

Moving from Testimony to Representation — Demand's 'Most Pregnant Moment'.

The grey, black and white curtain backgroundⁱ looks very much like the 'Fugue' painted by Paul Klee. Under the curtain, three acts of drama — '*Room*', '*Archive*' and '*Office*' — are being performed simultaneously, just without any actors on stage. The moments of either disarray or solemnity on the huge 'screens' leave visitors who have just walked into the space feeling not just amazed, but also a glimmer of regret: the song is over and the people have gone home — have I missed the most brilliant part of the story? What kind of story did these three acts actually tell? Harboursing such a sense of curiosity, we approach the 'screen', and start carefully trying to make sense of each detail — only then have we officially entered the artistic world of Thomas Demand.

The German conceptual artist Thomas Demand's first solo retrospective exhibition in China, '*The Stutter of History*', was held at UCCA Edge in Shanghai. Demand's work starts and ends with photography, but the process he goes through is extremely complex, including the choice of original image, his subjective understanding of segments of recorded history or everyday life, the construction of 1:1 paper replicas; also involves reflecting on and selecting materials — and, after recreating these scenes, ultimately

destroying them again.ⁱⁱ It seems to be a process of Sisyphean futility, yet it's touching — and reminds one of the words of Albert Camus: 'The only real true function of people born into an absurd world is to live, to be aware of one's life, one's revolt, one's freedom.'



UCCA Edge exhibition scene, Demand's work '*Clearing*' ; picture: Pang Zheng,

All of Demand's works depict moments in history — and not just historic events, but also natural scenes and everyday life. Through the medium of photographs, the artist awakens people's memories — the dramatic moment when Klaus von Stauffenberg attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate Hitler; a scene where a ceiling shakes and seems about to collapse during the Fukushima nuclear power plant leak incident; a reckless youth who is tripped up by his own shoelaces and smashes a priceless antique vase; or a dense forest, rich in romantic atmosphere, made up of 270,000 paper leaves — or a brown paper cup that had become squashed into a wire fence during the daily rush. If you just take a quick look,

the office, broadcasting studio, water lilies or stalactites all look very realistic, though it's hard to avoid a faint sense of something peculiar, which touches a nerve, and compels you to go a little closer. And then you realise that the printer, the telephone base unit, the metal shelves all display the grain and texture of paper, and the books, documents and labels, which ought to contain words, are all completely blank — like a puppet that has been stripped of its features and identity, in a work of the metaphysical school of painting. And then you realise that this is not an image that captures the real world — and you are immediately plunged into a realm of illusion.

The French philosopher Roland Barthes, who undertook a profound exploration of the nature of photography, said: 'The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object, but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.' ⁱⁱⁱ By making replicas of the original images and then photographing them, Demand breaks away from linear time, and creates a parallel space. If we talk about visual records of the real world, the testimony lies in the time. But in Demand's parallel space, the image lies in the objects, and here the power of representation exceeds the power of authentication. Demand himself also believes that, in a certain sense, images only remain in our memories as a substitute for history and major events. Photography is already a manipulated medium, only presenting the viewer with a single perspective from which to observe something. Meanwhile, a large amount of information is concealed. This information may be behind the lens, or outside the frame of the viewfinder. In contemporary society, the frequent appearance of fake news, and the absurd, farcical phenomenon in which 'when you refute a rumour it becomes the truth' means that most people feel that photographs/images have already become 'unreliable witnesses', and have gradually lost the 'power of authentication' that Barthes wrote of. Thus Demand, who takes a critical and questioning attitude to images and text, allows his photography to achieve the transition from authentication to representation, by means of model-making (an artistic medium which merges painting and sculpture).



