

# Picturing a Collection

## Presenting a History

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THE COLLECTION OF ROBERT E. MEYERHOFF AND RHEDA BECKER IS A RICH group of pictures that traverses a swiftly changing and complex period in the history of photography. Consisting of thirty-five photographs, it includes celebrated works by nineteen artists: Marina Abramović, Richard Avedon, John Baldessari, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Anselm Kiefer, Louise Lawler, Vera Lutter, Vik Muniz, Catherine Opie, Thomas Ruff, Cindy Sherman, Thomas Struth, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Jeff Wall, and James Welling. It was formed by two people, Robert Meyerhoff and Rheda Becker, who have immersed themselves in the arts for their entire lives. Rheda is a distinguished musical narrator who has worked with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and numerous other symphonies and chamber ensembles around the country for more than four decades. Bob is a businessman who, with his first wife, Jane, spent more than forty years assembling one of the finest collections of postwar American art in existence, with deep, unrivaled holdings of work by Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Brice Marden, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella, as well as exceptional paintings, prints, and drawings by Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Agnes Martin, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and many others. After Jane's untimely death in 2004, Bob stopped collecting, yet he continued to be deeply engaged with art.

Bob and Rheda began to collect photographs somewhat accidentally. Like so many others, Rheda was greatly moved when she first saw Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* hanging in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich in 2004. Yet she was startled when she went from there to the Pinakothek der Moderne and saw Thomas Struth's photograph *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000*, in which he presented himself admiring the same painting she had seen only moments before (pl. 5). In 2006, when Rheda told Bob of her experience and her delight in Struth's perceptive examination of the spectator's place in the museum, he remembered seeing this same photograph on display in New York. Shifting gears from decades of collecting paintings and drawings, Bob resolved to acquire it and together they embarked on a new passion. Although it took them more than a year to find a print of Struth's photograph, that visit to the Alte Pinakothek sparked their interest in forming a collection of photographs.

Every collection, especially a private one, bears the imprint, interests, and values of the personalities who formed it. On the most superficial level, we might assume that Rheda's love of music and performance helps to explain the inclusion of Baldessari's *Conductor/Pianist/Orchestra (Red/Yellow/Blue)* (pl. 19) and Sugimoto's pictures of a movie theater, *Tampa, Florida* (pl. 21), and Anne Boleyn holding a lute (pl. 22). Bob's degree in engineering, his knowledge of architecture, and his business in real estate might also suggest why Wall's *Hotels, Carrall St., Vancouver, summer 2005* (pl. 32),

Struth's *Notre Dame, Paris 2000* (pl. 7), and Welling's *0467* (pl. 24) would appeal to him. The numerous references to other artists and works of art—from obscure Renaissance portraits to celebrated paintings such as Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*—that appear in many of the photographs, especially those by Lawler, Struth, and Sugimoto (pls. 20, 2–6, 22), must surely have intrigued and delighted both of them, who have spent their lives going to museums and looking at art. But more fundamentally, every collection also grows out of a profound love of the objects themselves, and thus each picture was chosen primarily because of its individual power. They “fell in love” with each work of art, as Rheda explained, and “decided quickly with mutual enthusiasm and the desire to acquire it.”

The Meyerhoff-Becker Collection, though, is more than just a group of pictures with personal meanings to their owners; it is an intriguingly complex and telling collection of photographs. Perhaps one of the first things we notice on looking at it as a whole is that it has a remarkable diversity. Reflecting our new global society, nine of the artists were born in Germany and six in the United States, with one each born in Serbia, Brazil, Japan, and Canada. Ranging in age from fifty-two to eighty-five, four were born before World War II, six during or immediately after it, and nine in the 1950s or 1960s. Thus they matured during different periods in the tumultuous twentieth century: either in the mayhem of the war, its bleak aftermath, or the chaotic social and political unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s. Unlike earlier photographers who were often self-taught or served as apprentices to learn their craft, all but one attended art schools, and not all were trained as photographers; indeed, not all would consider themselves as such. Several studied painting, sculpture, or film, while those who went to school during the experimental 1960s and 1970s—when conceptual and performance art reigned supreme—often taught themselves how to photograph to record their other work. For almost all of these artists, photography made “an entrance by a sort of side door,” as Wall has phrased his own embrace of the medium.<sup>2</sup>

