

# Thomas Demand *Mirror Without Memory*

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The artistic practice of Thomas Demand centers around the image as such, its nature, methods of creation/construction, and the mechanics of the viewer's perception. When we look at Demand's photographs, what do we actually see? How much do the photographed paper and cardboard models relate to sensory or historical reality? Do we see some kind of "thought forms," mental constructs or living situations when we look at shards of porcelain in a museum, hotel rooms, a fairground ride frozen at the highest point, a landing gate, or an empty Bonn parliament? To what extent is an event that actually took place revealed to us, or how it appears in our memory while going through various stages of "filtering" and construction under the influence of waves of personal forgetfulness and the forming of general conventions regarding past events?

Demand's works, which are all photographed paper models, often created from photographs found in the press or on the Internet, live in a constant flicker between the event and its image, a flicker that noticeably corrects our perception of time. There are never people or visible action in his shots, and it is often problematic for us to correlate a picture with an event, a point on the timeline. Placed next to each other, the objects seem to launch their own autonomous narrative, making us automatically ask ourselves why this particular bathroom is in the picture when it looks like any other three-star-hotel bathroom. What is so special about it, what happened here and when? What is wrong with the cherry blossoms in the backyard of a completely ordinary (apparently American) house? Where should we look for relief from anxiety and vague recognition?

United by this search we wander through the exhibition, trying to construct the missing pieces of reality. The speed of current time is measured by the rapid digital flow of data, images, information, news. More quickly than ever, the image and facts of an event become vague, almost like guesswork rather than memories. This is why some works are provided with commentaries that aim to trigger mnemonic mechanisms and define the viewer's relationships with a certain event or its image, to trace the paths our cognitive activity follows. Like looking at yourself in a mirror. This is an almost Platonic operation, when the philosopher discusses the nature of mirror reflection in *Republic*. Despite his skepticism regarding the illusion created by the mirror, Plato nevertheless admits that the reflection corresponds to a different level of cognition. For him, reflection invites the mind to free itself from sensory perception and move from the perception of action, the result of this action, to the perception of the cause of the action. In other words, it invites us to consider the world in the brilliance of rationality, the ability to think. Reflection is a kind of sign, an image in the void, a phenomenon rather than an appearance. Reflection, devoid of real essence, forces a person to grasp the sign and signification. Going back to the origins of his method in one of his interviews, Demand discusses the sign and the relationship of the signified and the signifier as a key question: "That's exactly the nut I was trying to crack: the idea that language is a system of signifiers that don't necessarily describe your reality, but in itself is becoming a reality. But it's not representing reality in a one-to-one relationships. And to make a distinction between a scientific system and what my experience of the world is. This gap between the two was very productive."

Demand's works fundamentally do not line up into a sequential narrative; they remain single, fragmented, splintered. French philosopher Jacques Rancière accurately describes them as "mirrors" reflecting emptiness (and this is yet another way of decoding the mirror metaphor in the title of the exhibition). Fragments can only withstand "elective affinity," referencing not only the title of Goethe's novel but also to the eighteenth-century chemical term that denotes the ability of chemicals to combine with other substances or their compounds, choosing some over others. Informed by the principle of "elective affinity," Demand's works also live within the exhibition as essentially autonomous units that assemble into formal or substantive syncopations.

The various combinations of the exhibition become part of a lengthy (and intuitive on the part of the artist) process of seeking, selecting, constructing/cutting, and photographing objects, imparting a specific sense of temporariness that merges with other "temporarinesses": our unreliable memory, the washing out of pictures from the first pages of search engines, and their immersion into an endless digital archive of images "on demand."

<sup>1</sup> Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *Istoriia zerkala* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnor obozrenie, 2006), p. 166–167.