

Germano Celant, *The Cavern of Images*, 2007

Throughout its history, photography has thrived on sensational documents. It feeds on 'the unseen,' functions on the 'scoop' that reveals a hidden truth. Its evolution is linked to digging deep into appearances, beating unexpected paths and offering perspectives that open our minds and perceptions to a different reality. The submersion and side-view it provides enrich intellectual, social, aesthetic and political processes crucial to our reading of the world. Like literature and science, it is a tool that creates a 'voice' different from knowledge. By capturing forms and figures, it enacts a visual journey capable of reconnecting the fragments of an event, highlighting its intensity as well as its density. It reaches down into the core of the event and lifts it out of the hell of mediocrity and standardization in order to highlight its pathos. An aesthetic 'click' reawakens the emotional body hiding behind the surface of objects and events. A vision of transparency brings out what is hidden behind the facades of hermetically closed subjects.

It is precisely this magical act underlying the camera's mechanical gaze that re-establishes contact with 'objective' things and their reality. The revelation in which Thomas Demand is interested concerns not the world 'outside' the photographic image, but its 'internal' universe. That is, his work involves the 'hidden' dimension of the experience of vision through photography. This process is preferably entrusted to a mindset at once logical and fanciful that often goes beyond the intensity—ranging from drama to tragedy, from the historical event to the emotion of existence—underlying the image but not rendered explicit in it. Indeed, using an almost Neoplatonic method, he tends to bring out the shadows that move on the wall of the photographic cave. This yields the most intimate reality of the image and invites us to 'look inside' without becoming fixed on a single perspective and question ourselves on the multiplicity of vision, the intrinsic complexity of every appearance, and the specificity of every sort of photographic 'theatricality.' For this reason, Demand's approach centers on 'found' images – that is, on reproductions of events and activities, architectures and places that have already appeared in media from newspaper to magazines. These are images that effect a sort of 'imprinting,' brought into focus for reasons of information and communication. His work therefore precludes the *tabula rasa* from which the photographic gaze begins to create images, and instead focuses on an already

crystalized, imaginary 'product' that comes to us from the outside world at a given moment in history. It is, in fact, an attempt to 'surprise,' which brings out the raw material of photographic identity where vision and pathos are so closely intertwined that the frontier of the objective and impersonal spills into the subjective and the emotional. The artist thus rejects the notion of photography as a 'portrait' of the artist offering an image of himself, in favor of an introspection of the mirror-effect of a reproduced image that may decipher truly 'reflected' things. In order to obtain this 'objective' result, which is supposed to be free of all personal feeling, Demand enacts a process of 'thingification' of the photographed object. After having chosen it for the historical and social 'pregnancy' it gains through the information media, he 'reconstructs' it, life-size, using ephemeral materials such as colored paper and cardboard. He makes it 'heavy' and 'present' before his own gaze, so that it may not materialize outside of all possible psychological and narcissistic 'motivation'. Drawn from daily or monthly reality, it is presented anew as a 'thing': it doesn't reflect, but merely appears. It is a photographic 'thing' that, translated into material, takes shape in the artists studio and enters another dimension as 'sculpture'.

At first—from 1989 to 1993—Demand built tables, furniture, objects and tools for everyday use out of cardboard and then photographed them. Their transformations, however, was not effected for the purpose of 'freezing' them as artworks, but rather to render their contents highly 'meaningful,' in order to transport them from a subjective interpretative condition to a 'golden' state created by the reading given them by photography's impersonal gaze. In this procedure the artist 'gathers' them together to form a highly enigmatic environment and transforms them through an approach that 'hints' at a reality emanating from the image, annulling the fetishistic nature of the object and artifact.

