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“Candida Hofer: Interview by Carolyn Yerkes,” *Museo Magazine*, 2010.

MUSEO MAGAZINE

CANDIDA HÖFER

Interview by Carolyn Yerkes



candida höfer, musee du louvre Paris IX, 2005, c-print

Candida Höfer's photographs of interiors of public buildings have nobody in them but seem portrait-like nonetheless. As in her recent show at Sonnabend Gallery, "Florence and Naples," she titles her pieces after her "sitters," with names referring to institutions such as libraries and galleries rather than people. She tends to shoot each actionless room from an elevated vantage point near one wall so that the far wall is centered within the resulting image; instead of receding into space, the far walls, with such a framing device, seem to project forward toward the viewer. Background spaces become primary subjects.

Höfer groups her photographs into series that have institutional themes as well as geographical ones, but the formal similarity among her images is their dominant organizing principle. One need only compare this year's "Florence and Naples" to last year's "Philadelphia," also at Sonnabend, to see how this general formal similarity overrides any specific concern for place or building type. The continuity within each series—and between different series—depends on the composition of the interior perspective. Höfer maintains this view as a constant in a photographic experiment, a test of the image's ability to represent each three-dimensional space. The emptiness of the rooms eliminates potential distractions, preserving the emphasis on the perspective itself.



David Loggan, view of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, published in *Oxonia Illustrata*, Oxford, 1675, © Trustees of the British Museum



Jan van den Aveelen, view of the Orangerie at Sorgvliet, published by Nicolas Visscher, Amsterdam, 1697(?) © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Rare Book Collection, Washington, DC

These two aspects of Höfer's work, the formally unified series and the emptiness of the rooms, differentiate her photographs from other straight-on perspective views. The technique has been a common means of representing interiors since the seventeenth century, when it often appeared in topographical prints. Engravings like Jan van den Aveelen's *View of the Orangerie at Sorgvliet* (1697) or David Loggan's *View of the Bodleian Library at Oxford* (1675) feature the same balanced recession into space, focus on the rear wall, and exhaustive detail as Höfer's photographs, but they include human figures that give each room a scale. As in Höfer's work, the seventeenth-century prints were produced as parts of larger series devoted to particular places (Oxford University and the gardens of Sorgvliet, respectively), but in those series, the interior perspectives were published alongside plans, elevations, and bird's-eye views. The location itself remains the primary focus of both the single print and the series as a whole; each image is composed to foreground the architecture. Höfer's photographs, however, also use architecture to foreground the composition of the image.

Höfer's compositions include the photograph itself. In her insistently perspectival views, the picture plane completes the image as a structural component of the depicted enclosure. *Musée du Louvre Paris XVI, Peinture française* (2005), part of a series devoted to and exhibited in that museum, emphasizes this aspect of her work. In this view down a rectangular gallery, the side walls lined with paintings extend to the edges of the photograph, their depicted frames abutting the piece's actual one. The picture plane of

the photograph replaces the fourth wall of the gallery, parallel to and analogous with the wall at the opposite side. Made two centuries earlier, Pierre Antoine Martini's etching *Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787* is structured the same way but to a different effect, as the spectators supply a scale to the piece and simultaneously destroy its illusion. By emphasizing their own physicality, Höfer's photographs give virtual heft to a weightless medium. In many ways a portraitist, in this sense, at least, she is an architectural photographer.



pierre antoine martini, exposition au salon du louvre en 1787
© trustees of the british museum

Carolyn Yerkes: Your exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in New York this spring consisted of large-format photographs of libraries and galleries in Florence and Naples. While this subject is not new for you, it seems that you are progressively increasing the scale of your photographs with each series. Some of the prints in this recent show were over six feet wide. What are some of the motivations for this larger format?

CANDIDA HÖFER: I am not sure if the sizes are increasing from project to project, but I am indeed working with large formats over the last years. For this approach with which I have experimented for quite awhile, several developments have come together. In my view, these rooms share a character—as different as they may be among themselves—which invites a slow and careful reading of details distributed over space in shades of light. Also, the technology of making photographs has very much improved over the last years, allowing for an approach that would not have been possible before. I can finally invite people to fully expose themselves to the temptations of a three-dimensional perception of what is but a printed image.

Yerkes: One of the results of the increased scale is that each photograph captures an extraordinary amount of detail. In the photograph *Biblioteca dei Girolamini Napoli I*, for example, the interior view encompasses the entire vaulted gallery space, but the titles on the spines of the books lining the walls are still visible. Can you speak about your interest in exposing the “behind-the-scenes” areas in the rooms, such as the crumbling, awkward way the pediments over the windows join with the wall behind them?

