Back to Issue 7

Invisible Culture
An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

# Real Lies, True Fakes, and Supermodels

**by Elizabeth Mangini**


When friends show us the snapshot of a child or grandchild carried in their wallet, we usually don't ask them to produce the actual person as proof. In fact, the whole point of having that picture is that it may serve as a surrogate for the absent loved one. To this extent, we trust photography. Our trust in photography's ability to show us things as they "are" is what we call its transparency, since we see "through" the material of the photograph, the chemical emulsion on paper, to recognize that thing or person we know. It is the profound way we perceive a photograph to re-present something as it existed: the sense that the photograph is pointing to an object and saying: "that has been."1

If we trust in photography's transparency, in its ability to show us things as they really are, or were, why are most of us pretty certain that the photographs on the cover of the *National Enquirer* aren't the real deal? Why do we trust some photographs, yet consciously suspend our disbelief when viewing others? Such is the paradoxical nature of our relationship to photography, because photographs communicate to us by two different means, denotation and connotation. Denotation is what provides the sense of "that has been"; a wallet-carried portrait of a child denotes a particular human being, because the light bouncing off of her body was recorded onto light-sensitive film. But what does such a photograph mean beyond "that [body] has been?" In short, it is the context of the photograph that guides our perception of what is recorded in the photograph.

In one sense, the context of the photograph is the physical location in which we encounter it: the museum, the archive, the newspaper, the tabloid, or the family photo album. (A photograph kept in one's wallet is arguably a kind of souvenir or a remembrance.) But in another sense, the photograph is contextualized by its subject matter. This type of connotation is found in details such as pose, clothing, or hairstyle. Roland Barthes suggests that deciphering the connotation of a photograph: "depends on the reader's 'knowledge,' just as if this were a matter of a real language, intelligible only if one has learned its signs."2

In a sense, then, connotation is the caption of the photograph, literally, the context. To the mother of the denoted child, the wallet photo could connote "Jane at 4th grade" or "Jane before she had braces" or any number of personal markers of meaning. Since we don't know this child, but are familiar with the *type* of photograph, our "captions," our responses to the connoted meaning, are generic. To us, such a picture connotes things like youth, middle-class, family, or maybe school records.

Photographs provide us with useful information only when these denotations and connotations intersect. If the connoted meaning is missing, perhaps because we no longer know how to interpret a gesture, pose, or style, then the photograph becomes a fragment of information we cannot fully use. On the other hand, if what the picture denotes is irreconcilable with our experience of the real world, we might assume that something is wrong with the photograph. When denotation and connotation intersect, a photograph shows us something that comes close to our experience of similar objects in the world, and we find little reason to doubt its transparency.

Some contemporary photographers take advantage of this credulity, presenting us with photographs that are completely fictional or constructed, but that are such convincing simulacra, so close to our experience of the phenomenal world, we do not initially question them. A number of contemporary photographers have been using carefully deceptive fake or *faux* architecture as a subject matter, because architecture's long history as a subject of documentary photography gives it a certain enhanced credibility. Since photography’s beginnings, it has been used to document architecture, both monumental and banal. From early prints of “exotic” architecture and archeological wonders by such photographers as Francis Frith and Timothy O’Sullivan, to the *carte de visite* of the turn-of-the-century, photographs of architecture captured the physicality of a place for vicarious tourism. Even in the hands of artists, architectural photography has had both documentary qualities and archival uses.[3] We can see this impulse in projects like Eugéne Atget's photographic albums documenting turn-of-the-century Paris, August Sander's photographic catalogue of Cologne, and Bernd & Hilla Becher's photographs of industrial structures such as water towers and blast furnaces. Such historically documentary associations of the subject matter “architectural photography" provides artists the perfect context, or connotation, for surprising us with fakes and fictions.[4]

Among contemporary artists who employ architectural photography's sincerity subversively, Thomas Demand and Oliver Boberg make an interesting study because they use opposite approaches to the same destabilizing end. Importantly, as we will see, they both exploit the truth value inherent to architectural

photography by staging architectural fictions before the camera. Of course, any well-faked photograph weakens our ability to distinguish the denoted meaning of a photograph from its connoted meanings, and artists have been using staged photographs for decades to undermine photography's assumed transparency. Considering some of these works may help to illuminate the importance of context.

