



Robert Hobbs and David Moos, *Frank Thiel: Photography*. Stuttgart: Cantz Publishing, 2006.

Text © Robert Hobbs

The image features a vertical yellow metal tower structure on the left side, set against a background of a grey, textured wall. The tower has a complex lattice of beams and cross-braces. The wall has a mottled, industrial appearance with various shades of grey and blue. The overall composition is minimalist and industrial.

Frank Thiel

A Berlin Decade
1995–2005

HATJE
CANTZ

Frank Thiel

A Berlin Decade 1995–2005

With essays by Robert Hobbs and David Moos

Galería Helga de Alvear, Madrid
Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna

in collaboration with

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Marking Time: Frank Thiel's Photographs

Robert Hobbs

"The two Berlins, like the two Germanys themselves, have been separate societies for forty-five years and must overcome the ignorance, suspicion, and distrust built up over that time."

Steve Harding¹

The Cold-War Soviet satellite government of East Germany, officially known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR), claimed in the early nineteen-eighties to be the tenth-strongest financial system in the world even though its economy during this time was foundering. Overemployment—the GDR's euphemistic practice of handling unemployment by putting two people on the same job—was on the rise, and pollution had reached dangerous levels in its industrialized areas, making them smog-laden and bleak. In order to relieve psychological pressures on its citizenry, GDR government officials in 1983 increased the number of departure permits for political dissidents, allowing them to immigrate to West Germany (officially the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG), where they were welcomed as "repatriated Germans," supplied with modest amounts of money, and offered either vocational training or additional schooling so that they could eventually become totally self-sustaining.

Among those deported to the FRG in 1985 was the nineteen-year-old former student and future documentary-type photographer Frank Thiel, who had been enrolled in a special school for mathematics and physics before being arrested for his subversive political activities and sent to a penitentiary, where he was incarcerated between 1984 and 1985.² Thiel's mother was a chemical engineer, and his father was a nuclear scientist who worked in the area of microelectronics due to a lack of jobs in nuclear industry, so the science and mathematics aspect of his schooling extended a family tradition. An East German living in the West,³ a former socialist suddenly confronted with a capitalist economy, and a gifted mathematics and physics student beginning to inhabit a world in which science was one among a number of viable career options, Thiel at first found himself adrift in West Berlin. For this and other reasons it was not until 1987, two years after his arrival, that he determined a career path by enrolling in a photography program. He remembers making the choice as a whimsical "why not?" To a certain extent, his decision was a serendipitous gesture by a twenty-one-year-old expatriate who at first was unacquainted with recent developments in German photography. At the time he was unaware of the tremendous impact that the Minimalist-affiliated and typology-oriented West German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher were having on the next generation, which included Bernd Becher's students Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, and Thomas Struth, who were each turning in the late eighties and early nineties to the large-format color images that soon gained an international following for German photography.⁴

The Reunification of Germany and Thiel's Initial Series of Photographs

Thiel's work as a photographer made him the creator of an instantaneous past that was a concomitant of his newly chosen medium, and this past differed significantly from the life he had left behind in East Germany, which could be approached only through imagination and memory. Initially he accepted the theory of photography that had only recently been established by French critics Roland Barthes and Christian Metz, who conjectured that the results of this medium are always necessarily located in the past.⁵ Metz writes: "We always know that what the photograph shows us is not really here.... *This has been overpowers Here I am.*"⁶ This concept of photographs as the medium par excellence for the cultivation of an immediate history became the predominant Western paradigm in the seventies, and it has continued to be a major way of looking at the medium. Part of Thiel's importance, as we will see, is predicated on his subsequent challenge to this mainstream view when he modified Barthes' conception of photography as a past event by emphasizing French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's theory of "becoming."⁷ He has summarized his own take on this concept by pointing out succinctly: "The power of photography is not that it stops time, but that time keeps moving on."⁸

As a photography student living in the political island of West Berlin, Thiel could create a new and personal view of history. In this city he fortunately had a few friends and was able to enjoy a libertine atmosphere that differed significantly from that of the rest of West Germany. Situated in the midst of the GDR, West Berlin in the eighties was still a Mecca of capitalist opulence, and it was known for its radical demimonde of artists, gays, asylum seekers, and refugees. The city's occupants were not only freed from the constraints of military service, provided they stayed there long enough, but they also enjoyed federal subsidies and tax breaks, enabling them to become immersed in an exciting and radical international outpost, celebrated for its permissiveness as well as its openness to new ideas.