Several of them, including Gursky, Höfer, Ruff, and Struth, are closely associated with the Düsseldorf school of photography, a group who studied with Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and were deeply inspired by their sober, unsentimental pictures of industrial architecture and the conceptual rigor of their typologies. Others, such as Lawler and Sherman, with Baldessari as a predecessor, are part of the “Pictures Generation,” whose name derives from a 1977 exhibition at Artists Space in New York City of a fundamentally different group of artists who appropriated images from the mainstream media and often staged recreations of them. Several more, such as Abramović, Demand, Lutter, Opie, Sugimoto, Wall, and Welling, while influenced by the ideas of these two groups, were not part of either one, nor do they easily coalesce into another unit of their own. And even the members of the Düsseldorf school, the group with the largest presence in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection, have matured into artists patently different from one another and from their teachers, the Bechers. Moreover, many other prominent members of both the Düsseldorf school (Elger Esser, Axel Hütte, Simone Nieweg, Jörg Sasse, or Petra Wunderlich) and the Pictures Generation (Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, David Salle, Laurie Simmons, or Michael Zwack) are not represented in the collection.

The history of the formation of the collection is instructive. Bob and Rheda acquired the thirty-five photographs over the last nine years, purchasing from two to seven per year. Demonstrating a purposeful, methodical, and studious approach, they obtained multiple works by certain photographers—Demand, Struth, and Sugimoto, for example—deliberately and over time, rather than all at once. They also maintained a consistent breadth of focus instead of concentrating first on one school or group before

moving on to another. In 2007, for example, the first year they began collecting photographs, they acquired four works by members of the Düsseldorf school (Höfer, Ruff, and two Struths) and three by artists unaffiliated with that group (Baldessari, Sugimoto, and Wall). Another year, 2010, saw the purchase of an equal number of pictures, again almost evenly split between the Düsseldorf school and others (two by Struth and one by Ruff, with one each by Abramović, Demand, Kiefer, and Muniz). With two-thirds of the pictures made in the last fifteen years, the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection is especially rich in contemporary photographs. But Bob and Rheda also reached back in time, grounding their most recent art with important precedents from the past. Almost every year since they began to collect, they have added works from the 1970s (by Sherman and Sugimoto), 1980s (Sherman, Struth, and Sugimoto), or 1990s (Baldessari, Demand, Ruff, Struth, and Sugimoto). Each year also saw the acquisition of pictures with a range of subjects from architectural studies, cityscapes, landscapes, portraits, and still lifes to pictures by Lutter and Welling, whose subjects can best be described as meditations on the practice of photography itself. And, although Bob and Rheda met some of the artists and befriended a few (such as Höfer, whose work they helped to arrange at the George Peabody Library and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore), they did not seek to make the acquaintance of all the artists in the collection, nor did they purchase only the work of their friends. All of these factors make clear their intense focus and their determination to acquire specific works by specific artists.

In reflecting on the collection, we should also remember that both Bob and Rheda know that the cumulative power of a group of pictures is far greater and can tell us far more about the art and culture of the time than any single object by itself. The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection also evidences a similar catholic approach, with works by both those dedicated to abstraction, such as Ellsworth Kelly, Brice Marden, and Frank Stella, as well as those who almost always included the figure in their paintings, like Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>3</sup> Yet together, those pictures provide an exceptionally rich account of the evolution of mid-twentieth-century painting. Rheda, too, from her work as a narrator performing scores that merge music and words to bring forth the beauty of both media, is keenly aware of the ways in which seemingly disparate works of art can enhance one another when they are brought together in new groupings.

What, then, ties these artists and this collection together? What are the ideas, as the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé once wrote, that “split up into a number of equal motifs [and] rhyme” throughout the collection, binding it into a cohesive whole? And what do these concepts and concerns tell us about the evolution of contemporary photography? We might start to answer these questions by looking at several pictures made at key moments in the last forty years. Through them, we can begin to get a sense of the deep engagement that the artists in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection have with history and see how they have drawn on the art of the past to invent a new course for contemporary photography in the twenty-first century.

Bernd and Hilla Becher’s *Water Towers* (1972–2009, pl. 1) and Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still #4* (1977, pl. 17) succinctly illustrate the two ideas that dominated photography in the late 1970s and 1980s: the photograph as a document, a record of the world, a trace and direct imprint of it, and the photograph as a picture, a work of art unto itself. This understanding of the dual nature of photography has, of course, existed since the medium’s invention in the late 1830s, as artists, scientists, and others examined its nature and sought to determine its most appropriate use. Was it, to use phrases borrowed from two seminal historical figures, the “Pencil of Nature” — a process that

