

Museum
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THOMAS DEMAND

& Arno Brandhuber, Martin Boyce,
Rirkrit Tiravanija, Caruso St John

HOUSE OF CARD



De Standaard



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INTRODUCTION

This fall season, M is proud to present **HOUSE OF CARD**, a retrospective of the work of the German artist Thomas Demand (1964) with contributions by Arno Brandhuber, Martin Boyce, Caruso St John and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Demand was trained as a sculptor. He gained a reputation in particular through his photographs of life-size models, made of coloured paper or cardboard and often based on existing visual materials. After taking pictures of these models, he discards them. Instead of the actual models, then, their photographic representation basically serves as his artistic work.

Demand's work is often based on pre-existing historical and contemporary found images taken from the media, from books or online sources. By meticulously constructing photographs based on self-made models, he deliberately removes his compositions from the images they are supposed to depict.

The exhibition in M is the first to concentrate in-depth on the role of architecture in Demand's work. It provides an overview of his different approaches to building over the past fifteen years. Demand's works focus on the model, the décor or scenography, although his buildings are also inextricably linked to architecture. At the same time, **HOUSE OF CARD** highlights the similarities between Demand's projects and those of other artists or architects such as Martin Boyce, Arno Brandhuber, Caruso St John and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

The title refers to the precariousness of Demand's practice as a builder. Whereas architecture generally equates with permanence, Demand prefers to explore the limits of the ephemeral, as is evidenced in his use of paper and cardboard.

Artists, architects and fashion designers

The exhibition centres on Demand's ongoing series of 'Model Studies', works in which the concept of the model takes a central place as the space between creative idea and execution. In 'Model Studies', Demand abandons his usual practice. Here, for the first time, he does not photograph his own self-built scale models, but rather those of other artists, architects and designers, including John Lautner, SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa), Hans Hollein and Azzedine Alaïa.

Rarely exhibited projects

In addition to his series of 'Model Studies', the exhibition provides an overview of Demand's architectural interests and designs covering the past fifteen years. It presents several rarely exhibited projects, such as 'Black Label' from 2009, 'Embassy' from 2007 (a collaboration with the German architect Arno Brandhuber), 'Nagelhaus' from 2010 (a non-realized project in collaboration with Caruso St John), and 'Kvadrat pavilions', involving a design by Demand which is currently being executed next to the head office of textile giant Kvadrat in Denmark.

New monograph

In the context of the exhibition, a new monograph on the work of Thomas Demand will appear. Published by M Leuven and MACK London, the book's design is by Julie Peeters. This monograph contains essays by Maristella Casciato & Emily Pugh, Aude-Line Dulière, Karen Van Godtsenhoven, Valerie Verhack and Adam Caruso, as well as the text of a conversation between Thomas Demand, Hal Foster and David Chipperfield. The book also contains visual contributions by Martin Boyce, Arno Brandhuber and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

Curator: Valerie Verhack

MODEL

A model can be described as an instrument to represent complexity in a filtered fashion, so as to render this complexity more manageable. Models are used in all sorts of domains: in politics, medicine, the financial sector and so on. In this broad sense of the word, models are centre-stage in the work of Thomas Demand. In 'Model' (2000), an early work, he explicitly develops the concept within his oeuvre for the first time. It involves a photograph of a scale model which in turn shows a scale model. As such this work is a precursor of his series of 'Model Studies'.

'Model' is based on an existing scale model from the 1930s, which featured as part of the political propaganda effort of the Third Reich. It shows the German pavilion designed by Hitler's architect Albert Speer for the world exposition in Paris in 1937. This pavilion was to be located right across from the Soviet-Union's pavilion, which led Speer to design a soaring building that would tower above all others. Demand realised the work in the year the Expo 2000 World Fair took place in Hanover: at a time when the construction of national pavilions was called into question in the public debate in Germany.

EMBASSY

THOMAS DEMAND & ARNO BRANDLHUBER

In 'Embassy' (2007), the construction of the space involved is no longer merely at the service of the photograph. It is Demand's first installation in which the specific spatial setting he created should also intensify the meaning of his images. 'Embassy' comprises nine photographs showing the embassy of Niger in Rome, including its façade, corridors and interior. This was the location where in 2001 blank sheets of headed paper were stolen, which were later used to create forged contracts. These documents were supposed to prove that Saddam Hussein, as president of Iraq, was trying to acquire uranium from Africa. Later on, these forged documents were used in turn by American president George W. Bush to support his argument in favour of war against Iraq.

Demand created the installation 'Embassy' in collaboration with the German architect Arno Brandlhuber. In this installation, Demand's images are featured within a configuration of walls, which in terms of their placement follow the camera angle of the photos on display. Guided by Brandlhuber's architectural arrangement and Demand's sequence of images, the visitor enters a construction, a manipulation of an unknown piece of recent history. This approach turns a current topic such as fake news into a quite palpable issue.

More background information on this work can be found in the appendix: Thomas Demand on 'Yellowcake'.



Thomas Demand, Embassy I, 2007, Copyright of the artist



Thomas Demand, Embassy VII.a, 2007, Copyright of the artist

MODEL STUDIES

As of 2011, Thomas Demand has developed several series of 'Model Studies' – works which focus on the concept of the model as the space between creative idea and its execution. In these 'Model Studies', Demand moves away from his usual practice, for example by no longer exclusively photographing his own self-built scale models, but rather those of other artists, architects and designers. Often, these projects involve never realized models, and as such the projects continue to embody a potential, a possibility.

