

The virtual past

Close-up by Susana Ventura

SUSANA VENTURA: I would like to know a little bit more about your creative process, ideas and instruments, and not so much about the photographs, which I believe they are to be seen and felt independently by each person. So, in a response to a question by Hans-Ulrich Obrist about the epiphany, or how did you get into art, you have said that art is about using the brain differently from other ways and this is a very dear response to me, because I doubt there is a continuous path between a certain moment of revelation or awakening and what you create afterwards, because there is always the production of the unconscious, there are always many factors that come from different parts and it's impossible to map all the factors that are expressive in a work of art. In your answer, it seems implicit an idea that art is a production of thought. With this idea in mind, what drives you to think and create a certain photograph?

THOMAS DEMAND: *Well, I don't think that the two things are necessarily connected. How an artist makes an artwork... you know, the artwork is what it is in the end. Well, let's put it that way, there is a famous quote by Magritte,*

which resumes it and I like very much: he says that you cannot paint a thought, you can only paint the things necessary for a thought. In that sense anything you look at in an artwork is a representation of the things necessary for a thought, but they are not a thought themselves. I would have to tell you what brings me to make an artwork, I can only say: look at the artwork and if the artwork works then you know... So, what brings me or what gets me up in the morning and go to the studio is totally private, and it is trivial as well. When you look at an artwork, there is a certain kind of communication going on which I don't have to explain. For example, if you look at a Matisse: what is the Matisse about? If you say – well it is about a women in a red room – you miss everything about it. We may talk about art in terms of what's on the picture or what's to be seen like in terms of how a work is done... it doesn't get you anywhere. Also talking about the same Matisse, that there is a lot of red paint, or a lot of blue paint, it doesn't get you anywhere either. So, what it is about? They have to say it. But it is very clear that it's representing something human in a very unique way. If you are talking in the terms of an index,

and you talk about a photograph usually in terms of index, but even that gets you only that far, it's just like – ok, there is a house, there is a tractor and it looks like afternoon – and that's what critics like to do, but like the thing is, in the end, what makes an artwork fantastic is that you cannot transfer it into another system of representation without exorbitant losses. Like you can describe it fully, you will never have an equivalent, so that makes it so very hard to an artist to talk about other than a very trivial fashion. Which is just like, I made it, I thought of this and this and I have certain associations, but many of the associations you will never see on the painting, in a video installation or whatever. Let's take another example, you look at a Holbein painting, and you look at a Holbein painting of a portrait of someone and you think, you can imagine knowing that person, because is so well painted, and it's not only because is so well painting in terms of detail, but also it's so well painted because what you see is a really human being, and you know what you know from like not knowing from other people how they look, you can actually totally apply onto that painting, so you know about the face, the expressions in the face and you can apply to the painting. The painting is good enough to carry those experiences from real life onto that flat canvas, and it also tells you how that person might have felt which is really miraculous.

From that experience you know somehow what that life might have meant. On the other hand, you don't know at all who that is, he or she might have a name, but it doesn't mean anything to you. So, for Holbein of course it meant a lot, because otherwise he didn't have a face to paint and he didn't have a client to commission him. In the end, it also has to do with the fact that nobody would have taken the painting and cared for it long enough until it was known to be so seminal that it needs to be given shelter. Many paintings disappear, because nobody wants to care for them. This is all something very literal, but the point is that you just kind of know what you look at this and you know everything immediately and that's what I meant with the way of thinking in an artwork. Then the other thing with Holbein, which I forgot to say was, that everything you see happens now and not then. So, it's about how do you to put the things together in your head now about a time which is 500 hundred years ago, 600 hundred years ago, which is an amazing trajectory of human experience, which can be taken one to one. And then I don't know if you know that there is a German writer, Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, who wrote *Simplicius Simplicissimus* about the thirty years long war in Europe. It's a very, very long book. This is our report of thirty years long war, how it was, so you have like... The artwork has the potential to be the

only way to understand or to see something about a time of the past. What you seek in a palace in Venice, what you know about Venice is that there were doges, and there was this and that, but what you directly see and what you feel is the artwork, nothing else. Of course, you couldn't do it without the powerful people who were able to pay for that, but that doesn't mean that you see the powerful people. All you see, all which is left over is the Architecture and the decorum, the artifacts. The Holbein is not only this amazing thing where you just know exactly and you can see, and if you ever painted in your life you see how he painted, and if you ever had the chance to hang any of these works, you just realize that they are very fragile things as well as everything else. Imagine that in 600 hundred years what happened, there was a lot of fire, no sprinklers, a lot of war, so many crimes, so many possibilities that these artifacts would have get lost, and somehow, civilisation knew that these things were very important. It has been called aura, but it's more a respect for the sublime.