faithfully documented the wonders of the world, as championed by one of its inventors, William Henry Fox Talbot—or the “Hand of Man,” a tool that enabled the creation of pictures in which form and content could merge to create new meanings, as proclaimed by ardent proponent Alfred Stieglitz at the turn of the twentieth century? This debate percolated throughout the twentieth century, and was reignited in the 1960s and 1970s when artists associated with two new movements began to use photography in entirely new ways. The first to do so were conceptual and minimalist artists who sought to throw off centuries-old traditions of painting and sculpture as well as the heroicizing tendencies of art of the mid-twentieth century. Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, and Dan Graham, all key proponents of conceptual art, and minimalist artists such as Carl Andre, prized photography for what they saw as its anti-art properties, democratic nature, and ease, as well as its cool, systematic, and seemingly anonymous mechanical nature. Photography, they thought, enabled them to create neutral, archival records of their ephemeral practices. Exploiting photography in a wide variety of new ways, some conceptual artists projected photographic imagery onto their canvases, others used it in their books or slide shows, while still more transformed photography into three-dimensional sculpture or folded it into their multimedia projects. But all infused the practice with new ideas.

The conceptual and minimalist artists saw a kindred approach in the work and practice of the German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Beginning in the late 1960s, they championed the Bechers’ objective, archival use of photography, often exhibiting or reproducing the couple’s photographs alongside their own art. For more than fifty years, starting in the late 1950s and continuing until their deaths, the Bechers systematically photographed anonymous industrial architecture—blast furnaces, gas tanks, winding towers—and always depicted their subjects frontally, from an elevated vantage point, and with a gray or overcast sky. Deeply inspired by the methodical approach and cool objectivity of earlier German documentary photographers such as August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch, the Bechers did not turn their back on history but rethought earlier precedents by grouping multiple pictures of the same subject, made over several years, into series for publications and grids for exhibitions, as in *Water Towers*. They called these groupings typologies, a concept that would inform not only their own and their students’ work but that of many others for years to come. Using the camera as a tool of empirical verification, they constructed their typologies in order to facilitate comparisons between similar types of structures, often revealing their exceptional diversity as well as the extensive impact they have had on the modern landscape. Many of the objects the Bechers recorded were no longer in use and had been slated for destruction by the time they photographed them, and thus their pictures form an important archive of vernacular architecture of the late industrial era. Yet they also insisted that the objects they photographed were “Anonymous Sculpture” (Anonyme Skulpturen), as they began to call them in the late 1960s. In so doing they linked their work to Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the “readymade” and simultaneously indicated that their focus centered more on the thing they depicted than the picture they created, more on the knowledge to be garnered from their images than the pictures as works of art unto themselves.

The liberating example of conceptual art helped to invigorate and transform photography itself, prompting others to explore new paths. As Jeff Wall, who began his career as a conceptual artist, noted many years later, “when people came from outside the classic domain of photography and started practicing photography . . . they unlocked many aspects of photography that weren’t readily available or had been blocked in a way.”<sup>4</sup> One of those aspects that had been blocked was explored in the Artists Space

show, organized by Douglas Crimp, of the Pictures Generation photographers. “Our experience is governed by pictures,” Crimp asserted in the exhibition catalog, “pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures firsthand experience begins to retreat, to seem more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it.”<sup>5</sup> As has been frequently noted, the artists whom Crimp exhibited in 1977, as well as others who came to be called the Pictures Generation, were the first to have been raised on television and bombarded from their youth with mass-media images that celebrated the new consumer society and showed them how to dress, what to buy and eat, and how to live their lives. Moreover, these artists emerged during a time when not only photography was changing, but identity itself was being rethought. Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and other theorists suggested it was not inborn and innate, but inculcated and deeply influenced by mass media and societal expectations.<sup>6</sup>

Although Cindy Sherman was not a part of the 1977 show of the artists who would come to be called the Pictures Generation, her photographs, especially those derived from cinema, such as *Untitled Film Still #4* (pl. 17), encapsulate many of their ideas and concerns. Drawing on indeterminate imagery that reminds us of movie stills or publicity shots, Sherman staged herself in sixty-nine pictures as a fictitious character in scenarios that resemble scenes from a movie. Wearing vintage clothing, wigs, and makeup, she presented herself in clichéd roles: a smartly dressed young secretary in the big city, a lonely girl on the run. As in *Untitled Film Still #4*, her female protagonist was almost always shown alone and in seemingly unguarded, reflective moments, as if considering the nature of her life and present situation. Sherman was hardly the first photographer to stage photographs inspired by other pictures. Throughout the nineteenth century, as photography sought to claim its place among the other arts, numerous photographers openly quoted paintings in their own pictures. Oscar Gustave Rejlander, a Swedish-born British painter and photographer, for example, based his photograph



fig. 1: Oscar Gustave Rejlander, *Ariadne*, 1857, albumen print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Paul Mellon Fund



fig. 2: Titian, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1560, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection



fig. 3: Walker Evans, *Signs, Beaufort, South Carolina*, March 1936, gelatin silver print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation through Robert and Joyce Menschel

