

Paper, scissors, camera: the art of Thomas Demand

The artist talks to curator Russell Ferguson about turning fragile models of familiar objects into unnerving photographs

Russell Ferguson NOVEMBER 16 2018



RUSSELL FERGUSON Let's begin at the beginning. Why did you decide to become an artist?

THOMAS DEMAND I actually never considered anything else. My mother was an art teacher. My father was an artist who taught. He wanted to be a painter, but at that time in Germany you couldn't make a living as an artist. But art was always around me.

RF I've always thought that in German art schools it's a one-to-one relationship, that you are "a student of so-and-so".

TD No, they put you in a class immediately, and I was one of the leftovers. Like, "This guy clearly has talent, but I don't want him." So I found myself in the most unpopular class. I stayed for one year and then realised I had to get out. I got an old Opel and I drove through Germany to Hamburg and Düsseldorf and Berlin, and I saw different professors. In Düsseldorf I saw [the artist] Fritz Schwegler, who said, "Well, maybe come back and show me what you've done in like six weeks." I did that, and he accepted me in his class. When I got to [*Kunstakademie*] Düsseldorf, I just swore to myself that I was going to make it as an artist, and I never took another job again. Things there were much more professional. The students had tough battles with each other but they weren't personal; it was about the art. It was quite competitive in that sense.

RF Is that when you started to move toward sculpture?

TD The one thing I didn't have any clue about was sculpture. I had never made one; I was never interested in it. A lot of people in my class were making sculpture. I was starting completely from scratch, but it was healthy because I started out making very basic things, just trying out volumes and geometric shapes. They were somewhere between representation and abstraction. It was about, "At what point does something become 'something', and at what point is it still just a 'blob'?" I wasn't sure if I wanted to keep making sculptures, so I made them as cheaply as possible. That's how I started making things out of paper — because I didn't want to store them and I didn't want to keep them.



'Poll', 2001

RF Something that came into play in your work quite early is a reluctance to embrace the sense of a model as a miniature version of something in the real world. Can you talk about that a little bit?

TD Even if my sculptures weren't very convincing and didn't last very long, I wanted them to be taken seriously as objects — at that point I wasn't photographing them. I thought, if I make an object that's too neat, or appeals to your sense of prettiness or cuteness, it would be a failure, because it would get stuck in craftsmanship. Scaling things into miniature automatically "cute-ifies" them. So when I started making objects, I just thought, I really need to know what I'm talking about. I made things that I knew from my own experience. I tried to keep the bar as low as possible. Making it monumental would have been taking it beyond my own limits again.



'Tribute', 2011

RF After this, you went to Goldsmiths. Why did you decide to go to school in England?

