

Dailiness

Hal Foster

Let's begin with the title of *The Dailies* (2008-12), the twenty-plus photographs that Thomas Demand worked up from iPhone snapshots of everyday things in everyday settings, such as cigarette butts snuffed out in a sand bowl and colored fabrics loaded in a washing machine.

Newspapers were once called “dailies,” as was movie footage shot during the previous day, and together they connote the ephemeral and the fast. But *The Dailies* are hardly transient or rapid in these ways: even if the initial snapshots are taken quickly, Demand mulls them over slowly and selects them stringently, and a great deal of effort is put not only into the usual making of paper and cardboard models that are then photographed, but also into the special dye-transfer process chosen for these images (“it takes 40 hours for each print,” Demand tells us).¹ Different orders of time and attention are thus in play in *The Dailies*, and in this respect they seem to ask, “Can art be made of our smart-phone image-world?” That phrasing might sound too grand for such modest subjects, but then the modest and the grand often converge in ambitious work.

Certainly *The Dailies* mark a turn for Demand from images based on media stories about important events, such as the death of a German politician or a British princess. Whereas those “Histories” (as we might call them) are freighted with obscure significance, *The Dailies* are not laden with enigmatic clues or hidden meanings. “It's still the same author,” Demand says simply, “it's just a different form.”² The shift is one from a high genre – “Histories” connotes the highest category of all, history painting – to low genres: most of *The Dailies* are interiors, and nearly all qualify as still-lives. As in most still-lives, the focus is on things at hand, a comb under a bathroom mirror in #3 or two coffee saucers on a breakfast table in #13; these are pictures of near space in which our bodies are implicated, where we want to reach and

touch.³ Yet unlike most still-lives, the objects are rarely centered or seen straight on; often caught at an angle, they appear as if glimpsed, usually from a position above, looking down while standing or crouching. And, again, they are usually set indoors: the days of *The Dailies* are passed in apartments, offices, and hotels. In fact, not only is the natural world largely absent, but the dailiness of *The Dailies* is mostly administered; it is made up, almost entirely, of the “second nature” of manmade things and denatured spaces (in this respect the blank red “Do Not Disturb” sign on the anonymous hotel latch in #12 is a little chilling).⁴ If windows are pictured at all, they are frosted as in #14, covered with a blind as in #16, or grated as well as blinded as in #19. The thing seen prevails over the view out.⁵

It is not simply that windows and mirrors appear here; more importantly, the two dispositions underwritten by the two models – “I see the world” and “the world is seen” – are placed in tension, both with each other and individually (windows are obscured, mirrors reflect little, and so on).⁶ Even as the objects in *The Dailies* seem simply to appear, we know that the images are constructed several times over: they imply not only a viewing subject but also a hyperactive artist taking shots, selecting images, building models, determining views, lighting scenes, arranging compositions, and deciding on prints. If people are nowhere in his photographs, Demand is everywhere; indeed, for Michael Fried these works are artifacts of “sheer artistic intention.”⁷

Certainly *The Dailies* pressure the sense of “sheer artistic intention” with scenes that appear incidental or accidental: an outlet sags from a wall in #1, four panels have fallen from a cheap ceiling in #5, a green tissue is caught in a gray grating in #7. The root of both “incident” and “accident” is *cadere*, to fall, and gravity is foregrounded in some *Dailies*, as in #11, which looks down on green maple seeds that have landed on a brown wooden deck. Also featured is the contrary state of suspension, as in #17, which shows five pins on a clothesline strung across a blue sky. Other images thematize a precarious balance between the two conditions: a plastic glass with a bilious liquid sits

uneasily on a window ledge in #20, as does an orange bar of soap on the edge of a white bathtub in #21.⁸ When an accident is not staged, then, an inadvertence is suggested, again in a way that pressures the intentionality that otherwise suffuses the work. (It also pushes back on our sense that the world here is totally administered.) In *The Dailies* Demand seems to turn his eye to his scenes and away from them at the same time (the *advertere* in “inadvertence” means “to turn to”).

Demand likens *The Dailies* to haikus, which suggests a degree of descriptive detail, and many of the images do possess a poetic concision.⁹ For example, the green seeds on the brown wood in #11 call up Imagist poetry inspired by the haiku, such as the famous lines of Ezra Pound – “The apparition of these faces in the crowd/Petals on a wet, black bough” – and William Carlos Williams – “so much depends/ upon/a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/ chickens.”¹⁰ Some of *The Dailies* are indeed apparitional (the dance of the colored pins on the clothesline in #17 is for me), and in this way they invite us to reflect on the status of such experiences today. Can the ephemeral still touch on the eternal, as Baudelaire proposed 150 years ago? Can everyday things still prompt epiphanic insights in an administered world?¹¹

As Demand sees it, his photographs also have to do with recognition. “My sculptures are only imitations,” he says, “dummies made of things that bear precisely the right number of symbols to be recognised as such.”¹² His play with detail, then, is not simply to underscore that his images are fabrications but, more importantly, to activate them as tests of our seeing, reading, and remembering. Distraction, Demand suggests, is “the actual state of what we absorb as news”; “what is decisive,” he continues, are “the blurred traces left in the media by the incidents” that they relay (this statement pertains primarily to the “Histories,” of course, but it bears on *The Dailies* as well). On the one hand, distraction produces “a very diffuse sense of dullness,” Demand believes; on the other, it allows the “blurred traces” of incidents to “lodge in the memory,” a memory that he sees as collective as well as individual.¹³ Could it be that these blurred traces are somehow evoked in the blunted details of his

photographs? Certainly our shared media memory is one deep subject of his work, and *The Dailies* also point to a mnemonic dimension buried in the trivia of our lives.