Rather than being nostalgic musings, Demand's 'Model Studies' document his chance encounters with the work of these artists. If in most of his photographs the camera is in a frontal yet remote position, in these studies the various scale models are shown from up close. This results in series of images which come across as abstract and highly tactile through the textures and materials depicted.

In the next room, 'Model Studies I' (2011), based on the work of the American architect John Lautner, is on display together with the sculpture 'Do Words Have Voices' (2011) by the British artist Martin Boyce. Like Demand's series, this ceiling sculpture refers to an architectural legacy from the past. Both works were first shown together in 2012 at the Venice Biennale of Architecture.

'Model Studies II' (2015) starts from the work of the Japanese architectural firm SANAA. The wallpaper of the room in which the series is on display alters the spatial experience of the room through the repetition of a folded motif.

The most recent series, 'Model Studies IV' (2020), which draws on the work of fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa, is on display in the third room.

More information in the appendix: Thomas Demand on 'Model Studies'

MARTIN BOYCE

Thomas Demand shares a fascination for architecture with the Scottish sculptor Martin Boyce (1967). During the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2012, their work was shown side by side in one room: Demand's 'Model Studies I', based on architectural models by John Lautner, and Boyce's 'Do Words Have Voices'. In M the two works are jointly displayed once again.

'Do Words Have Voices' is a ceiling installation exploring the history and legacy of modernist design and architecture. In 2011 Boyce won the famous Turner Prize for this work among others. It consists of six elements which can be shown separately or together. Each element is the result of a careful study and construction effort. As Boyce commented on 'Do Words Have Voices': "It all centres on the landscape. I'm interested in the physical landscape, but also in the psychological landscape – in our densely built-up environment which we traverse each and every day and of which we

are only occasionally aware. At such moments it may trigger a meaningful resonance. The work is meant to intensify these rare moments.”

JOHN LAUTNER

John Lautner (1911-1994) was an American architect who became known in particular for his designs for buildings that resemble functional sculptures. After an internship with Frank Lloyd Wright, he started his own practice in Los Angeles. Most of his projects were also realized in California. Several models of designs that were never realized, are preserved at the Los Angeles Getty Research Institute. During a residency at the Getty Institute in 2013, Demand had the opportunity to study and photograph these models. It resulted in a series of works that mainly focuses on the sculptural qualities of Lautner’s architecture.



Thomas Demand, Segel #49, Model Studies I, 2011, Copyright of the artist, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

SANAA (Sejima And Nishizawa And Associates)

SANAA is an architectural firm from Tokyo, founded by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa. Among the buildings they designed are the Museum for Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the glass pavilion of the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio. In the city of Almere in the Netherlands, they built a theatre hall annex arts centre called De Kunstlinie. In 2010, Sejima and Nishizawa won the Pritzker Prize, the world's most prominent award for architecture.

Several times Thomas Demand visited the SANAA studio – a place where paper and cardboard are part of the daily conceptual processes. Architectural models often provide an abstract, idealized vision; they are filtered interpretations of reality which will frequently highlight utopian elements. Demand's photo series of the scale models shows an abstract landscape of architectural shapes, stripped of any human dimension or reference yet with a clearly resonating creative language.



Thomas Demand, Model Studies II, Sphere 31, 2015, Copyright of the artist, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

AZZEDINE ALAÏA

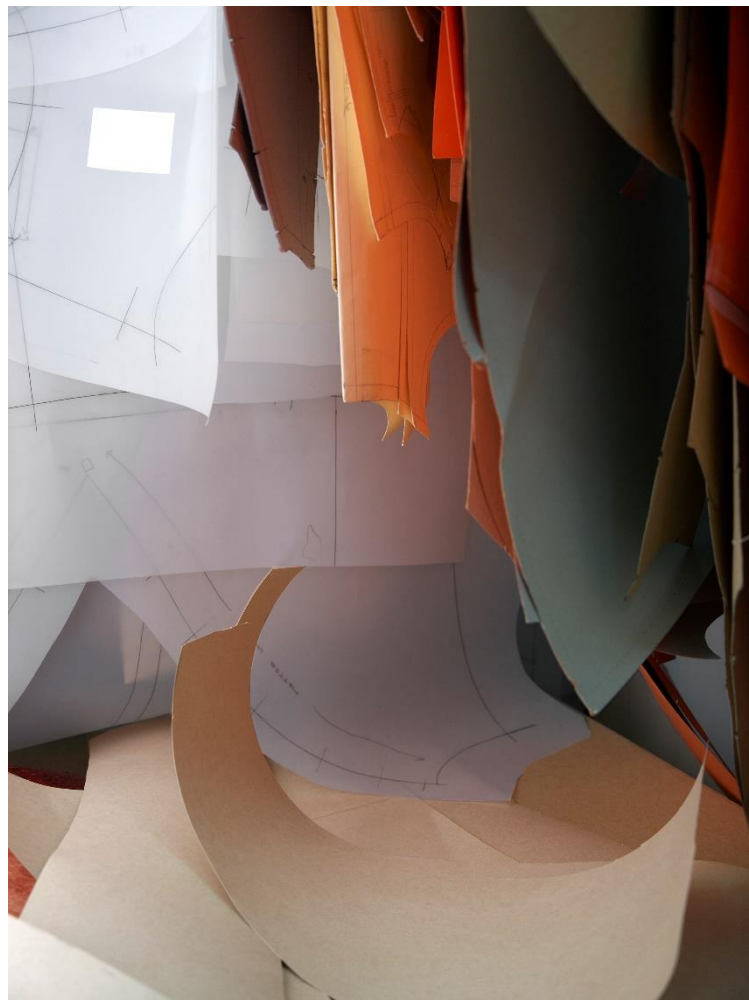
Thomas Demand has also taken pictures of the paper patterns by Azzedine Alaïa (1940-2017), a French fashion designer of Tunisian descent, which he used to make his original clothing designs. If Demand's pictures are based on material objects, through the lens of his camera they become abstract – they show something, even though we do not recognize what they show. Rather than registering or documenting reality, the images mainly refer to themselves: they are 'autofigurative'.