Furthermore, every artwork is creating a problem, a complication nobody asked for, a way of creating a complexity, which might in the end be more than you can anticipated of yourself in a first place. It has to be, otherwise it is just an execution of an idea and a graphic designer could do it as well. The other thing why I like the

Holbein example very much is: Henry VIII sent him around in Europe, because he thought he was the best painter in Europe, and instead of photographing, he painted future wives, possible wives. So he painted all this people and sent the paintings home, until he painted Catarina de Aragão (Catherine of Aragon), which I think is in the National Gallery today, and he sent that painting home and Henry VIII said like – "Oh dear, I Like her. Let's get her over". And then she arrives and he says that she is ugly like a pig. What I want to say is that the painting doesn't even have to be true, it doesn't have need to be a good observation. But it still is a great painting and it still tells you about humanity. It's not about realism at all in this case, and this is what you have in the table, before you start making art. It doesn't make it easy.

SV: No, it doesn't. It's interesting, because one of my favourite painters is Francis Bacon, and he usually says that his process starts sometimes with a photograph and what he likes in photography is what he wants to achieve in his paintings. When he sees a painting with two people, for instance, he doesn't care about the story that is behind, he just care about what is paint, and what is paint is not the technique, which also doesn't interest for the painting, but interests only in order to achieve something, a certain sensation, which in his works

is very powerful. Sometimes, you even feel almost to vomit or something. The sensations, in his paintings, are very, very powerful and he also says exactly that these are what then survives the time. And if you are looking to a painting from the 16th century, you feel the same way, not because of the stories, or the space, or how the space is represented, but because of the possibilities that open your own body. You perceive most of the works of art through your body in an almost visceral way. Of course, there is the role of memory, but his memories are fabricated, because you cannot precise where the pieces come from.

TD: *Have you ever been in Dublin in his studio?*

SV: No.

TD: *It is very good to see. I thought that it wouldn't be very interesting, but it is, because you see the all process, you have the palettes and everything. You come to this room and realize how small it is, physically what a tiny space, and how densely stuffed it is. You see where the light comes from, no single window – just a small skylight – which is very important, because tahts also the lightsource on most of his paintings, from above. What I never saw was how physical the painting process needed to be, literally he has to wipe away all that matter around him, so the only area which*

is not full of clutter is the canvas. So, with him it works a lot about the contrast between much and little, and when you look at the paintings, they sometimes looks quite empty, which is a contrast to the apearance of the space in which the painting has been made.

SV: Yes, mainly the latest works which are like the Sahara. As he says: he likes to paint the Sahara.

TD: *You see the difference between his surroundings and the paintings, and is not that the paintings have to be like that because of that surrounding, it's just more that you see there's an aspect of physicality of the painter himself, which gets overlooked by the canonized interpretation of Bacon.*

SV: Yes, you feel him on his paintings, the movements of the hand, the cuts.

SV: I find your process quite interesting, not because of the richness it has to do with the model making, but because it presents to us a different path towards photography, that has also to do with the earlier beginning of photography. For instance, Susan Sontag and Walter Benjamin noticed that photography deal with reality and it almost is a collection of fragments, or little pieces of reality, that you can take with you, but in your process the



THOMAS DEMAND

VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / SPA, Lisboa
Sidegate, 2014, C-Print/Diasec, 180 x 255 cm



photograph is shoot after the construction of the model, which is by definition an abstraction of reality, implying already a filter. So, what do you want to get with this process, because photograph happens after abstraction and not with the beginning, with reality? Is the photography just a medium which content is produced through another different media, in this case, model or sculpture?

TD: *Well, it's kind of it all. Of course, it's not like this is one and this is the other or something... The idea, I mean it's not the main idea, but imagine that you could open a newspaper and you could walk into any of its pictures, physically, you can actually enter the space of imagination, because anything you see here is like dots and something. So, you just imagine the content. When you see a picture, the picture is only working if it is so strange that it attracts you, but not so strange that you don't recognize it anymore. So, in a sense like everything you see in the picture has something to do with the things you have seen before yourself, or like you have experienced, or you have read about or something, so that you can recognize what is on the picture. In a sense, it's an echo of what you are already. Then in these terms of déjà vu, you just mentioned memory: when you look at a photograph, it seems about just what was in front of the lense at some point. That's the beauty of the photography and that's why I like*

photography. It's a clear agreement. I know, you know, everybody knows how it's made practically – But memory! As you know, every story you tell a second time or third time is always a little bit different depending on the way you are, who are you telling it to, and how your mood is, and so memory is not a very reliable container. Memory is bending facts and expanding narratives. So, memory, for me, it's quite interesting, because it's kind of nearly dialectic opposite of photography according to the machanics we all know. Then, the third thing which interests me on photography in this sense is that photography is about the past. It's always about the past.

