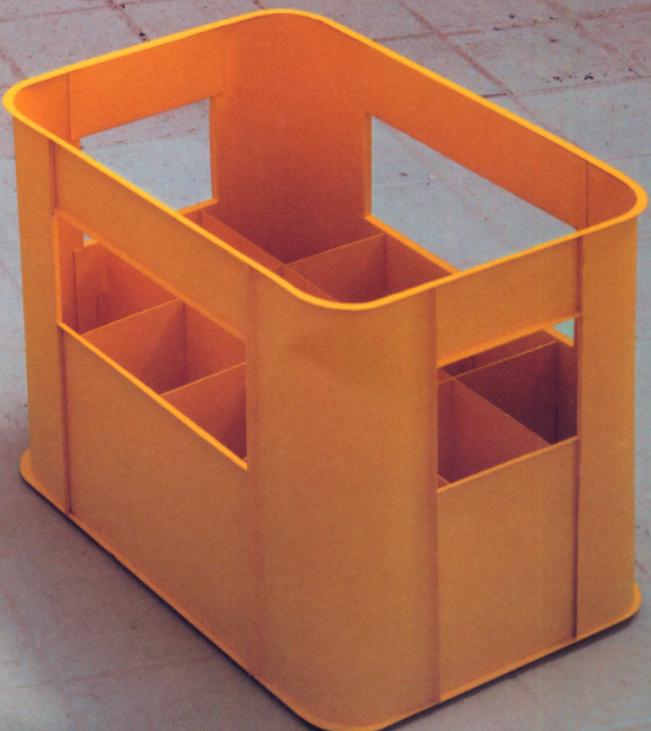


art on paper



thomas demand's education

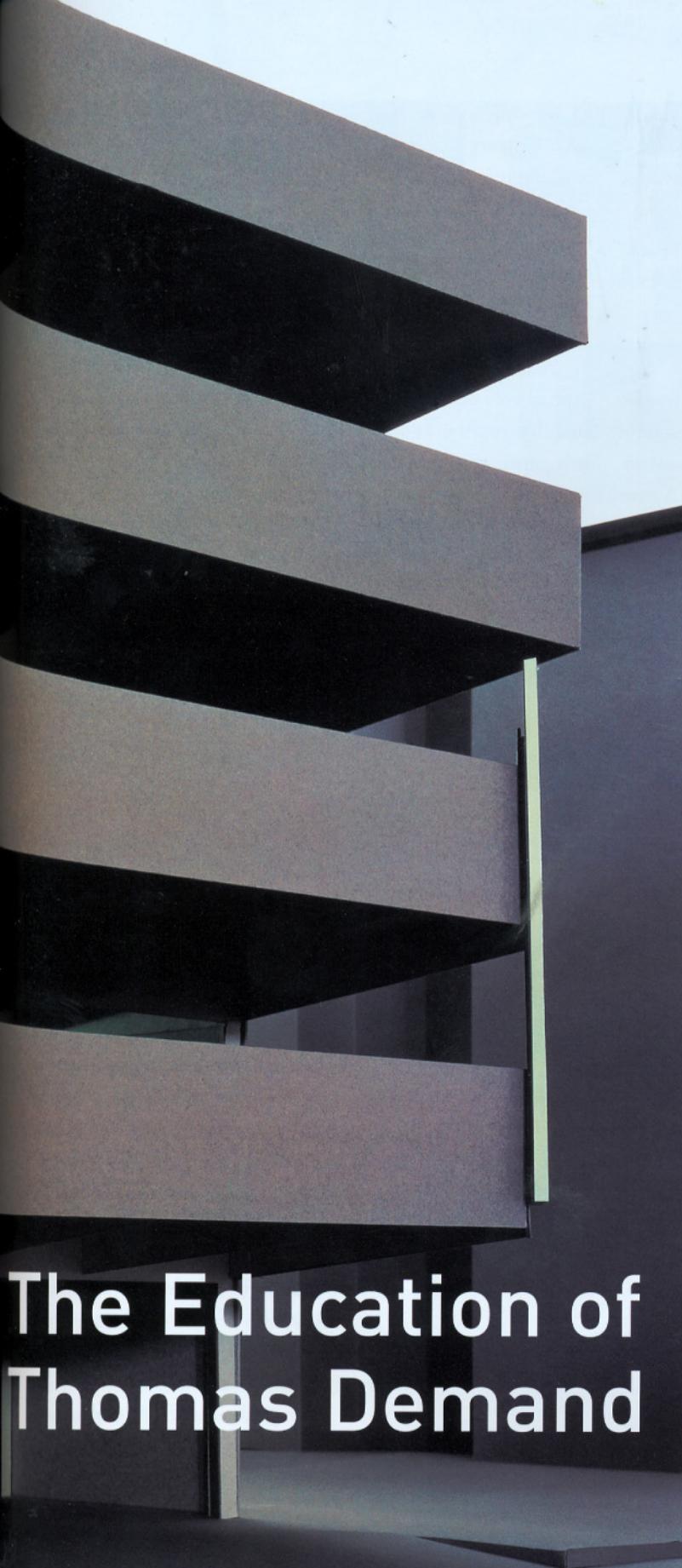
New Paper Sculpture
The Timeless Chris Ware
Abstract Photography





Parking Garage, c-print on diasec
(53 x 65 in.), 1996.

