

THE TERRACE OF 36 BEDFORD SQUARE.

interview with thomas demand.

by s.taher

Thomas Demand rebuilds life-sized cardboard models from pictures and postcards, and then he photographs them. More often than not, the scenes have some cultural or political relevance. There was, amongst innumerable others, *Kitchen* which is based on soldiers' snapshots of the compound where Saddam Hussein was captured, *Yellowwake* which portrays the Nigerian Embassy in Rome, and *Presidency* showing the Oval Office. There is something extremely focused and sincere about the pictures.

In five years of studying architecture my predominant condition has been that of 'the kid in a candy store'. There is so much out there, where do I go first? Not much sincere focus there... then I look at a Thomas Demand and its as if someone has presented me with ONE slice of cake, 'sit down, enjoy it, don't worry about the other sweets right now' it says in a confident voice. The candy store forgotten, I enjoy this moment.

It is a good moment, and I wanted to know more about how it happened. A few emails back and forth, and here we are: me, Thomas Demand, and a little list of questions on the AA terrace...

Sylvie Taher: How did your first photograph come about?

Thomas Demand: It evolved. That's why I am still not completely sure what it is actually. I guess that is why I am still doing it. I started in Dusseldorf. At the time, the leading figures in the art world were people like Katerina Fritsch. You know how it is, there is a winning recipe and everyone follows it. I didn't want to spend my time working on a single piece for six months, which ends up looking like a real thing anyway. Especially not as someone else already did it ten years ago. So I decided to make something which I could do really quickly,

one thing a day, by myself, without a workshop, which I could throw away if I didn't like it. It was only after quite some time, about two years maybe, that I realised that I should document it before I actually threw it away.

ST: Johannes Itten, a famous foundation teacher at the Bauhaus, is reputed to have said that one of the greatest challenges of the artist, and arguably the architect, is in learning to see. Do you agree?

TD: It was also said in the Bauhaus that it's only worth something if you can draw it. Now, this may be a jump in thinking but, I moved from Dusseldorf to Goldsmiths in the early 90's. In Dusseldorf it was very much about an objective vision of the world. So I thought, 'ok we can actually talk about "the table" as iconic, the idealistic concept of a table, and all the other tables are just little bastard children of the great idea of the table'. Then I got here, and realised no one knew what I was talking about. Because here, the history of ideas is not a generalising one. It is an anecdotal one. So it's "a table". Any table is "a table". And I realised that you can choose to bad-mouth the anecdotal, but you can also say that it is much more representative of the world we live in, which is not the idealistic world. It is the watered down version of the idealistic world, in which we can talk about chipped table corners.

ST: In the general theory of the artistic mind, there are two types commonly discussed: there is the fox, whose curiosity spread in all sorts of unexpected directions; and there is the hedgehog, who pursues one subject to its very limit. Do you think its possible to make this clear division between the types?

TD: I don't agree. Because if the fox would talk about the hedgehog he would say 'oh he is only interested in this one thing' and if the hedgehog would talk about the fox he would say 'look I am as curious as the fox, I am only more consistent'. So you just can't say that the hedgehog is linear, or that he is only interested in one thing. Because, to kind of keep him going, he also has to be open.

What I find much more helpful is the comparison by Levi-Strauss about the engineer and the bricoleur. The engineer is someone who thinks the whole process through, he makes a plan for himself and then searches for the tools and materials to execute it.

By comparison, the bricoleur has only a general notion of what he wants to do, and will use whatever he has *at hand*. However, he tries to make it really well. So for me the bricoleur is obviously more intriguing than the engineer. The bricoleur employs a certain creativity in what to use and what he has. He uses the things around him in this world to make something.

Looking back, over the 20 years that I've been doing this, out of my whole generation, there were lots of really good artists. But the ones that are still around are those that took one simple problem and chewed on it for a long time, because they understood the complexity of the idea. Its also a matter of self-confidence. If you think you are a genius then of course the first drawing you do will be the work of a genius, and so you don't have to rework it because it's perfect. But many people don't think they are geniuses. And actually even geniuses will say that its maybe 90% work and maybe 10% ideas. So maybe you just have to get to a point, where you revisit something.

ST: What is the best piece of advice that you have ever received and what advice would you give a young architect today?

TD: I know too little about architecture to give an architect any advice but one of the best and most applicable advices I ever got was... well it's an anecdote. When I tried to get into the academy, the way it was done was you went with your portfolio and showed it to the professors. So one of the professors was this *Fluxus* artist [Fluxus was an international network of artists, composers and designers noted for blending different artistic media and disciplines in the 1960s. They have been active in Neo-Dada noise music and visual art as well as literature, urban planning, architect-

ture, and design]. It was Robin Page, he had a blue beard and his work was absolutely not up my alley. But I thought 'what the heck, I'll go and see'. Anyway, I was sitting there waiting for a crowd of people to all show their work when a girl came in. She showed him these very expressive paintings on an A4 sheet of paper. She was hoping that would work with him, and probably they would have, but he simply looked at it. He took the A4 sheet and turned it around, turned it sideways, and he said 'that is an awful lot of paint for one sheet of paper'.