HÖFER: Yes, you are right about detail. As I said before, an exploration into the details, sometimes indeed strange, sometimes ordinary, has become possible. For me, this is not to expose strangeness, or, so to speak, to catch the space at an odd moment, but to investigate the details, their contribution to the overall space, which seeks to organize them, and the shades of light that altogether make up the character of a space.



candida höfer, biblioteca dei girolamini napoli iv, 2009, c-print

Yerkes: Further to this point, the imperfections in the scenes you choose to depict are rendered more evident in contrast to the technical perfection with which you depict them. Can you describe your interest in this contrast?

HÖFER: To render justice to the detail, I have to be precise. About “imperfections,” I am not so sure that I would not use this term here. I would assume this perception is a consequence of the slow reading the images allow. And like slowly reading a text, we now may realize something we had not realized before, a spelling mistake or typographical error. But does this really deeply change our understanding of the text? I think that this is what spaces are about; they unite all this, but they are still stronger than their details.

Yerkes: Do you digitally alter your images? If so, how? What is the goal in these alterations?

HÖFER: Most of the images at *Sonnabend* are digital. I still do analog images, and sometimes I work in parallel. Analog images are usually smaller. In the lab, the process is, however, basically the same, even if working digitally allows more possibilities, which also means working with more conscious restraints. I work to create an image that is composed of my memories of the space when I photographed there, which may have been some time before, depending on my work schedule and the print or prints that come out of the machine. In the prints being spread out before me, color, shape, and geometry obtain more weight. My work then is simply to balance the one with the other in creating an image that, in my view, renders justice to the space, and this then always requires cropping, and occasionally, other interventions.

Yerkes: Many of the galleries and libraries you photograph, especially in this recent series, contain other images of large-format artworks. The photographs taken in the Uffizi, most obviously, include the paintings and sculptures exhibited in the rooms, but the libraries, too, feature elaborate frescoes. In some, every surface in the room is completely covered, either with books or paint. What motivated this emphasis on the artwork-within-the-artwork, this turn away from more austere interiors, which strikes me as a relatively new turn in your work?

HÖFER: I am interested in the presentation of culturally-made objects in spaces—and the spaces themselves as such objects, the presentation of presentation, if you like. There are, of course, special

presentation types for presenting special objects, libraries being such a case. At the same time, there is not only the interplay between the presenting and the presented, but there is also an interplay between the type and the individual space. And finally, this individuality is formed by the cultural environment and the historical period of the space. Making images of spaces is, for me, an exploration of these interplays. In some places, certain historical periods prevail over others, and this shows in the spaces. So, images of Naples and Florence invite a different approach from, for example, images of a Portuguese monastery from a different time.

Yerkes: In the examples I have cited, the rooms you photographed seem to have been chosen deliberately for their contents and for the ways they relate to the institutional theme you were investigating at the time. But you have also, on occasion, collaborated with architects to photograph their buildings—I am thinking specifically of your series on Rem Koolhaas' Dutch Embassy in Berlin, which is the only building featured in the series. Do projects like these change your approach to the subject? Do you consider these projects to be documentary? Do you consider any of your projects to be documentary?

HÖFER: I do not perceive them to be different, it is all about exploring, learning about spaces and functions.

Yerkes: Are there any other architects you would want to collaborate with in this way? If so, what appeals to you about their work?

HÖFER: I always keep my eyes open. I am working closely with Kuehn Malvezzi Architects for my exhibition designs. Showing images of spaces in spaces is, for me, an integral part of my work. And I do like Sanaa Architects' work. It is difficult to dissect and articulate what makes me make such choices.

Yerkes: You are, famously, associated with the generation of photographers who studied with Hilla and Bernd Becher, a group that many associate with a specific style and focus on architectural subjects. How do you respond to such an association? Has there been a conscious process of self-differentiation?

HÖFER: I have gotten used to it. The Bechers' teaching—or rather the conversations we had, because their style was conversational—did not press us into any school. And we have all been different from the beginning. So there was no need for a conscious effort to free ourselves. I assume it is more retrospectively that this school perception seemed to have evolved. We simply enjoyed being together at a specific place, at a specific time when photography as art was no concern for us because it was self-evident.



candida höfer, musee du louvre paris vii, 2005, c-print

Yerkes: One aspect of your practice that stems most obviously from the Becher School is the use of the series, the tendency to maintain the same viewpoint and relative scale across a group of photographs of different subjects, creating a typology. This has been one constant in your work even as it has evolved in almost every other respect—increasing size, new subjects, the addition of color, etc. Why always the series?

