

MEDIA STUDY

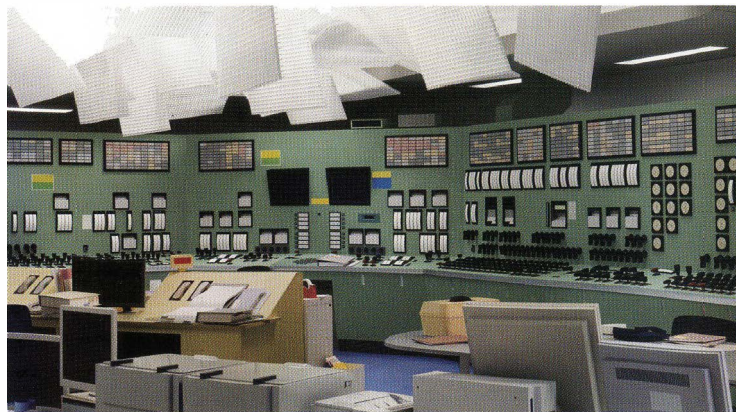
THOMAS DEMAND

PHOTOGRAPHY IS A MODEL of a mutual understanding: We all grasp how it works and what it takes to make an image that the viewer can identify as “photographic.” In this relation between photograph and viewer, the technical side doesn’t have much relevance (as we learned with the change to digital), nor does the photographer’s subjectivity, now that the source of an image is just as important (think of Lynndie England or any Facebook posting). At the same time, the so-called *transparency* of an image is rarely as clear as one would wish. Take, for example, the photographs of the control room of the damaged Fukushima power plant. We are looking not at a disaster but at an image of a disaster, although it’s very hard to separate the two. Here, the disorder we see implies the disaster we associate with it. And we cannot ignore how the original images came to us—via emergency workers snapping cell phone pics while trying to stop the meltdown. For many, these images represent human hubris, but considering who was actually taking the pictures, they also depict self-sacrifice.

It might sound trivial, but nobody seemed to notice the skylight panels in the nuclear plant’s control room,

dangling in their sockets from the ceiling, dislodged by the earthquake. It’s not surprising that this detail was overlooked by the media. Multiple images of the ravaged control room exist, yet the version circulated by the plant’s owner, TEPCO, notably downplays the disarray, even falsely showing the panels back in place. But the fallen panels can also represent something else. I introduce another set of issues by claiming this slippage of representation as a starting point for my

interpretation of a place that has fallen out of sight and time for the foreseeable future. By erasing the contextual information and diffusing it with a generic version of what one might remember, the resulting image seemingly formalizes and aestheticizes a previously documentary and shocking picture—maybe inevitably—as an artwork. That transaction suggests a de-allegorization of some sort, and that’s why I decided to make that work. □



Thomas Demand,
Kontrollraum (Control
Room), 2011, Diasec
mounted C-print,
78 3/4 x 118 3/4".