SV: Do you think so?

TD: *Well it is, because it had happened. And following this agreement: something in front of the lens, something behind and in between the two, whatever the device is called, the artificial eye itself, and no to forget photography implies light. But it is about a moment in the past of whatever significance, that can be a private snapshot, that can be a public one, like a news photograph. It can't show you the future.*

SV: No, it cannot.

TD: *It can simulate the future in a sense, but that's a different story, not powerful enough*



THOMAS DEMAND
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / SPA, Lisboa
Landscape, 2013, C-Print / Diasec, 200 x 325 cm

to shatter that agreement as I called it. Mainly, when we think of photography is a thing which was in the past. In my case, with my photographs, I'm trying to reconstruct the past which I have never visited, because I couldn't, because I don't know, I was not on Iraq at the time, for instance. What you look at is not only that past, which you recognize, it is also the past of that physical recreation in front of the camera. So, we have two superimposed past times, so to say. Then, you have the fragility of the thing you see. It's not trying to sell you itself with the fragility, it's not like you see how fragile it is, you just know that it has not been there for a long time, because it's very hollow, it's very flat, it has this kind of sensory of the surface, which is not lasting long, you know it's not wood, you know it's not painted, whatever, you know it is just set up for a moment, maybe a week or something. So, you have the moment of the past which is currently what you call history sometimes, what you call a rendering of a significant moment of the past. And, at the same time, you have the other past which is my own recreation of it, which is more like a picture of memory than a picture of a factual matter. So, you see that, for instance, there aren't any writings on the papers, that there is no trace of usage or wear-out. The moment is very hard to point down, because usually the things we know on photographs is like the sun is like this height, all the details which let you believe its authenticity.

SV: Because they are already after abstraction.

TD: Exactly, they are really abstractions of something. I am trying to find also a moment, where it would be imaginable that somebody just left the room. It's not like a still life, it is more an environment without people. What I'm trying to render and to recreate is not a space as an ideal, but to show you the traces of a human presence in the space, and maybe the space as a metaphorical quality. But it's not about the dining room, or the church, or the library, or something. It never tries to generalize in a sense, it tries to be very anti-allegorical. This was just that moment, then, and then, and not like any 'the' moment. You have all these layers with ability of interfering with each other – partly contradictory like the short term of the construction and the long term of the index, the short term of the moment which is pictured together with the metaphorical weight of the picture you are looking at later on. I'm trying to have contradictions between those aspects and not actually work out as a solution, because an artwork should never be really a solution.

SV: Of course not! It should put problems and awake you.

TD: That's what I'm trying to follow in a work and that's why I'm doing everything in life-size,

because my own experience is equally important than yours. I can only communicate to you if you take it seriously enough to know something about your world as well. What I said first about the past time experience which we all share, I know in terms of photography that we can recognize what's on the photograph. If you look at the photograph of Saddam Hussein's kitchen, for instance, if you might remember...

SV: Yes, of course.

TD: *I had a lot of stuff on there each you know as well, because you use a Tupperware as well and you know an oven, so in a sense I need to know this and I have to make it so believable that you just trust me for a second, and then I had your attention, your imagination and maybe triggered some fascination for something which you have seen a thousand times. The next step comes and it has to do with illusion, and with what I said about memory. And in the same way as the sculpture is a construction, the story is a construction. And in the same way the photograph itself is a construction as much as the memory is a construction. These are the things which I'm trying to keep relatively prominent in a work.*

SV: You once said that it's a picture and not a story and a picture has to work on itself, so what do you use as composition that belongs to photography itself? This is quite intriguing,

in your case specially, when you speak about memory, the past and this contradiction, and how you try to put some traces that allow the viewer to enter the photograph in order to understand the other things. So, about the other things that you really want the viewer to understand, and that don't belong to his or her subjectivity, what do you use as composition? Because some things come from photography and some things come from sculpture. Light, for instance. You can use light and you can understand light, and you can understand light in many ways, as a substance, as matter, as color, and in many the ways. How do you compose?