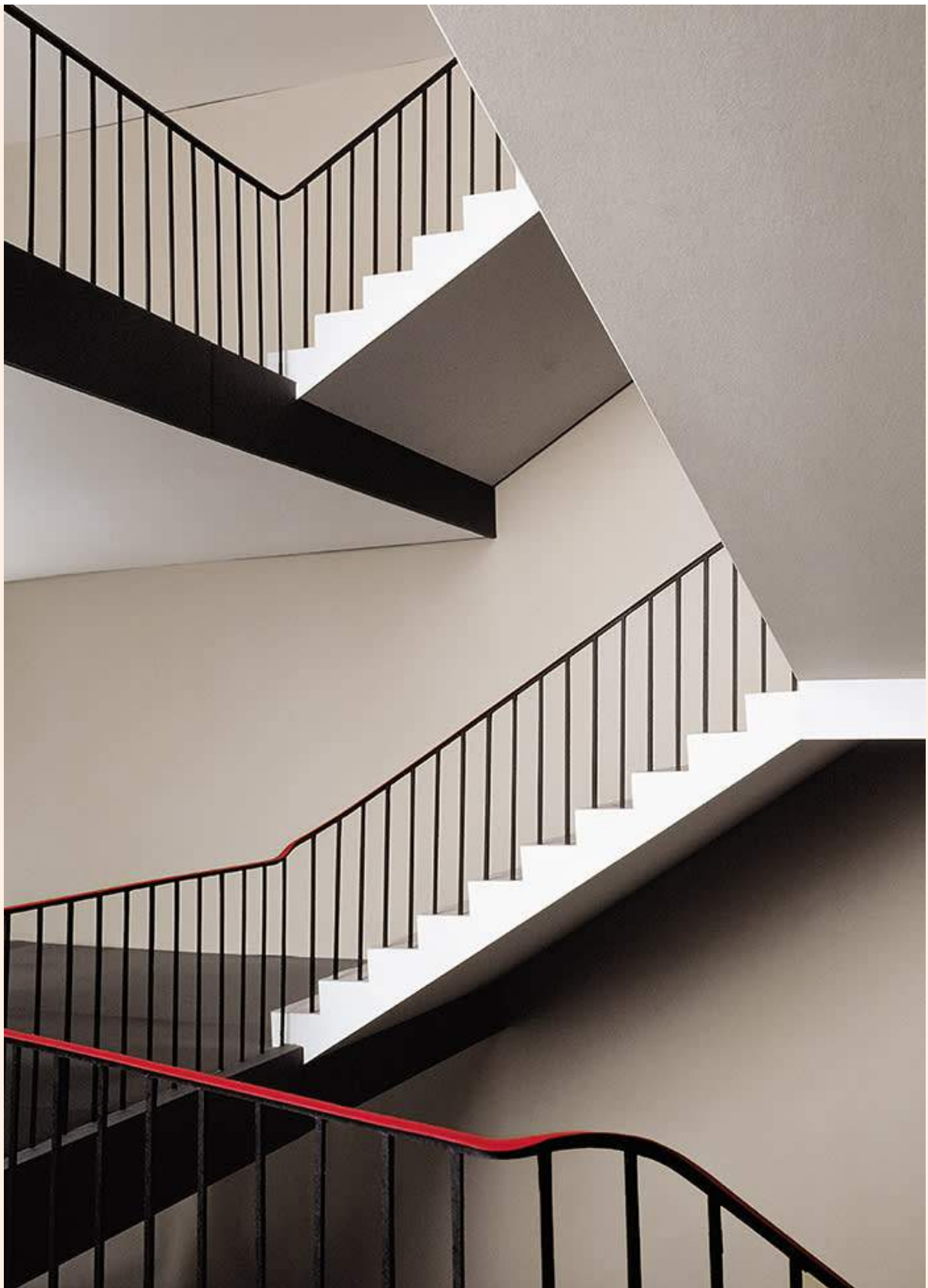
TD I was in Paris on a grant for a year and it reminded me of Munich — the same palette of problems. It was a very different format at Goldsmiths. You had to be able to make a case for what you were trying to do, and describe what you expected the audience to see. I hadn't been exposed to that language at all. It was also the beginning of the art world in London at the time, just a couple of years after *Freeze*, the show Damien Hirst curated [in 1988]. It was all about British art — it wasn't about German art at all. You would actually be at a disadvantage as a German, because "German art" meant [Anselm] Kiefer and [Georg] Baselitz. I was really thrown into the deep end there, as a German.



Detail from the video 'Pacific Sun', 2012

RF Were you still making sculpture?

TD I made sculptures, but I couldn't just take on the Düsseldorf rhetoric of, "Oh, this is like an object, you know what I mean — *wink wink*?" It needed to be much clearer and probably much more individual, subjective. At that time I started photographing stuff before I threw it away, which was basically because my teacher told me that I should.



'Treppenhaus/Staircase', 1995

RF This was mainly for documentation?

TD It was only for documentation. The original idea was that I would only keep around 20 objects, a mixture between the best objects and the latest objects. And my professor said, "You should really photograph them before you throw them away." For one very intelligent reason: because otherwise I wouldn't know if I was making any progress on them.

RF But even though your pictures began exclusively as documentation of sculptures, then the possibility emerged that the thing you're making is really the photograph. Let's talk about an early work, "Sprungturm/Diving Board" (1994). This is kind of exceptional in your work, in that it's not to scale.

TD This is a smallish model because the studio was so small. I couldn't do it 1:1 or I probably would have ended up in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.



'Sprungturm/Diving Board', 1994

RF It is a colour photograph of an object, but it's close to monochrome. Was that part of its appeal?