The hint of a buried meaning is not overtly manifest, nor does the artist make it so. However, the recasting of the object as 'other,' as a 'counterfeit' in *papier-mâché* or cardboard, triggers an investigation into the dormant reason beneath the remade and recast environmental object and its relation to reality. By thus 'suspending' the image through a fictitious reconstruction, Demand achieves a tactical artifice that cloaks in mystery the gaze's reading of things and architecture. He creates in the viewer an unsureness, an anxious attention to

them, making one open to the emergence of a meaning dependent on the deferral of interpretation. One does not content oneself with first impressions, but suspends one's reading of the phenomenon, postponing interpretation because one knows that haste and facility do not pay. In fact, they are the reason for its fall. In the rush to 'recognize' Demand's photography as 'real' and not reconstructed, one only discovers that visual perception has been swept away by haste and deceived. Indeed one realizes that the virtual reconstructions of the photographed subject explains nothing whatsoever, but only refers to a greater fullness of meaning.

Since 1994¹, the photographic glance that transforms the object through the sole process of 'looking' has given way, in Demand, to a photography of consciousness – a photography of discipline that takes the found image, cuts it out, recomposes and reconstructs it on a natural scale and in a different material in order to reflect on its 'scenographic' motivations, which take it from the silent stage to the screaming theatre of life past and present. In this sense the artist, following Plato's example, becomes a spectator or *metteur-en-scène* able to seize and elaborate the meaning of the fragmented imagination in the intricacy of human affairs. Photography is inflected to question itself on the true meaning of existence as the *mise-en-scène* of an event, a tragedy, or a drama. This is why Demand reconstructs in paper or cardboard the scene of an event or 'crime,' in order to bring out its intense and hidden 'theatricality.' Ashe 'animates' perception through reconstructions – by exposing its imprecision and absence of detail—the photographed subject begins to 'vibrate,' and the image warms up and becomes a human face: the 'reversed gaze' (Goethe) that brings with it the ability to see into photography's soul, calling forth, as in Mephistopheles, its guardian devil.¹² The demon may take on the guise of Hitler's favorite architect, Albert Speer, with his monumental projects (*Model*, 2000) or that of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, who is evoked by the anonymous environment of his apartment (*Corridor*, 1995). Or he may materialize before our eyes in the chaos of documents in the offices of the Stasi, the former East-German secret police (*Office*, 1995), or else reveal himself in the recreation of the silent and orderly archive of Leni Riefenstahl, director of propagandistic documentaries for the Third Reich (*Archive*, 1995). Elsewhere his photographic constructions evoke stories of suicides and mysterious deaths, such as that of the politician Uwe Barschel (*Bathroom*, 1997), or undertake the visual deciphering of a building that witnessed an apocalypse of killings for

pedophilia (*Klause/Tavern*, 2006). All these projects that 'revisit' an anguishing event or tragic scene are conveyed through visual 'symptoms' that Demand makes coincide with a series of images (*Klause/Tavern 1*, then *2, 3, 4, 5, 6*) where the artist, like a detective, runs through the repertoire of available information by means of reproductions and testimonies, then translates them – after crystallizing them with light and ephemeral, papery material – into a visual document enclosed within the sphere of the photographic frame. He collects directly and indirectly related material to generate a reflection that is equivalent – because it is constructed and derived therefrom – but not identical to the place where the event occurred. In this way, in *Yellowcake* (2007), he treats a case of international espionage where the image of a place, an embassy, turns into a fiendish melting-pot from which a piece of news is forged for the purpose of declaring war on Iraq.

