



Thomas Demand  
Space Simulator, 2003  
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Bonn / PICTORIGHT Amsterdam  
Courtesy Sprüth Magers

# Real Memories

An Interview with Thomas Demand

by Catherine Somzé

A photograph can look deceptively real. In the case of the photographs of Thomas Demand (1964), the “real” appears to be a model that, in its turn, happens to be based on a picture. Academically trained as a sculptor and a self-taught photographer, Demand came to fame in the mid-1990s with handcrafted life-sized cardboard and paper models, which he photographed and later destroyed. At the beginning of his career, he based most of his work on pictures culled from newspapers and other media sources that spoke to recent modern culture and history, German and beyond. Over the years, he expanded that repertoire to include his own pictures, taken daily, in the manner of visual notes. The resulting works are fittingly titled *Dailies*. He also creates stop-motion animations as well as concepts for whole exhibitions, such as *The Boat is Leaking*. *The Captain Lied*, which drew viewers into a whole environment.

If Demand diversified his output, the artistic strategy behind it remains consistent. For every picture taken, a model is made that is not an exact copy of its original. Details are left out and the visual properties of the paper and cardboard, along with the chosen printing method, endow the final work with specific aesthetic qualities. With every translation comes a slight distortion, so that the picture becomes further removed from its original — like the story in a Chinese whisper game.

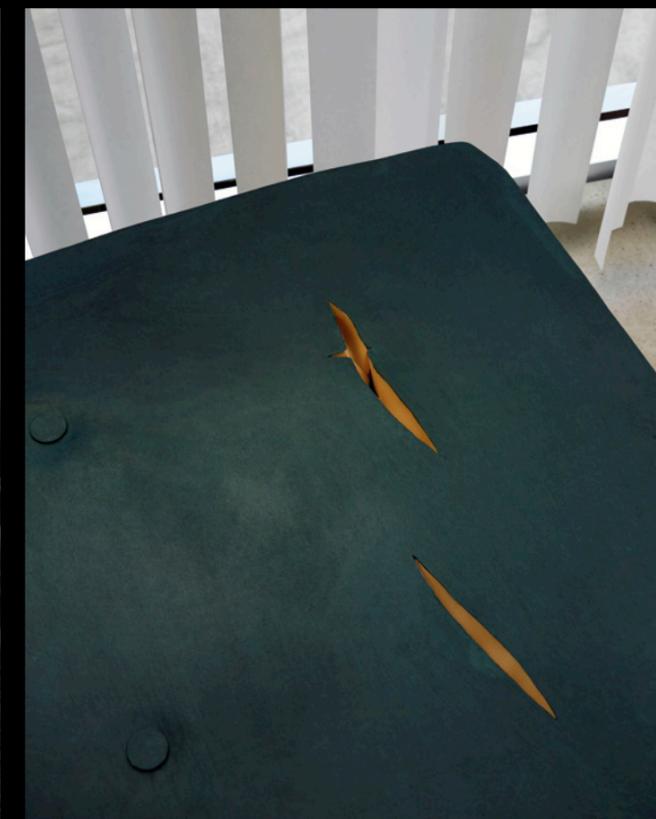
A striking effect of this process is that representations associated with laden subjects, such as the failed murder

attempts on a Baader-Meinhof prosecutor, and Hitler, become devoid of drama and forensic specifics. The pictures, which were always devoid of human presence, now also exhume a sense of unavoidable doom and uncanny conformity with their emphasis on even surfaces and archetypal forms, the whole further underscored by generic titles such as *Office* and *Clearing*. Not unlike a memory or a dream, Demand’s photographs appear real but also give hints about their fabricated nature. Demand talks to ZOO about the ideas behind his practice, the construction of memory and the value of fake.

