

## The Iron Cage of Boredom

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There is something very straightforward about Andreas Gursky's photographs. It is as though he holds up a peopled landscape or a building or a workplace for our inspection, saying simply, 'here it is'. In a typical view of one factory, *PTT, Rotterdam* (1995), most of the planes of the cubical objects within the box-like space are held rigorously parallel to the picture plane, ensuring the least disruption between subject and frame; to look at this photograph seems at first as natural as looking through a window. These planes are arranged in a pretty pattern and while a person or two leavens the composition—though not so that they really draw attention to themselves—there is no information about what is made here, nor what happens here, nor indeed much sign that anything happens at all.



Figure 1 *Paris, Montparnasse* 1993

Gursky's big, colour images encourage two distinct modes of viewing: from afar, standing in the middle of the gallery, and as we must look at them when reproduced at a small fraction of their size upon the page; or very close up, with our noses against the glass, like nineteenth-century viewers of the first photographs with their pocket lenses. So with *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993), from afar we are presented with the giant patchwork block of an apartment building, and close up with the representation of each little rectangle, in which we can identify curtains and glimpses of interiors with their lamps, chairs, potted plants and easels, and here and there a little figure. The picture seems to present the viewer with the impossible task of reading each detail as though it were a clue to the meaning of the whole.

Two of the most widespread strategies used by fine artists when faced with the embarrassment of photography's indiscriminate recording take opposite forms, though both approach formalism. One does its best to efface the subject while making it clear that there is still some residual mechanical or digital representation involved, while the other embraces objectivity, matching the straightforwardness of the medium with blankness of style. The point may be pressed further if the artist creates many pictures of similar subjects and presents them in a series. The latter is of course the strategy of the Bechers and their followers, who include Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer and Gursky.<sup>1</sup>

While the Bechers will create a typological sequence comprising many pictures, Gursky pursues seriality within a single frame, presenting a series of rooms in the same building, or a large number of similar office workers, or cars or cows or bathers. Even where direct typological comparisons cannot be made, seriality is implied across and outside the frame, as Gursky in picture after picture fixes on grids, internal framing devices and transparent screens. Nothing escapes being fixed within these frames, like butterflies pinned to a collector's box.

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<sup>1</sup> This work is the subject of *Typologies: Nine Contemporary Photographers*, a catalogue from the Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA, 1991.

Within these well-disposed grids nothing much happens, no single element is plucked from its series and no incident is ever fixed upon. The gaze of photographer and viewer remains spread equally over the whole picture: the light is always flat, the colours subdued, and Gursky often takes considerable distance and height from his subjects, pressing them against a single, unified field. Yet his large, populated landscapes often refer to painting, to Brueghel or Claude, so it is tempting to look for some narrative or meaning, especially involving the tiny figures inhabiting these settings. Such readings and indeed any interest in people except as types is deliberately eschewed by Gursky. He has said of the factory pictures: 'I am at pains to make everything look as normal as possible. The people must be neither too beautiful nor too ugly nor too old so that the viewer is distracted by them.'<sup>2</sup> He has also denied that his interest in people is ever particular or sociological, claiming rather that he reflects on the human condition in general.<sup>3</sup>

It is not just people who are nondescript. Gursky takes as his material cityscapes, dramatic landscapes and factories, which have all been the subject of highly-charged representations. Yet here they all seem somewhat boring, or somehow ruined by human presence and human artifacts. In a book which marked the inception of postmodernism, Robert Venturi recommended vernacular boredom over modernist architectural drama, though of course he was sure that the visual apparatus of commerce, like the operation of the market, would tend towards perfection.<sup>4</sup> Gursky's pictures are about boredom; *Albertville* (1992) is a snow scene filled with dark little figures—a Brueghel without incident. A night picture of Foster's Shanghai Bank in Hong Kong (1994) effaces the building's striking structure in favour of row upon row of illuminated offices, uniform and without action.

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation between Andreas Gursky and Bernhard Bürgi in the catalogue from the Kunsthalle, Zurich, *Andreas Gursky*, 1992. Trans. Fiona Elliott.

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Graw, 'Ausflug. Ein Interview von Isabelle Graw mit Andreas Gursky', *Artis*, no. 42, January 1990, pp. 52ff.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, second ed., Cambridge, Mass., 1977.

The staginess of these images seem to reflect more on the artificiality of their subjects than on the manner of representation. Gursky's manipulation of colour has received much attention. It seems that it is greatest in the smaller, earlier works, for instance in *Rhine, Düsseldorf* (1985) where bathers are lost among the scrub grass and stones of the shore, and colour has been drained from the print to make it look like some old amateur snap. In more recent work, colour is subdued but naturalistic, concentrating attention on the colour of the environment, not the print.

There is an absolute concentration, then, on the quotidian and on boredom, but without apparent comment. Gursky's flatness is both formal and emotional, and his pictures seem to be about nothing, or at most about the prevalence of banality in the world. In common with other members of the Bechers school, this very lack of significance, this refusal to have an opinion can stand as a mark of distinction against vulgar snappers, photojournalists and the like. Various writers have supported such a view; Norbert Messler has written of Gursky's 'ironic realism', that magical first word releasing the project from all critique (except the most global), while Lewis Biggs claims that Gursky is basically agnostic towards his subject matter.<sup>5</sup>

Yet having once seen a few of Gursky's depictions of a mass-produced environment and a mass-produced sensibility, you cannot help seeing his subjects everywhere. Gursky has said that although he avoids documentation, 'it is important for me not to omit anything.'<sup>6</sup> Taken from afar, we can read Gursky's work as the ultimate grand narrative, a photographic rendering of the end of history in which the very size of the work becomes a metaphor for the immersive, ubiquitous character of postmodern anomie; equally their very high resolution suggests that this narrative goes all the way down: there is no going around or underneath it. The draining or regulation of colour further reinforces the overall flatness of effect, showing how in commercial culture, where the

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<sup>5</sup> Norbert Messler, 'Andreas Gursky: Johnen and Schöttle', *Artscribe International*, September-October 1988, p. 91; Lewis Biggs, 'Brave New World', in Tate Gallery, Liverpool, *Andreas Gursky: Images*, London, 1995, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Isabelle Graw.

gaudiest of colours are randomly applied, the result is an environment of neutral grey, just as a diversity of incident becomes a static, unified field when viewed from a sufficient distance.