Compared to the typical artist's subjective interpretation of things, Demand tends instead to assert the principle of occurrence through the thing itself—the home or office, bunker or stairway, hallway or entrance, which are objective, which are objective data. In seeking out facts, he approaches a 'journalistic' reconstruction that feeds on 'words,' i.e., his paper or cardboard, in order to exhibit a 'chamber' or 'apartment' of horror, a diabolical, terrifying *Wunderkammer*. His ambition is to establish a 'field' of information and details about an environmental space whose cross-relationships will produce a spark that sheds light on the horror or wild nature of history. Unlike that generation of photographers from Cindy Sherman to Jeff Wall, who hypnotized a 'self-creative' approach to the photographic object, producing a new condition of imaginary existence, Demand refuses any formulation not derived from or determined by real circumstances – namely, those inferred from information sources and written, recounted, reproduced or documented in the mass media. He 're-presents' them as the result of an 'archaeological excavation' that brings to light the 'bodies buried' in photographic documents. In so doing he manages to summon forth phantoms and mortuary effigies, true doubles of the photographic process. It is a journey into hell which allows him to visit secret realms inhabited by the ghosts of history. He deciphers, as it were, a 'final glance' – that cast by the victim at the site of his sacrifice – thereby also tracing the 'path' of events of European culture with all their tragic 'shadows.' These are not apparitions dreamt or conceptually called forth, but buried 'figures' that return to the light of photography, whose image is shadow.

They assume not the physical form of persons but that of environmental and architectural effigies. They embody a figurative death, in which Demand transforms façades and places into funeral shrouds, urban relics of deathly events in which the living observer may grasp the presence of death. At the same time he uses the photographic technique not to say what he wants to express emotionally, but to confront the 'indeterminate' character of the image in a detached manner, invoking this quality without manipulating and without altering, thereby managing to capture its true life, which is fictitious, ghostly, and not that of a real body. As a result, the photographic 'representation' the artist produces, after having cast the document into imagery in the studio, is not only metaphorically a sculpted stone on which the names of the dead are inscribed, but also a metonymy and a sublimated prolongation of the physical aspect of an event dissolved in time and yet particular. It is something uncontrollable, which Demand nevertheless manages to dominate and project through time so that it may present itself to and touch those who were not there when it happened. It becomes a kind of certificate of perpetuity that annuls distance and makes permanent the precariousness of living and dying. This labor involves the endless reshaping of the tragic, dramatic event, for the purpose of keeping open the door of a history that, with the acceleration and astronomical multiplication of images, seems more and more like a mysterious, subterranean stratification.

In 2006 the artist created *Grotto*, a photograph of an underground site derived from a postcard featuring an image of a grotto in Majorca that was first reconstructed in the studio, using 30 tons of grey cardboard shaped and measured by computers and divided into 900,000 different parts then placed on top of one another recreate the cavities, stalactites and stalagmites visible in the postcard. It is yet another suspension of the flux of images found by Demand in his visual wanderings, but it no longer concerns a news item or a moment of history, but a simple grotto. The choice here is of a different nature, involving no other 'invisible' entity than itself as symbol and metaphor spanning the history of art, philosophy, literature, and architecture. A unique image, inert and stable, living only by the ray of light illuminating the cavities. Demand thus 'revisits' a philosophical and visual motif linked with the evolution of perception and construction, two poles that inform Demand's approach.

One could consider *Grotto* a metaphor of his method of immersion in the viscera of a 'territory,' namely, photography, whose stratifications are infinite and in continuous motion. It is an attempt to examine the schema of deciphering and analysis as applied to the found image. First of all, the photograph, here in form of a postcard, is the gateway separating daylight information from dark, nocturnal, subterranean information. It is the enigmatic threshold offered to the gaze by a dialogue with its interpreter. In order to understand it, one must immerse oneself in it, venture into its space so that new places and materials are created. To achieve this end, it is important not to rely on illusionistic or creative effects that decidedly estrange consciousness, nor to follow the kaleidoscopic results of their fragmentation and alteration. The point is not to give life 'other' images, but rather to pass through them and arrive at an awareness of their fullness. The photograph, with its frame—at once a door and a threshold – marks the confines from which emanates a light arising from a deep, unknown well. To adhere to its reality, one must descent to it. Demand effects this descent into the cavern of images by taking 'physical' possession of their 'appearance' by reconstructing them in cardboard and light materials in the studio. Feeling attracted by the cave's informative power, he translates it into a landscape of his own, opening up a garden of curiosities onto which he directs his attention as a researcher and a curios onlooker. Finding himself before it, he illuminates it and warms its soil, seeking to make it subterranean seed sprout. At times he immerses himself in it in search of a profound, essential afflatus. Digging deep, he is ready to find archaeological artifacts past and present and to enter into dark and mysterious hollows. Through such entries he lends himself to a process of transforming the landscape; the photograph gradually becomes a place of passage between two strata, two worlds, between the known and unknown, the visible and the invisible, light and darkness. Heading into depths where time has become stratified and solidified, the artist begins a journey as photographic speleologist toward an 'elsewhere' that one can now show and therefore look at. Bringing together the scattered pieces (those that remain and are available), he succeeds in discovering the complex identity of the image, whose scents and florescences differ from those of the document.