titled *Ariadne* (1857, fig. 1) on Titian's *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1560, fig. 2) to show how the painter had strayed from correct anatomical depiction and prove that photography could render facts more accurately. Nor were Sherman or any of the Pictures Generation artists the first photographers to draw on vernacular culture. Walker Evans, the Bechers, and numerous other earlier twentieth-century photographers had turned to the artifacts of everyday life, understanding them as important cultural evidence (fig. 3). Unlike Evans or the Bechers, though, Sherman and the other Pictures Generation artists saw the vernacular not as a subject matter to be prized, studied, and elevated, but merely as a means to make pictures. Sherman made this clear by purposefully and playfully emphasizing the artificiality of her pictures: she made deliberately rough prints, reminiscent of poor press photographs; she repeatedly posed herself as all the different characters, often with crude makeup or props; and, on occasion, she even included the shutter release cord. Far from documents, Sherman's photographs are pictures that openly acknowledge themselves as such.

Thirteen years later, when Thomas Struth made *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* (pl. 5), the dialogue between photography as document and photography as art had changed and the lines between the two had become fascinatingly blurred. As one of the Bechers' first students, Struth had adopted many of their methodological and stylistic approaches. Seeking to address the culture of his age and the character of individual metropolitan environments, his initial black-and-white photographs from the late 1970s and 1980s depict empty urban vistas and are recorded frontally from a slightly elevated vantage point while standing in the middle of a street (fig. 4). Austere and dispassionate, they strive to be neutral records of fact. But *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* is a different kind of picture altogether. Showing Struth standing near the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer's highly celebrated *Self-Portrait* (1500), this is clearly a carefully constructed photograph about art and its importance to our history and culture. Like a Russian nesting doll, it is also a picture within a picture—in this case, a double self-portrait—that becomes more complex and intriguing as we unpack it.



fig. 4: Thomas Struth, *Dey Street, Financial District, New York*, 1978, gelatin silver print, Courtesy Atelier Thomas Struth

The Dürer *Self-Portrait* is often hailed as a daringly original work, one of the first frontal self-portraits ever made, and a pose previously reserved for religious depictions, especially of Christ. Through his portrayal of himself as an inspired creator and humanist intellectual, Dürer signaled the rising centrality of the individual and the arts in the Renaissance. In the years since, Dürer's bold articulation of himself served as an important touchstone, especially for those artists who, like Struth, came of age after World War II and struggled with what it meant to be a German artist in the wake of the Holocaust. By incorporating Dürer's self-portrait into his own self-portrait, Struth constructed a dialogue with his artistic past, as if to imply that the two artists were conversing across the centuries.

As its title unobtrusively suggests, *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* is also a picture about the relationship between photography and the other arts. Like the other Meyerhoff-Becker artists, Struth matured during a time when the study of the history of photography proliferated in colleges, universities, and art schools, and when museums increasingly exhibited photographs alongside the other arts. This growing exposure to the history of the medium, coupled with the ability to see photographs displayed in new settings, once again raised questions for many about the different ways in which photographers express their ideas from those working in other media.<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on these differences, Struth depicted himself in this picture, which he considers his only self-portrait to date, in a very dissimilar way to Dürer.<sup>8</sup> Standing to the side and seen from the back, he shows only a portion of his torso and jaw—no face or head, no thick mane of curly hair. Even his hand is hidden in his pocket, unlike Dürer's elegant rendering of his fingers that has sparked much discussion about his intention.<sup>9</sup> Partial, out of focus, and seemingly fleeting, ephemeral, and contingent, Struth's appearance contrasts markedly to how he presented the Dürer painting, head-on and in exquisitely sharp detail. By utilizing key attributes of photographic vision—detail, focus, blur, crop, and what Wall calls the “accidental quality” of a snapshot—Struth expanded the dialogue he set up in this picture beyond that of past to present and artist to artist, to one about the relationship of photography to the other arts.<sup>10</sup>