Alaïa was called an engineer or architect of fabric, and he was known for his endless search for perfection. At times he worked for five years on the pattern of a jacket – and after it was eventually shown on the catwalk, he again took it to his studio to work some more on it. His technical skill was equal to that of geniuses like Balenciaga and Madame Grès. He actually collected pieces of clothing they made, and sometimes he unstitched them to imitate their design, if not to modify it.

Alaïa passed way three years ago. His collection of paper patterns, which is stored in a depot outside of Paris, serves as a kind of library of models, which are still used by the staff of his Paris studio. The instructions, measurements, dotted lines and technical specifications on the paper patterns are silent witnesses to the master's skill, and they also make it possible to carry on his label after his death. The occasionally well-thumbed patterns with all their folds and perforations, their curling edges and tears, are relics of an intense creative process, ready to be used all over again any moment. Demand shows them as ready-mades or *objets trouvés* from the practice of a fellow-artist – as if frozen in their initial conception, their coming into being.



Thomas Demand, Model Studies IV, kinglet, 2020, Copyright of the artist, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



Thomas Demand, Model Studies IV, chaffinch, 2020, Copyright of the artist, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

KVADRAT PAVILIONS

Invited by the textile company Kvadrat, with their head office located in the Danish town of Ebeltoft, Thomas Demand designed an ensemble of pavilions (2020), which is currently being built. It is the first time that a building is actually constructed on the basis of Demand's designs. The artistic concept for this project started from a visual notion that is both simple and metaphorical: the tent as a textile building. In collaboration with the British architectural firm Caruso St John, he developed this concept resulting in three pavilions, taking on the shape of, respectively, a folded sheet of paper, a paper plate and a paper hat. These three ordinary items all follow the logic of paper or cardboard – materials consistent with Demand's visual art practice.

As the 'Kvadrat pavilions' are being built in Ebeltoft, this room's exhibit documents the process of their design. The display case contains, among other things, sketches, paper models of the buildings and postcards of tents, a mode of architecture which Demand has been exploring in more detail for some time. There are also prototypes of details of the interior on display, such as door handles or light fittings, which he also designed from scratch. Finally, a plaster model serves to illustrate the location of the three pavilions, including the undulations of the nearby landscape.

