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Arcana Imperii

Pictures require no commentary, and descriptions and analysis of pictures are usually reserved for a later time, when the picture has become art history and the interpreters now wish to reveal hidden connections, allusions, iconographic contexts, and subtexts—all those matters that only the trained and practiced eye can see, but the knowledge of which quite literally brings before our eyes all the hidden wealth of meaning and reference. A contemporary meanwhile who encounters a picture—in this case Thomas Demand's pictures from the *Presidency* and *Embassy* series—still reacts freely and spontaneously. Of course, he is not entirely naive and lacking in preconceptions, and he always brings his own experience of pictures—and whatever harm he might have incurred through pictures—to bear. In pictures he sees not only reproductions of something but also whatever pictorial worlds he himself carries around. We see with our eyes, but more than that we see with our heads, our minds, our memories.

A Flood of Images.

Resistance

There is certainly an iconography of power, which we, as inhabitants of a world that thinks so entirely in images, know all too well. And the generations of the postwar era have their own considerable stock of images. Predominant among them are specific snapshots, those historical moments in which a whole complex constellation is condensed, or seems to fall apart. Moments of shock predominate too, whenever the world holds its breath and looks at the scene as if spellbound. There are many pictures of political actors among these, but these are not all. It would be possible to create a whole gallery of moments when constellations of power were captured in a picture. Among them would be the Big Three at the conference in Potsdam (grouped around the round table at Cecilienhof), and perhaps even at Yalta (in the wicker chairs on the Livadia Palace terrace). Probably the gallery would include photos of a nuclear mushroom cloud, new and sensational at the time (Los Alamos or Novaya Zemlya); the satellite images of missiles on their way to Cuba; the face of Patrice Lumumba at the moment he was taken prisoner and shortly before he was killed; pictures of the Berlin Wall when it still looked like an improvised construction site (the bricklayers at work; the East German soldier in full uniform as he runs up to jump over the wire); the out-of-focus picture of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas, Texas (JFK slumped on the back seat of the open car); and the Soviet tanks on the streets of Prague (with the rather naive faces of the soldiers looking out). Later more images were added: of helicopters above the US embassy in Saigon (no

room for the final stragglers); of the sudden power vacuum of 1989, helplessly gesticulating old men wearing hats from a former age that show all too clearly that their time has come. Other pictures then entered this cosmos, images that could not be buried or deleted by half a century of peace. They remain like a memento mori: a procession with torches along Berlin's Unter den Linden boulevard and through the Brandenburg Gate; the burning dome of the Reichstag parliament building and smoke billowing from the synagogues; film excerpts, showing the Nazi judge Roland Freisler screaming at the men who plotted to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944; and the piles of corpses that the British found when they liberated Bergen-Belsen (all of these are no longer just photographs, but film stills or motion pictures). We grow up with pictures. An age of extremes, of breakneck acceleration, of *Blitzkriege* and of genocide, produces images that can only be outdone by getting right up close, as now happens every day. We watched as hundreds of people jumped out of the World Trade Center and fell head first like little dolls to their deaths. The image itself becomes a means of waging war and the viewer becomes the hostage of the image. We are there live, whether to watch a volcano erupting or the beheading of journalist staged for the camera. You cannot bear images like this for long. The horror cannot be prolonged indefinitely. However concerned we may be, we always have our limits. And so everyone in his own way has to resist the challenge of this flood of images. We may still just about notice them, but no longer really see them. Images are fast, and so we do not really see what is happening. The picture disappears behind the news, and one piece of news is hastily replaced by the next. The bigger the flood the greater our willingness to render ourselves immune, to let it flow past us, because otherwise we would not be able to stand it. Resistance and indifference toward images become a mode of survival. We simply accept what we cannot change.

