

SEAN KELLY

McCormick, Carlo, "Frank Thiel: Void Territory," *Camera Austria*, 2006.

Camera Austria

FRANK THIEL: VOID TERRITORY

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 10.3. – 15.4.2006

by Carlo McCormick

Emptiness is something. Nothingness occupies its own kind of space. Absence however, is a very definitive mark. Frank Thiel, who has long suffered an unhealthy fascination with the inter-zones of Berlin's fitful rebirth, has to date made a prolific body of photographs on the problematics of disjuncture along the fault-lines of Berlin's reunification. As simply a shift in subject – from the construction that sprouted in the vacancy around the former borders to the deconstruction of the vacancy in regions now defined by their disuse – Thiel's most recent work addresses the schism as the surface of neglect. As for content, the artist remains consistent in his employment of pictures to articulate the critical and social issues inherent to change. We might say however that what has so far been quite literal is now more poetic. It is as if Thiel has ceased to view emptiness as an optimistic promise and must now regard it as the physical evidence of failed opportunity.

As chaotic a concerto on silence as John Cage ever wrote, and as rife with surface noise as Paik's »Zen for Film,« Frank Thiel focuses his acute eye for detail on the de-evolutionary nature of what remains when humanity has left the building. Make no mistake about it – this is virtuoso work. Beautiful in a way that you know will make rich people dig into their pockets, but haunting if people such as this might have a conscience. These pictures are absolute hybrids of seamless perfection. Not only is content submerged by effect, but also this is as close to pure

abstraction as the most attentive realism of photography can get. And surely in that old dialectic between photography and painting, how much more painterly can you get than when the photograph is of nothing more than peeling paint. It's all so clever in so many ways that are disturbingly close to calculating, one might likely feel some unease towards their seductive force. But what makes this work so formidable in the scope of decade-plus tenure as a photographer of considerable art market attention, is that if his previous work could, for all its emotional force, leave some cold, there is a visceral punch here that outright wallops the senses.

Frank Thiel's »Void Territory« is the topography of indifference measured as a kind of psycho-geography for the social and political upheavals of human consequence. In his statement for the Sean Kelly exhibition Thiel refers directly to Berlin, the physical and metaphorical source of these photographs. »The city that suffers from an overdose of history«, he describes it, »yet it does not suffer from its sediments like other European cities, but from the consequences of its eruptions.« What he documents so matter of factly then, how the elemental forces of water, temperature and time work organically upon the industrial surfaces of abandoned factories, is a micro model for the broader force of trauma registered in the rash folly of Germany's militaristic culture of atrocity in the Twentieth Century. This bit of abstraction is key. We still get a full whiff of the melancholia and sentimentality that closes around the broken promises in Thiel's art like a brave soldier's wound, but it's just hard enough- no soft focus here – that the edges still slice through any haze of time. And yet that very matter of being so micro, versus the macro tendencies of so many of Thiel's most



FRANK THIEL, *Stadt 12/22* (Berlin), 2005. Framed C-print face mounted on Plexiglas. 246 cm x 184 cm or 139 cm x 105 cm.

Courtesy: Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Galerie Krinzinger, Wien.

prominent piers, is what oh so discretely makes his pictures warmer than »German Photography.«

Rather than loss, Thiel's emptiness never quite looks all the way back. It's more askance, history as intuited knowledge rather than absolute fact. That is, looking here as we do at the walls of factories that have served absolutely no function for going on a decade and a half, the point is not the former but the pressure points of waiting for an unexpected future. This peeling paint is more than simply the scars of abandonment it is the rough texture of contemporary economic conditions. This is not the kind of urban renewal that calls for a new coat of paint – there's no money to even tear down these buildings let alone rehabilitate them. If Thiel started with a premise that the challenge was an opportunity, that by examining the hand of privatisation of public land we could come to some understanding on how urban spaces can be filled with something that truly

serves the needs of the people, the void we fall into here is not one of accelerate change but of slow motion cessation.

Berlin is not so much destroyed by its past as crippled by its future. It is a city in which less than ten percent of its industry remains and freedom means little when it carries a sixty billion Euro debt. Thiel has said his void spaces are »the kind of beauty that the normal eye is too blind to see and is usually abandoned from perception.« It is here then, not in the bustle of a great metropolis but on the peripheries of an industrial wasteland in East Berlin where the media has no reason to turn its gaze, where Thiel reminds us that beauty is itself one of the saddest truths we can ever know. Frank Thiel caught our eye because he understood that when the wall came down we had an unprecedented chance to rethink the city as a whole and to build unity from within the great void in the middle. Having seen this moment squandered, he shows us not the building going up by merely the wall left unpainted. It is upon that humble surface that we can see a map of what happens to a city that is thought of only in fragments by a multitude of private interests: it falls apart.