Yet *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* is more than just a picture of a picture or one about the relationship between photography and painting. Measuring more than 62 × 73 inches, it, like many of the other photographs in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection, is big—so big, in fact, that Struth reproduced the Dürer painting almost exactly the same size as the original, while his own figure is much larger than life-size. The scale of the photograph clearly signals that it, like Dürer's painting, was made to be seen on the walls of a museum, not reproduced in a magazine or book (which had been the goal of so many earlier twentieth-century photographers). Its size also forces us to approach the photograph not as a personal object we might hold in our hands, but as a public declaration, like a painting with all of that medium's concomitant authority, seriousness of intent, and presence.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* is in color and face-mounted to a sheet of plexiglass, making the colors appear saturated, vibrant, and glowing. Throughout much of the twentieth century, most photographers who sought to create works of art made black-and-white, not color, prints; high gloss was seen as a sign that a photographic print was a snapshot or made for reproduction, not to be contemplated as an aesthetic object. By the 1970s and 1980s, as technological improvements enabled the production of both more stable color prints and much larger ones, numerous fine-art photographers began to make big color pictures. Color by itself conveys a striking and beguiling immediacy, as it so closely approximates how we see and experience the world. With face-mounted prints that sense of propinquity is intensified, as the colors seductively vibrate with luminosity. More important, large color face-mounted prints like Struth's self-portrait not only seem more lifelike, they also create an odd spatial relationship for viewers. Because *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* depicts objects at their original size or larger, it plays on the confusion in photography between document and art, between what is depicted (in this case, a painting and a person) and the reality of what the photograph actually is (a two-dimensional picture) while simultaneously seeming to tempt us to enter into the picture itself. Both inviting and disconcerting, this strangely destabilizing experience prompts an almost visceral response in viewers, of a different kind and magnitude than we usually have when looking at paintings.

*Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* thus becomes what Jean-François Chevrier has perceptively described as a “tableau,” a picture that is “designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator.”<sup>12</sup> That “confrontational experience” is not new in photography: the desire to transform the act of looking at pictures into a dizzying new experience was the impetus for Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, one of the medium's two primary inventors, to discover photography. Daguerre's diorama, which he invented in the early 1820s, was a theater that displayed giant, 45 × 71 foot translucent paintings that seemed to come to life through varying color and lighting effects, dazzling the audience. Daguerre never succeeded in making photographs as large and as spatially disorienting as the paintings presented in his diorama, but twentieth-century commercial photographers did—in giant billboards and other photographic advertisements, such as the Colorama, an 18 × 60 foot backlit transparency installed in the main arrival and departure hall in Grand Central Station, New York, from 1950 to 1990. But as Chevrier notes, that confrontational experience did not appear in fine-art photography and on museum walls until the late 1970s, first in the three-dimensional light boxes of Wall that assume a sculptural presence and alter the relationship that visitors have to viewing photographs. No longer small or unassuming, no longer intended for reproduction, Wall's light boxes, and, later in the 1980s and 1990s, the supersized prints of Ruff and Gursky (often measuring

from  $7 \times 5$  to  $6 \times 11$  feet), fundamentally changed the dynamics of how and where photographs were viewed and altered the discourse in the debate about them as documents or works of art. This new tableau photograph could, as Chevrier asserted, either spring from a documentary impulse, as in Struth's *Alte Pinakothek, Self-Portrait, Munich 2000* or Ruff's *Portrait (P. Stadtbäumer)* (pl. 15), or from a more purely artistic one; it may be unmanipulated and "straight," as Edward Weston would have demanded, or it may be staged and manipulated. What matters, Chevrier insists, is that the tableau asserts its presence not through its subject matter but as an object unto itself: designed specifically for exhibition, it "affirms its status as an autonomous image" and it "presents more than it represents."<sup>13</sup>

Höfer's *Musée du Louvre Paris VIII* (2005, pl. 10) functions in this way. One of the first of the Becher students to consistently use color, she is known for her rigorously centered photographs of empty museums and libraries. Fascinated by the way the art and culture of the past is made visible in the present in these edifices, she draws on the rich history of architectural photographs. Architecture was a favorite subject for nineteenth-century photographers: it did not move during long exposures and it enabled them to demonstrate the ability of the new medium to record, preserve, and celebrate important historic monuments. The nineteenth-century French photographer Charles Marville did just that when he photographed galleries at the Louvre in 1851 (fig. 5). In addition, by positioning his camera off-center at eye level and using its ability to abruptly crop forms, he imparted a sense of life and immediacy to his picture, presenting the scene as viewers themselves might have experienced it as they walked through the galleries.

Höfer did something quite different in *Musée du Louvre Paris VIII*. She placed her  $4 \times 5$  inch view camera at a slightly elevated vantage point in the middle of a gallery displaying Greek and Roman sculpture. Like Marville, she used mainly natural, not artificial, light, yet few shadows animate her composition, nor do any people populate the scene. Instead, the soft, even light, the insistently perspectival point of view, and even the absence of people all seductively pull us into the composition. As our eye wanders through the surprisingly empty scene we are drawn to a distant window,



fig. 5: Charles Marville, *Salle des Cariatides, au Musée du Louvre*, c. 1851, salted paper print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund



fig. 6: Thomas Demand, *Corridor*, 1995, chromogenic print, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

