

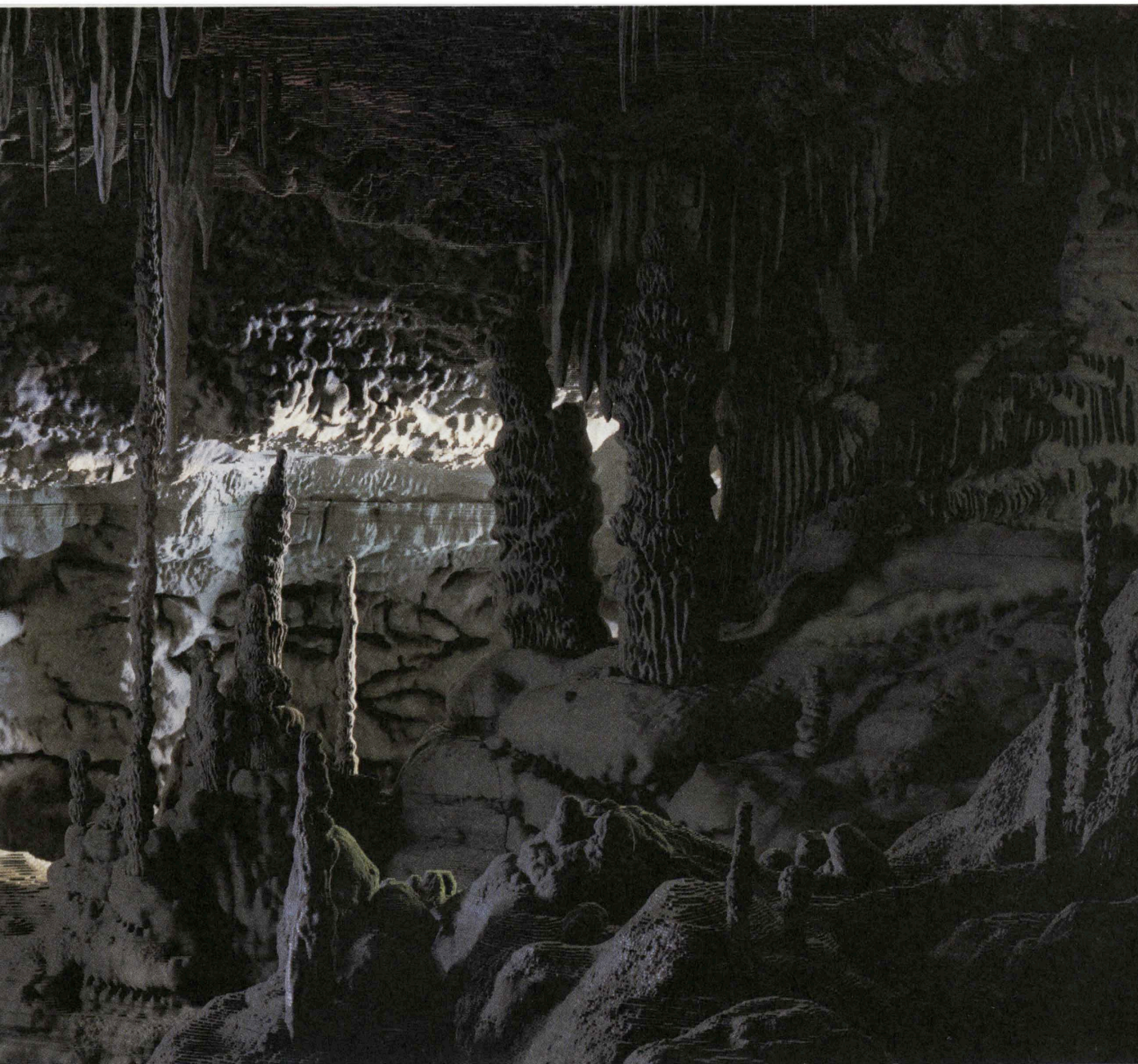
HELIUM FOR THE CAVE MONSTER IN THE SERPENTINE GALLERY, BERLIN-BASED ARTIST THOMAS DEMAND HAS BUILT A MONSTROUS CARDBOARD CAVE AND REM KOOLHAAS HAS RAISED A HOUSE OF AIR.