NAGELHAUS

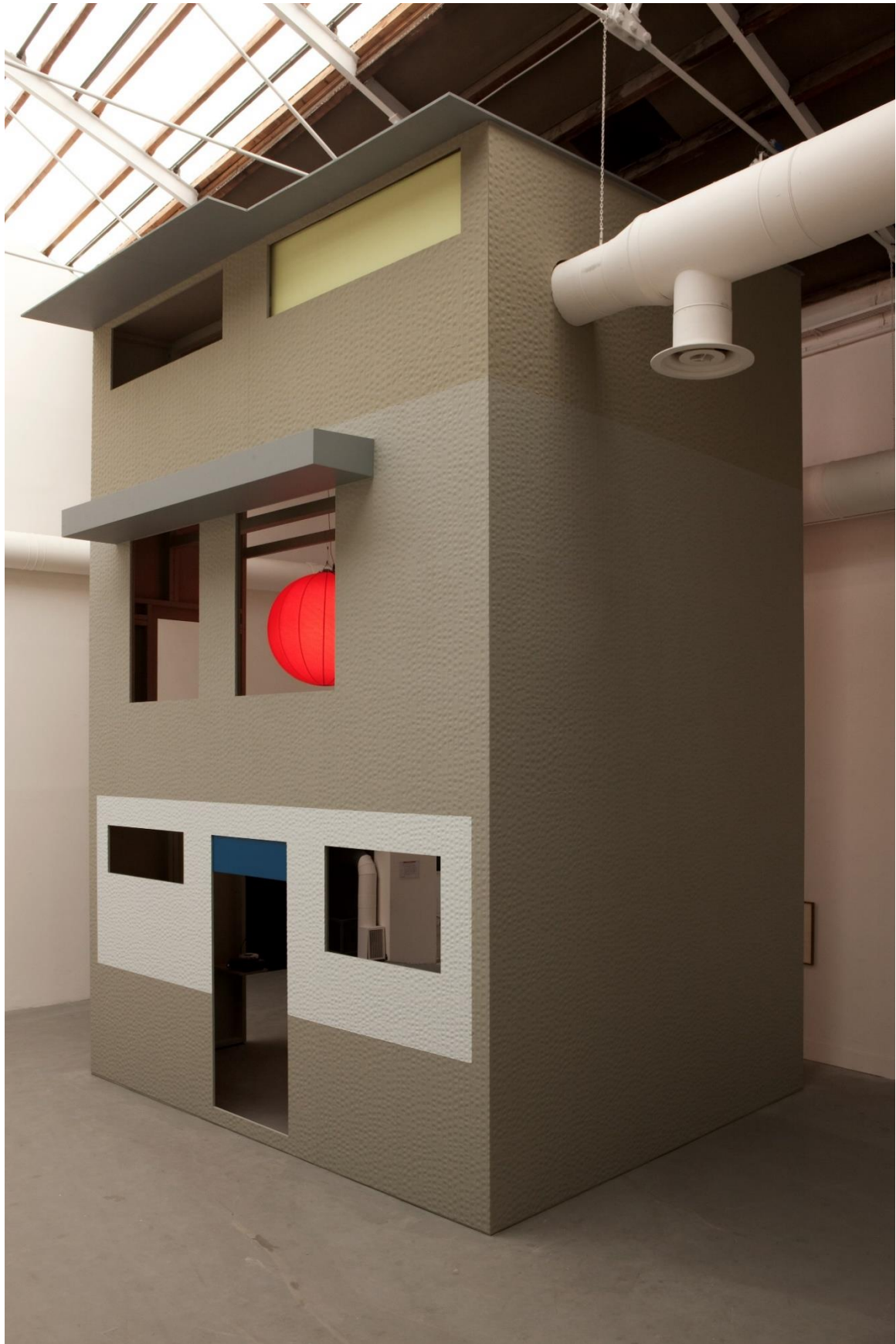
THOMAS DEMAND & CARUSO ST JOHN

The architectural firm Caruso St John was founded in London by Adam Caruso and Peter St John in 1990. In their designs they pay much attention to the context in which a building will be built, and they frequently refer to architectural traditions from other eras and cultures. This is why their buildings cannot be tied to a single specific style, shape or ideology.

Thomas Demand and Caruso St John together designed 'Nagelhaus' (2010), a reference to 'the most stubborn nail in history' – a house in Chongqing, China that made world news when the private owners of the small house unexpectedly resisted developers who were planning to build a shopping centre in the area. All surrounding buildings were demolished and the house remained alone in an empty construction site.

In 2008, Caruso St John and Thomas Demand won an open call for a redesign of the Escher-Weiss-Platz in Zurich. Their proposal was to make a reconstruction of the 'Nagelhaus' beneath a highway overpass, and to give it the function of a 24/7 restaurant. The right-wing party SVP, however, tried to stop construction, causing the project to become subject of a referendum. Eventually it was cancelled altogether. The house, then, elicited protest two times: in China there was resistance to its demolition, in Switzerland to its construction.

'Nagelhaus' was on view at the Venice Biennale (2010) and is now on display again in M. The installation consists of the reconstruction of the house, a brief sequence of filmed media images, illustrations from proposals for the original design and a slideshow with historical images of oriental-inspired pavilions on the European mainland. The installation raises questions on innovation and preservation, on protest and urban development, as well as on the western attitude vis-à-vis China.



Thomas Demand, Nagelhaus, 2011, Copyright of the artist

BLACK LABEL

'Black Label' (2009), is a project that refers to an eponymous bar in the station district of Kitakyushu in Japan. The location of 'Black Label' has been changed several times due to urban developments and the work is currently situated on a very small and multi-sided plot that completely dominates the appearance of the bar. Demand replicated the bar as a scale model in his studio and exhibited the photographs at the CCA Project Gallery in Kitakyushu, where he was in residence at the time. At the same time he hung a photo of the empty reconstructed exhibition space in the CCA Project Gallery in the original Black Label bar as a replacement for a mirror.

UNTITLED 2013 (THOMAS DEMANDS HERE)

RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA

Rirkrit Tiravanija is a Thai artist. He was born in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 1961, and lives in New York (USA), Berlin (Germany) and Chiang Mai (Thailand). Architecture and structures to live in and to find social interaction in, constitute the core of his work. His installations often take on the shape of spaces in which you can eat, cook, read or make music.

Four years after Thomas Demand, he realised a work for CCA Kitakyushu as a guest resident. During preparations he visited the Black Label bar, which had meanwhile become quite familiar to visitors of the CCA. He was charmed by the place as well as the owner, Teruko Ikegami, who received all of her guests warm-heartedly. He decided to start from the work of Demand, but to put the focus on social contact. As Rirkrit Tiravanija himself commented: "The work is a combination of sculptural and relational elements. I again worked with the location and existing models, through observation of residents and everyday life in Kitakyushu and its surroundings."

In M the two works are jointly on display for the first time.

