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MAS CONTEXT

Tracing Intentions
The Photography of Frank Thiel

Untitled (Palast der Republik #35), 2007 (Detail) © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Essay by Krishna Bharathi. Photography by Frank Thiel.

It's not that I have a new intention or idea for every single image. These 20 years of work are like a process, almost organic for me, like the branching of a tree. If you put a timeline on the works you could see that almost everything refers to everything, that I go back and forth all the time, that I intensify certain elements and others I don't follow anymore (at least for a certain time). One observation leads to the next and many aspects run parallel consciously or unconsciously simultaneously. It's the incomplete, temporary, in-between, progressing nature of the things I photograph that mirrors my way in working which is of a very similar nature. [1]
–Frank Thiel

Frank Thiel's photographic work centers on Berlin, an epicenter of weighty social, political, and technical narratives. Whether Thiel documents the demolition of historic GDR era buildings of aesthetic and historic value in their own right, marketing follies superimposed onto actual buildings, or peeling paint in forgotten interiors, his subtle observations provoke insight into universal themes of decay, renewal, memory, integrity and legitimacy within the context of the urban landscape and encourage viewers to engage in a collective imagination beyond local understandings of place.

Although the "detailed details" of technical execution is critical to the aesthetic expression in the imagery he creates, Thiel asserts that it is his preference to speak more generally about the work as a whole as it

"can and should be understood in more than one way," and when left "a little bit open, usually encourages people to do this." [2] Despite the intent here to do just that, that is simply show the images and allow the viewer to draw connections, it is of interpretive use to briefly locate Thiel's efforts in relation to photographers working in apparently similar ways. As the option to view the corpus of his work in its entirety, chronologically and embedded in its historical context is not available here, [3] comparative readings can effectively locate alternate purpose in methodology.

Thiel's work is often grouped amongst a certain set of artists that could be called the German school of large format photography or the Becher progeny. This association might better be attributed to the force exerted by the subject of documentation – the built form, the individual portrait, and their complementary details or essentially, the object of the artists' scrutiny. However, it is the intent behind the gaze that critically differentiates the work. A succinct discussion of Thiel's so-called Becher school contemporaries in large format photography – Candida Höfer, Andreas Gursky, and Thomas Struth – outlines strategic differences that mark their respective efforts.

To date Thiel has primarily focused on aspects of transformation within Berlin and its surrounding locale. This stance varies from Struth whose images intimate objectivity even in his portrait work; from Höfer whose particular interests lie in documenting building typologies more in the tradition of the Bechers; and even also from Gursky's early non-digitally enhanced work that consistently underscores composition and the artist's distance through his high-angle, large-scale panoramas. Highlighting intertwined conceptions of public social space and the built environment are not central ambitions to the work of Gursky, Struth or Höfer, and accordingly, their respective output conveys serene stability. Additionally, in the work of Struth and Höfer although the places, objects and individuals documented, physically extend beyond their image boundaries, the selected scenes appear to reside comfortably within their frames.

Stadt 12/52 (Berlin), 2006 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Annex of the former Preußisches Ministerium für öffentliche Arbeiten (1878-1921), responsible for the railway structural engineering. Leipziger Straße 125, Berlin-Mitte by Paul Kieschke, 1892-94. Empty since the wall came down, now recently sold.

Stadt 5/31 (Berlin), 2010 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Second, Thiel's work encourages symbolic readings into architectural materiality and public space that is largely absent from the visual occupations of Struth, Gursky or Höfer. Although this is salient throughout the work, it is particularly poignant in the close frame imagery of Communist era blue paint peeling in disused buildings; in delicately detailed historic facades whose formerly glazed openings are now boarded with plywood; [4] and in marketing imagery of a poorly photoshopped family of specters that is no less ridiculous than the building façade follies which hang in their vicinity. [5] These images reflect an inquisitive, watchful eye, but also a voice that often articulates a gentle critique. For example in discussing the site selection of the tightly framed images of degrading paint, Thiel explains that he had "always wanted to include the economic reality of the city," and for some time had sought for the correct means of expression. He explains that it was not until he, "started paying attention to these walls and ceilings," in former government and industrial buildings in East Berlin that he recognized that he had "the perfect metaphor for this subject" since these spaces had witnessed "the downfall of East Berlin's industrial sector and the disappearance of a complete political system." [6]

Detail of an investor's digital simulation of a new shopping center at Leipziger Platz (Berlin-Mitte).

