

## Thomas Demand

### NEUE NATIONALGALERIE

The method Thomas Demand has been using since the early 1990s to produce his often large-scale color photographs has become well-known: The Berlin-based artist and his team generally begin with press photographs, which they use as starting points for constructing detailed replicas of interiors, historical moments, public spaces, nameless buildings, and natural scenery. Demand then photographs these models, labels them with the most generic titles imaginable, and mounts them behind reflective Plexiglas via the Diasec process. These static tableaux are invariably missing certain details of their originals; there are never any actors on the scene, and all writing, signs, and other references that might allow for the immediate identification of the circumstances and contexts of these motifs are eliminated. Both the conception and production of Demand's photographs are indebted to a dialectic that simultaneously reinforces and undermines the status of photography as an indexical trace of the real, since, after all, these works are vouching for nothing more than the existence of a stage set, while on the other hand they point to a source that is not in fact original but has itself been mediated in the first place.

For this overview at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Demand chose thirty-eight works that all have their basis in source material borrowed from German media or moments in the artist's West German biography, resulting in Demand's own "Nationalgalerie," as he titled the show—from the bus stop where the band Tokio Hotel was founded (*Haltestelle* [Bus Stop], 2009) to the famous photograph, plastered all over the bus stops and billboards of Berlin, showing the bathtub in a Geneva hotel room in which conservative politician Uwe Barschel presumably committed suicide in 1987 (*Badezimmer* [Bathroom], 1997). Working in cooperation with the London firm Caruso St John Architects, Demand has erected a temporary exhibition architecture in which gray, brown, and yellow woolen curtains falling in folds serve as a backdrop for the photographs while creating a labyrinth of spaces. In combination with Demand's photographs, this provisional pathway, which, it appears, might be discarded again at any moment, serves as a paradigmatic illustration that historical narratives and national identities are fragmentary constructs even when they are effective, providing ideological models for both individual and collective memory (even if Demand's tautological afterimages, in their ostentatious indifference, refrain from political statements of any kind).

Several years ago in these pages, critic Sven Lütticken spelled out a problematic aspect of Demand's work that unfortunately also produces a disturbing rupture in his "Nationalgalerie": the tendency to impose the importance of certain subjects onto the work itself. In his Berlin show, this form of "iconographic blackmail" is brought to bear on the exhibit as a whole in the form of captions by writer Botho Strauß, displayed in both German and English in vitrines placed before each individual work, containing books open to the appropriate page. Strauß's culturally pessimistic texts speak of metaphysics, loss, dissolution, farce, and tragedy (in a tone that could best be characterized as a *Reader's Digest* version of Heidegger). In Demand's pictures, as Strauß writes in the lone caption that mentions the artist by name, "art alone has the power to exchange much for little," countering the "crowded," "far-too-much" overload of everyday experience; a "magical emptiness clears our world of a great deal of superfluity." A potential critique of representation thus surreptitiously gives way to conservative cultural criticism and metaphysics. Seen in this light, the title "Nationalgalerie" stops looking so ironic. The provisional character of the exhibition design takes on the *haut goût* of the willfully sententious. The blatant grasping for national importance (the show is accompanied by a lecture program tellingly titled "How German Is It?") turns Demand's show—his own premises and aesthetic viewpoint notwithstanding—into a kind of self-anointment that is obsolete in its claims, in its apparent aim to establish his status as official artist to the State.

—André Rottmann

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

Thomas Demand,  
*Parlament*  
(Parliament), 2009,  
color photograph,  
70 1/4 x 87 3/4".