And somehow there is something really interesting in that, which is perhaps that you shouldn't try everything at the same time. Maybe keep it simple; just try to focus on the one thing, which is somehow really important to you. It kind of gives you guidance, but it also tells you what you can leave behind...

Thomas Demand has left and my questions have been answered, but what of the 'kid in a candy store' condition? Perhaps, unsurprisingly, it is still there — but, with one small addition. I now have three words in mind, which might as easily be about architecture as the art of Thomas Demand.

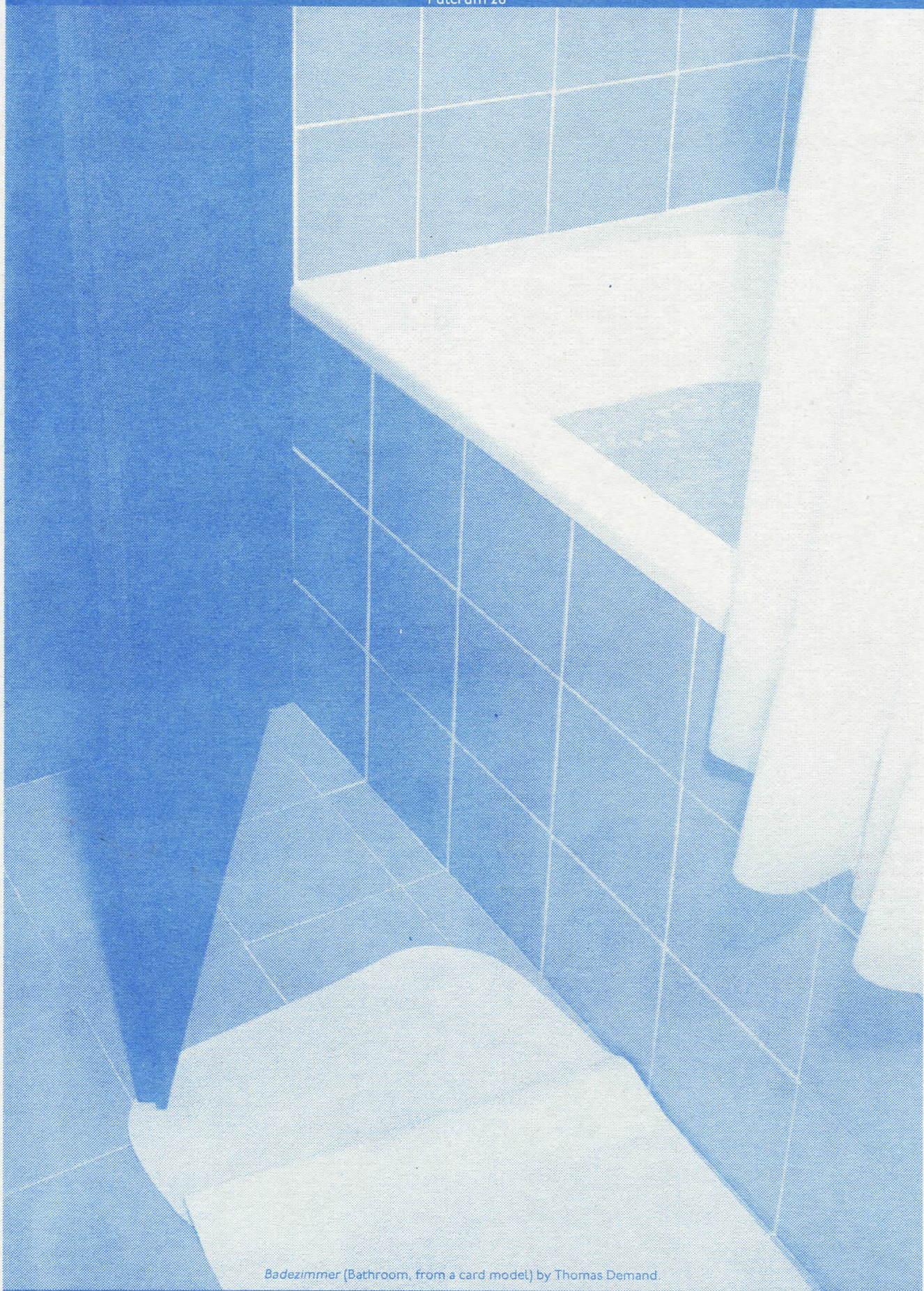
QUICKLY: The possibility of doing a lot in an almost flippant enthusiasm of production. The possibility that this process, the one driven by doing 'quickly' is a revealing one.

ANECDOTAL: The possibility of a world in which 'a' rules over 'the'. A world in which 'a table' is a protagonist, and 'the table', well it simply doesn't feature in the story.

REVISIT: The relief that comes from acknowledging that it's okay to have another go — indeed that having another go is actually part of the process.

So, one hour with Thomas Demand, and the kid in a candy store lives on in me. But now she has three little words of guidance. A good result, by any standards.

Thomas Demand is a sculptor and photographer, and was interviewed by guest editor Sylvie Taher.



Badezimmer (Bathroom, from a card model) by Thomas Demand.