THE BOOK

In the context of the exhibition, a new monograph on the work of Thomas Demand will appear. Published by M Leuven and MACK London, the book's design is by Julie Peeters. This monograph contains essays by Maristella Casciato & Emily Pugh, Aude-Line Dulière, Karen Van Godtsenhoven, Valerie Verhack and Adam Caruso, as well as the text of a conversation between Thomas Demand, Hal Foster and David Chipperfield. The book also contains visual contributions by Martin Boyce, Arno Brandhuber and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

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THE WORKS ON SHOW

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Thomas Demand, *Modell/Model*, 2000, C-print / Diasec, 164,5 x 210 cm

ROOM 1.H

Arno Bradlhuber and Thomas Demand, *Embassy*, 2007, installation

Thomas Demand, *Embassy I*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 168 x 204 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy II*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 228 x 320 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy III*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 51 x 53,5 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy IV*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 198 x 198 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy IV.a*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 88 x 100 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy V*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 224 x 164 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy VI*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 168 x 204 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy VII*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 180 x 232 cm

Thomas Demand, *Embassy VII.a*, 2007, C-print / Diasec, 74 x 90 cm

ROOM 1.J

Martin Boyce, *Do Words Have Voices*, 2011, aluminium, steel, paint, brass, wood, electrical components, fluorescent light, fabric, casting resin, paper

Thomas Demand, *Model Series I (John Lautner)*, 2011, Framed pigment prints

ROOM 1.K

Thomas Demand, *Fold*, 2015, UV print on non-woven wallpaper

Thomas Demand, *Model Series II (SANAA)*, 2015, Framed pigment prints

Thomas Demand, *Model Series IV (Azzedine Alaïa)*, 2020, Framed pigment prints

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Thomas Demand and Caruso St John, model Kvadrat Pavilion Ebeltoft, Denmark, 2020

Thomas Demand, designs for interior and furniture Kvadrat Pavilion Ebeltoft, Denmark, 2020

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Thomas Demand and Caruso St John, *Nagelhaus*, 2010, installation

Martin Mörck, *Nagelhaus*, illustrations

Thomas Demand, *Nagelhaus*, film

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Thomas Demand, *Black Label I*, 2008

Thomas Demand, *Black Label II*, 2008

Thomas Demand, *Black Label III*, 2008

Rirkrit Tiravanija, *untitled 2013 (thomas demands here)*, 2013, installation

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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The museum is a 10-minute walk from Leuven train station. If you come by bus, the closest stop is Rector de Somer Square. You can find the easiest route via Google maps.

→ **By car**

The new circulation plan will direct you to the car parks in Leuven via various loops. If you would prefer to avoid traffic in the city centre, you can park in one of the car parks on the edge of the city and take the bus to the centre for free. Would you prefer to park nearby? The Ladeuze car park is only a 2-minute walk from the museum.

Click [here](#) for more information about the circulation plan and all the parking options in the city.

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→ Images in high resolution can be downloaded from this page:
<http://prez.ly/1Hub>

Yellowcake,
Revisited

Thomas Demand

On New Year's Eve 2000-2001 someone broke into the embassy of the country of Niger in Rome. The Republic of Niger is known to be an extremely poor country, and as a result the ambassador and her staff reside in an unglamorous apartment in the fifth story of a modest building originally built in the 1930s. The house is located in the Via Baimonti, a street in an outlying district of the Italian capital. The only indication that it serves any consular purposes is the flag hanging over the balcony railing. The perpetrators turned the rooms upside down, but took astonishingly little with them. According to the embassy staff all they stole was a cheap wristwatch, a bottle of Bulgari-brand perfume and some stationary. Because the theft was so minimal, the police decided not to take photographs of the crime scene. That the law enforcement authorities of a city where 680 thefts occur daily should show no great interest in the burglary of a few sheets of letter paper is certainly understandable. For me, however, the event was of great interest. I should explain that everything seen in the pictures here has to do with or is to be found on paper. Like most of my works, the starting point of these images are the life-sized cardboard sculptures in my studio, which I built for the project. Why, I asked myself, would someone take the risk of committing a robbery for

a few blank sheets

of paper?

A few months after the break-in, contracts were leaked to the Italian weekly magazine *Panorama* — which belongs to Silvio Berlusconi, at this time the country's prime minister — and later to other media sources, which were written on the same kind of paper that was stolen from the embassy. The content of the contracts was politically scandalous. They seemed to clearly prove that Saddam Hussein had ordered the purchase of 500 tons of "yellowcake". Yellowcake is the yellowish, powdery base product from which fuel rods for nuclear power plants and nuclear bombs are produced. Niger, along with Canada and Australia, is one of the most important producers of it. Proof of this kind of transaction would, of course, have been sensational, and yet doubts quickly arose over the authenticity of the papers. The most obvious of the numerous inconsistencies was that the foreign minister of Niger who had supposedly signed the contracts hadn't been in office for over 10 years when the documents were drawn up. In fact, completely independent of the authenticity of the contracts themselves, the story was already quite hard to believe. With some basic research the journalist Elisabetta Burba, who was first shown the papers, was able to calculate that the transport of 500 tons of yellowcake would require some 120 fully loaded tractor trailers. It seemed extremely improbable to her that the dictator of a country under an extensive UN embargo would honestly believe that he could sneak 120 gleaming tractor trailers from Niger through four countries and then transfer the load — unnoticed — onto ships that would bring it to Iraq.

The whole story was so obviously contrived that no journalist showed much interest and the contracts remained unpublished. Nevertheless, a year and a half later the documents suddenly re-emerged. The United States government, in search of convincing justification for an immediate military invasion of Iraq, released these papers to the international public. They cited British secret service sources and claimed that they now had the "smoking gun" they had been looking for — irrefutable evidence that Saddam Hussein was secretly building a nuclear arsenal and that he presumably already possessed a nuclear weapon. British prime minister Tony Blair, the U.S.'s most important ally, corroborated this assessment.