Seeing. Stopping the Film

Thomas Demand's pictures work as if someone had stopped the film. The viewer is thrown off track, loses his step, and is suddenly at the edge of the action, from where he can now see different things and see differently; stumbling he pauses, so as to be sure of his next step. We begin to wonder, and to ask why we never really saw this picture that was before our eyes for so long. We are held fast, instead of just passing by, and we stop to take another look. We are amazed, and then we begin to see the whole world in a new and clearer light. Everything is in better focus: the grooves between the tiles, the foam in the bathtub, the shadow cast by the cigarette machine, the round shape of the plastic ashtray, cables in a knot. In Demand's world no blood is spilled, there is no axe,

no brute force, and the light does not burst out, but is rather always dimmed and broken by blinds. This light is so regular and hardly perceptible, like the humming of a PC; the shadows are so precise as if calculated with dividers, while the color tones are taken from a world in which there can only be one basic material and one basic tone underlying everything—just as supermarkets have their own homogeneous synthetic aroma. These are images of a perfect world, the best of all worlds. This world is not compared to any counter-world, something entirely “other,” but rather unfolds its own spotless perfection. There is no dirt or garbage here, but only trash that is easily disposed of. Everything is exactly drawn and easily seen. Thresholds, edges, locks, windows, drapes, and blinds all play an unintentional but significant role. The transparency of the whole affair is so obvious that it almost hurts. Even the pencil lying ready to use is a sign of something. This is the interior of the best of all worlds, whose limitations are located nowhere but within itself, and it is the inventory of a world that in a thousand years from now archeologists will still be able to identify as the civilization of our time. A world in which there is no more physical labor, at least not in certain circles, and in which routine has found its own unshakeable rhythm, where every morning the desks are tidy and ready to use, and where when the work is done the cleaning personnel move in to remove cigarette ash and paper trash, and to put the paper clips back where they belong. In this best of all possible worlds everything has its place. It is clearly a very specific world, without landscapes and prairies and jungles, without mountains and beaches, without bodies. A world of offices, stairwells, kitchens, escalators, garages, elevators, and shelves. It is the universe of a perfect and trouble-free world that has emerged from reconstruction and a new start after a great catastrophe. Here everything has its purpose, its meaning, without any superfluous ornamentation, and not a trace of luxury. On everything good hard work casts its shadow, along with prudence and disciplined living. This is the interior of a world that has rebuilt itself, with hardly any aging or signs of use; what has gotten old disappears discreetly from view, and if something no longer works it is disposed of. There is no excess here, neither good nor evil. This is the universe that is dominated by the banality of goodness.

Arcanum Imperii.

The Absence of Power

There is no visible power in this world, but just its trappings. Power is present as a negative image, an offprint, a shell, a lining, or a casing. The trappings allow us to guess what this power might look like. It is inconspicuous, requires no grand gestures, prefers the intimate and human-all-too-human to anything monumental or visionary. Its interiors are restrained and functional, and they are highly recognizable (as in *Parliament* where the parliamentarians' benches are all in black, or in the wonderful elegance of the White

House in *Presidency*). The symbolic is reduced to a minimum, while power assumes the style of modest representation (an ultimate aristocratic virtue). The president's office is many things at once: the stage for television addresses, a public reception room with flags, the commander's bridge and the cockpit from where the affairs of the nation are controlled; then the leather armchair that is both comfortable and representative, not to forget the framed photos of the family, as the guarantor of true dependability in the highest office. We have probably seen this scene many times, whenever there was news that meant something for the whole world, but we have probably never really seen it as one really only sees something when the film is paused, when we step out of our routine and temporarily are put in a kind of quarantine, where we can concentrate our attention anew. The surfaces of power could probably provide material enough for a whole history of the representation of power, of the rituals and magic of power, where every detail is meticulously thought out and has a history of its own. But this space is also no more than an empty space for a real person who holds an office, a person who is made strong by that office, notwithstanding his own personal weaknesses. Here the presence of the person of the president could also signify the presence of an institution that remains powerful even if the person who is to hold that office may be weak.