By NIKLAS MAAK



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This must be, you think, a photograph of a cave: stalagmites below, stalactites above, with light falling at curious angles into this underground world. But then, as you take a closer look at the photo, you notice something odd. There are pixelizations here that look as if a printing error has been made, and then, if you stand right up close to the photo, you discover that the stalagmites are comprised of eerily similar layers – it's as if the cave isn't a result at all of limestone and water dropping to the depths over thousand of years, but



rather a computer-generated illusion or a monstrously precise reconstruction of a cave.

In fact, this is exactly what the photograph by Berliner artist Thomas Demand depicts: a cave, built of paper, layer by layer, glued by hand, three and a half meters high, five metres deep and seven and a half metres wide, 52 tons of cardboard in all. As always with Demand's works, at first you are overcome by the madness of what you see: an entire cave, practically life-size, built within a few months with the time-lapsed help of a

Thomas Demand,
Grotte, 2006, C-Print/
Glass, 250cm x 550cm,
© Thomas Demand,
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

computer and a few glue-wielding students, accomplishing what the drips of nature need millennia to accomplish. Simply impossible. It can't be real.

Demand has become famous for his paper constructions. What looks in the photograph like an image of the real world again and again reveals itself to be pure illusion, a photographed model, and the mimicry of the material is outrageous. Demand's paper might genuinely look like freshly mown grass or like heavy gold bars; the forest in his pictures, looking more beautiful, fresher and all around more forest-like than any other forest one has ever seen, turns out to be a clever illusion composed of light, water drops and 270,000 sheets of paper. The cave turns out to be a gigantic paper mine.

Demand's *Grotte* appeared at the Serpentine Gallery in London this summer with other new works that have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York over the past year, and the Gallery's new co-director, Hans Ulrich Obrist, along with Demand, lined up another spatial thinker. In July, Rem Koolhaas and his engineer, Cecil Balmond, presented a spectacular work of temporary exhibition architecture, which might be understood as an equivalent counterpart to *Grotte*. A helium-filled canopy, a castle in the air, rose up over the park as a swaying aerial structure in which images of Demand's works were projected. The hovering chimera Koolhaas built around Demand's optical illusions is a further development of the utopian sphere à la Buckminster Fuller, a homage to the pneumatic architecture of the late 70s and such works as the "moveable, inflatable and inhabitable cloud" developed by Coop Himmelb(l)au in 1972, an architecture currently being revived in contemporary art by, for example, the work of Tomas Saraceno.

An archaic image of the cave here, a futuristic pneumatic architecture there. With Demand and Koolhaas, Obrist opened up a fundamental discourse in architectural theory relating to the question of what space can be, with Demand primarily exploring the relationships between space, memory and control. His pictures reconstruct collective dream imagery of places where control has gone missing. You recognize the security checkpoint Mohammed Atta slipped through, Hitler's headquarters after they were bombed, the house in which a small boy was tortured and murdered, the hotel bathroom in which conservative German politician Uwe Barschel was found dead – and, in a certain way, this cave, too, is a place out of control. The entrance to an underground grotto was seen in the 18th century as a point of transition from the rational into the magical, from the calculable to the measureless world, to the subconscious of nature where prehistoric men and monsters of all kinds lived.

"La casa del diavolo," the house of the devil, is what fishermen called the Blue Grotto discovered by August Kopisch in the 19th century on the isle of Capri, and what made the cave so spooky was the fact that no one knew whether the bizarre towering figures within were the artful result of moody nature or man-made, possibly even devil-made works.

The grotto appears as a hybrid between natural form and artifact, as a place of lunatic, inexplicable formal excess. What the baroque grotto builders, bored by the geometrical culture of rectangular salons, loved about caves – what romantics, Merzbau master builders and futurists loved about them – was their delirium of forms, this wildly endless and senseless accumulation of forms. Small wonder that head futurist Filippo Marinetti set his novel *L'isola dei baci* in the Blue Grotto, where a surreal conference on the possibility of love takes place and everything's hot and glistening.

