

SEANKELLY

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PIN-UP

LA DÜSSELDORF



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Candida Höfer returns to her roots in the city that shaped her professional path

Specificity of place looms large in the work of German photographer Candida Höfer. Since the early 1980s, she has trained her camera on buildings and spaces with outsized identities — whether it's the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the Galerie des Glaces in Versailles, the abbey library of St. Gall, or the Yusupov Palace in St. Petersburg, Höfer's best-known subjects are the grand halls of Western culture. Höfer generally shoots these monuments empty, often head on, or at prickly angles that tempt the eye to hunt for order. The results are marvels of technical precision as well as conceptual clarity and rigor, raising questions about the mark buildings leave upon their inhabitants and vice versa. Her work is also strangely paradoxical, amplifying the *genius loci* while rendering her subjects eerily unrecognizable, even to those who frequent them. In Höfer's now considerable oeuvre there is one city that holds a special place: Düsseldorf. She spent nine years there, from 1973 to 1982, initially studying at its famed Kunstakademie under Bernd and Hilla Becher. And it was to Düsseldorf that Höfer, who lives in Cologne, returned again and again over the years to capture local landmarks, including the opera, the theater, churches, museums, private collections, and monuments of Germany's post-war economic boom. An exhibition entitled simply *Düsseldorf* opened in September 2013 at the city's Museum Kunstpalast, and included

many lesser-known works from the 1970s, such as footage from a Roxy Music concert or a short film with British artist Tony Morgan (*Da Forno*, 1975, which shows a surprisingly giggly Höfer at a local ice-cream parlor). The subjects in the show — which has since traveled to Austria, Switzerland, and, earlier this year, New York — may be less grand than in Höfer's more famous works, but specificity of place is more than ever the central theme in this photographic love letter to the city where it all began.

PIN-UP: What does Düsseldorf mean to you?

Candida Höfer: For me, Düsseldorf represents the *Akademie* and the memories of my friendships with the Bechers and my classmates. Düsseldorf is also where I lived for a while after the *Akademie*, and the place where I had my first show, at Konrad Fischer. So there's a strong sentimental attachment for me. When I went back for my *Düsseldorf* project, I realized how much my way of working has changed over time. I felt encouraged to continue with what I'd started even before the *Düsseldorf* project: working more with my handheld camera, liberating myself from the organization of shooting projects with my large-format camera. So *Düsseldorf* has been a return in many ways.

PU: In your early years in Düsseldorf, it seems that you photographed as you wan-

dered the streets and explored the city. This seems to have come back again in your more recent work, but with a tendency toward a new abstract language.

CH: Yes it's true, I've taken up the wandering style again, but without giving up on the complex spaces. And yes, those smaller works tend to focus more on details and look for abstract structures. To stay with the reference to language, I see it more as a dialect than a new language. But even if the images of the complex spaces are about detail, their compositions are reflections on basic abstract forms as well.

PU: Would you agree that there's an idealist quality to your work, in the way that you capture the "true" nature of a space, revealing qualities that the naked eye can't see?

CH: I feel "true" is a bit strong. What I like to bring out, if possible, is what I have called the character of a space. For me it seems to be a mixture of the building type, the time period to which a space belongs, and its individuality, even if sometimes it seems to be hardly visible.

PU: Symmetry seems to be another important element. The curator Fanni Fetzer said that your work makes one "look for symmetry in spaces that are clearly asymmetrical."

CH: I think that this is also an effect of the medium. Photography brings out patterns that then guide the viewer to put them back, so to speak, into the image.

PU: Do you look to capture an existing order in a space when choosing a subject to photograph? Or is it you who imposes order on a space, by systematizing and organizing it with the help of your camera?

CH: I think that we three work well together: the order in the space, my sense of order, and the viewer who is seeking out order.

PU: How has technological advancement in photography influenced your work?

CH: I'm not a technology expert, nor am I a technology fanatic. For me technology essentially means that it has to be usable without much ado. This is why I have basically — although not entirely — switched to digital photography.

PU: Did the return to the site of your earliest works in Düsseldorf reignite an interest in working with the moving image, as you did with *Da Forno*?

CH: I've always been interested in moving images, and I've also produced them occasionally. I continue to create projections, and seek to integrate them in my shows. But film, I've found out, is not my way of making images. The sequential photograph in a projection can develop a dynamic of seeing that is different from, and at the same time supplements, the dynamics of the viewer's eyes wandering over a complex image.

PU: You recently let Rui Xavier make a film about you and your work, *Silent Spaces*. Knowing you to be a very private person, it was surprising to learn that you let him film in your home.

