

Thomas Demand: *Movements*



Pacific Sun, 2012, Video, 2,02 min, stereo (production still)

Movements is a tool designed by **DHC/ART – Education** to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in *Thomas Demand: Animations*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, **DHC/ART** educators intend to inspire dialogue about the exhibition and to encourage visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes with their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these *migratory concepts*¹ are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

Movements also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body – its senses and its movements – as much as the intellect. The body's physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilize our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed – mind and body – into **DHC/ART** exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

CONTEXT

Index

Our reading of Thomas Demand's photographs (and animations created out of still photographs) shift between document and fiction, evoking both photography as proof of an actual event and as a complete subjective manipulation. His images of intricate life-size paper models, photographed and demolished, act both as *indexes* of the artist's intervention in his studio and as imaginary empty sites in which we can circulate and project ourselves. The term *index* is borrowed from the work of semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce: through the 20th century, it became, for theoreticians of analog photography, a central concept to illustrate the relationship between an object and its photographic representation². For Peirce, the *index* is a sign that points, indicates, or references, existing solely as the trace of an object. Examples of *indexes* include analog photographs, footprints, fingerprints or smoke, all objects that can't exist without direct contact of another object (light, a foot, a finger, fire). André Bazin goes further in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* when he states that "only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation"³. This rhetoric of photography as objective

trace has since been widely critiqued, especially with the arrival and popularity of digital cameras in the 1980s and 1990s. In his use of photography, Demand explores the relationship between the objects and the images we make out of them, underlining our own perception of photography as a medium of the real while also exposing photography as a medium that fabricates the real out of construction and framing.

How do you perceive photography today? Do you still believe that it is the best medium for documenting a real-life event?

Can you think of other examples of indexical signs used in contemporary art practices or in various fields? What are the roles of indexical signs in these instances?

CONTENT

Memory

The concept of a memory is difficult to grasp. We rely on our memories to situate ourselves in a given time, place or situation, and yet they can fail us so easily by leading us down false paths, turning realities into fictions and past truths into constructed narratives. Our memories are almost always selective – often without our knowledge or acknowledged permission. We have personal memories, but also collective memories that stem from our experiences on an individual basis and as part of a general cohort or group. These two aspects of memory are apparent in Thomas Demand's practice and approach on many different levels: memory exists on a personal level for Demand, as can be seen in the example of *Yellowcake*, in which the artist constructed his model and later photographs based on his memory of the rooms he visited as opposed to an original source photograph that he could go back to consult at any time; and it exists on a cultural and collective level, as he is interested in the visual media's influence on the memory of the general public – how certain popular printed images can evoke feelings of knowledge when, in fact, these images could simply be triggering a kind of visual recollection and familiarity.

¹ Please note that the on-line series titled *Travelling Concepts* is a complementary reflection to the themes introduced in *Movements*: <http://dncart.tumblr.com/>

BAL, Mieke (2001). "Concept". *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

² PEIRCE, Charles Sanders (1894). *What is a Sign?* Online. <<http://www.upui.edu/~peirce/ep/ep2/ep2book/ch02/ch02.htm>>. Consulted December 18, 2012.

³ BAZIN, Hervé (1958). "Ontologie de l'image photographique". *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

Can you think of examples in the public sphere where our reliance on the accuracy of our memories can create problematic situations, either for ourselves or for other people?

What are some ways that you relate to the idea of memory in Demand's work? When concentrating on the visual aspect of his films or photographs as opposed to the story or place that they actually represent, do any of his works evoke any personal memories for you? What is it about the image in question that conjures up these ideas (the object itself, architecture, environment, setting, colour, sound, general feeling of the image, etc)?

COMPOSITION

Construction

Beatriz Colomina states that, «Thomas Demand sees media as architecture. In his words: as a vast landscape, a virtual domain with its cities of scandals, its towers of superstars, and its marsh of murders».⁴ The starting point for much of Demand's artistic process is an exploration of the media as architecture, a constructed social space, that is configured and reconfigured. These spaces are composed of strong sensations where the spectacular unveiling of political scandals exists alongside popular radio hits. Or, for example, through a banal interaction with a viral YouTube video we are exposed to a gruesome assassination.

Reflect on Demand's notion of "media as architecture". What does it mean to you?

Like an architect describing a building they are walking through, write a fictional text in which you imagine your day-to-day Internet surfing, your navigation between websites, the newspapers you read, the signs and images you see on your walks through the city, or the television you see. In what way does this fictional text offer you new insight into media?

An avid spectator of the architecture of media, Demand also embarks on a second kind of construction inspired by an image that strikes his memory or imagination. He recreates the location - or at times the event - associated with this image by translating it into a life-sized paper assemblage⁵. Once finished, the assemblage is photographed or filmed and Demand often uses stop-motion techniques to animate the constructed elements. The fixed or moving image becomes the final work while the original paper constructions are destroyed. In effect, once Demand's works are exhibited to the public, the images become reintegrated into the media architecture from where they emerged.

Reflect on Demand's choice to reconstruct an image, location, or media event in paper and cardboard – and then to photograph and destroy it. In doing so, what ways does the artist's work encourage us to reflect on our relationship to the media?



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CONSIDERATIONS

Presence/Absence

The office is empty, no one is riding the escalator, the furniture isn't being used, and the equipment appears to be working on its own.

The subjects of these works are built environments - both in their original incarnation and as models - and as such reveal multiple layers of human intervention. Their materiality is increasingly tangible the more closely we look, however their meticulous detail continues on some level to fool us into thinking that what we are looking at is the real thing. So we ask ourselves, *where is everybody*?

Our efforts to make sense of the 'who' may spark any number of responses, from curiosity to doubt to suspicion. When was the last time anyone was here -- minutes, hours, years? Are they returning, and if so, when? Or have they abandoned the space and thus abdicated responsibility for whatever happened here? And what is it that happened?

Leaving people out of unclear - but inarguably human - socio-political moments can affect the viewer in intricate ways that may give rise to new meaning. On one hand, their absence has the potential to detach us from the context in which the location (and consequently its mediated image) originally found its place in the collective consciousness. At the same time, distanced from the human relationships and decisions responsible for the location's cultural weight, we may find ourselves in a privileged position to create our own narratives – and thus become closer, more present. Indeed, Demand has suggested that a lack of human subjects – and thus any interaction between them - in his photographs makes more room for the viewer to project their imagination onto the work.

"I don't erase people, but I don't reproduce them. It's more about leaving things out." How do you understand the difference between these two notions? What effect does the subtlety of these types of distinctions have on your understanding of Demand's - or other contemporary artists' - practice?

As your body moves through these works as one of the few - if not only - inhabitants, how would you describe your physical and/or affective relationship to the environments Demand has created?

We find in Demand's work an absence of people but nonetheless, indirectly, a human presence. What are the signs, aside from their very construction, that evoke it in these spaces? In what ways has Demand also left signs of his own presence?

Looking more closely at Demand's images our sense of time is further destabilized if we allow ourselves to create a subjective narrative to accompany the space. What are some other strategies used by contemporary artists to play with temporality? How does this differ – or not – between mediums or other contemporary artistic practices such as dance?

⁴ COLOMINA, Beatriz (2006). Thomas Demand. Exhibition Catalogue (London: Serpentine Gallery, June 6 - 30 August 2006). Munich: Schirmer/Mosel.

⁵ Assemblage is a sculptural technique of organizing or composing diverse objects into a group.