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Daily #30, 2017  
© Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst,  
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Daily #30, 2017  
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Thomas Demand  
*Folders*, 2017  
125 cm x 195 cm  
© Thomas Demand, VG Bild-Kunst,  
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Thomas Demand  
*Lichtung (Clearing)*, 2003  
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**Catherine Somzé: You became famous in the mid-1990s for works based on archived images of cultural and political relevance. Today, your interest seems to have shifted to daily life. Why?**

Thomas Demand: I don't make pictures about the world. I make pictures about pictures. In a very simple way, I am making the world for the pictures. What I'm talking about is our use of images. The questions I'm asking are, for instance, how much detail in a picture do we need in order to remember something? What happens with memory when all what you can remember are pictures? We've gone from an era in which text and what I would call "objective photography", such as photojournalism, have become less important in comparison with "subjective" photography with the advent of social media. Nowadays, the part of communication that's based on personal images is getting much more important than the kind of collective material I grew up with, and which I referred to in my early work. The shared codes of culture previously carried through news media and other "objective" outlets have increasingly

been replaced by an emphasis on the personal. As an image maker, that's the field to which I can contribute now, and that's what I like. This is why I started making small pictures that constitute the basis for the ongoing *Dailies* series.

**CS: Is it a coincidence that you started making these around 2010, the time you moved from Berlin to L.A.?**

TD: I had said what I needed to say in the context of Germany. After my mid-career survey exhibition at the National Gallery in Berlin in 2009, I didn't want to repeat myself. Also, the exhibition wasn't representative in the sense that it was a specific selection of works that dealt with Germany in particular. My primary concern was never about those topics alone, but about questions of communication as they relate to image making.

**CS: But how do you decide on specific pictures to use?**

TD: It's always easier to say afterwards because when you make work, you merely have a feeling

of what you are looking for. There are always a couple of elements that return in my work, though. One is the idea of the model, which, in the case of my practice, is a representation of a reality but filtered, with certain omissions. Models can have all kinds of qualities, but they always lead back to the idea of memory, which itself leads back to that of history — personal and global. My work is about the overlap between the two, because memory doesn't discriminate; it blurs the boundaries between the important and the futile, the collective and the personal.

**CS: And how did that play out in an early work such as *Zimmer* from 1996, for instance, which was based on a picture of the studio of Richard Vorhölzer, the urban planner of postwar Germany?**

TD: When you talk about models, you start talking architecture. Scientists also build models but for some reason I never found proper scientific models to work with. The architect's office also has something else: it's like an artist's studio, it's about having and developing ideas, it's about

intellectual rather than material production, and if it's a good picture of a studio, it has this kind of aura of a place where you become inspired, where things can happen. This is what that picture had done for me. Then I wanted to get my hands on an original print, which I never managed to do, but found out in the process that my grandfather, who had been an architect himself, had worked closely with Vorhölzer. That's when I realized I really wanted to work with that picture and started building the model.

**CS: Why are scale models such important props in your work?**

TD: Architectural models are very often about representation. They are there to impress clients, but that's not why I'm interested in them. In the case of *Zimmer*, I wasn't concerned about whether or not this was a great building, for instance, but it was more that I was looking at a space where people sit and make a drawing or try to find a solution for an architectural problem. It was not about showing, it was about conceiving.

**CS: Scale models also have strong connotations to childhood and innocence lost, which seems quite relevant given your grandfather was an architect.**

TD: I know, and I guess if I had a shrink, I should talk with him about it and how I'm compensating this with my work. No, I'm joking! [Laughs.] Of course, I grew up with scale models, but the models I make are not smaller, they are life size. Because my experience of the world is 1:1, so I always try to avoid scaling things down. I mean if you do a tower, I guess there's no point in trying to build it 1:1, but other than that I'm trying to build an environment, which is somehow believable and somehow not. The believability of it or the convincing quality of it has to be present as well as its artificiality.