Exhibition Scene, UCCA Edge, in front of the work 'The Office' ; photo by Pang Zheng

The work '*Office*' shows the office of the East German secret police, the 'Stasi'. The Stasi, the state security ministry of the former East Germany, was an infamous agency for monitoring public sentiment, which, over the course of many years, gathered information about citizens of the country by means of espionage. The paper files this produced ran into the hundreds of millions. "There is nothing we cannot do", was a Stasi motto at the time. In 1989, as the East German government was about to collapse, the Stasi began destroying the secret file in their headquarters and local offices. On December 4th, clouds of thick smoke poured out of the main building at Stasi headquarters in East Germany, and the East German citizens who witnessed this scene and forced their way into the building were stunned at the spectacle that greeted them: shredded paper piled up in huge heaps; shreds of paper which they hadn't had time to burn, and could only rip up by hand, filled 16,000 large sacks; all the paper shredders in the building had burnt out due to overuse. A photograph of the ransacked Stasi offices at this historic moment became the blueprint for this work by Demand. He used different coloured sheets of paper as his materials, and thus, by making a replica and photographing it, 'colour-tinted' the original black and white media image. Visitors standing in front of the photograph become members of those crowds of shocked East German citizens, witnessing a scene of total disarray. Although the image is filled with sheets of paper, there are no words on the blank pages, so they cannot provide any clear explanation of the work. The image created by the artist is concerned less with reproducing the historical scene than with hinting at police

surveillance of individual lives. Since the paper has been stripped of words, it can represent any form of surveillance, for example a venue code.



Caption: Exhibition scene at UCCA Edge, with the work 'Control Room' , photo
by Pang Zheng

W.J.T. Mitchell, the leading figure in the field of post-modern iconology, once said, 'When an important global event occurs, (such as a war or natural disaster), a 'storm of images' will sweep across the entire world.' Demand responds to this: when discussing his work 'Control Room', which recreates an original image of the Fukushima nuclear power plant, he said, 'We are not observing the disaster, but an image of the disaster.' This photograph came from a technician at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, who was on the scene during the 2011 disaster, and used his mobile phone to record the scene in the plant's control room, as the damage was occurring. Yet we won't read any descriptions in the news media of how the earthquake shook the ceiling windows of the control room so that they almost fell in — in terms of the main storyline, this detail was too insignificant to mention; even the reports from the Tokyo Electric Power Company that were circulated to the media seem to have included some embellishment of the indicators of regarding the nuclear leak. For Demand, the process of recreating the scene of the disaster is also a process of personal experience: — using ice-cold, emotionless machines and a dehumanized silence, from which all people have been removed, he accurately recreates

the terror of confronting death, the arrogance of technology, and human's delusional attempts to control natural forces. Like an empty city engulfed by COVID-19, it depicts the kind of 'heterotopian' scene that implicitly follows on from a high level of technological development in an age of globalisation. Is human civilization really rapidly heading towards a future of disenchantment? Or is this just a prophetic reminder of a doomsday scenario?

Demand's works intentionally remove text, yet he employs a creative process akin to that of writing texts: the final image is the argument he is making, the original picture is the argument that he is citing, and constructing the replicas is the process by which the writer's argument is explained. This form of discourse truly opens up the object of the event, and results in a representation of the truth. But in the end, this process is hidden, and so in the moment when they first see the image, viewers may have the feeling that the artist is attempting to say something in particular. This 'attempt' is, in a way, connected to the 'stutter'-ing in the exhibition's title — a perceptual connection, related to speaking but not expressing. Being tongue tied is a very vivid metaphor for astonishment and embarrassment, and also amazement and ecstasy. And as the Chinese saying 'staring angrily, and tongue-tied' reveals even more vividly, when they are unable to speak, people open their eyes wide and look more intently. Here, with a little effort, we get closer to the objects in the image, approach history itself, and the moments before and after the picture come pouring out with great clarity. From testimony to representation, the truth is abundantly clear. In this way, Demand, via a medium which is uniquely his own, creates what Lessing called 'the most pregnant moment'.^{iv}

ⁱ At three places [points] in the exhibition, the background wallpaper is also Demand's work — e.g. the wallpaper with the curtain pattern on the ground floor of the exhibition is his work 'Curtain'

ⁱⁱ Demand's creative process is: reconstruct the three dimensional space of an archival news photograph (or a photo of daily life from social media) on a 1:1 scale, using coloured paper and cardboard, then light and photograph the scene he has built, then destroy these physical models.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1981, p. 88-89

^{iv} The most pregnant moment' corresponds to the German original 'Der prägnanteste Augenblick' in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's work 'Laocoon'