In the grotto, all that is measurable falls apart to make way for the measureless – even in the case of the new computer baroque master builder Demand. A postcard from Majorca served as a model; his paper cave is not in any way a minute replication of an actual grotto, but instead a fantastically built misunderstanding between image and space. The computer that gave its orders to the paper-cutting machine often



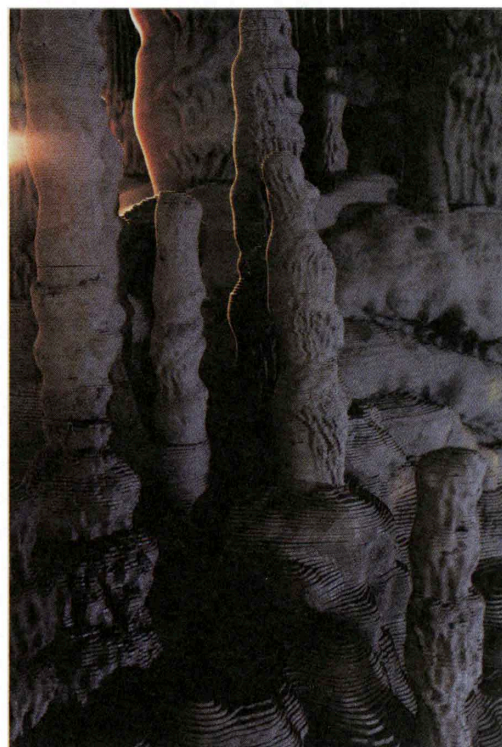
crashed under the weight of so much data, producing errors before breaking down while the cutting machine carried on cutting forms that no longer had anything to do with the grotto on the postcard. These forms are as irrational and random as nature itself, and the machinery, abandoning the programme and turning coincidence into form, mimicked nature.

Demand's work must bring tears to the eyes of design theorists because it makes visible what they find difficult to explain even to their peers. The system crash producing never-before-seen, uncontrolled forms is a favourite motif of deconstructionist design theory that poses the question of what happens when the computer no longer carries out the will of its human operator but instead, due to errors, creates forms no one could have foreseen and, as a sort of virtual nature, hurls these forms at people like so much flotsam and jetsam.

Of course, Demand's grotto photography also addresses the perception of images, the question of what you see when you look at something and which images you choose to believe. Pictures of grottos fascinated people as early as the 18th century because what could be seen in them seemed so unrealistic and fantastic; every grotto looks invented. Today, Demand's *Grotte* first registers as a computer-generated animation – you can hardly believe that a real space has actually been photographed here and that the unfocused spots are not mistakes in the photograph but a computer crash translated into three-dimensional space. *Grotto*, then, continues the tradition of Demand's early pictures, dealing with how the gaze is seduced and with the mechanisms of memory.

Demand's reconstructed scenes refer to well-known images and make visible the ways in which memory depends on the recognition of circumstances: you see a bathroom reconstructed out of paper that reminds you of something, and then you remember that in another similar set-up, in this inviting bathtub, Uwe Barschel once lay dead. Demand's paper worlds are backdrops of consciousness, speculations on the ways memory works and how things are reconstructed in the mind, that to remember is to set images and forms before the eye as if the interiors of the mind were a theatrical stage. Demand removes both text and people; like a police inspector who aims to comprehend the monstrous, he reconstructs the scene of the crime, attending to the most minute details as if this reconstruction, this double translation from image to space and then to photography, might offer clues as to what's happened.

But what Demand has created with his *Grotte* is a novelty for the transitional borderline between image and space – namely, an out-of-focus space. Both Koolhaas's pavilion of air and Demand's grotto break the rules of architecture. One aims to relieve architecture of its anchor and lead it to weightlessness and dematerialization, to make it a surface for projection, nothing more and nothing less. The other reconstructs a historical desire for an unsystematic space and has machines create such spaces as could never be planned. This model of a grotto is the opposite of a classical model: it does not make what's large comprehensible by making it smaller, but instead produces new incomprehensible models. Whoever steps into Demand's *Grotte* feels as if he has just stepped into a computer simulation, a room without the smells or the cool humidity of a real cave. It is, at the same time, both a real and a virtual space that Demand has built, and when you stand there among all these cardboard stalagmites in front of the strangely smooth reconstructed computer error, you feel like the man in the Woody Allen film who realizes with horror that it is not his eyes but he himself who has become unfocused. Demand's machine has turned its own breakdown into form. It's dutifully translated a distorted image into three dimensions, thereby producing something entirely new, namely, space out of focus, and the crashing computer that has produced these fantastic forms is in this way the true grotto of the 21st century.



Left/Right: *Grotte* (Details), 2006, © Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.