surrounded by a radiant arch, in the exact center of the composition. Yet oddly, because the window and the luminous path of light leading to it are the brightest elements of the composition, they do not recede in space but come forward to the front of the picture frame. Although Höfer is fascinated with the ways in which art is displayed in museums, she also seeks to heighten the tension that exists in viewing works of art within her own art—“the presentation of presentation,” as she notes. She intensifies these actions of both sucking us into the illusion of three-dimensional space and showing us back to its flat surface by creating large, exceptionally detailed pictures that invite a “slow and careful reading of details distributed over space,” as she asserts, and entice people “to fully expose themselves to the temptations of a three-dimensional perception of what is but a printed image.”<sup>14</sup> Whereas the imprecision in Marville’s photograph (a result of the softness of his paper negative and salted-paper print) infuses the scene with a suggestive ambience and human presence, Höfer’s almost unnaturally detailed prints convey both a sense of abundance and absence, dazzling us with their lavishness but always pushing us back to their surface. Even the one lone shadow of the head and torso of a sculpture on a plinth in the lower left remains firmly on the foreground. In the process, she transforms the architectural space into an impenetrable abstraction: a picture, not a document.<sup>15</sup>

Demand’s *Clearing* (2003, pl. 28) explores this same idea but from a different perspective. Although he attended the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf when Bernd Becher taught there, Demand did not study with him but instead focused on sculpture, making small paper architectural models. Recognizing their inherent fragility, he learned how to photograph in the late 1980s in order to document them, but in 1993 he changed course and made his photographs his finished works of art. Striving to explore shared cultural memories, he appropriates images from news archives, magazines, films, and television programs—often of highly charged scenes, as in *Corridor* (1995, fig. 6), a picture of the hallway in the apartment building where the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer lived and murdered his victims. Demand then makes painstaking, full-size replicas of these pictures using paper and cardboard that he photographs, later destroying his models. Walking a thin line between the credibly real and the oddly artificial, he uses



fig. 7: Thomas Demand, *Clearing*, 2003, installation view, offset print on affiche papier, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

the enhanced resolution and verisimilitude of a large-format camera to simultaneously reveal the strikingly precise details of his constructions (the light switches in *Corridor*, for example) and their artifice (there are no knobs on any of the doors in *Corridor*). By playing with detail and omission, specificity and ambiguity, Demand explores key characteristics of both analogue and digital photography. Our faith in the veracity of analogue photography resides largely in its seeming fidelity to reality, while our apprehension about the deceitful nature of digital lies in its ability to so easily alter facts. Thus in these potent pictures Demand raises questions about the relationship between photography, truth, and image-making while also commenting on the unstable relationship—the “truthiness,” as the satirist Stephen Colbert terms it—between fact and fiction in the twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup>

When *Clearing* was made, it was somewhat of an anomaly in Demand's work. One of only two landscapes and the largest photograph Demand had made to date, it was conceived for his participation in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Unlike much of his other earlier work, though, it is not based on an emotionally fraught historical occurrence but a scene in one of Venice's public parks, the Giardini della Biennale, where the art fair is held. Using 270,000 paper leaves that were die-cut into eighty different shapes, he constructed a handmade forest in a steel frame that measured approximately 18 × 50 × 32 feet. He illuminated his model to replicate the light in the original scene (a feat in itself, as the intense lights threatened to ignite the paper) and photographed it. He then made a huge print slightly larger than 6 × 16 feet, exactly the same size as the original scene. His previous photographs were triply removed from reality: they were photographs of constructions based on photographs of a scene.<sup>17</sup> In *Clearing*, he took his practice one step further: he shipped his print from his studio in Berlin to Venice and installed it in front of the very forest it depicted, thus completing a circle from reality to two-dimensional photograph to three-dimensional construction to a two-dimensional print and back to the thing itself (fig. 7). Even when *Clearing* is separated from its installation in Venice and seen on the walls of a museum, its monumental size and quietly insistent artificiality force us to contemplate it not merely as a straightforward depiction of a real space but as a work of art in itself.