The subsidized world of West Berlin's demimonde came to an abrupt halt, however, on November 9, 1989, when a widespread people's revolt in East Germany led to the peaceful dismantling of the Wall that had been in place for twenty-eight years. The revolution that ultimately brought down the Iron Curtain had initially been fueled in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika*, which was a concerted effort to reinvigorate a sagging socialist economy with democratic values, and his strategy of *glasnost*, which was an attempt to make Soviet administrative practices transparent and open to debate. Both empowered people living under Soviet rule by providing official approval for them to reform and revitalize their government, which they did in ways Gorbachev had not anticipated.

The fall of the Berlin Wall had also been aided by an incompetent GDR administration, and it was celebrated and ratified by an initially enthusiastic FRG populace ready to welcome East Germans as long-lost relatives while privately acknowledging victory over the former Soviet regime. At first, the fall of the Wall connoted a new permeability between the borders separating the two Germanys. Less than a year later, on October 3, 1990, it became the basis for a highly emotional and deeply satisfying resolution to bitter Cold-War divisions when East and West Germany reunited under one government, which became known as the “Berlin Republic,” after the new capital that was to replace the FRG’s “Bonn Republic.” In view of Germany’s past aggressions during two world wars, there was surprisingly little debate about whether or not to reunite the GDR with the FRG; most of the deliberations came later, when questions arose as to how Berlin should be rebuilt. Particularly notable in 1989 because it so clearly differed from the general reunification fever of the time was author Günter Grass’s argument that Germany after Auschwitz had forfeited the right to become once again a unified nation because such an alliance could lead to a Fourth Reich and renewed pan-German nationalism.⁹



Fig. 1 Frank Thiel, *Brandenburg Gate November 10th 1989, 1989*



Fig. 2 Frank Thiel, *Soviet Soldiers at Sanssouci Park, 1990*

As the premier symbol of the newly unified Germany, Berlin became the focus of grandiose ambitions and immediate speculation as members of the two city governments, in conjunction with West German and international businesspeople as well as architects from around the world, competed for control of the metropolis’s most viable spaces. Rather than taking the time to create a concerted overall plan that would consider the most effective way to join the two cities and to position Berlin most advantageously to ensure it a successful future, the planners were swept up in a gold-fever mentality as different views of the city’s future vied for supremacy. West Berlin’s quest for progressive international styles came into direct conflict with its policy of “critical reconstruction.” The brainchild of Hans Stimmann, the building director of the Berlin Senate from 1991 to 1996, “critical reconstruction” is predicated on the contentious idea that an indigenous Berlin style of traditional architecture, surviving mainly in pre-1945 stone façades in the Friedrichstadt quarter, should be preserved and perpetuated in the city’s new construction. This tactic, which was intended to serve as the basis for a “New Teutonia,” required both local and international architects working in or near historic areas, particularly Friedrichstrasse, to adhere in their designs to a standard height and setback limit, to use sandstone as an exterior cladding, and to employ the type of detailing found in the earlier buildings.

In addition to these two different architectural approaches, one international and the other local, which were embraced by different groups of West Berliners, competing generative metaphors for the new municipality reinstated many barricades of prejudice, soon called “the wall of the mind,” which became apparent after the fall

of the actual Wall. Questions were asked about whether Berlin should focus on becoming (1) a national capital; (2) a major European city on a par with London and Paris; (3) a bridge between East and West, linking an old Europe with an emerging Eastern one formed of former Soviet satellites; or (4) a world metropolis capable of fully participating in a global economy. Each of these four views of the new Berlin gained a certain number of adherents. Unfortunately no image managed to generate a wide enough following to define a clear direction capable of cohering the many well-intentioned yet scattered satellite rebuilding efforts into a unified whole.¹⁰ Instead of achieving a clear mandate, Berlin was balkanized into competing and unrelated districts, reenacting in these new satellites the diffuseness and sometimes the ineffectiveness of the loosely affiliated German confederacy, which antedated the nation’s founding in 1871.