The photograph thus constitutes itself as an underground tunnel, a secret, transverse passage to the reasons for its existence. It is the 'opening' of an event. In this respect Demand stands apart from the other photographers of his

generation, from Thomas Struth to Andreas Gursky, because he does not 'assert' a vision of reality, but rather allows it to spring up from the most inner, arcane secrets of the image. He shuns the magic of the photographic technique, whose aim is to portray the world, so that he might extinguish its fictitious, technical and linguistic characteristics, annulling its seductive properties with his cardboard reconstructions and highlighting the veil that protects its actual, hidden, repressed contents. He uses the image to illuminate not the object but its shadow. He goes through its door so that he may turn his gaze to its dark side.

To return to the image of *Grotto*, it is a place of continuous surprises, with extraordinary excrescences forming niches and halls. As it is a 'reconstructions,' it falls within the sphere of art imitating nature. The term 'imitation'—a process Demand has been working with since 1993—implies a variety of meanings. To imitate³ is to represent something by means of sculpture or painting, and with a high degree of verisimilitude, on a par with that of a mirror. Imitation, moreover, is associated, through the gaze, with the concept of image as external, perceptible form. According to Panofsky⁴, imitation, in Plato's vision, falls into two categories: *realistic* mimesis and *fantastic* mimesis. The former achieves proportion and remains faithful to the subject, while the latter exalts its appearance. Art may thus exist as the representation of existing objects and as a dimension of fantasy linked to the imagination of the artist. Demand apparently moves between these two poles. He imitates the photograph, translating it into a construction that 'looks like it', then captures it again, photographically, from a personal angle and in a personal light. He moves, that is, between Platonic and anti-Platonic discovery. Adopting an impersonal tool like the camera, he arrives at a subjective reading of the image, at a quest for real truth to be attained through a virtual process. Through this exchange of functions between real and virtual, moreover, he raises questions about images that are false because they are illusionistic, and about images that are real because they are highly expressive. Of the two images – the original and the one reconstructed according to a fanciful, communicative vision – which is the more real?

Alongside the theme of imitation, the 'grotto' is a subject encountered throughout the history of art and architecture. From the sixteenth century onwards, the imitation of nature is the basis for the Tuscan and rustic orders⁵, which derive their motifs from grottos and caves, trees and boughs, in an attempt to endow

buildings with functionality and a spare, primitive adornment, As the same time, these architectural concerns are linked to the very naturalness of the materials, which are humble and simple. Demand adopts a similarly elementary approach to construction in his recourse to cardboard, which is light but robust, solid and coarse. In fact, *Grotto*, which was constructed in his Berlin studio, recaptures the natural process of calcareous incrustations. It is rustic even though it was created by an electronic 'inlaying' that allowed each part to 'drip' onto the next. It is thus the result of a process that is half rustic, half logical, with an awareness of the delicate balance between the contrasting elements, such as the manual and the digital. This same opposition informs Demand's representation of reality, which is inspired by a real place that is then revealed to be 'unreal', if not surreal, because of its subterranean, mysterious disturbing connotations.