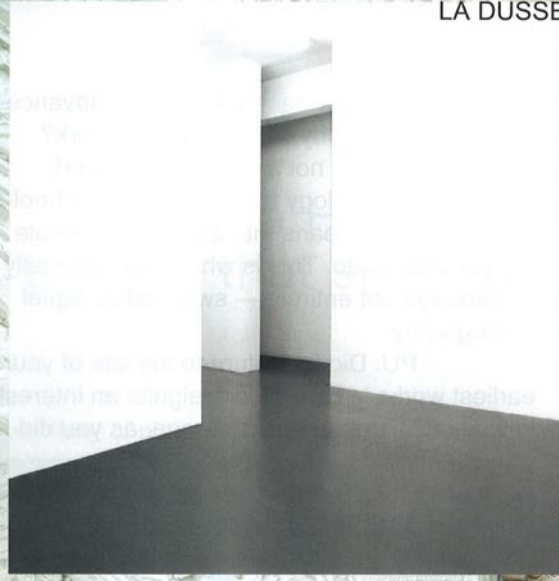
CH: Rui Xavier wanted to do a film on his impressions of my way of working and less about me as a person. He and his crew worked very discreetly. So I had no problems, I hardly noticed them at all. And in the film you really don't know which parts were shot in my house.

PU: Would you ever feel inspired to photograph your own home?

CH: No, not really. I like to keep a certain distance between myself and the spaces I photograph — a sympathetic distance, but a distance nonetheless.

— KEVIN GREENBERG

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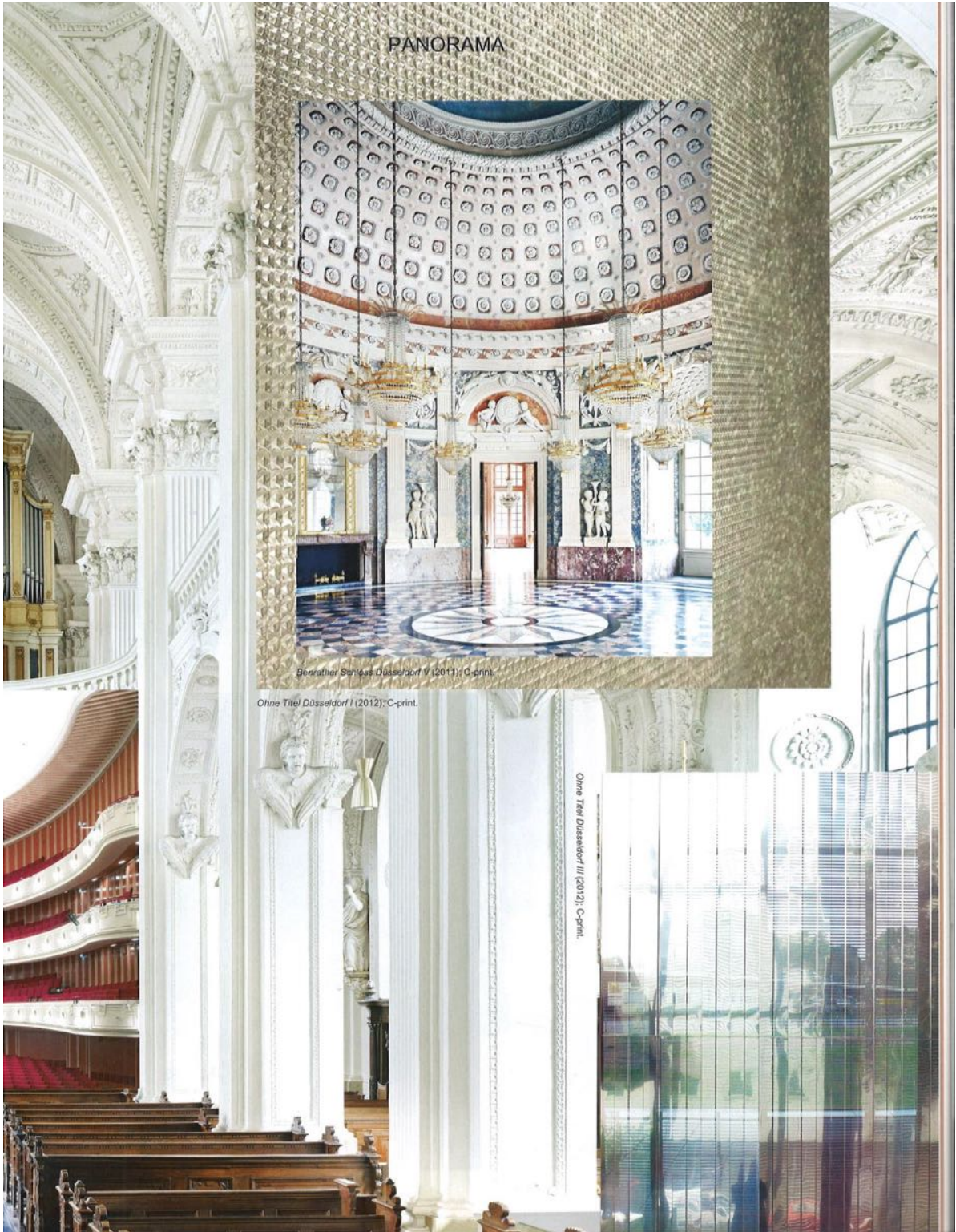
Julia Stöschek Collection Düsseldorf IV (2008); C-print.



Benrather Schloss Düsseldorf I (2011); C-print.



Deutsche Oper am Rhein Düsseldorf (2009); C-print.



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Benrather Schloss Düsseldorf V (2011); C-print.

Ohne Titel Düsseldorf I (2012); C-print.

Ohne Titel Düsseldorf III (2012); C-print.