That this colourlessness is universal is strongly implied by Gursky's similar treatment of the worlds of leisure and work, which serve as textbook illustrations to Adorno's arguments about their secret affinity and interdependence in which leisure, only apparently partitioned from work, adopts work's structure and forms.<sup>7</sup> Part of the slow shock of Gursky's work is his use of a highly commercialised medium to present the results of commerce; not the excitement, passion and fulfilment shown in advertisements, but regulation, uniformity, boredom and the ubiquitous ruination of ideal beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> See the essay, 'Free Time' in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, London, 1991, pp. 162-70.



**Figure 2** *Stock Exchange, Tokyo 1990*

People in Gursky's pictures are poor creatures. Viewed from afar, their individuality is lost and they seem to struggle insignificantly against the weight of land or floor, sky or ceiling. These tiny figures indicate, Gursky says, his interest in 'the human species as opposed to the individual'.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes the camera is closer but individuals are lost in a mass which produces uniformity. The blurring of movement caused by slow shutter-speeds is partly a technical imperative, but has the effect of effacing activity, while leaving stasis sharp (this effect is very striking in

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<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Schmitz, 'Neither Murder nor Baptism: Andreas Gursky's Holistic View', in Hamburg, Deichtorhallen, *Andreas Gursky. Photographs, 1984-1993*, Munich, 1994, p. 11.

*Stock Exchange, Tokyo, 1990*) and this happens to suit Gursky's purpose. People are never agents, but rather instruments which react to a certain space, disposing themselves this way and that, involuntarily producing an emergent order which, since it cannot be represented accurately by action and development, is simulated by composition. It is hard to imagine Gursky's human subjects having an internal life; they are entirely the product of Max Weber's iron cage of bondage.

Yet people are hardly marginal to Gursky's concerns since his subject is precisely their universal presence. It is rather that he adopts the view of human products as a whole, instead of their creators, just as Manuel de Landa wrote a history of the evolution of intelligent war-machines from the point of view of the machines themselves, in which human agency was merely one transient phase in a wider story.<sup>9</sup>

Photography cannot escape implication in the universal dominance of banality. A form of evidence tainted by commercial mendacity, its imperfections force it forever to repeat itself. Gursky takes this as a specific theme: 'The composition of my landscapes is oriented towards images of the Romantic period: only the Kodak colours transport them back into the present day'.<sup>10</sup> The average ruination of photography is evident in Gursky's references to amateur practice, certainly in the early work, but even in the quasi-abstract shots of a sunset and a carpet which seem to refer to amateur preoccupations and mistakes. Most of all the mass of photographers are present in his pictures, since they make the same blunders as Gursky; their pictures are full of figures which should be familiar but are lost against vast backgrounds, and of picturesque places from which intrusions (phone wires or cars) can never quite be cropped.

Despite such self-referential disturbances, the overall impression in this work is of universal banality described by a highly rational and ordered compositional structure. As the viewer steps back, moving from particular to field, the

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<sup>9</sup> Manuel de Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, New York 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Isabelle Graw.

composition takes hold, as if it could inject sense into senselessness, as if a flat, mechanical beauty could be found in the alliance of formal regulation and worldly boredom. Gursky's own techniques, controlling, evening out, placing matter into neat little squares, reflect those forces of rationalisation and banalisation which he depicts. Gursky sometimes uses digital manipulation, occasionally just to get around technical limitations as in the marrying of two photographs to make *Paris, Montparnasse*, but he also uses it in ways which go far beyond this, for instance in the addition of a couple to the foreground of *Car Show, Paris* (1993). Each element is grist to Gursky's beauty mill, each object or person merely a collection of grains or pixels: at the top of *Car Show*, pressed up hard against the frame is the single word 'Information'.



**Figure 3** *Car Show, Paris 1993*

mass.

There is however one arena which escapes banality; these pictures are presented as high art, and such products and their producers have inbuilt immunity against Gursky's critique. The typology photographers are not subject to any typology. There is a great contrast between the sorry inhabitants which Gursky shows us, and the artist, who presents himself as a dreamer wandering the world in search of images already in his head.<sup>11</sup> Such an immunity allows the artist to sidestep responsibility, to present work while saying, 'this is the way things are', injecting a blank beauty into it and always holding irony in reserve. Implicit in this is the feeling that the artist and the elite who views and buys this work somehow stand outside the

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<sup>11</sup> Various writers have repeated this claim including Fiona Bradley in the introduction to the Tate Gallery catalogue, p. 8.

Yet if we look closely enough, Gursky's subjects do act. The numbered workers of *Hong Kong Stock Exchange (Dptych)* (1994), ordered in a strict form of internal seriality, mess up the order—they yawn, sleep, chat and read the paper. In *PTT, Rotterdam* two women in the background look back at the camera, questioning, even suspicious. And when we approach the work really close, despite the 4 x 5 camera, the grain does become visible, marking the limit of what can be resolved and controlled. While Gursky presents a picture of a totalising system, it cannot say anything about the way this system is formed or maintained. Finally, in its concentration on affluence, particularly in Germany and Hong Kong, it misses the titanic scale of misery and oppression on which this parade of average boredom rests.