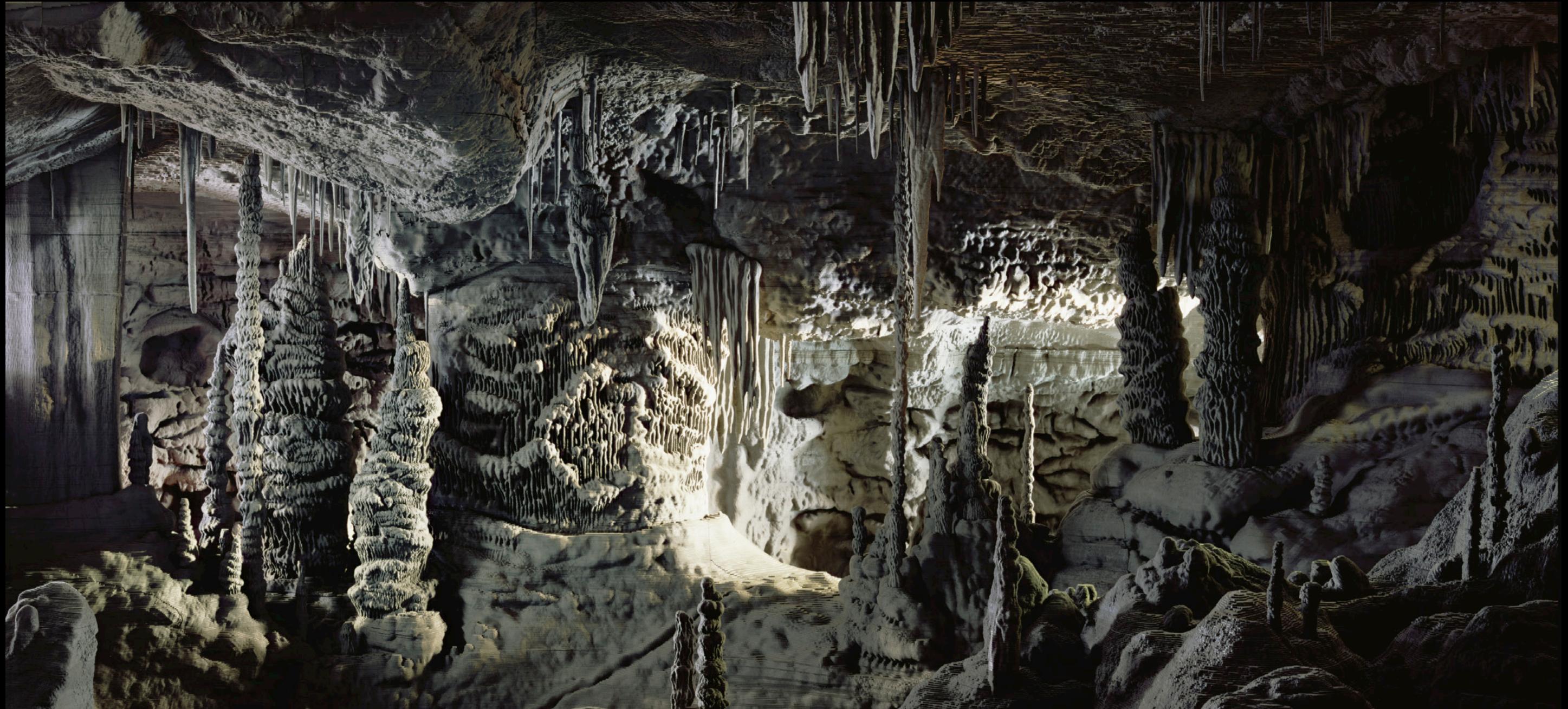
**CS: But this is not the most efficient way to obtain the result, is it? You could play with the power of photography to make things look bigger than they are in reality.**

TD: But I would know. Photography is such a quick medium that the lack of time invested in

the making process often becomes a topic of discussion in itself, whereas that wouldn't be the case with painting or a sculpture. It doesn't matter to a painter or sculptor whether it took five hours or five days to make a work. If it takes me three months to build a model, then that's what it takes. I don't have an issue with that.