As a contemporary example, I propose the ubiquitous early work of photographer Cindy Sherman. Sherman's *Film Stills* are not denoting or documenting scenes from actual specific films, but are staged, generic scenes that connote the style of the industry film still. They demonstrate that style often directs our interpretation of a photograph more than visual fact. So, how is the effect of Sherman's photographs of fake architecture different? Cindy Sherman's subject matter is film, a context, or connotation, in which our suspension of disbelief is already conditioned. However, since the connotation of architectural photography is denotation itself, what is at stake in photographs of faux architecture is more than simply our perception of photography as transparent denotation. Because these "architectural photographs" allow us to see one of the most factual of photographic genres as, in fact, deceptive, we may be led to question other "trustworthy" sources of cultural and historical knowledge. These subversive photographs are successful in making us question our reality, first, because they use a documentary subject matter, and second, because they aim their attack at our visual perception itself.

German artist Oliver Boberg makes just these kinds of subversive "architectural" photographs. His well-wrought and intensely detailed photographs appear to represent post-war architecture — buildings familiar to us because they resemble the unremarkable architecture that is ubiquitous in modern cities and suburbs: a cinderblock building, a parking structure, a highway underpass [Figs. 1 & 2]. But the sense of "that has been" in Boberg's photographs is a false response. While his photographs connote familiar urban architecture, they denote small table-top models built and painted in his studio.

Why are we so easily fooled by Boberg's photographs? In short, it is because we assume without question that the architectural photograph is denotative, and the photographs themselves do not connote anything to the contrary. The buildings in Boberg's photographs are so banal that one cannot imagine why someone would even take a photograph, except perhaps to document the scenes. Boberg uses a "documentary" medium to impart a message that is pure connotation. His photographs connote "post-war, poured concrete architecture," "the suburbs of an industrial city," and perhaps even "central Europe." We know the type of building represented, but there are no details one could immediately recognize as particular to any one building or even one specific city.

But why would Boberg go through so much effort just to present something that is so generic? It often takes him months to produce a single image—why not just take a photograph of an actual non-descript building? The answer may become clearer if we examine the details of Boberg's practice. Boberg gathers images of vernacular architecture in the world that are otherwise largely unnoticed, often taking hundreds of snapshots before sketching out his construction. The image he presents of the finished model is therefore a composite: it is a visual description of the mean of twenty-five or fifty common structures. The photographs do not denote any building in particular, but refer to a type. The only way to refer, photographically, to a type without denoting any one thing in particular, is to construct an image. A photograph of a real building will always denote a specific place. By building a model, Boberg ensures that everyone has the same experience of fragmentary familiarity. Again, why? Because we are bothered by these fragments. We want to believe that photography can show us things as they are, we want to be able to say for certain where or what this image denotes. The desire for "truth" keeps us searching the photograph, actively looking rather than passively accepting what it re-presents.

The sense of familiarity without specificity that is possible only through the model not only weakens our ability to separate denotation from connotation, it undermines our faith in our own visual memory.5 Boberg's photographs spark a memory-recognition through their fragmentary familiarity. That is, we have a sense of recognition, but in fact see only a slice of the building - with no extra indicators such as setting, weather, or people. Left without such connotative clues, which do you trust more: your memory or a photograph? Even if we can't say for certain where it is, it is so close to something we have seen before that we hardly believe it isn't a real building. As we continue to look at the photograph, trying to find some hint, some detail that will reveal the truth about this building, we come to understand how photographs work. Boberg uses constructed models to construct a visual discourse on photography. When we try to reconcile the image in our memory with the photographic image, we come to understand that photography, even the most documentary type of photography, communicates through the confluence of objective and subjective factors, through the connection of photographic images to memory images, and thus are never purely objective or transparent. Once we realize this, no photograph can be accepted, categorically, as evidence. Moreover, if we can be fooled by photographs, is it possible that we are wrongly trusting of other bearers of "truth?" Perhaps the transparency of other categories like history and culture, which we often assume to be self-evident, must be re-evaluated along with the transparency of photography. We can see the impulse to address such larger questions in the work of another young German photographer.

