



INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS DEMAND: DEMANND'S WAY

Andrea Blanch: How do you go about producing your work. Do you do it by yourself or do you have assistants? Who makes the actual models?

Thomas Demand: Predominantly I do them by myself. When I get assistance it is for making the walls because you need three or four hands for this. When we did *The Forest* or *The Grotto* I had a team of thirty to forty people, but I try to do most of it myself because I enjoy doing it myself.

Are the models themselves the size of an architect's model for a building, or are they larger than that?

Everything is life size.

What kind of camera do you use?

Most of the time I use an 8x10 because that's simply how I get the widest variety of film. Recently I have been using digital, medium format, or whatever I have at hand. I don't have a problem with using any other format but a 4x5 is usually too small, and there was a 5x7 format, but I haven't used that for almost ten years now.

What kind of prints do you do?

I did many C-prints, and I am still doing them for my large pieces. I started working with other mediums as well, like Ink-Jet prints for my *Model Study* series, which depicted models of unbuilt architecture by John Lautner. Also, there is a whole

body of work, called *Dailies* for which I've been working on for five years using dye transfer, but that is going to come to an end because we are running out of material. It is an amazing approach to photographic printmaking.

The dye transfers must be quite beautiful, I've only seen them online.

The internet rendition doesn't even come close to the richness and beauty of the original prints. It is really a revelation to see real Dye Transfers. I could only find one person who could print this way, who lives on a small island in Washington state. I found out over time that it's not only about the materials, but mainly the experience of the printer himself. He has over forty years of expertise and there's no one like him. It was such a pleasure to work with him and his wife.

What is he going to do?

Since we started, he said he is going to retire soon and I think my project was partly his retirement fund. He used to print in the 1970s for William Eggleston, he's nearly seventy years old now.

That's a good last project to work on. So, what do you think dye transfer adds to your work? You haven't always used dye transfer.

No, partly because of the scale, because the sheet size had certain limitations and my work is life size, and because I print it

in the size of the sculptures I make for the images, I have used large scale C-Prints in the past. But dye transfer is not only promising a long lasting quality but more importantly gives a delicate color and allows you to have control over the print to a degree no other process does, while still being a photographic and not a retouching or cosmetic approach.

I just wanted to do something other than inkjet prints. They're ubiquitous now and they all look the same. Most of them share the same problem; they're way too graphic and have much too harsh a contrast. You lose all of the beauty and richness of the photographic process and those things seem to be forgotten. I wanted to work with the dye transfer process before it is completely gone. It was curiosity, and then I found out how complex everything was and all of the subtleties there are. It was way more complicated than I thought, every print took about forty hours to make and months of preparation. Even every test print took forty hours. The guy basically works a week on every print, so if you do an edition that means he works six weeks on just the edition, and that's why we were working on this for five years, but no one ever asks how long a painter painted on a painting, so I hope it's all worth it.



Thomas Demand, Daily #11, 2009.

I was curious, do you have any daily rituals in your life?

Yeah, I go swimming everyday.

What do you want your art to communicate to the viewer? What do you want to provoke when somebody looks at your work?

If it doesn't say what it should say, then there is no point in declaring that it says something. I'm really reluctant to say what my work should communicate. I can only talk to you about what I needed to do to make it work, but as far as what it should say, that's up to you to say.

Would you rather it be a visceral or emotional response?

Visceral, for sure, but the new dye transfer work comes across more personal and you make all of that emotional in a sense. It has a much more private subtext.

Did you get *The Dailies* from the media, like you do with a lot of your work?

No, they were photographs which I did myself on the go. One thing I realized is that the majority of the images we talk about now, or which we receive when passing by, are actually private images and snapshots that people do and send on Twitter or something. When you have a cell phone on you all the time you accumulate all these images, which you will probably never need again, which don't even mark an important point in your life. They are just a daily note. I thought I should really try to make that my material, to make use of it instead of using material from the media.

If you think about anything from 9/11 onwards, photojournalistic work as we know it is going out the window. If someone writes something, they have to send pictures as well. There's no independent photographer coming along with a journalist anymore.

So, all of that which we know about photographic images in the media is on the way out. I thought I would like to work with those kind of images but they're not as public as they were before.

I think there's an intimacy to it, capturing those private moments. Do you use Instagram?

No, no, no. I don't like it much because it gives you a pre-fabricated way of what images should look like and I'm just trying to connect to the opposite, and to deconstruct the image. For me, Instagram is the wrong tool. It's like going into a church with a tank. That's not what I'm after and so I'm trying to avoid that prefabricated look of images. If you look at the course of things these days and how we talk about them, it's mostly coined by the internet communication. What the problem is with internet communication is the subjectivity of it. I work with subjective images.

You say you destroy everything and the only thing that's left is a photograph?

Yes.

Why?