HÖFER: Again, I assume this is an observation after the fact, so to speak. I make individual images, which, if seen together in a show or a book, may invite such an interpretation, but I am not interested in any kind of completeness. Each image is, for me, a new inquiry into the relationships of an individual space.

Yerkes: How important will it be to maintain these constants in future projects? What does having established a personal style based on specific formal traits allow you to do? Is this a question of freedom and constraints?

HÖFER: It all depends on the spaces I am going to encounter, the technology that will be available to do my work, and the directions into which my curiosity will lead me. Those are my “constraints.”

Yerkes: Why always interiors?

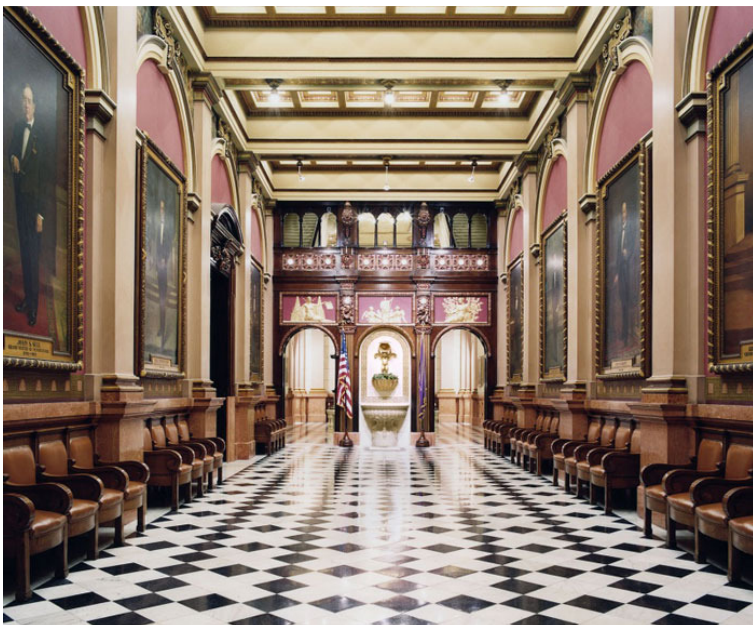
HÖFER: I am not good at landscapes.

Yerkes: Michael Fried recently made your work a focus of his 2008 book, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*. In this book, he argues that contemporary photography engages viewers in ways that previously only painting could, in part because photographs now can be produced at such a large scale and mounted on the wall. If you are familiar with his critique, and with his citation of your work within that critique, do you feel that he accurately captured your project and its goals?

HÖFER: I believe in a sort of separation of labor (or even power) in art. I just do the images. Others do the interpretations.

Yerkes: More generally, when your work becomes incorporated into a critic’s theoretical project in this way, does that kind of criticism, in turn, affect your work in any way?

HÖFER: Not consciously.



candida höfer, masonic temple philadelphia iv, 2007, c-print

Yerkes: In 2007, you took a series of photographs devoted to interiors of Philadelphia. Many of your shows center around a single geographical location in addition to or in place of an institutional theme, and this was, as I understand it, the first time you focused on an American city. How important is the idea of “place” to your work? And—I am curious because I live there—why Philadelphia? Do you have plans to work in a similar way in any other cities in the future?

HÖFER: Philadelphia has been an opportunity. And I do depend on such opportunities because I am dependent on access. But—I think I have mentioned this too—places have their impact on spaces, obviously, by establishing, for example, historical clusters. So with each approach towards the character of space, you also capture something of the place, and the place then becomes more obvious when you group your images from a particular place.

Yerkes: And finally, this interview is taking place by e-mail because you are currently working on a project in China. Can you describe what this project entails?

HÖFER: I am traveling in China and I am keeping my eyes open. There is no concrete project yet.

- REFERENCES -

Founded by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizama in Japan, Sanaa is best known in the United States for designing the New Museum in New York and the Toledo Museum of Art. The Berlin-based Kuehn Malvezzi, founded by Johannes and Wilfried Kuehn and Simona Malvezzi, specializes in museum and exhibition design, including Documenta 11 in Kassel.

Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, New Haven and London, 2008. Fried discusses Höfer’s work in the chapter “Thomas Demand’s Allegories of Intention; ‘Exclusion’ in Candida Höfer, Hiroshi Sugimoto, and Thomas Struth” (specifically pp. 281-294), where he suggests that “a fundamental point of reference for Höfer’s photographs of interiors, whether or not she is aware of it, is the modernist gallery space, which her pictures at once allude to and critique in several highly specific respects” (p. 290).