

*...au fond, le papier, le papier, le papier.*  
(Jacques Derrida)

On August 1st 1984, in Moscow, a group of young architects—mostly recent graduates from the Moscow Architectural Institute—gathered at the editorial offices of the *Junost'* (Youth) magazine on Mayakovsky Square. They were united by expediency. As for their Constructivist forebears of the '20s, their practice was burdened by expectations of political affiliation and servitude towards the national-economic complex; in response, they proposed an exhibition of radically imaginative two-dimensional works on paper, mostly submissions to an international competition organised by *Japan Architect* magazine. The offices of *Junost'* were to become for them a bubble of utopian escapism: through a combination of diplomacy, graphical faux-naïveté, and cunning choice of medium (little did the State concern itself with the paper fantasies of architects in the face of impending disintegration), the Paper Architects, as they were henceforth to be known, succeeded in bypassing the restrictions of the Soviet censors and open the exhibition.

The choice of name was a cunning provocation. On the one hand it was clearly ironical, given their resignation to the fact their vision would remain unbuilt; at the same time it referenced and subtly glorified the hairbrainedness of the Constructivists' legacy of unbuilt projects (referred to colloquially in Russian circles as "paper architecture"). On the other, it opportunistically played on the existence in the collective consciousness of a loose association between the medium of paper and worthlessness or disposability: what in the hands of an artist, as a support, would be considered a potential weapon of subversion, is seen as harmless in the hands of someone whose oeuvre is inherently three-dimensional and concrete. Like tigers of papier-mâché, how could the visions of paper architects possibly be genuinely threatening?

It is through a bewildering number of contextual cues and formulae—some rational, many subconscious—that we determine the worth of a piece of paper. Paper is the most schizophrenic of materials: we are perfectly accustomed to observing its value oscillating seamlessly between the absolute (money) to the worthless (yesterday's newspaper) in front of our very eyes, and sometimes even back again (even yesterday's paper will become valuable if we conserve it long enough). To dismiss a simulacrum we describe it as a "paper tiger", yet to credit someone's wealth we estimate their worth "on paper": Its value is simultaneously in its fragility and its durability, and its disposability and its ability to tendency to generate surplus value. In the balance, it remains the wonder material of throwaway culture, to the point it is easy to forget its erstwhile scarcity, and that Karl Marx once had to pawn "a coat dating back to h Liverpool days in order to buy writing paper"<sup>1</sup>. This rather ambiguous collective attitude towards paper's value makes it a somewhat odd choice for the architectural model-maker. Unlike the blue foam popularised by OMA and other mostly Dutch firms in the 1990s, it requires deliberate effort to achieve three-dimensional form using paper. Foam is the preference of the pragmatist who wishes to commit the least possible time and effort to the production of a volume, in order to be able to expediently move on to the next iteration: the hot wire operates by subtraction, slicing away chunks until the desired conformation is achieved. Wood, or more recently 3D printed polymers, by contrast, are the materials of choice of the architect wishing to seduce the client into signing a big check: the sheer beauty of their precision and minute detail makes them seductive, distracting the viewer away from potential doubts regarding

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<sup>1</sup> FOOTNOTE MARX

the design itself. Paper, save for extreme cases, is neither effortless nor seductive: it is the material of the bricoleur. Not only does it require patience to achieve form, but it carries with it the stigma of trashiness; furthermore, it is far from robust, and tends to exist for a brief moment in its originally intended form, buckling and warping rapidly under the effects of humidity or mistreatment (which it anyway invites, given its valuelessness). The paper model requires you to invest effort in its production, then rewards you by encouraging you to discard it and move on. As time passes, it becomes even less attractive a proposition, as the paper model's decline runs parallel to the ebb of paper in the general thrust towards the dream of the "paperless office" and the age of e-everything. On the efficiency spectrum, one could say that the paper model occupies the opposite pole from BIM, or Building Information Modelling—a form of integrated parametric design software that allows alterations to be propagated globally across a virtual model automatically and continuously, eliminating the need to rethink or redraw each individual system to accommodate changes. Just as capitalism yearns for the noncommittal fluidity of the marketplace to encompass every human interaction, BIM aspires to an ideal of absolute fluidity in architecture, in which the immaterial model of the building continually morphs to accommodate the countless forces exerting pressure on it from all directions—until the moment in which it must inevitably and abruptly freeze, solidifying definitively into architecture. Not so the paper model, each of which presupposes an idea, a decision, and then a commitment.

For well over a decade now, Thomas Demand has employed paper and photography to short-circuit collective perceptions of reality through the production of elaborate sets which linger on the verge of photorealism. While also depicting models primarily made out of paper, his series *Model Studies* bears little resemblance to his previous work at first glance. The models are not his own, and bear none of the hallmarks of the painstaking precision that characterise his own attempts to reproduce reality. Although the subjects are architectural structures, far from playing on the ambiguity between reality and fiction (or performing the carefully-framed tricks of scale that architects typically play in photographing their models) the photographs appear at first as almost abstract forms, like the product of an accidental firing of the shutter while a more carefully-framed shot is being set up. Some exude an energetic vibrancy—model-making as the by-product of the furnace in which the white-hot ore of architectural form is smelted—while others are permeated by a certain melancholy, like the forlorn residues of unrealised dreams described Shakespeare's Henry IV:

*Like one that draws the model of a house  
Beyond his power to build it; who, half through,  
Gives o'er and leaves his part-created cost  
A naked subject to the weeping clouds  
And waste for churlish winter's tyranny.<sup>2</sup>*

These explorations, an ongoing derive through the archives of John Lautner and SANAA, two practices distant in both time and space, Demand's photos appear to be in search of a meaning hidden within the works that transcends the mere production of an architectural form. One cannot help but be reminded of Jacques Derrida's notion of paper as something "experiential", a form of non-electronic multimedia involving the body, beginning with

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<sup>2</sup> Henry IV

hands, eyes, voice, ears, mobilising both time and space<sup>3</sup>. It is this performative process of transformation that makes possible the process of transfiguration from the trashiness and disposability of paper to the quasi-mystical state of “first version”, “original”, “manuscript”, or “rough draft” that only a work on paper can lay claim to. In Demand’s photographs, every slip of the knife, every uncertainty is laid bare (no burn marks from laser cutters here!), as are the ravages of time and mistreatment.

However, these photographs are not the exaltation of the authenticity of craftsmanship (which generally speaking is plainly and intentionally poor), and few concede to aestheticising their subjects by abstracting them. Speaking his own work, Demand claims to be primarily interested in investigating those moments of connection and *shared memory* that images of places and events can provoke, and the images he produces are often jarring precisely because they so powerfully capture our experience of remembering places we have come to know through shared images. Similarly, through their obsessive model-making as bricoleurs, the architects experiment with countless iterations of places that *are to become* shared memories in the future, exploring outlines and forms as they will appear as they sediment in the collective memory. In this sense the little worth of the material is an effective decoy (it’s only paper! Why be seduced by a particular form, as one would if it were well-crafted wood?), that sidesteps the fetishisation of the model from standing in the way of the research of form, the search for a future memory.

And as for the models themselves— *We are time's subjects, and time bids be gone.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In Paper Machine

<sup>4</sup> Henry IV