As was to be expected, the story quickly collapsed like a house of cards. The scandal that resulted was, in the best American journalistic tradition, dubbed “Nigergate” and made for headlines worldwide. One of the numerous side stories to this affair was accordingly known as “Plamegate” after Victoria Plame, the wife of long-serving diplomat Joseph C. Wilson. In the 1990s Wilson had worked in this part of Africa, and in 2002 he flew to Niger at the CIA’s request in order to investigate whether the transport with the 120 trucks would have been feasible. His assessment that such an undertaking would have been absolutely impossible did not fit into the U.S. government’s political agenda. It fit even less into their agenda that Mr. Wilson did not keep this opinion to himself, but rather published it in the *New York Times* for all to see. Immediately following his statements, it was plastered all over the press that Wilson’s wife, Mrs. Plame, worked for the CIA as well. The man responsible for this intentional indiscretion was, it would later turn out, Lewis Libby, vice-president Dick Cheney’s right-hand man. This succession of events has gone down as “Libbygate” in the files of American judicial history.

...

I can of course only very briefly summarize this thick web of intertwined events here. Anyone interested in the details can refer to the numerous comprehensive accounts of the affair, which parliamentary and senate committees in both Italy and the U.S. have investigated and which have accordingly been very well documented. And yet strangely, almost nothing is known about the place where it all started, the offices of the embassy of Niger in Rome. When I began searching for material for a new work based on the episode, I assumed that the easiest way to start was to create a descriptive image of the crime scene. The story had attracted massive media attention. All I would have to do is order the newspapers and keep my eyes out for a photograph on which I could base a sculpture. This is how I had successfully completed many other projects. To my surprise, in the massive amounts of press material

there was not
a single image
of this location.

I asked press photographers and archivists to no avail. Apparently no journalist had ever been granted access to the rooms and no illustrator had ever attempted to draw them for readers.

I continued to investigate and tried contacting journalists who had at least worked on the story at the time. I spoke with a handful of well-known Italian authors, with an American journalist who had described the events in great detail for *Vanity Fair*, as well as with a few British and German journalists. An extremely interesting image emerged from all these different puzzle pieces: It turned out that the break-in itself was probably a sham, invented in order to cover up a modest corruption affair within the embassy. The main secretary, an Italian woman referred to as Madame Laura, wanted to make some extra money and thus gradually handed over the address book, stationary and all kinds of embassy documents to a person closely associated with the Italian secret service. This person came up with the idea of forging the contracts — though whether she did this with the help of the secret service (which in Italy is called Sismi) is still disputed. The intention was apparently to help shore up the masculine friendship between Berlusconi and Bush.

The person calculated that the story would be printed in a couple newspapers and would inspire public outrage against Saddam. That the whole thing would be resuscitated and finally have its original intended explosive effect a year later was not at all foreseeable for the individuals involved. After all, the break-in took place before September 11, 2001. It was a minor case of

forgery processed by some CIA back office. The CIA asked the French secret service if there might be something to the story. The French knocked on the doors of the British MI6. The British said they were taking the thing as seriously as the French. And so the CIA already had two allies that were a little uneasy. The affair had gathered some steam, mostly on the basis of hearsay.

...

Niger is a democratic country — according to the German aid organization German Agro Action (*Welthungerhilfe*) it is the fourth poorest in the world. The legally elected ruler does, however, not really fit into our conception of a tried and true democratic leader. The only significant source of income for Niger is the extraction of uranium. The uranium operations are entirely owned by the French, which is why the French secret service was involved. The French took over the uranium mines when they freed the country from colonial rule. I spoke with someone who was there. Anyone wishing to go there has to travel three days through the desert and then across the entire Sahel region — assuming he or she is granted permission. There are two military posts and otherwise nothing. There are no people walking about, everything is dead. But when you arrive everything is suddenly just like in France — three, four supermarkets, champagne, oysters, pâté. Every day seven to eight airplanes arrive with the latest newspapers and everything a Frenchman might need to feel at home in a foreign country. They have built a kingdom in the middle of the desert. Uranium is relatively profitable, and the mines are internationally monitored. It would be impossible to secretly divert 120 tractor trailers.

Everything that I have described here I picked up from newspapers, conversations with journalists and a few books that have recently appeared on the subject. I always

base my work

on information and

photographs that

are accessible to

everyone.

Here too I had the feeling that everyone must know the story to some extent or another. That these specific images were lacking seemed strange to me. This is why I wanted to get into the embassy and have a look at the rooms. So I went there, took the elevator to the fifth floor and rang the bell. The door opened a crack and an older woman asked me what I wanted. I claimed to want to apply for a visa, as I thought this would be a good pretext to be invited in. Unfortunately I was mistaken. She disappeared for a second, came back, handed the form to me and closed the door. I decided to let sleeping dogs lie, gave up trying to enter the office and tried instead to establish contact with a few of the journalists who had first covered the story. As is generally well known, journalists don't like being asked a lot of questions. But since I didn't have the faintest idea how to get into the embassy, I wanted to get some tips from a professional.