Jeff Wall is another artist in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection who walks the line between art and document, verisimilitude and reality. Although he began his career as a painter, he was drawn to photography as a young student, especially as it was used by conceptual artists such as Ruscha, Graham, and Robert Smithson. He largely stopped making art between 1971 and 1977 and concentrated instead on art history, first studying at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London and later teaching. His first backlit color transparency, *The Destroyed Room* (fig. 8), was made and exhibited in 1978 and was inspired both by illuminated advertisements and commercial window displays of clothing and furniture. In this picture, which is a staged scene of an aggressively ransacked bedroom, filled with premonitions of violence and death, Wall “passed his ideas . . . of the punk phenomenon, which was quickly filtering through the whole cultural environment,” as he said a few years later, “through the historical prism” of another work—Eugène Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 9).<sup>18</sup> Replicating things he had seen but not necessarily photographed, Wall describes this aspect of his work as “cinematographic” to suggest both his process of collaborating with others to make the pictures and also the influence of cinema itself, particularly the work of Luis Buñuel, Jean-Luc Godard, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who moved seamlessly between documentary-style films and elaborately staged ones. Cinematographic pictures give Wall, as he has said, “a certain freedom to then re-create or reshape what I saw.”<sup>19</sup> Freezing a seemingly precise moment in time, some of his cinematographic pictures have a snapshotlike quality but on closer inspection, the action sometimes (but not always) seems too bizarre to be true. Often meticulously constructed, using actors, artificial lighting, and carefully selected props, his strangely resonant pictures suggest a narrative that is never fully explicated and leave viewers wondering what happened in the moments before and after his exposure. As with so many of the photographs in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection, scale matters profoundly in Wall’s work. If his pictures were small, they might seem to have parallels to other staged pictures from the nineteenth or early twentieth century, where photographers like Rejlander conceived and deliberately posed each element in their pictures. The strikingly large size of his images (over 8 × 10 feet), their glowing luminosity as backlit transparencies, and the physical presence of the aluminum light boxes themselves, coupled with the scenes they depict, transform them into an entirely different experience. But they are not big merely to be big or to imitate the other arts. “A sense of scale,” Wall has written, “is one of the most precious gifts given to us by Western painting.” And that scale, he believes, must be tuned to the human body: “The size and scale proper to pictorial art,” he writes, “is the scale of the body, the making of pictures in which objects and figures are limned so that they appear to be on about the same scale as the people looking at the picture.”<sup>20</sup>



fig. 8: Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, transparency in light box, Courtesy of the artist



fig. 9: Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Acquired on the arrears of the bequest of Maurice Audéoud, 1921

Although Wall categorizes many of his pictures as cinematographic, he describes others made from the mid-1980s onward as documentary, using the term as any other traditional photographer, such as Walker Evans or Paul Strand, would have done: these are pictures where he selects the time and place but does not intervene in the site or scene in any way. *Hotels, Carrall St., Vancouver, summer 2005*, is one of those documentary photographs (pl. 32). Showing a sunlit street in Vancouver, the picture depicts a row of buildings, some of which are under renovation. At first glance, the photograph seems oddly simple, a casual snapshot made perhaps from a moving car to note the progress of construction. Yet as we look more closely we see that if it is indeed a snapshot, someone with a discerning eye must have made it. The picture is filled with rectangles and triangles, punctuated by lines, stripes, and cylinders of richly saturated colors—yellow, orange, red, green, and even white (if we may count that as a color)—set against a lush red background that ranges from Bordeaux to burgundy. Stretching

from left to right and top to bottom, the colors and forms make the picture read more like an abstract painting than a photograph; indeed, Wall himself likened it to Robert and Jane Meyerhoff's *Autumn Gold* (1957) by Hans Hofmann (fig. 10).<sup>21</sup> When it is backlit and illuminated in a light box, *Hotels, Carrall St., Vancouver, summer 2005* displays the sort of vibrant interaction between color and form that Hofmann, in reference to his own paintings, described as “push and pull,” energizing the space and “helping with the transference of three-dimensional experience to two dimensions.”<sup>22</sup>

But as with any documentary photograph, this is also a picture of specific objects made at a specific time and place. Wall makes this clear in his title: it is a picture of hotels on Carrall Street in Vancouver, Canada, in the summer of 2005. Although Carrall Street is one of the shortest streets in Vancouver, for much of the city's history it was a commercial hub and connection between several other major points in the city. By the early 2000s, it was a tough area, home to some of Vancouver's trendiest bars and restaurants but also “a stone's throw from . . . junkies and crackheads huddled around doorways like extras from *Night of the Living Dead*,” as a reporter in the *Vancouver Sun* noted.<sup>23</sup> When Wall made his photograph, a project was under way to revitalize the area and transform Carrall Street into a “Greenway,” as the banners in his photograph proclaim. Other pictures painted on the plywood covering the construction site depict a pond surrounded by mountains and trees, perhaps showing how the area once looked when it was inhabited by First Nations people before the intrusion of others. Above the mural, a sign for “Darwin Construction,” the company no doubt responsible for the renovation, suggests that Carrall Street, like everyplace else, is subject to the laws of evolution.