Well, you could put this in a big philosophical debate, but I'm inclined not to because it gets in the way. I need my brain for something else, or it becomes fragile. So that means we need to work steadily and with one thing at a time. You also need to repair the situations all the time because they're always falling to pieces before you are ready to photograph them. My projects got bigger and bigger and more complex. At one point I wanted to work with something light again, you know, making a poem instead of a novel.

You talk about memory and how your memory has to do with adding things and leaving things out.

Memory is amazing. We talk about pictures in our head, but of course no one has a picture in their head, we are constantly reconstructing things. Photography and memory have a weird love-hate relationship because on one hand if you have a photograph of something you aren't going to remember it so well. On the other hand, you might remember things because you only have a photograph.

So there are many people that would say don't make a photograph all the time because you won't remember the moment, you will only read the moment as something you can tweet about later or you only read the moment as something which makes a nice photograph and the photograph somehow replaces the experience. On the other hand the photograph reminds you of so many things in your life that you have forgotten already. The other thing is when you remember something your brain starts to construct and put together all the things you need to imagine that picture. So whenever we talk about pictures or we remember pictures or an incident, which might have a picture attached to it, you construct it. It's not that you have it already. So during reconstruction, you change it a little. If you tell a story four times it will be

a different story the fourth time. Essentially the facts will be the same but you can make it shorter, or longer.

When you're constructing your photographs, why do you choose to leave something out or keep something in? Is the decision purely aesthetic or based on meaning?

I leave lots of important things out and at the same time I am leaving out traces of names and letters on paper and things that got used up. All kinds of details that I leave out to keep that fragile balance open to keep the game open in a sense so it's a proposition, it's not fact. I'm just trying to keep that process visible to show that this is a reconstruction instead of the real things and that's why I would be reluctant to call myself a journalist as well because I'm actually not adding any truth to anything. If anything it's about truthfulness, like in a novel if someone writes about their childhood in Russia, you would never say it's not true, but you may say he might have forged some facts and it is a really impressive description of it. With a fictional writer you would never be able to really say, "this is not true," you would only be able to say, "I don't like the novel," or "he really bent reality," or something like that. That's all quali-

ties in fictional writing and not advantages or disadvantages. Whereas, when a journalist starts doing that, he's out of business, so I'm on the border where real things become fictional. The other thing is that leaving out a lot of details has to do with perfection versus beauty. I think things are not at their most beautiful when they are complete. A sense of perfection comes when things are not flawless. Perfection is not about having no mistakes, perfection is when you know you can leave things open for imagination and you can also leave them open in a fragile state. You don't have to define everything. Think of the most beautiful novels where the imagination of the reader is triggered and you can imagine and feel things, but that doesn't happen when every little thing is written out. That is why I try to do my work myself and decide with every object: how much information do I need and how much is too much?



Thomas Demand, *Daily #10*, 2008.

Would you think of yourself as romantic?

Yeah, totally! Because I really think you recreate the past to visit the past again. You can visit places through art that would otherwise be inaccessible because they do not exist anymore. That is deeply romantic.

With the way the art world is today, and the way photography is today crossing boundaries with mixed media and multimedia, do you think anyone could be just a photographer anymore? Where do you think it is all going?

We all are photographers. I made a sculpture and then I decided I wanted to do sculptures because I wouldn't have to care about them afterwards. I thought why not make documentation of the main impersonation of the work. Then I found myself in a discourse about photography dying and my work is apparently proving that you cannot trust photography anymore because it is becoming digital.

I was never really interested in that because that isn't what I started with. I find it to be a very trivial thought, that photography could lie. We all know that it can lie; it depends on what you photograph or who photographs it. That is when I started making films, because I didn't want to be pigeonholed as the photographer who faked the "thing." Then it went on and what happened is, instead of photography dying, everyone now knows – more than ever – how photography works. Now everyone has a camera in their phone. The importance of the image as we know it, and how we can use it, is so much more ubiquitous than it ever was before.

Thomas Demand. *Daily #10*, 2008.

The opposite is happening, what has died is not the photograph, it is the photographer. The profession of the photographer as we knew it, which goes to the jungle and photographs the Indians or whatever, is going. Classic photography is going out the window because everyone can do it. You don't need to be a professional anymore to make a really stunning and fantastic photograph of something because the cameras do it all for you.

Well, what advice would you give someone starting off in photography?

For me it is very hard to give advice because I am not a trained photographer. I am actually an amateur in terms of technical photography, so for me the picture has to come first. Something, which involves me as a person, has to come first and then how it's made and what I use for that is just actually a relatively tedious affair. Whether it's black or white; or whether it's big or small; I can't be bothered to think too much about that.

What is your personal fantasy?

My fantasy is that in all of my work I wish I could revisit that moment where I see a picture and walk into that picture.