Consider the kinds of objects pictured in some of *The Dailies*, such as the loose roll of orange fencing in #9 or the tacky stool in the makeshift stall in #10. They are the very stuff of capitalist junkspace; they appear so artificial and so automatic as to be almost posthuman.¹⁴ Not many people understand how such things are produced, and yet they are used, everyday, by all of us. And in *The Dailies* they appear not only used; they are also broken, like the outlet in #1, or discarded, like the drink in #18.

Paradoxically, however, this use, this breakage, this trashing, renders them human: at least they show the signs of our consumption, if not of our production. And as for production, this is where Demand intervenes with his “organized tinkering,” which is his term for his selecting, modeling, and photographing of the banal things that stock our daily lives. “Things must be slowed down,” he says, if the mediation of our world is to be understood and the second and third natures that weigh on us are to be pressured in turn.

“We see what the specters of history left behind,” Alexander Kluge remarks to Demand in an extraordinary conversation in 2006; “it looks ghostly and yet realistic.” But the traces of past representations and the residues of dead labor that Demand offers us are not only uncanny. Again, he aims to trigger a recognition that has a mnemonic dimension: “A bell rings in your long-term memory.” And, paradoxically, this mnemonic dimension can have a projective force, a future vector, as well, one with an ethical component. This is the material of your lives, *The Dailies* say to us; it might be tacky, trivial, tiresome, even a little deadly. But there is beauty here too. It is not redemptive, but it might be, at times, epiphanic. It might be enough.

1. In the dye-transfer process there are three printing matrices (one for each primary color), and gelatin is used to fix the colors, which possess more tonal range than in any other technique. Eastman Kodak stopped production of the materials required for this process in 1994, and very few printers still have the equipment and the expertise necessary to accomplish it. Demand discusses the making of *The Dailies* in

Thomas Demand: The Dailies (Sydney: Kaldor Art Projects, 2012).

2. Coline Milliard, "Same Author, Different Form," *ARTINFO*, April 18, 2012. Implicit in the shift from "the Histories" to *The Dailies* is the notion that there exists a significant practice of everyday life (à la Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau) that lies beneath the grand events of official history.

3. Of course, one cannot touch them, not simply because they are artworks but because, however actual in appearance, the model, much less the referent, is long gone. In still-life there is often a tension between the haptic and the optical and sometimes an ambivalence between an offering (of food) and a withholding (the food cannot be eaten). Both kinds of ambiguity are active in *The Dailies*.

4. Georg Lukács discusses "second nature" in *The Theory of the Novel* (written in 1914-15), as do several Frankfurt School critics after him.

5. Contrary to his laminating photographs behind Plexiglas Demand protects *The Dailies* with glass and a wooden frame, that is, he presents them as delicate objects, too.

6. Demand also plays with presentational surfaces that are neither window nor mirror such as the bulletin board in #8, which might call up the use of similar devices in trompe-l'oeil painting (e.g., William Harnett, John Peto).

7. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 271. A photograph has only one vantage point, unlike sculpture, which is why the young Baudelaire dismissed sculpture as "tiresome" in his Salon of 1846. Both Fried and Demand have cited this argument.

8. Gravity and suspension are conditions negotiated by bodies and pictures alike, a sharing that might underline the subtle sympathy between the two that Demand is able to elicit here.

9. Demand in Milliard, "Same Author, Different Form."

10. Ezra Pound, "In a Station of the Metro" (1913); William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923).

11. Transient joys are found in small events, but they hold other surprises too. If God resides in the details, as Mies van der Rohe and others have said, so too does death; often it is the little things that kill one, literally. The Tolstoy protagonist Ivan Ilyich knows as much: he watches with anguish as an innocuous bump becomes a big It that first stakes him out, then stalks him, then takes him away. The symptom is lodged in the detail as well.

12. Demand in "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2006), pp. 51–112. Unless otherwise noted, all other Demand and Kluge quotations are from this text.

13. "Blurred traces" is almost oxymoronic, but it is useful as such. In order to be potent, a detail, a punctum in the Barthesian sense, need not be precise: for example, there are blurred traces with traumatic force in Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter. On this point see my *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Ruscha, and Richter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

14. See Rem Koolhaas and Hal Foster, *Junkspace with Running Room* (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2013).

Foster, Hal, *Dailiness*, p.6-67 (images interspersed), 2015, in: *Thomas Demand: The Dailies*, catalogue, Mack Books, London