The Power of a Place

Historical events do not only take place in time, but also in place. Everything has its place: intrigue, secret service activity, diplomatic intervention, decisions about war and peace. Just as power has a place, so there is also a power of place. We have become accustomed to trusting events and dates without asking where they actually occurred. Our faith in dates provided by historians and chronicles is almost unlimited, while we hardly ever ask where something took place. We trust our naive faith in time and dependency on dates, but our sense of space and place as related to historical events is slight and poorly developed. Identifying and naming places is not primarily necessary to give an event some local color and atmosphere, but much more because this is a matter of truth. The Aristotelian unity of place, time, and action is not old-fashioned or obsolete. Thomas Demand's series of pictures like *Embassy* and *Presidency* are also defining places; they are the scenes (and scenes of the crime) that he has sought out and then examined and illuminated much like a detective going about his business. The place that Demand shows is real, even if it is reconstructed and rebuilt and then photographed in his studio; it is the guarantee that something has taken place—or not taken place. No blood is spilled in these places either, and there are no corpses—here too paper, documents, codes are more important: *hardware*, *software*, processes and methods, all

the practices of the heyday of the postindustrial world in the early Twenty-first Century. This insistence on the scene, the place where something really happened or took place, seems to be contradicted by the game with images that in reality are not images of reality but just pictures of images. But I see Demand's whole world of images less as a game with pictures and more as a way of sharpening our view on reality. All of his pictures aim at closer perception and a more precise way of seeing. He posits sharper focus against the disempowerment of our eyes faced with that unmanageable flood of images—I would even say that

Demand wishes to empower the eye. This is then nothing other than a strengthening of our sense of reality.

The pictures are flat and smooth, but the images are so crystal clear that it feels as if you could touch them. You would like to get hold of them because you are sure that they will push back at you. These surfaces have tears, dents, and cracks that you would like to put your finger in, and also palpable smoothness and softness. The president's armchair is massive against a brightly lit background, and the traces of the working of the leather only heighten this contrast. The ballot papers in piles in offices in Florida can almost be felt sheet by sheet, they are so carefully stacked. All of these objects have their own materiality, and are self-evident in that they are not mere illustrations for or of something else.

The Iconography of Our Universe

This is our world, in which the copy machines no longer make much noise and just hum very quietly, occasionally sighing perhaps when they restart. This is the iconography of a world that is somehow perfect, that is happy that the age of great global events and of great wars is over, in a time of peace that senses that things could have been different—and worse—at any moment. These are pictures of a postwar era that has found its way again. In Demand's pictures—especially in the *National Gallery* series—we can see the entire topography of the restrained, and somehow deeply insecure and intimidated world in which we live. The copy shop with its humming machines is part of this world, with its regular milky light and synthetic flooring; this world includes the cozy and sheltered world of adjacent apartment blocks and their balconies; the transparency, or even the elegance of the stairwells, which is due alone to the scarcity of financial resources during the reconstruction years; the plastic chairs on the terrace lit by night with a hint of skeptical romance; the bathroom rug bought in a department store; the stacks and boxes on the shelves; the housing estates and garages that denote the geometry of the world we live in; the gangway that leads to the great big world outside; the child's bedroom with all the plastic our epoch has brought forth; the

bus stop where anything can happen; the doorbell plaque for a block of several apartments and the dried-out house plant on a window sill—the saddest that ever an artist considered. The complete inventory is here: the inevitable plastic water bottle and the role of toilet paper on the camper's table. Here everything is recorded, the order of our world which is oppressive even though there are no excesses of violence.

In place of the visible power of political rulers comes the power of routines and everyday practices with the forms they have assumed. Demand's pictures depict the universe of our routines. In this universe there is something much more powerful than power itself: the gravity of everyday life, our daily chores, our silent procedures. The tone of these pictures is like the regular humming of something that never stops working, something that is switched on and yet only requires our attention when it ceases to run. But whenever this happens, then the epoch will really be over. The routines of life are more permanent than those of power, and their destruction is always much more consequential than the collapse of the strongest regime.

Working on Concision.

Truth

It is true that Demand's pictures do not depict any reality; we have in any case long progressed beyond realism as verisimilitude. But all in all—materiality, concreteness, the sense of real bodies and of belonging to one location— all this brings us closer to a reality that we normally simply cannot see in the midst of image upon image. All the magic of these smooth surfaces, the sharply drawn lines and the masterly segues notwithstanding, these pictures still are primarily about generating a way of seeing that is appropriate to our world today. There were times when this way of seeing was called materialism, today we could call it working on concision. In both cases it is a matter of truth.