

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

# 23.2

## COMMENTARIES

# Thomas Demand

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## Thomas Demand 'Daily Show'

There is an empty envelope in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach, so Maria Zinfert reports, inscribed 'Curriculum Vitae in pictures (Friedel).' This envelope – part of the Siegfried Kracauer estate – is the only reference to such a CV. It promises a pictorial biography, and hints, in bearing the affectionate nickname of the renowned theorist, that this might afford an intimate glimpse into his everyday life. For Zinfert, the intriguing, unfulfilled inscription 'invites one certainly to try a reconstruction which can, however, hardly be undertaken seriously.' Her fascinating, if purely hypothetical, recreation of the envelope's possible contents accompanies a recent collection of Kracauer's writing on photography.

That a piece of office stationery, mere folded paper, indexed and filed within an archive, should conjure up an imaginative, even fictive, construction of a life in pictures, speaks to a certain productive tension at work in Thomas Demand's 'Daily Show.' For it is not easy to say whether Demand's *Dailies* have more in common with the photos that presumably once occupied that envelope, insofar as the series originates in images the artist had accumulated on his smartphone recording details of his daily passage through the world; with the speculative reconstruction of Kracauer's missing life in pictures, insofar as *The Dailies* are not Demand's smartphone pictures themselves, but – in keeping with the procedure for which the artist is renowned – records of short-lived, 1:1-scale paper constructions made solely for the purpose of being photographed; or even with the envelope itself, insofar as *The Dailies* are also paperwork of sorts, and invite imaginative elaboration rather than directly delivering a portrait of someone's life. Just as Demand's *Dailies* are painstakingly produced through the dye transfer process, with its successive layerings of colour, so they are layered in their exposure to each of these possible takes on the daily lives of images.

Kracauer's well-known 1927 essay 'Photography' worries that photographic technologies threaten to supplant the meaningful (but partial and non-linear) relation of human memory to its objects with seamless (but ultimately false) documents of spatial and temporal continuity. Perhaps Demand's 'history' pictures subject photography precisely to the partialities, omissions and elisions of memory – not only the artist's own, but those of the culture at large too – and in so doing offer a possible answer to Kracauer's concerns. *The Dailies*, however, are

aguably closer to Kracauer's observations in a later, less anxious text, 'On Yesterday's Border' of 1932, in which he writes glowingly of how the earliest photographs turned the camera on the trivial and mundane 'to save the transient and not to make it eternal to excess'. To save the transient in photography, then, is not to take it outside time or life, but to picture it *as transient*; to leave it, as it were, unfixd. Photography might minister to lived experience, not just administer it, Kracauer seems to allow, on the condition that it confines itself to the 'possible meanings' of 'inessential phenomena', and refrains from portraiture in particular. Demand's quotidian subject matter in *The Dailies* suggests an affinity with those first photographs, albeit that any notion of saving or redeeming the minutiae of contemporary everyday life remains in question here.

The 'daily' appears in *The Dailies* as at once the disenchanting life-world of the daily grind and as the locus of a non-administered spontaneity or errancy that emerges in the informal materials and practices of everyday life. Paper – the ubiquitous, adaptable 'Zelig of all materials,' as Demand has observed – is the perfect vehicle for this complex take on the daily, since it stands in the cultural imaginary at once for abstract possibility; for note-taking, drafting and other impromptu or ephemeral gestures; and equally for making things official, fixed and archivable. Paper was indeed 'the foreground and background' of the 'Daily Show,' thanks to the use of a specially-produced wallpaper, the pattern of which was itself derived from folded paper. A surprisingly rich recent literature on paperwork has shown the formative role of bureaucratic materials, practices and habits in the construction of politics and daily life alike. Cornelia Vismann's *Files*, for instance, outlines the gradual miniaturisation of the apparatuses of state bureaucracy, to the point that they now fit – in the form of the smartphone, for example – in one's pocket, as so many digital files and folders. Ben Kafka's *The Demon of Writing* contributes the important insight that paperwork remains subject to the same inadvertency, errancy and overdetermination as any other human construction: it is inevitably full of gaps, losses and projections. Demand's 'Daily Show' intimated that photography, a special form of paperwork, still invites us to imagine sharing a life in pictures (as the empty envelope in Marbach does), even as the lives of pictures seem to leave paper behind.

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