

# SEANKELLY

Mac Giolla Léith, Caoimhín. "Candida Hofer: 'Candida Hofer: The Atmosphere of Absence,'" *American Suburb X*, 2005.



## CANDIDA HOFER: "Candida Höfer: The Atmosphere of Absence"



Much has been made of the absence of people from Candida Höfer's photographs. How the empty halls, silent lobbies and unpeopled rooms might set us dreaming uneasily of a world bereft of human beings. How these vacated interiors, which she has been photographing assiduously since the late 1970s, hint at the trauma of an interrupted narrative, but tell us little of what may just have happened, or what might be about to take place. This vaguely melodramatizing tendency in the literature on her work is by no means predominant; but it is prominent enough. Its dubious effect is to edge her work towards a corner of contemporary visual culture in which it is somewhat out of place. The apocalyptic strain in popular cinema has, after all, provided us with plenty of images of that moment, seconds after some unspeakable catastrophe, when the mass of humankind has been erased from the planet, leaving its once bustling civic spaces forlorn and attendant. Yet, while Höfer's interiors may on occasion exude a sense of melancholy or disquiet, there is no sense in them of desolation or definitive abandonment. Careful scrutiny of these images of ordered, but never immaculate spaces inevitably reveals the tell-tale marks of wear and tear left by the people who occupied them so recently. There is nothing in these images, or the way they are presented, to make us imagine that those same people, or others like them, will not do so again quite soon. It is just that for now these spaces are empty.

Besides, the prohibition on people is not absolute, and breaches occur here and there. A few diners tarry in half-deserted restaurants in Cologne or Düsseldorf; a group of shadowy workers toil in the gloom of a

Munich construction site; a sprinkling of engrossed researchers are dotted about the cavernous interior of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. These stray souls are, however, the exceptions to the rule. This has not always been the case. Höfer's earliest series of photographs, from the late 1960s and early '70s, are of passers-by on the streets of Liverpool, and Turkish immigrants in the cities of Hamburg, Düsseldorf and Cologne. In retrospect, however, these series seem like false trails or cul-de-sacs within the wider arc of her oeuvre, regardless of their intrinsic interest and indisputable quality. Even in the most ostensibly intimate of these early photographs there is a sense of distance and detachment about Höfer's nonetheless observant gaze; a suggestion that she might ultimately be more at home with subject matter that does not move around and cannot talk back. (The high visibility in recent decades of photographic practices that marry immersive engagement with a skewed subcultural anthropology merely emphasises this aspect of her temperament.) Since the late 1970s humanity, both individual and collective, has usually been evoked in Höfer's pictures by metonymic indirection in the form of the recurring motif of the empty chair, sometimes pictured in relative isolation, but more often in rows or stacks. Those few human figures who still haunt the margins of her vision are held firmly at bay and are treated no differently than the statues that are featured more often, especially in recent years. They are, in Jan Avigkos's apt phrase, 'minor intrusions into the self-contained lives of undemonstrative places'.<sup>1</sup> In a similar fashion, the doleful exotic animals who inhabit her images of zoological enclosures seem barely more animated than the stuffed exhibits in the natural history museums she has also chosen to portray. So, in the world as viewed by Candida Höfer, life may appear reduced, constrained or entirely evacuated. But perhaps life, as we cherish it most, simply happens elsewhere, or at another time. The types of architectural space to which she is repeatedly drawn, after all, include no permanent homes, no private dwellings. They are, without exception, public, or semi-public places that have been constructed for specific purposes; spaces in which we may expect to linger a while but not reside. They are, moreover, places that tend to favour anonymity over familiarity, strictly functional interaction over intimate rapport.

The library, the museum, the archive and the zoo are particularly favoured locations. Repositories of information and laboratories of classification, they are monuments to a fundamental desire, which has been gathering pace since the Enlightenment, for a systematic knowledge of our environment, past and present. As such they are apt subjects for an art that is itself wide-ranging and, to some degree, systemic. In this regard Höfer's pedigree and credentials would appear to be perfectly in order. As most commentators have noted, she is heir to a remarkable tradition in twentieth-century German photography, from the pioneers of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) in the Weimar years, in particular August Sander's lifelong ambition to create a photographic typology of the German people, to the endless architectural typologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher, her tutors at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, whose influence is still so evident on the work of a number of her equally illustrious, if slightly younger contemporaries. And yet, the points of divergence between her work and that of these strong precursors are as noteworthy as the points of convergence. The Bechers, for example, continue to insist, as they have done since the late 1950s, on a fixed, centrally located viewpoint, identical lighting and a uniform format for their photographic taxonomies of industrial architecture. For much of this time they have also preferred to present their framed photographs in regimented grid formation, effectively curbing any desire we might have to find a particular grain store, water tower or house type uniquely interesting. Within the bounds of the individual image, and in the larger scheme of exhibition display, Höfer allows herself a far greater freedom and openness to nuance, to the unforeseen poetry as opposed to the perceived or superimposed regularity of her chosen sites and subjects. Though she habitually works in series, hers is not, in essence, a serial art. Thoughtful and thorough though they are, her photographs of libraries, museums, archives and zoos are neither systematic nor relentless enough to suggest any underlying critique of tyrannical administrative systems or bureaucratic authority, or of the totalitarian intimations of the will to comprehensive classification. For every classically staged exercise in perspectival symmetry there is a more off-centre view that nudges our gaze diagonally across a room toward a disregarded corner, simultaneously drawing us into the picture and inviting us to look around and savour the quirks and oddities of the place. Höfer has an undeniable feeling for places, for their implicit emotional freight as much as their explicit documentary interest.