TD: *In first place, it's just interest. I don't understand the image in the beginning or I think I discover something on an image somebody else has seen, it's quite amazing what you can find on images. For instance, the piece I did here for a show in Tokyo was the control room in Fukushima's nuclear plant and there you have the grid ceiling which falls down – nobody has ever really mentioned it when the entire world imagined a meltdown from these images of loosing control. Even if a journalist would have seen it, he wouldn't write about it, because it would have no point, it would have not added to our understanding or consideration. But I found this quite amazing, because it is a very poignant metaphor. It can tell so much about the situation, even if it's not big enough for news to ever bringing it up.*

SV: Yes, because it is visual and has a significance and power.

TD: *I hesitate to say much about the picture, I cannot tell you what a picture should mean, and when it's out there, it's gone, it has to have its own life, in a sense, nurtured by its own visual power. So if it doesn't have that immediacy, that kind of power of a story or narrative – it doesn't matter whether you know the story – to create a narrative in your head, which usually art can do very well, then it's probably not very inspiring.*

SV: It has to hold the maximum of intensity.

TD: *Exactly, but you cannot exercise this, so either it's there or not...*

SV: Which instruments do you use for shooting? What type of cameras, other things...

TD: *Well, I use my scissors, cardboard from the shop around the corner and then the camera: the bigger, the better, because I can see more, like 8 X 10'. It is like a window, if you have a small one, you just have one eye, and if you have a big one, you have two eyes, you can look at what you're photographing, which is, for me, important. But, you know, if I can't do that anymore, I don't. You can't discuss film with me, for instance, it's very hard to discuss technical things with me, because I never*

learnt photography. I just do it and I'm trying to get these things resolved. And if I can't fix it photographically, I change the object in the front of the camera.

SV: How do you come to the final image, and what makes you reject a photograph?

TD: *I never reject photographs.*

SV: Never?

TD: No.

SV: Really? How amazing!

TD: *It's what it is, like, I'm doing, until I'm dead what I need... it's a train of thought, it takes a long time to make it, so in the end you know what you want, because through the process of making it, you just know more or less what you want.*

SV: Yes, because you have a previous level of abstraction that eliminates a lot of unnecessary things.

TD: *I have a couple of maybe fifty or something photographs, and say, ok this is no good, I need to look into this, I need to look into that, and trying to get the photographs to a point where it has its own logic. And I am trying to develop the image totally through*



THOMAS DEMAND

VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / SPA, Lisboa

Kontrollraum / Control Room, 2011, C-Print/ Diasec, 200 x 300 cm

this process in front of the camera rather than retouching or composing it on the scan later on. For me, it's not the point that my less complicated on the screen, the point is that I know why I wanted this because I had my objects and my light like this for a reason. In Photoshop, which of course is a fantastic tool, the problem with most photographs you see today is that you can change anything so easily that everything is awesome, but you lose the necessity of knowing why.

SV: Physicality.

TD: But also the...

SV: The manual process...

TD: *There are architects who really want to see what they make in one to one models of their buildings, or of the rooms, because they want to see what it is, and then they change it in the computer. They could change it right away in the computer, but you need the physicality of yourself, and you need the complexity of realizing why something doesn't work, and not just because you can make it nicer or something, and it might not even be the nicer solution which works in the end. So, you need the history of trying and error as much as you need the solution, and that's what makes it much easier for me to go there. Besides, many ideas come in the making.*

SV: You photograph analog, right?

TD: *It depends. I have to be honest. I photograph small things with digital, because you can't find the films anymore and the big ones, they take so long to be processed. So, for the small works, I am using digital. I don't have a big problem with it, however digital is much more dissolving the value of the pictorial. It could be like this, it could be like that..*

SV: Do you show them to anyone before exhibition?

TD: *Only if I am running to problems which I don't know what to do and that happens. My common experience is that the differences which I am laboring so much about – you know, I just really can't sleep, because I think I will about to ruin the entire piece – they aren't even comprehensible to me a few months later any more.*

SV: It changes a lot with that small difference.

TD: *Exactly, and you have this tunnel vision and you need somebody to say: "Look, this doesn't matter, just take that one, that's not the problem". So, I realized that sometimes I think problems are much bigger than they actually are.*



THOMAS DEMAND
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / SPA, Lisboa
Junior Suite, 2012, C-Print / Diasec, 140 x 115 cm