Reflecting on the massive amount of new construction that was taking place in Berlin and the paucity of planning that had gone into it, Thiel mused: “Berlin really was given a chance to rethink the city as a whole but the city was built in fragments because there was so much pressure on Berlin from outside, from investors and from government officials.”¹¹ In consideration of the lack of overall organization characterizing the major phase of rebuilding, which extended from reunification in 1990 to the first years of the new millennium, one might compare this metropolis with the world’s preeminent postmodern cities, Los Angeles and Houston, which are similarly composed of imposing yet disconnected communities. Some of Berlin’s old and new major fragments include the government district around the Reichstag; the spread-out shopping areas of Kurfürstendamm, Friedrichstrasse, and Potsdamer Platz; and the complexes constructed around Checkpoint Charlie and Alexanderplatz.

Even though Berlin was divided into separate and largely disconnected districts during the first years of reunification, a West German capitalist ideology continued to prevail in the entire city’s new construction, and a winner-takes-all mentality reigned supreme as East Berlin’s Soviet-era monuments and architecture fell victim to Western-inspired international-style architecture. Just as home buyers have a psychological need to renovate newly acquired dwellings to demonstrate their ownership, so West Germans felt compelled to rid themselves of reminders of the GDR’s hegemony over the East. Instead of allowing significant traces of the past to remain as poignant reminders of the Cold-War interregnum, as architect Zaha Hadid proposed in her 1991 plan for the former *Todesstreifen* (death strip) adjacent to the Wall, many progressive and conservative Germans from the West and the East wanted to eradicate the Wall, which symbolized the forty-year interlude dividing their city, as well as major GDR structures such as the Palast der Republik.

One of the first to anticipate West Germany’s eventual assault on GDR culture was Thiel, who initiated in late 1989 his first series,

a group of black-and-white soft-focus photographs revealing segments of the Berlin Wall. Working with a definite sense of purpose, he created over the next year several series, including *Berlin Wall*, *Potsdam/GDR*, *Political Monuments of East Berlin* (his first large-format works), and *Guard Regiment "Friedrich Engels."* The latter consists of twenty-four almost-life-size images of East German NVA (Nationale Volksarmee, or National People's Army) soldiers. These four series memorialize, respectively, the Wall itself; the Cold-War "no-man's land" adjoining the Wall, which was to become the highly commercial Potsdamer Platz; a group of mid-twentieth-century Socialist-era sculptures; and the East German guards who regularly stood ceremoniously at attention before Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Neue Wache (New Guard House). This structure was built in 1816 to 1818 after the wars of independence against Napoleon; it was transformed in 1931 into the "Memorial for Those Who Fell in the Great War," and twenty-nine years later it was rededicated as the "Memorial to the Victims of Fascism and Militarism." Created after the fall of the Wall and completed before reunification, Thiel's images represent his expressed desire to document GDR monuments before they too would be torn down and replaced with sculptures and buildings representative of the new society. He sought, moreover, to memorialize the East German honor guard before they were replaced. As he noted cryptically: "When political systems change, the art changes."¹² Soon thereafter his predictions proved true when the last vestiges of the Wall were completely eradicated in December 1995, and Schinkel's Greek Revival temple was rededicated yet again, this time to another victor, the FRG, which renamed it in 1993 the "Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Victims of War and Tyranny" and placed an enlarged version of Käthe Kollwitz's *Mother with Dead Son* in the center of its interior.

Coming at the beginning of Thiel's career, these four series reflect his conflicted feelings about the enormous changes besetting the two Germanys, which he has summarized:

"*Berlin Wall* was an attempt to decelerate the demolition of the Wall. In 2005 the almost final demolition of the Wall is more and more seen as a mistake by a growing number of people. There were various ways to deal with such a massive 'building,' but back in the days [of the rapprochement of the two Germanys], it seemed to be the most natural thing to just destroy it (fig. 1). *Potsdam/GDR* was in a way a journey back to my own teenage years to refresh my memories, to visit places I have had a personal connection with. This little series is a subjective portrait of the town during this very special period of history (fig. 2). *Political Monuments*... express[es] very well... how one society sees/understands itself and want[s] to be seen from the outside. I started doing these works quite a long time before the first [GDR] monument had been destroyed (fig. 3).