Often these vectors collide to compelling effect, and this suite of photographs taken in Dublin in 2004 is no exception. It would not be unreasonable for the casual viewer to treat these painstaking images simply as a meticulous photographic record of places of considerable significance in Irish cultural history. Each of the interiors she has photographed are housed in buildings with rich accretions of historical import. Building work began in 1680 on the Royal Hospital in Kilmmainham, the earliest of the British hospitals for old or disabled veterans, reflecting an age of intensive military activity. The Dublin building preceded London's Chelsea Royal Hospital by two years and its principal exemplar was Les Invalides in Paris, built by Louis XIV during the previous decade. As the architectural historian Christine Casey has noted, the vast contrast of its Renaissance form with that of the late medieval fabric of seventeenth-century Dublin makes it a seminal building. 'Little wonder that it was the most illustrated building in early views of the city. It was such a sight that in 1684 a rule was introduced forbidding residents to accept gratuities from visitors who came to see it.'<sup>2</sup> Having undergone several restorations during the course of the following three hundred years, in 1990 the Royal Hospital was remodelled for use as the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Rather than focus on any of the designated exhibition spaces, however, Höfer has chosen to photograph the large dining hall, decked with royal and official portraits on its upper walls, and two of its adjoining rooms. One of these, the spectacular chapel with its ornate oak reredos, has been described as the best surviving seventeenth-century interior in Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

Three of the other Dublin interiors photographed by Höfer are in eighteenth-century buildings of comparable historical significance. Marsh's Library in St Patrick Close was built in 1701–3, extended in 1710, and was subjected to further alterations in 1863. Conceived as a public library by Narcissus Marsh, former Provost of Trinity College and Archbishop of Dublin from 1694 to 1703, it is a relatively plain building whose interest today derives primarily from its contents, a collection of over 25,000 books relating to the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, covering medicine, law, science, travel, navigation, mathematics, music, surveying and classical literature. The Old Library in Trinity College Dublin, built in 1712–33, is the largest and most imposing building in the College. It houses the

magnificent Long Room, one of the grandest interiors in Ireland, exceeding in scale even Christopher Wren's great library at Trinity College, Cambridge. The Merrion Hotel occupies the site of Nos. 21–4 Merrion Street. Nos. 21–3 Merrion Street were built sometime before 1762 and No. 24 was built a few years later. Formerly Mornington House, the latter was reputedly the birthplace in 1769 of Arthur Wellesley, the First Duke of Wellington. Finally, the National Library and the National Museum were built in 1885–90. They were designed to flank Leinster House, the largest and grandest eighteenth-century townhouse in Dublin, originally built for the 20th Earl of Kildare and now housing Dáil Éireann, the Irish Parliament. These pendant buildings are described by Casey as '[two] busy and colourful classical set-pieces that at once demonstrate their authors' discomfiture with a Palladian brief while revealing an impressive command of the picturesque. They are the outcome of two successive competitions: in the first all premiated designs were by English architects, a result which provoked public outcry.'<sup>4</sup> The National Library and the National Museum, along with the Museum of Natural History and the National Gallery on Merrion Square, today form a constellation of national cultural institutions arrayed around the seat of central Government.

If the genesis of the National Library was marked by the rising tide of nationalist sentiment that ultimately led to an independent state, the recently reconstituted Merrion Hotel and the thriving Irish Museum of Modern Art, which hosts this exhibition of Höfer's photographs, are testaments to the unprecedented economic prosperity of Ireland in the 1990s. Much of these buildings' recent history is registered obliquely in Höfer's imagery: the brand new carpet covering the expansive dining hall at IMMA, for long neglected and now a popular venue for banquets and other events, providing the expanding museum with welcome revenue; the portable projection screen and carefully arranged tables covered in crisp white linen in a sumptuous conference room at the Merrion Hotel, awaiting the arrival, perhaps, of an eager band of Celtic Tiger entrepreneurs. Such socioculturally telling details are made readily available for our perusal; but they are hardly the point of these exquisite pictures, nor do they seem to be the focus of Höfer's most abiding interest. She seems more obviously taken with the pleasing formal geometries and contrapuntal play of diagonal ladders amid the vertical stacks of the Old Library in Trinity College, or the almost comical severity of a rank of white marble busts of great men lined up along the length of the library floor behind an incongruous cordon of silver stanchions and red velvet ropes. Like any good library or museum, Höfer's photographs facilitate a careful examination of the contents they so judiciously frame, but they also encourage the eye and the mind to wander. These images seem born more of curiosity than wonder, and attuned more to formal poetics than to cultural politics. As Michael Diers has observed of an earlier series of works shot in Hamburg, these pictures, for all their specificity and detail, are not intended to be representative of their particular geographic, sociocultural or even architectural milieu. They are photographs from Dublin rather than of Dublin.<sup>5</sup> As such, they quietly take their place within the larger framework of Höfer's ongoing investigation of the pictorial atmospherics of absence.

1 Jan Avigkos, 'Candida Höfer', *Artforum* (November 1990), p.164

2 Christine Casey, *The Buildings of Ireland: Dublin* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2005), p.674. The summary account given here of some of Dublin's most notable historical buildings is entirely indebted to Casey's invaluable and comprehensive guide.

3 Casey, *Dublin*, p.678

4 Casey, *Dublin*, p.479

5 Michael Diers, 'A Physiognomy of Public Interiors: Notes on Candida Höfer's City Images', *Candida Höfer: Hamburg* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2002), p.11