For Thomas Demand, reconstructing real places mimics the constructedness of

categories like culture and history. Demand's photographs refer to the ways we learn about history and culture in our society, which is mainly through the media. Whereas Boberg's photographs are of generic types, Demand's are all reconstructions of specific, existing places, reconstructed at full-scale, and the source material is usually a photograph of that place extracted from popular media. The subject matter of individual photographs, however, varies in terms of cultural significance. In many cases, Demand's photographs are reconstructions of places that carry a certain cultural or historical significance, places like Bill Gates' dorm room (*Zimmer*, 1996), the set of a famous German game show (*Studio*, 1997), or Hitler's Berlin bunker (*Raum*, 1994). Other times the subjects of Demand's reconstructions are as banal as Boberg's images: a staircase, a bathroom, or an office window. But Demand gives minimal titles to all of his works, regardless of their significance: Hitler's Bunker is called simply "Room," and the office window is "Window." When you take the captions away, it is difficult to tell which image shows the significant place. Further, the reconstructions he builds in the studio are technically and materially equalized: all of the scenes are re-constructed out of paper. By taking such images of "disproportionate significance," and giving all equal attention, Demand levels the importance of acceptedly significant places, thereby questioning how significance is attributed, and how such cultural knowledge is transmitted.

Whereas Boberg's photographs are pure connotation, Demand strips away the connoted meaning – or cultural significance – and leaves us the visual facts – that which is denoted in the original photograph. Of course Demand's photographs are not denoting real structures, but his models do try to recreate the experience of seeing the real building, the purest form of denotation. He accounts for the distortions of photography when building his model, (the distortions, of course, come from the fact that we see bifocally, but the camera sees everything through a single lens.) Demand accounts for the single lens when he builds the model, so that the experience of viewing the photograph of his construction is more true than viewing the photograph of the real thing. It is in the gap between the visual facts encountered in Demand's photograph and the cultural significance "or insignificance" of these actual places, that his reconstructions literalize the constructedness of history and culture.

We might look to Demand's Barn, (*Schuene*), 1997, to see this effect at work [Fig. 3]. Barn shows us a tight, dark corner with light glaring through two unadorned windows, and creeping in through separations in the plank walls. We might begin by asking what this place is, what takes place here, and where we have seen it before? It might not take an art historian to recognize that Barn is a reconstruction of Jackson Pollock's Hamptons studio, since the photographs by Hans Namuth, upon which Demand's reconstruction is based, appeared numerous times in both

popular magazines *Life* and *ARTnews* during the late ’40s and early ’50s. Why does he choose to reconstruct a photograph from Namuth’s series? Demand recognizes that, aside from being a foundational myth of modernism in art history, the story of Jackson Pollock is a useful marker in post-war American culture. Pollock became a symbol in popular and trade press for the brash force of the United States after the Second World War. What Demand’s photograph enables us to do is to rethink the myth of Jackson Pollock vis-à-vis the medium that “made” him. The Namuth photograph denotes the barn, tools for making paintings, and a guy who makes paintings. Namuth's photographs also show a canvas dejected on the floor of a non-elitist space, "unruly" cans of paint passionately scattered about, Jackson with a furrowed brow attacking the canvas. All of these things connote the myth of Jackson Pollock as "Jack the Dripper." Take away all of the adjectives in that description and we return to denotation.

Demand strips away fifty years of connotations, metaphorically reconstructing the myth of Jackson Pollock. Like Boberg, he uses the special credibility of architectural photography to highlight what is denoted or documented in the photograph. *Barn*, with its unassuming title, asks us to look at the structure as just that: a barn. Was it a magical place? Was Pollock a man who could stand-in for all of the ideals and dreams of post-war America? Or was he just a guy who made paintings in a barn? By what means did he become a legend? This is not the place to answer *these* questions, but these are the questions Demand's photograph is asking. Demand asks us to recognize that, cut free from the captions and connotations, the photographs in Life magazine are just as enigmatic as *Barn*. Such examinations of history and cultural mythology are at the core of Demand’s project.