Stadt 15/06 (Berlin), 2011 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Digital simulation mounted on scaffolding. Bertelsmann Media Group bought the land with the prestigious address Unter den Linden 1 to build a new representative headquarter in the German capital. The building is a mix of the reconstruction of Berlin's former Stadtkommandantur or city garrison headquarters, which stood on that land historically, but did not survive WWII. This is the modern rear view. During Bertelsmann's annual summer event, a huge party tent was erected behind the simulation. Limousines stopped in front, and guests literally walked through the simulation into the party tent.

Stadt 9/33/A (Berlin), 2001 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Digital to scale simulation, printed on plastic and mounted on scaffolding of the future Berlin Castle. A historic replica in part, located on a significant site, it will replace the Palace der Republik (PdR) that had been constructed by the GDR after the demolishment of the remains of the Berlin Castle.

untitled (Palast der Republik #57), 2009 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Lastly is Thiel's use of the photographer's most expressive multifaceted tool – framing. Here framing refers to the intersectional dimensions that inform photographic judgment, execution and presentation. That is the balance of image content, perspective, scale, technique, as well as physical formatting. It is within this context that the respective efforts of Thiel, Gursky and Höfer diverge. Post-1990s Gursky has come to heavily rely on digital enhancement to achieve his intended scale, color saturation and hyper realistic graphic impact. Alternatively, Höfer initially worked with a 6 x 6 cm middle format camera for an extended period of time, but as quality limitations of greatly enlarging 6 x 6 negatives hindered the ability to print larger exhibition works, she began working with large format cameras. This is evidenced in the format shift of her physical output from square prints to rectangular. Essentially it appears that her use of large format cameras followed the intent to physically print larger scale images, rather than a pointed interest in capturing a wider context driving the equipment change. This is also suggested by the visible thematic stability across the technical change in Höfer's work.

Unlike the diversity found in Thiel, Gursky or Struth's respective efforts, Höfer's work primarily highlights comparative variations in symmetric, receding interior perspectives of voluminous spaces, occasionally employing elevation and detail views. [7] In contrast, the work Thiel, Gursky and Struth mixes image content, perspective and object scale freely. However like Höfer, Struth's alternatively scaled views do not explicitly inform other pieces, and to a certain extent neither does Gursky's imagery, although the sense of infinite immensity in his work is consistent. In Thiel's corpus, the viewing scales of his images are carefully chosen to elicit or extend the perception of the action across multiple frames. The image formats within each series are not always consistent and follow logics of narrative, rather than being strictly technically prescribed. In Thiel's work these interests have directed his progression from tighter frame elevation images of buildings to depictions of larger, more complex scenes where the image construction shifts from a two-point construction to three. In a two-point perspective the viewer is more easily able to imagine the contents of the frame as something or somewhere they might actually encounter at or near eye-level, whereas a three-point perspective from a bird's eye view immediately signals to the observer that the frame allows them access to an atypical viewpoint – a perspective of detachment and visceral oversight.

For example note the framing variations in the demolition images of the Palast der Republik, a significant GDR era building which programmatically embodied its social ideology and possessed architectural value in its own right. [8] Consistent perspectival framings function as narrative devices here. By holding a single element steady across images, attention is drawn to what is animated from frame to frame. Another observable strategy in this series relies on the architectural cohesion shared by the stripped interior steel brace detailing, theatre floor plan and ceiling grid organization that transparently connects the frames as well. Despite public protest, the demolition of the asbestos ridden building proceeded, and the controversial reconstruction of the baroque style Berliner Stadt Schloss or City Palace associated with former imperial Prussian rulers will be rebuilt on the same site.