The particularities of domestic politics in Italy are to blame for the fact that *La Repubblica* in Rome maintains a maximum security area for its journalists, who are subject to great risk especially when the mafia is involved. This, however, was a story that had long since been covered and so it wasn't too difficult to be admitted to the office of Carlo Bonini, the first man to make the association between the embassy break-in and the forgeries. I explained my objectives and asked him for advice. Should I go to the embassy and say I wanted to photograph the natural wonders of Niger for a calendar and that I needed permission to do so? He laughed in my face and said that Niger had absolutely nothing worth seeing. It was a massive desert — I wouldn't get very far with that kind of story. My next idea:

would it be possible

to bribe someone?

He replied that that's what he would probably do and that it might work in a detective story, rarely in real life. The question was, he said, who would I bribe? The woman who opened the door was none other than Madame Laura, the secretary who had sold the papers. She still worked there. In fact she was the only one who still worked there. All other embassy employees had been replaced immediately after the affair. In other words, it was quite clear that Madame Laura was working for the secret service. Even if I were to agree upon a sum with her, I would have to assume that when it came time to hand over the money the police would be waiting for me. And then I'd be in some pretty hot water, especially since an embassy was considered foreign territory. Bonini concluded that this would not be a good idea. I suggested a private detective. Would he be able to recommend me one? He predicted I wouldn't find one willing to do the work. I was out of ideas. He at least had some sympathy and offered one last possibility: "Why don't you just go there and tell them that you want to make a life-size cardboard sculpture of their offices? They'll be so surprised that they'll think it's just a cover. Maybe you'll get to speak with her for a few minutes." It sounded plausible enough.

So I drove out to the Via Baimonti again and rang the bell. Once again Madame Laura opens the door. She recognizes me and goes to close the door, but I have a thick book of my work in hand that I shove through the crack in the door while calling out, "It's an art project. Can I please talk to the Ambassador?" Madame Laura hears the word "art" and — maybe this kind of thing is possible in Rome — actually proceeds to let me in, though only into the first room.

...

I am allowed into the foyer and she lets me have a seat on a leather sofa in the bare white room. According to Carlo Bonini I had already made it further than any journalist. I sit and wait, able to hear hushed negotiations going on somewhere. In front of me is a flag hanging limp. Over the passage to the embassy office hangs a picture — the only picture I've seen here. It is the official portrait of the president of Niger.

Madame Laura comes back, picks up the catalogue and shakes her head. She only leaves again after I assure her that I can wait all day if necessary but that I must speak with the ambassador. She says that this probably won't be possible. I look around some more, study the electrical outlets, the door knobs and other details. Finally Madame appears again and says with an acerbic smile I can now speak with the consular representative. It turns out that the ambassador is almost never in the embassy, as she is mostly in Niger. As a result the consular representative is responsible for everything.

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I am led into a darkened office which consists of two connected rooms. The blinds have been lowered because of the sun, and the fluorescent lights are on. In the corner of the back room sits a small man on a chair with a cup of coffee, strong cigarettes and a telephone on the table in front of him. He waits there and asks in French what it is that I want from him. I attempt to explain to him in German, English and horrendous Italian. That the communication is so difficult is an advantage — I'm buying time. I discreetly look around, attempting to imprint the objects in the room on my memory. I notice the fax machine is the same one I have. The envelopes on the extravagant tables have an official, pale color and look as if they'd never been opened. Meanwhile I attempt to explain to him what my intentions are. He picks up the catalogue and looks through it. I explain to him that it is a catalogue of my exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He opens it and I see that he doesn't have a clue what he's looking at. This is a

good thing, since I have a long and winding way ahead to actually to explain to him what I'm intending to do:

make a life-size

model of his entire office,

including the chair

in which he is sitting,

out of cardboard.

He doesn't seem to really understand why it is that people take photographs. The man seems quite cultured, but I notice that the art of photography is quite foreign to him — how much more so my eccentric model constructions. And yet despite all the complications and communication problems at some point he understands what it's all about. He closes the book and says, to my absolute shock, in fluent English: "The republic of Niger does not have any interest in what you do, please leave this room".

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Fortunately I had already seen everything I wanted to. It was, incidentally, extremely trivial. But then what did you expect? In the end most places that are considered meaningful because something important once happened there are trivial. In this case it was a completely unspectacular apartment, built during Mussolini's time, which nowadays serves a poor, unknown African country as a consular office and happens to be the setting of the first event in one of the most deceitful episodes in recent history. Of course there are no evil intentions to be seen there, no conspiracies or falsehoods, and these things aren't to be seen in my photographs either. I hope nevertheless that the images provide an evocative impression of the rooms.

Maybe the most intense way of immersing oneself in a setting like this is to attempt to recreate and describe it. The sensual and abstract, the logic between the objects and what the camera records, that which is preconceived and that which is invented and that which is real and what really happened all go into this imaginative process, which in turn leads to an accessible environment or a connection in an unpredictable manner. In this way this group of pictures is both a documentation and a narration, reportage and illustration.

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After visiting this double room which radiated an order foreign to me and yet consisting of familiar objects, it became clear to me that I had to keep going. And so I asked to see the ambassador again, this time through official channels — the foreign minister in the capital, Niamey. After a few months I received a polite letter (on embassy stationary!) which posed a series of mistrustful but harmless questions that I would have to answer in advance. I overcame this hurdle as well and after a few more weeks and countless phone calls I was cordially offered an appointment. And so I managed to enter the embassy a second time. I took a seat near the ambassador's coffee table and tried to comprehend the situation, but above all to be polite. At this point I had already completed my work. I had long since internalized the surroundings. I was actually finished.

