

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

## 23.1

COMMENTARIES

### Thomas Demand

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### Thomas Demand 'The Dailies'

Photography has had a long association with the everyday. In early modernist photographs, such as the work of Paul Strand (1890-1976), the everyday was deployed as a reservoir of potential forms, a resource to refresh picture making. Walker Evans, similarly, working in the 1930s, discerned the appealing visual patterns in the everyday shop-signs and advertising hoardings of the early twentieth-century city, as well as recording their intrinsic social-historic interest. The work of Henri Cartier-Bresson helped establish the emerging genre of street photography, in which everyday actions and people passing by offer visual incidents that seem marvellous and exceptional.

Another aspect of photography's association with the everyday is the camera as the instrument of the mass democratisation of image-making, meaning everyone can make their own images: 'You press the button, we do the rest', as Kodak promised in an 1889 advertisement. As such, photography was understood by many in the early twentieth century as a popular and unpretentious form, opposed to luxury, artisanal image making. This was photography as a mass social movement.

A third association of photography and the everyday emerges in a variety of art practices of the 1980s and 1990s. In this work, the camera is used to capture *actions* in the everyday world. Sometimes the actions captured are spontaneous or anonymous gestures, by members of the public, as in Richard Wentworth's series, *Making Do and Getting By* (1978-), in which, for example, he photographs a found cardigan stuck on a railing, presumably put there so that whoever lost it can find it again. These photographs have charm and humour, as well as seeming to testify to people's ordinary ingenuity and generosity.

The claims made in the literature for such work, especially Wentworth's, tend to refer to the everyday as a source of potentially radical political meaning and utopian energy. Michel de Certeau's book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, first published in 1980, is the theoretical touchstone for such claims. Michael Sheringham, in his round-up of the French tradition of theorising everyday life, summarises this idea of the everyday, as standing for the idea of 'something precious and compelling in the *quotidian*, when it succeeds in resisting the sway of the spectacular and the eventful: a dissidence that might pertain specifically to a dimension of experience whose value we relinquish at our peril.'

And yet, none of the three associations I have described, between photography and the everyday, is represented in Thomas Demand's *Dailies* series. They are not beautiful parcels of abstract form, in the modernist tradition. They are not mass, democratic snapshots; on the contrary, they are laboriously hand-crafted, limited edition, expensive. And they don't capture people's anonymous collective actions in any seemingly redemptive way.

In fact, all of the history of the possibilities seen in the everyday seem deliberately made to appear obtuse, naïve, and hopeless, by Demand's work. The everyday surfaces and objects seen in his photographs are not beautiful. They are dumbly ugly, with that stupidity which mandates that corporate architecture and mass produced surfaces can't be beautiful or elegant, but will be made from the worst, most unappealing materials, in the stupidest, most inelegant forms. And these photographs do not suggest the ludic happiness, or gestural freedom that Richard Wentworth's found actions seem to reveal. The cup in the fence, the cigarettes in the ashtray, the clothes pegs on the line, pins on a notice board, the plastic cup of beer left on a window-sill – in Demand's case, these subjects don't look charming, they just look grimly, determinedly banal.

Therefore, the *Dailies* series might seem to represent the end of the possibility of 'the everyday' as a potential zone of utopian energy or transformation; the end of a particular spontaneity of photographic vision; and the end of the idea that the photographer's eye has something redemptive about it, finding the beautiful in everyday life. As such, we might title the series, 'the end of the everyday'. It is from this perspective that we might find Demand's photographs depressing, or melancholic: an artistic enterprise similar perhaps to Gerhard Richter's practice, in painting, which is often interpreted as signifying the end of a certain set of hopes for painting, cycling through all available styles and genres to demonstrate that none of them is possible any more, in a gesture simultaneously of renunciation and cancellation.

But are there other possibilities? Might Demand's represent an anti-idealist vision of the everyday – in which case, what would be the significance of this, now?

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