In an essay published in his 2005 catalogue raisonné, Wall reflected on the evolution of his ideas about photography. For a long time, he noted, he thought it necessary “to contest the classical aesthetic of photography as too absolutely rooted in the idea of fact,” too closely linked to a documentary tradition. At this earlier stage,



fig. 10: Hans Hofmann, *Autumn Gold*, 1957, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection

he believed that the way to do so was to make photographs “that put the factual in suspension, while still creating an involvement with factuality for the viewer.” Dancing on the line between fact and fiction, this approach emphasized photography’s relationship with “other picture-making arts, mainly painting and the cinema, in which the factual claim has always been played with in a subtle, learned and sophisticated way.” Initially conceiving of this method as an imitation of the other arts, he came to realize that this “mimesis was of course taking place on the foundation provided by photography itself.” Merging art and document, trace and picture, he eventually saw that “it was possible to turn photography toward itself, as an equal player in the mimetic game. Now I see the possibility of developing a mimesis of photography, as photography.”<sup>24</sup> Skillfully navigating this line between documentary representation and art, Wall and the other photographers in the Meyerhoff-Becker Collection, through their new conceptualization of the medium, their dynamic and innovative exploration of color and scale, and their choice of powerful and provocative subjects, have helped to repurpose, redefine, and reimagine photography for the twenty-first century.

1. Rheda Becker to Sarah Greenough, March 1, 2016.
2. Jeff Wall, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/exhibitions/jeff-wall/themes.html>.
3. See Harry Cooper, “I Think I See . . .,” in *The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection: Selected Works* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2009), 3–5.
4. David Shapiro, “Jeff Wall: Interview by David Shapiro,” *Museo Magazine*, 1999, <http://www.museomagazine.com/jeff-wall>.
5. Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (Artists Space, 1977), 1. Crimp expanded this essay in a later one, also titled “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1978): 75–88.
6. For further discussion, see Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2009).
7. The study of the history of photography as a discipline emerged in the 1930s with the first histories published just before World War II. Although some museums exhibited photographs starting in the first decades of the twentieth century, most did not embrace the medium until the 1970s.
8. Francis Outred, “In Conversation with Thomas Struth,” *Christie’s Daily*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.christies.com/features/reflections-on-the-self-portrait-thomas-struth-6290-1.aspx>.
9. Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago, 1993), 171–176.
10. Jeff Wall, “Marks of Indifference: Aspects of Photography in, or as Conceptual Art,” reprinted in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982*, ed. Douglas Fogle (Walker Art Gallery, Minneapolis, 2003), 39–44.
11. For further discussion, see Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, 2008).
12. Jean-François Chevrier, “The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography,” in *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography, 1960–1982*, 116.
13. Jean-François Chevrier, “The Tableau and the Document of Experience,” in *Click Doubleclick: The Documentary Factor*, ed. Thomas Weski (Haus der Kunst, Cologne, 2006). See also Olivier Lugon, “Before the Tableau Form,” *Études Photographiques* 25 (May 2010): 2.
14. Carolyn Yerkes, “Candida Höfer: Interview by Carolyn Yerkes,” *Museo Magazine*, 2010, <http://www.museomagazine.com/candida-hofer>.
15. For further discussion, see Mary-Kay Lombino, “Inner Order,” in *Candida Höfer: Architecture of Absence*, ed. Constance W. Glenn (New York, 2004), 24–25.
16. Elizabeth Armstrong, “On the Border of the Real,” in *More Real: Art in the Age of Truthiness*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong (Minneapolis Institute of Arts), 48–49.
17. Roxana Marcoci, “Paper Moon,” in *Thomas Demand*, ed. Roxana Marcoci (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2005), 10.
18. Jeff Wall, 1985, as quoted in “Jeff Wall: In His Own Words,” <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/jeffwall/>.
19. Sean O’Hagan, “Jeff Wall: I’m Haunted by the Idea That My Photography Was All a Big Mistake,” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/nov/03/jeff-wall-photography-marian-goodman-gallery-show>.
20. Jeff Wall, “Frames of Reference,” 2003, reprinted in *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Theodora Vischer and Heidi Nael (Göttingen, 2005), 444–445.
21. Wall in conversation with Rheda Becker and Robert Meyerhoff. I am grateful to Rheda Becker for sharing this information with me.
22. Hofmann as quoted by Kerry Rose, “Hans Hofmann,” in *Modernism from the National Gallery of Art: The Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection*, ed. Harry Cooper (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2014), 80.
23. John Mackie, “Carrall Street: Home to Some of Vancouver’s Coolest Bars, a Stone’s Throw Away from Crackheads,” *Vancouver Sun*, October 18, 2008.
24. Jeff Wall, “Three Thoughts on Photography 1999,” in *Jeff Wall: Catalogue Raisonné*, 441.