The sixteenth-century grotto is, moreover, a place of intellectual experimentation where the Renaissance mind reclaims its autonomy from the natural world. There is an attempt to distill the ascending path to an unexplored mode of representation, that of environmental 'enchantment,' which will lead to Mannerist architecture. Demand's *Grotto* tends toward the same result, the liberation of photographic 'naturalism' to an imagery of surprise, which has its roots in the 'naturalness' of the photographic image but distances itself from it in order to create an exception: the single, disturbing subject that lies at the lies at the foundation of photography as the chosen medium. It is a way to disturb the other photography – heavy and rough, lapidary and assertive – and to isolate a process that will broaden its sphere to include the ghosts that live its viscera. The clash between the manifest and the hidden originates in the raw material and the nature of photography – the visual testimony already given by others for reasons of reporting or journalistic information – and allows one to detach oneself from it and re-present it as a renewed surprise. Exhibiting photography in the primal state, even while provoking a crisis in its inner meanings, Demand de-natures it in order to highlight its subterranean character. This dialectic between the medium's artificiality and its truth is not unlike what one finds in the grottoes constructed in the gardens of Pratolino and Boboli from the plans of such 'artist-architects' as Bernardo Buontalenti, Giulio Romano, and Sebastiano Serlio.

Demand 'deforms' the naturalistic aspect of photography to make it an always living entity imbued with the human stories that have produced it. Among the

'grottoes' that have marked the history of art is Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1923–1942), an amalgam of life and art and the concrete symbol of a total expression of the authentic self driven, in order to exist, to built a hidden, impenetrable place for itself. Made up of a sedimentation of objects and artifacts (bottles, pieces of wood, letters, roots, paper cutouts, hair, finds, and organic wastes) collected over time by the Dada artist, the space arose initially from a Column that over the course of time would grow and expand until it filled an entire room. Defined by Schwitters as the *Cathedral of Erotic Misery of KdeE* for short, the whole presents itself as a cave of libidinal projections, a kind of urban space on a personal scale. The artist 'inhabits' it and goes on journeys combining the oneiric and the erotic. It is a uterine grotto that houses him so that he may detach himself from the real world, a cavity constructed to find an equilibrium within his own solitude – unlike Demand's *Grotto*, which is an attempt to 'take possession' not of an obsession, like Schwitters, but of a mode of interpretation for organizing a process in which the artist may master the labyrinthine, enigmatic progression involved in the non-superficial reading, poised between rational and irrational, of a photographic document.

The photography of *Grotto* is, in fact, a metaphor of its own immersion in the 'nocturnal' places of the image, its entry into labyrinth burrows in which one may get lost, its search for answers to its reason for existing. Every photograph therefore presents itself as a grotto whose 'wild' and 'brutal' architecture may provide answers to the questions of sight. It is a dark landscape to be imitated in order to individuate its damp and shadowy crags, but also to be understood, so that one may understand the first receptacle of life, the prehistoric bed from which man went forth in various directions to experience the world.

Like the artificial caves built by the sixteenth and seventeenth-century architects, Demand's photography is similarly made rough, rustic materials such as cardboard and colored paper, 'alternative' elements that increasingly underscore the artificial dimension of contemporary vision. His simple style wrecks the fine, classic form of photography, because it is 'reflected' through the alternating use of cardboard of different colors and thickness that render his reconstructions generic and imprecise, making it rather like 'inlaid' painting, where, 'since the inlays are a medley of small wood chips of different colors that can never felicitously join and unite without their cutting edges and color differences

remaining crudely distinct, they of necessity render their figures brittle, crude, and without roundness of relief.¹⁶

We can infer that *Grotto* expresses the artist's desire to break away from photography's technical absolutism and its figurative aspect, which is almost always emblematically clear and precise, in order to bring the medium into a more irregular, imprecise system of 'uncertain' manufacture, so that from it a new figuration may arise, more intense and surprising, more rough and truthful.

