question here the authenticity of Demand when he declares that for him, his models are conceptual means to an enquiry, a way to gain insight into the world. What we will argue instead is that this is also the reason why he was drawn to architectural models in the first place. Architectural models, when used as a design tool, are precisely that: a learning environment in which to test relationships. The more relevant difference then is that while Demand retains total control over his work by crystalizing it in a photograph and destroying the object, the architects, in their translation to building, have to go through a long process in which delegation and compromise inevitably detract from the purity of intention and the total control of the original models.

Interestingly enough then, the collaboration of Demand with Caruso St John for this series of exhibitions presents us with a hybrid mode of practice, one where the museum provides a controlled environment that occupies an intermediate position between he

total control of the artist's dark room and the chaos and compromises of building in the city. In that sense, the photographs of these exhibitions are different to either the work of Demand or Caruso St John with models, in that they suck part of the real world into the frame, allowing for a temporary coexistence of representation and construction. They allow for a degree of manipulation of the setting, but also are forced to work with it as a given. It then makes sense that furniture is such a protagonist in these projects, as it becomes an intermediary element that enables the authors to control and modify the perceived scalar relationship between Demand's images and the architectures in which they sit. This use of constructed objects as modifiers of the space is enabled by a certain disability of the photographic camera when it comes to faithfully representing scale. This is of course something that both the artist and the architects are well aware of, and that they learnt through their systematic use of scenographic models. The novelty here is that this technique is used consciously to produce a new reading or interpretation of an actual space (f5).

In addition to its disability or ambiguity towards scale, photography is also decisive here in that it brings to the table an aura of realism that makes us accept the plausibility of what we see. Demand's hyper-constructed and painstakingly rigorous visual language –like that of the Bechers– utilizes precision and consistency as a way to induce an illusion of objectivity –what he describes as “sincerity”. The images deploy even lighting, perfect focus and calm framing –the full range of tools that documentary photography uses to convey objectivity– in order to temporarily stabilize the complex collision of images, objects, and architectures, allowing us to inhabit for a second these precarious new worlds.



f5 Exhibition at Neue Nationalgalerie

Thomas Demand, Berlin, 2009. Photograph by Annette Kisling. Courtesy of Caruso St John Architects

endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information of Thomas Demand is taken from Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon", in Thomas Demand, Roxana Marcoci, and Jeffrey Eugenides, *Thomas Demand* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 9-27.
2. "At first, I didn't want to make objects that would be lying around afterwards getting in my way. Also, I was thinking about ways to keep things moving and avoid spending years and years in workshops". Thomas Demand in *Thomas Demand, Hans Ulrich Obrist: The conversation series*, (Cologne: König, 2007), 104.
3. Beatriz Colomina, "Media as Modern Architecture", in Thomas Demand, Beatriz Colomina, and Alexander Kluge, *Thomas Demand* (München: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006), 19-46.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See for instance Barry Schwabsky, "A Makeshift World: On Thomas Demand", *The Nation*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.thenation.com/article/makeshift-world-thomas-demand>.
6. Thomas Demand in *Thomas Demand, Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 126.
7. Among this group of older artists, all of whom influenced Demand, Ruff seems to have had the greatest impact, even directly inspiring some of Demand's works as direct responses to his own. Demand's *Constellation* series (2010) is directly evolved from Ruff's *Stars* series (1989-1992).
8. *Ibid.*, 104.
9. Peter St John in Aurora Fernández Per et al, *As Built: Caruso St John Architects* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: a+t ediciones, 2005), 17.
10. While Caruso St John had been aware of the work of Demand for some time, it was in 2000 that the artist and the architects met in person and started their collaboration. In the following years Caruso St John used images by Demand as examples in order to explain to their architecture students how to produce and photograph models for their projects.
11. Thomas Demand in *Thomas Demand, Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 143.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Caruso St John website, "Project Report for the Thomas Demand exhibition at Fondation Cartier", accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.carusostjohn.com/projects/thomas-demand-fondation-cartier/>
14. Thomas Demand in *Thomas Demand, Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 146.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Caruso St John website, "Project Report for the Thomas Demand exhibition at Palazzo Pitti", accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.carusostjohn.com/projects/thomas-demand-pitti-palace/>
17. Thomas Demand, Dave Eggers, Enrique Juncosa, and Karen Sweeney, *Thomas Demand: L'Ésprit d'escalier* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art; Cologne: Koenig; New York, N.Y.: D.A.P., 2007).
18. For a full account of the circumstances surrounding the show see Adam Caruso, and Thomas Demand, "Architecture + Art: Crossover and collaboration", Lecture at the Architecture Foundation, London. Filmed on November 2, 2009. Accessed on June 10, 2013. <http://www.architecturefoundation.org.uk/programme/2009/architecture-art-crossover-and-collaboration/adam-caruso-and-thomas-demand>.
19. Caruso St John website, "Project Report for the Thomas Demand exhibition *Nationalgalerie*, at Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin", accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.carusostjohn.com/projects/thomas-demand-nationalgalerie/>.
20. Adam Caruso, and Thomas Demand, "Architecture + Art: Crossover and collaboration. Lecture at the Architecture Foundation.
21. Caruso St John website, "Project Report for the Thomas Demand exhibition *Nationalgalerie*, at Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin".
22. Adam Caruso in "Architecture + Art: Crossover and collaboration", Lecture at the Architecture Foundation.
23. The curtains were custom made by the firm Kvadrat. For more on the specifics of these textiles see Adam Caruso, and Thomas Demand, "Adam Caruso and Thomas Demand discuss their collaboration", Conversation recorded for Wallpaper Magazine video archive, accessed on June 10, 2013, <http://www.wallpaper.com/video/art/thomas-demand-and-adam-caruso-interview/72450400001>
24. Caruso St John website, "Project Report for the Thomas Demand exhibition *Nationalgalerie*".
25. Adam Caruso and Thomas Demand in "Architecture + Art: Crossover and collaboration", Lecture at the Architecture Foundation.

26. This is my interpretation of the work. Demand's aim, at least initially, was to build a total work of art or *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which the linear sequence of images and narrative captions, together with the exhibiting design would generate a full place-specific and time-based experience. For a full account of his intentions during the exhibition preparation period see Thomas Demand and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Thomas Demand und Nationalgalerie, A Conversation about the Exhibition with Hans Ulrich Obrist*. Cologne: König, 2009.
27. See for instance the analysis of Demand's retrospective show at New York MoMA in Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon", 13-27.
28. Thomas Demand, "A Conversation between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand", Thomas Demand, Beatriz Colomina, and Alexander Kluge, *Thomas Demand*, 60.
29. Michael Fried, has written extensively on Demand's photography, characterizes his art practice as being "saturated" of authorial intention. See Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For Fried's comments on Demand's video format work see Michael Fried, "Thomas Demand's Pacific Sun", in Thomas Demand et al, *Thomas Demand: Animations* (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 2012), np.
30. Thomas Demand in *Thomas Demand, Hans Ulrich Obrist*, 140-141.

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