All images © Thomas Demand,
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Courtesy of 303 Gallery, Victoria
Miro Gallery, Esther Schipper,
and Galerie Monika Sprüth.



The Education of Thomas Demand

This Berlin-based artist used his training as a sculptor to give new meaning to the making of a photograph.

by Brett Littman

"Thomas Demand: I think that photography is less about representing than constructing its objects. That's one of the central points in my recent work: to reconsider the status of the image by producing one particular moment of perfection."

—“Vik Muniz and Thomas Demand: A Notion of Space,”
conversation in *Blind Spot*, no. 8, 1996

Thomas Demand does not take photographs—he literally builds them. Although he has received wide recognition as a conceptual photographer, it is important to note that his initial training in art school was as a sculptor. A new survey of his photographs and films, now on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (March 4–May 30), offers an opportunity for a deeper look into his sculptural use of paper in creating his artwork.

Demand studied at Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Germany, from 1989 to 1992, working closely with the peripatetic sculptor Fritz Schwegler, not the influential documentary photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, as one might suppose. Schwegler, who is trained as a master carpenter, is known less outside of Germany for his own interdisciplinary output than for his influence on several higher-profile sculptors, among them Thomas Schütte and Katharina Fritsch. Under Schwegler, Demand start-

ed working with architectural models and paper to construct environments and installations. “I choose paper because of its accessibility: it's an ‘open’ material,” said Demand to Francois Quintin on the occasion of his exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. “We all have the same memories of paper, and I can use your experience to make you understand what I am saying.” His handcrafted paper models also point to the influence of his grandfather, who was a model maker and architect, as well as his own explorations of the Bauhaus and its material-based conceptual core curriculum. “At a certain point in my career, I realized that paper is a very good signifier of itself, because although it is paper, you understand it more as a representation of paper made out of paper, rather than paper itself,” he has said. In his sculpture, he began to explore the tenuous relationship between reality, material, and collective memory. The use of photography during those years was only a means to document these works before they were destroyed or damaged in his studio.

While in graduate school at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Demand began to change his ideas about the relationship between his paper sculptures and photography. The groundwork for this shift was laid at the Kunstakademie during a visit to Bernd and Hilla Becher, whom he had approached for suggestions on how to take better photos of his models. They recommended that he study photography for three years and become an art photographer. Rather than follow their advice, he

poured his energies back into his sculpture, experimenting with how to create paper sculptures specifically for the camera. He would first build a sculpture to represent the form, and then translate that form into a new sculpture to accommodate distortions produced by the camera lens. These second sculptures became the basis for a hybrid work that existed somewhere between photography, painting, and mixed media. Goldsmiths College, where artist Michael Craig-Martin fostered an environment of post-medium experimentation, supported his interdisciplinary proclivities.

After graduating from Goldsmiths, Demand moved back to Germany, to Berlin, where he found a large studio in a building where Tacita Dean and Olafur Eliasson also worked. The studio was big enough to allow him to create a series of 1:1 scale paper sculptures



Escalator, 35mm projection (includes DVD, 35mm film, archival Digibeta master); continuous loop, 2000.



Space Simulator, C-print / Diasec (118 x 168 in.), 2003.

specifically created for photography. Works such as *Studio View* (1994) and *Car Park / Parkgarage* (1996) represent early attempts to recreate everyday spaces through photographed paper constructs. In a conversation with Vik Muniz in *Blind Spot* magazine in 1996, he said, "My so-called models are mostly life-environments. In the usual small model, you tend to realize what you know already; there will be no corrections, you just fulfill your plan. Full-scale, on the other hand, has its own reality, its own gravity and stubbornness, and you are confronted with problems of proportion, form, and other sculptural concerns—it's very different. The concept of constructing realities in the studio is much stronger than faking things for the camera. They are genuine sculptures documented."

Studio View presents a small carton on the floor of an otherwise empty room. In the background, one can see the seams of the wall and, on close inspection, the creases in the paper near the floor. Demand makes it clear that he wants us to see the trace of his own handiwork in the image; however, he says, "I don't cut paper on purpose so that you can see how it was cut. But it is true

that at every stage I can choose whether or not to leave these visible flaws. Over time I have developed a more acute sense of this kind of subtlety. That, maybe, is the perfection my efforts are directed at."

Demand has only exhibited a sculpture once, in a show organized by Francesco Bonami in Turin and has vowed to never show any again. In 2001, he explained to British photographer Jason Oddy, "I don't want to emphasize any sculptural quality by showing the sculptures, because it is not the real point. It may be part of the process, but it is not the end of the process. It would be like showing a half-finished canvas." Nonetheless, it would be interesting to see the paper sculptures exhibited alongside the photographs; we could then see just how close they really are to what we see.

Brett Littman is an art and design critic based in New York. He is also the senior administrator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a MoMA affiliate.