In 2007, the 'grotto' motif returns in the form of *Processo grottesco*, which presents anew the image of the *Grotto*, exhibited in London in 2006. Alongside it, however, are related documentary materials – postcards, books, tourist guides, photographs, catalogue illustrations, and various publications – a first in Demand's career – as well as the mammoth reconstructions using 900,000 layers of cardboard, of the grotto of Majorca after its postcard reproduction. What is the reason for this change of sign with respect to the past, when the colored-paper reproductions of found images were destroyed? Many interpretations are possible. First of all, the appearance of a double title 'describing' the work is an anomaly in need of deciphering. Normally, Demand defines his works with a single word – *Archive, Barn, Corridor, Yellowcake*. Thus, the emergence of a double definition circumscribes a 'situation' where the component parts of the creative and analytic 'process' meet on unusual ground. We are confronted with a 'twofold' event, both photographic and sculptural, concerning the grotto, the metaphor of a revelatory excavation accompanied by the 'read-out' of an amazing journey into the manifestation of an obscure matter, the artist's creative approach. The hidden background that comes to light here in Demand's method, the one whereby he arrives at a photograph through the study of a 'subterranean' subject and the ephemeral and sculptural reconstruction of its image. This exhibition publicly brings to light the 'transcendent' as well as revelatory function of photography with respect to a reconstituted reality.

The term 'Process,' moreover, is accompanied by the adjective 'grotesque,' which harks back to the theme of the grotto but also relates to the artist's operative process, underlining its provocative, peculiar character, which was also typical of the Cinquecento painterly genre called *grottesca*. A whim and an unexpected

exercise, perhaps, for Demand tends to put his status as sculptor and photographer to the same plane. Indeed the presentation of a *déjà vu* – the *Grotto* was already exhibited in London in 2006 – is an invitation to examine his own method and creative process, to reveals its modalities in order to highlight the ‘ambivalent’ side of his photography: that wavering between different genres ranging from the representation of reality and reality’s unreality, its physicality and its immateriality. This ‘exhibition’ involves no ‘critical’ reconstruction (the ‘grotto’ is already a metaphor for excavation and the revelation of subterranean motifs and thus exempt from calling forth any ‘guardian devil’). Yet it serves to proclaim the lightness and freedom of a photography as realistic as it is dreamlike. Imposing and permanent as a cave or grotto, it is also as airy as a branch of flower painted with joy and amusement in a grotesque. But the curiosity of *Processo grottesco* also derives from another sort of ‘prettiness’: the use of a virtual camera, which Demand employs here for the first time to ‘cut,’ according to a 3D model, the different strata of cardboard used to reconstruct the *Grotto*. Thus, the reconstruction of the most ancient form of dwelling is ‘surprisingly’ obtained using a high-technology instrument that is supposed to imitate, with its accelerated deciphering, the stratifications of an extremely slow-paced nature. This operative ‘extravagance’ makes Demand’s work-process half technological, half archaeological – an osmosis where Plato dialogues with a computer and the machine of illusion gives shape to an object, the grotto, that may here be experienced at once as a two-dimensional image and a three-dimensional object. It is a real world becoming a pseudo-world and vice versa. Indeed, the ‘grotesque process’ tends to produce a representation of ‘hybrids’ identifiable by their lack of gravity and density: photographs. *Processo grottesco* is a pure product of the imaginations that condense the fantasies and tragedies, the dramas and the threads of a history marked by the turbid, fleeting vitality on which all beings impress a value, each according to his vision – political and erotic, artistic and cultural.

¹ “Thomas Demand”, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2005

² Carla Stoppa, *La luce oltre la porta*, Moretti & Vitali, Bergamo 2007

³ Riccardo Pacciani, “Aspetti di imitauione della natura dal Quattrocento al Cinquecento,” in Marcello Fagiolo (ed.), *Natura de Artificio*, Officina Edizioni, 1979

⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, trans. Joseph J. S. Peake, Columbia, University of South

Carolina Press, 1968

⁵ Gabriele Morolli, "L'Opera Rustica nella teoria del '500," in Maurizio Fagiolo, op. cit.

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Galileo as a Critic of the Arts*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1954

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