**CS: Isn't there a kind of challenge in that as well?**

TD: Sometimes, I just want to know whether it would be possible to do something. *Space Simulator*, for instance, required building an eight-meter high model with a staircase and very intricate forms. I was thinking, 'I'm not sure I can pull it off, but I would like to try at least'. Then sometimes there are banal things that are so difficult to model, such as a simple piece of lawn. It took me a week to make a piece of grass the size of two stamps, and a month to make it into an A4 size of paper. There's a little bit of sportsmanship in there like, 'that would be cool if I would manage to do this'. And then sometimes you've invested so much time in it



that you think, 'no, I'm not going to give up on that!' And then at some point, it's there, and it's unique because nobody else would have done it, everybody else would have said, 'no, I can do this on a computer!' [Laughs.]

**CS: But then you destroy the models once you've taken the picture!**

TD: With the exception of the model of a grotto on permanent exhibition at the Prada Foundation in Milan, and which is made out of solid cardboard, which can be expected to withstand the trial of time under the right preservation conditions. But more generally, my work is the result of a process and I hope viewers imagine that process as much, and as long, as they look at the pictures. When you look at the photographs, you see it's a fabrication. Besides, the models were never meant to last. At the beginning,

I had a super small apartment but I was making sculptures, which take up a lot of space. When you make sculptures, you are always in need of more space, and if you can't afford it, you end up in your living room surrounded by your own work and nothing else, which is quite sad. So I had to find an alternative solution to renting storage. That's when I decided I would make things I could easily redo if I needed them. And in the beginning, I really thought: if I ever have a show, I will just make the work there, go to a local paper store, bring my scissors and just make the thing. So in the set-up of the work, the temporary nature of the models is already there.

**CS: This process of destruction embedded in your artistic production also mimics the workings of memory.**

TD: We would lose our minds if we would

memorize everything! Memory is a kind of filter because we don't need all that information in order to identify a thought. It is also much bigger than we know, and much smaller than what we experience. It's always in movement, but where something is lost, something is also gained. When I change little things in the building of my models, the representation might lose some details but gain in iconic quality, which the original probably didn't have. So, in a way, the models are always true, even if they are not "right" in the sense of an exact copy. In the German language, we have a lovely distinction to make that point between *Wahrheit* and *Wahrhaftigkeit*. In English, it translates as "truth" and "truthfulness", although the fine line between them has become a little shady since Trump. But this is exactly the mechanism of fictionalization that I'm fascinated with and that I keep coming back to in my work.

**CS: For a decade or so now, you have started creating environments to frame your pictures using wallpapers and stage design. Why do you keep on adding layers to the process?**

TD: What I'm trying to do is expand the boundaries of the artificial environment into your head; it's not only a picture on the wall, but the space in between the pictures. It's very much about how to elongate or to make an environment that kind of wraps around you. When you leave the exhibition space, the best thing that could happen is that you view the world with different eyes, which is what often happens with art, it teaches you how to look. If that works then that's quite an achievement, I think.

**CS: But there's also something restless about this need to further complicate things.**

TD: Well, one is not always optimistic about one's

own work, that's part of being an artist. Sometimes, I think, 'Oh man, I'm never gonna have a better idea or something'. You think you run out of reality. But then, Donald Trump gives a press conference in which a stack of folders that supposedly contains his business plan is repeatedly used as evidence of his integrity, but then the folders turn out to be empty, just blank paper. I mean, this is a fantastic gift! Sometimes you just have to sit there and wait and reality has amazing surprises for you. It's not only that I want to try to move on with the work, but it's also the work, which moves on too; it brings out things, which we didn't find important in the first place, and they turned out to be amazing!

**CS: Are you saying that Trump is a source of inspiration?**

TD: He erases the value of fake. All I do is faking,

and then here you have a president of the United States and he is totally working that way!

[www.thomasdemand.info](http://www.thomasdemand.info)

Thomas Demand  
*Grotte (Grotto)*, 2006  
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View of the exhibition  
*The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.*  
Fondazione Prada, Venice  
13 May 2017 - 26 November 2017  
Photo: Attilio Maranzano  
Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Thomas Demand  
*Ruine (Ruin)*, 2015

[Previous page](#)  
View of the exhibition  
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Fondazione Prada, Venice  
13 May 2017 - 26 November 2017  
Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti  
Courtesy Fondazione Prada

Thomas Demand  
*Werkstatt (Workshop)*, 2017