TD Absolutely. It had this connotation of a black-and-white picture. And, of course, as a German in London, this carries a quasi-fascistic connotation.

RF It has quite a Bauhaus feeling to it, but it also has some Berlin Olympics feel. Is this a step up in ambition? That while making a cardboard sculpture you can also take on — “problematic” is an understatement — issues of aesthetics and German history, or the history of photography in Germany?

TD I just realised that those pictures for me are my own, even if they’re also part of the public consciousness. So your memory intersects with the collective memory.



'Junior Suite', 2012

RF You told me once that this diving board is the diving board from the pool where you learnt to swim. So it's a personal memory, but it also evokes a kind of public history of representation?

TD Absolutely. As an artist, you have to align your own memories with what these memories mean for someone else. It started with the simple idea that we all have pictures in our head. Do we have these pictures in our head already, or do we construct them when we talk about those things? Obviously, we don't have pictures in our head. It's always a reconstruction. Hence the method of reconstruction and the odd mistake in my pictures. Because I may remember a thing differently than it really was.

RF A lot of the early works, like "Brennerautobahn" (1994), or "Fabrik" (1994), are still large things that you made on a small scale.

TD Yes, on the table top. After London, I went to Amsterdam, to the Rijksakademie, where I had a much bigger studio. And then, in New York I was incredibly lucky because my studio was in a massive building. That's where I made "Corridor" (1995).



'Werkstatt/Workshop', 2017

RF So it was built life-size?

TD It's life-size, yes. In America, for the first time, I found cardboard that was big enough to make something this large.

RF Can we talk about your first film, *Tunnel* (1999)? It's the tunnel in Paris that Princess Diana was driving through when the car crashed?

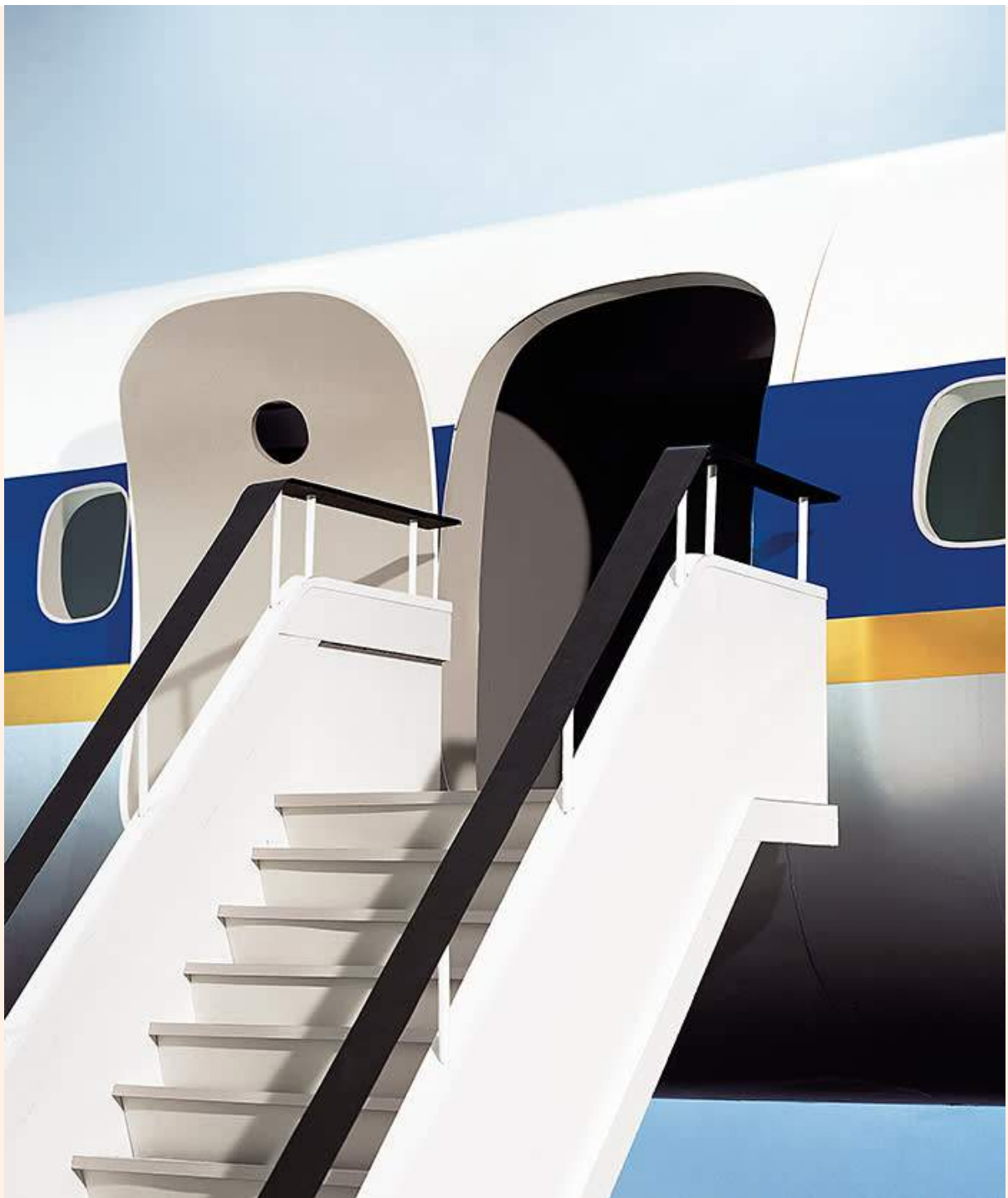
TD In the beginning, it came from a completely different idea. I noticed that the discussion of my work was focusing on whether photography “lies” or not — that was in 1998, when digital photography was just about to take over everything. I found it a very limiting way of talking about pictures. I thought, OK, I need to do something to emphasise other aspects of my practice than just, “How real does it look?” And for me, the moment when you stand in a studio and something is built is a very peculiar one. You experience the fragility of everything, much more than you notice it on the picture. You know that you cannot sit on the chair, and you cannot use these things as things. But they still, to some extent, do what they’re supposed to do. And I just wanted to get more of that feeling of, like, you’re standing in the studio in this environment. So I thought, OK, if I move the camera through the space, rather than have it provide like a window on to the space, that would probably redirect the perception of the work. So the most natural thing was, of course, to move through spaces that are built for being moved through, like a tunnel. I had already developed the idea of making a movie of a succession of different tunnels, morphing into each other. About three months later, Lady Di died, so it wasn’t originally about that event, but at some point it was inevitably about her.