Throughout the work it is evident that the enmeshed narratives of physical place, materiality and symbolism are articulated by weaving images of the detail, building and urban scales. Yet, Thiel is clear that his ambition is not to exhaustively document an earlier historical reality. Rather his interest is in contextualizing the rapid transformative processes of destruction and reconstruction within the city, by capturing the remains of an alternative aesthetic and social vision. [9] The exploration of robust understandings of place in Thiel's work mirrors the inherent diversity present in experiences shared by many, and has led him to focus on the transformation of key renovation sites within Berlin, a city once physically and formally divided through its architecture. [10] Thiel's examination of the incomplete encourages a curious viewer to delve further in any direction, whether into the past, present or future, and depending on that choice, provides an introduction to a very different understanding of the challenges of the site beyond the technical efforts of construction and demolition. The careful assembly of his work reminds us of what changes in our built environment represent contextually – politically, physically and for the collective. However, it is his long visual engagement in Berlin's particular mix of discursive tensions that grounds Thiel's corpus of work and anchors his distinctively refined, but singularly incisive tone.

untitled (NSA Field Station, Berlin, Teufelsberg #14), 2005 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

untitled (Palast der Republik #33), 2007 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.
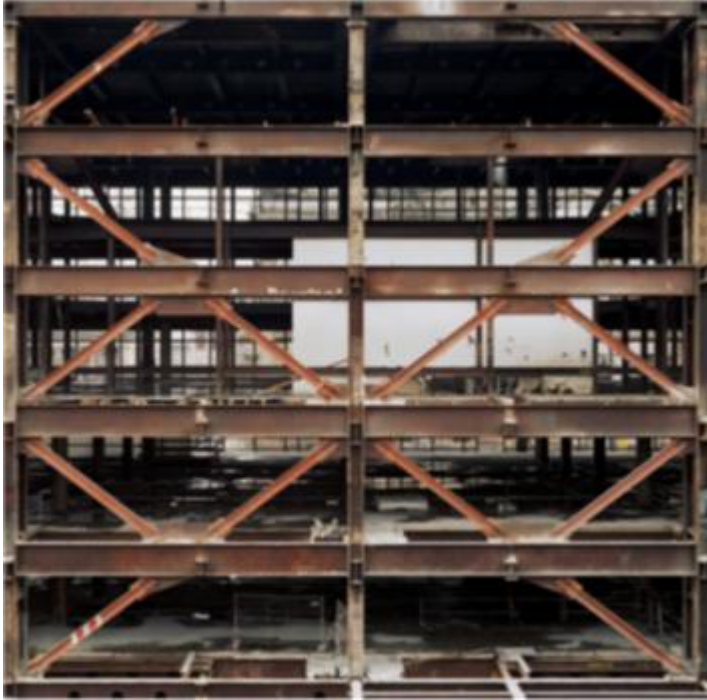

untitled (Palast der Republik #47), 2008 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

untitled (Palast der Republik #13), 2004 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

untitled (Palast der Republik #28), 2007 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

untitled (Palast der Republik #30), 2007 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Stadt 16/01 (Berlin), 2011 © Frank Thiel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Galeria Leme, São Paulo, Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna and Galeria Helga de Alvear, Madrid.

Endnotes

1. Correspondence, July 16, 2013.

2. Correspondence, July 17, 2013.

3. Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid; Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, eds. 2006. Frank Thiel: A Berlin Decade 1995-2005. Hatje Cantz: Wein. 260 pp., 168 ills., 153 in color.

4. Correspondence, July 10, 2013.

5. Correspondence, July 10, 2013.

6. Correspondence, August 16, 2011.

7. Höfer has also shot an international comparative series of Zoo interiors.

8. Correspondence, July 10, 2013.

9. Correspondence, July 10, 2013.

10. Correspondence, July 10, 2013.

Krishna Bharathi is an Indian-born American artist and architect who draws on experience gained from working as both a lead designer and field architect in multiple building typologies and planning scales in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. Krishna has a Bachelor of Psychology from the University of Chicago (1997, Honors) and a Master of Architecture from the University of Washington (2004, Tau Sigma Delta). Currently she is a doctoral research fellow supported by NTNU's Centre for Technology and Society, as well as, the Norwegian Research Centre on Zero Emission Buildings. In 2012 she was an invited exchange researcher to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zürich) under the EU Erasmus Program. She lives in Zürich.

Frank Thiel moved to West Berlin in 1985 and attended a training college for photography from 1987-1989. His work describes a type of architecture in transition; the formation of a new political space within urban structures. However, the narrative of the incomplete – processes of construction over final results, of temporality and change – is present throughout his work. Frank has exhibited extensively in museums and galleries worldwide and his works are included in the collections of many major international museums including the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Museu National Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland; and Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden. Frank Thiel lives and works in Berlin.