Since the constructedness of history cannot be directly or easily observed, architectural models and reconstructions such as Demand's serve as descriptions or analogies for the constructedness of history. Since the model, the object denoted in Demand’s photograph, can be seen as something that has been pieced together or constructed, then by analogy, the history which it supports can also be seen as a construction. Perhaps this notion of history’s constructedness is especially present to someone like Demand or Boberg, both Germans born after World War II. After all, the obstinate reality of a divided Europe and of two Germanies, East and West, was seemingly un-done in one night when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. In the decade since, Germany has tried to re-construct itself, both economically and culturally. One is told that he is no longer West German or East German, only German, but to some extent a divide still exists in the minds of Germany's citizens. Having witnessed the reconstruction of their own culture, it is no wonder that Demand, Boberg, and other German photographers might have a special interest in exploring the construction of history and culture. Like photographs, history and culture are only understandable as the intersections of

denotation and connotation. They are neither static nor self-evident, but are in constant motion. Just as our perception of the same photograph can shift from one moment to the next, so too can our view of history and of culture be altered by a different view of the “facts” presented.

For example, Demand's reconstruction of a photograph of Hitler’s bunker, *Room* 1994, is removed from the captions and texts of the source image, leaving it open to multiple interpretations. In other words, one could easily be led to believe this was a picture taken in the aftermath of a tornado or other natural disaster. Just as pure connotation in Boberg's images fails to give us any specific information, Demand demonstrates that denotation alone is not enough. Even the documentary photograph relies on con-text (with text) -- a caption, a story, a con-notation -- to be a bearer of useful information. Such contextualization is a highly subjective, personal process, during which one might mistake Hitler’s bunker with an insurance photo and thereby change what and how history is told.

The investigation into the constructedness and contingency of prevailing histories and culture is not unique to photography: it is also one of the core pre-occupations of post-modern philosophy, music, and literature. But photography is an elegant means of critique, because the medium itself carries the same contradictions between art and document, between connotation and denotation, that historical narratives do. Thus, Oliver Boberg and Thomas Demand can use photography itself to construct a discourse on photography, simultaneously deconstructing the transparency of the subject matter and the transparency of the medium. Through these photographs of architectural models and *faux* architecture, we may come to terms with the post-modern realization that the only way to approach the incomprehensibility of reality is to allow for multiple and endless interpretations and representations -- it is to say that no denotation is any more trustworthy than any connotation, that no "truth" is any more real than any "fiction." If a documentary medium like architectural photography is open to such criticism and revision, then the history we are taught in textbooks, the news we read in newspapers, and surely our own experiences must be seen as only one of many views to reality.

*Elizabeth Mangini is an independent curator and scholar based in New York City. Her most recent curatorial positions were in the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In 2000, she organized the exhibition SUPERMODEL, at the Massachussets Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) that included the artists discussed in this article.*

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981),18.

2. Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 10.

3. To see how closely art photography resembles and even consciously mimics documentary photography when dealing with architecture, one can look at a detail of one of the Becher grids and a page from a book instructing amateur documentary photographers on the correct viewpoint for taking architectural photographs for Britain’s National Record. Author Terry Buchanan instructs amateur archival photographers that:

> …[t]he purpose of record photography is to convey as much information as possible to the person viewing the photograph. This information must be given in a simple and direct way. Information may be obscured in a photograph which attempts to convey atmosphere or distorted in one taken to express artistry …. Make it clear; keep it simple.

The Bechers, literally, use a textbook archival approach to their photography. See Terry Buchanan, *Photographing Historic Buildings: For the Record* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1983), 27. In this chapter on correct viewpoint there is a direct, frontal shot of a water tower as an illustration on how to achieve this effect. I acknowledge that such amateur archival practices in Britain have a complex ideological background, including the Mass Observation project, and regret the inability to discuss such issues further within the scope of this project.

4. Benjamin Buchloh has argued that any architectural photograph is complicated by the contradictions between the proposed objectivity of the picture — its documentary connotations — and the degree of control an artist actually has over the final outcome of the picture —its artistic connotations: “It seems impossible for any architectural photograph to escape from the contradictions that have continually compromised photography and its various practices - contradictions that were already inherent in the line of (architectural) photography leading from Marville to Atget, from Atget to Sander, and from Sander to Bernd and Hilla Becher.” Benjamin Buchloh, “Thomas Struth’s Archive,” in *Thomas Struth: Photographs* (Chicago: Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago, 1992),

5.

5. For a discussion on the connection between photography and memory, see Sigfried Kracauer, ”Photography” in *The Mass Ornament*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1995), 50-52.