From the film 'Tunnel', 1999

RF In 2009 you had a [major show at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin](#), for which you made five new works that all dealt directly with the weight of German history. Was making [your next series] “The Dailies” — these very simple, everyday objects — a way of taking some of that pressure off?

TD Yes, for me it was. For the Nationalgalerie show I had to admit that there are narratives you might want to know in order to understand many of the pictures, which is something I had sort of been denying for 20 years.



'Gangway', 2001

RF Did it feel then transgressive to make such apparently inconsequential images?

TD Well, it felt like an exercise in modesty. I kept thinking, is this enough? I gave myself certain rules. It should never take longer than a week to make a "Daily", instead of occupying me for three months, or three years. And I should be able to do it myself, without having like an army of people supporting me. And the authorial perspective should be that of a *flâneur* — something you would see when you pass by on a street or while travelling. Starting from there, a lot of "The Dailies" came to me because I saw things and I thought, oh, that would be a good one, just by walking around. For me, the narrative is the picture itself. It's not something you have to explain, or assume, or imagine. Rather, the reason for the picture is in the picture itself.



'Daily #2', 2008



'Daily #9', 2009



'Daily #10', 2009

RF Do you still consider yourself a sculptor?

TD Like 80 per cent of what I do is concerned with the object — trying to find a way to make a new object, like a violin, for instance, which is such a distinct thing. Photography is not easy for me because I never learnt it.

I feel like I'm still learning. Five times a year I make a photograph. But the rest of the year I just make sculptures. And it is still important for me that most of the things I photograph are actually creating a space or a room or a small corner of the world, rather than just being a surface.

This is an edited extract of an extended interview that took place in 2017 and 2018 in the artist's studio in Los Angeles, published in "Thomas Demand: The Complete Papers", published this month by [MACK](#)

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