The ambassador spoke English. I commenced to explain to her the occasion for my project — the Biennale in Venice, the theme of which that year was Africa and where this series was to be shown for the first time. I argued that it was more apt for a European artist to show the

consular offices of an African state in Europe than to journey to Africa with a camera. That made sense to her. More difficult to explain was why I had chosen the Republic of Niger of all places. She found that strange and emphasized that her government was above all interested in ways of revealing to people the beauty and wonders of Niger, and that she would of course not support anything that would create a negative image of the country. At this point I asked whether the fact that most recently Niger was associated with a scandal called "Yellowcake" was good or bad for her nation's image. The atmosphere immediately changed.

Clearly incensed, she began an outraged defense. Niger had been shamelessly betrayed. Her country had clearly done nothing wrong (in fact it hadn't), and had never had the chance to prove its innocence to the world. No one would have dared do something like that to Canada or Australia. Niger simply didn't have the same influence. After this, a long conversation unfolded about the damage to the country's image that would result from the fact that in the Google world Niger would be associated with this affair alone for the indefinite future. A turn in the discussion that I, considering the special circumstances of my visit, found pretty extraordinary.

Thomas Demand, *Model Studies*, 2011

“Does this mean I have to give up brie?” John Lautner had written these words on a copied list of dietary restrictions, given to him by Dr Mauer, for whose father he also built a house. The architect’s handwriting looks rather square, with many diverging energies, large letters and dynamic diagonals – not what I expected from a 80–something– year–old architect, who presumably had a life of drawing some rather eccentric buildings behind him. This, amongst countless other notes of less or more relevance to the history of architecture, can be found in the vaults of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, which looks after Mr. Lautner’s professional bequest. Part of this collection are 12 models made by Lautner and his studio since 1960 that were mostly used to study and work on his audacious projects. These models are all a little run–down and certainly not fabricated to impress or convince a client, even if they played that role at times, too. In other words, they are working tools, and on those rough models; in fact, I tried to avoid making images of architecture. It’s the sculptural presence and the traces of someone’s practice, of understanding and remodeling, which raised my attention. Given the temporary purpose of the models, their material components are equally cheap and fading: cardboard, aluminum and found objects, indications of vegetation made with a colored pencil, comments and traces of discarded alternatives. One of them is just the landscape, no house left (Concannon House) and another one only the roof (Hope House) and that wasn’t built in that shape either. But such information is pointing to the referential aspects of these models, for instance; one could compare them with the incarnation as an actual house or muse about the what–ifs. However, I’d like to ride this horse towards another claim. In my view, the images in this book are like distant cousins to the images made by students of the Wchutemas school of architecture (1920–27), for which it was mandatory to photograph their rather unelaborated drafts as an exercise. It was of course part of the foundation for a Soviet avant–garde architect to understand how much the image of a work of architecture is an essential aspect of the building itself. Lautner, coming literally, geographically and probably politically from the other end, didn’t make much of that correlation; somewhere in his notes I found a nebulous equation that read, **“the image is the reality, therefore there is no reality”**. Let’s assume this means as one soon finds out when studying Lautner’s work, drawing wasn’t one of his many talents. So I like to imagine that this man–with a notoriously powerful handshake and no fear of large

gestures in concrete—would have inspired himself with these modest cardboard objects, which have since weathered over time and have now become the concern of conservatorial efforts at the Getty. **“Architecture should be really odd.”** Frankly, I wasn’t a fan of Mr. Lautner’s buildings when I started looking into the 70 boxes of the bequest, but I knew that the opinion about his work is split between avid admiration and spiteful damning. The argument I heard repeatedly from both sides was that his work is ‘cinematic’. It would describe the weakness of a hollow gesture made for James Bond as much as the splendor of a surrounding that lets the inhabitant feel like a film star. But ‘cinematic’ also means that the camera moves, or the actor moves through a space when filmed, rather than stands still. And I realized that was why I didn’t get the point of his architecture until I stood inside one of his buildings myself: it doesn’t photograph well, and even a master of that trade like Julius Shulman seemed to have trouble representing the particular quality of the designs in his photographs. Wherever you stand in these constructions you experience space in a different way, even if the idea seems to be simple and straightforward. The collection of images in this book doesn’t try to fix that problem. Instead I decided to focus just that (unlike most architecture) reality is a flexible concept. The Cubists reminded us that space and shape can be described in ways other than the mimetic representations proposed over centuries by Brunelleschi’s perspective. Picasso’s cardboard guitars (between 1912–1914) come to mind, and their freedom in rethinking a commonly known volume might find a distant echo in some of the spatial concepts shown here. Above all, I would like to express my gratitude to The Getty Research Institute, which generously invited me as a scholar in 2010/2011 to come and see what’s in their vaults. Except for the Goldstein Office model (which belongs to the Foundation) all the objects were introduced to me by Albrecht Gumlich from the GRI, who keeps fighting to prevent time from taking its damaging toll onto their holdings. Frederike Seifert, Naomi Mizusaki and Vina Rostomyan were all as instrumental as they were inspiring and indispensable in putting this book together. I want to thank the Lautner Foundation for its openness to this project, and most notably the dapper Mr. Frank Escher for his first-hand information and procurement. Finally, the book finds itself in the reader’s hands mostly because of the patience, vision and trust of the team at Ivory press, namely Iñaki Domingo and Elena Foster.

(899 words)

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