With *Guard Regiment 'Friedrich Engels'* I wanted to make a work on

the kind of military guards of honor that you can find... all over the world, even though this guard regiment was the 'child' of a very specific ideological constellation. Somehow this work could have been photographed in a different country as well (fig. 4). I see all these series as works about collective memory, the collective mind, collective consciousness and hope that they do go beyond the German-German issues they seem to debate at first sight."¹³

Photographed so that they imitate nineteenth-century pinhole-camera images in their irradiating light, exaggerated halation, low resolution, and softly demarcated framing edges, Thiel's black-and-white photographs connote photography's presumed past tense with a special poignancy when they memorialize the GDR's passing as if it were already a century-old event. Thiel has described his technique for achieving this effect:

"I did not use a pinhole camera. All these early black-and-white works are photographed on regular 35mm-black-and-white film with a regular 35mm camera. Each photograph consists always of two negatives enlarged together. These two negatives are always the consecutive negatives (for instance number 12 + 13) from the very same film. (The only exception is... from the *Political Monuments* series with the title *M.E.L.* [stands for Marx + Engels + Lenin]....

The left part consists of four negatives. So I did combine two sets of consecutive negatives for this part.)

The idea was to [create a] work about the 'merging' (addition) of two separate images into one image.... It became very conceptual and sort of formal. So I did always do one shot → then panned the camera → then did the second shot.

In a way this is a transmission of a movie-making technique into photograph[y], or the attempt to overcome the limitation that photography has... (instead of photographing one moment I did photograph two moments and combined them later in one print → so in a way it's also a work about time and perspectives).

[The] 'pinhole effect' is the result of extensive darkroom work/manipulations afterwards."¹⁴

The implied distance in time created by Thiel's allusion to pinhole photography endows the work with the type of "aura" that Walter Benjamin described in "A Short History of Photography" as "a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be."¹⁵ Although a special aura imbues these works with the resonance of another time, an air of unreality also pervades them, perhaps because the joining of the two negatives—two subtly different perspectives—turns them into fantasies unconnected with the present-day world and thereby transposes the GDR into a mythic realm. Thiel describes this glitch in time:

"My idea behind that 'pinhole-look' was more caused by the feeling that the time itself was accelerating extremely in a (for me unknown) way after the Wall came down and everything changed



Fig. 3 Frank Thiel, *Eternal Glory I*, 1990

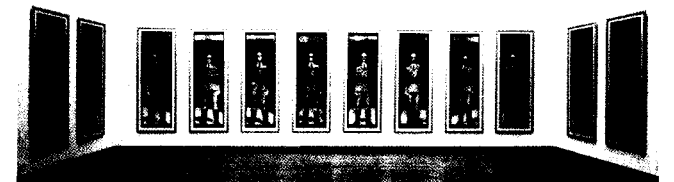


Fig. 4 Frank Thiel, *Guard Regiment "Friedrich Engels"*, 1990, installation at Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany, 1991



Fig. 5
Frank Thiel,
Wuppertal,
1992



Fig. 10
Frank Thiel,
Bonn,
1992

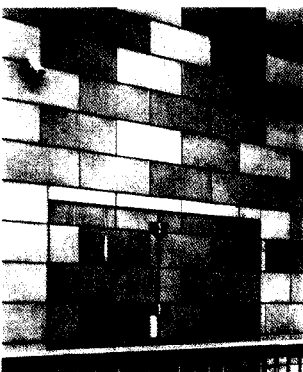


Fig. 7
Frank Thiel,
untitled (City TV
[Berlin] #01),
1998

fundamentally in a very short period of time. Each day could have been totally different from the one before and the next one. This acceleration of time made it really difficult for me to take pictures.

I mean naturally each picture is part of the past when you have taken it. But during those twelve months I always had the feeling it is impossible to find a photographic 'equivalent' that expresses/describes this time in an adequate way. Each picture has so much history already when you have taken it that it seemed obsolete to take pictures at all to me.

So instead of finding some 'contemporary' way to describe these times, I went [in] the opposite direction. [This] means I printed my images in a way that they look very much like the past; even like taken during the last century. The idea was to combine two opposite things: a very recent photograph and nineteenth-century aesthetics. The idea was not to be part of this extreme 'flood'/'stream' of images that was circulating in all types of media since the Wall came down; not to compete with this media machinery; to even contrast/oppose something against it.

Therefore I aesthetically 'beamed' my images one hundred years back in time. I wanted to achieve [the idea] that people who see them watch them with the same approach they would... [when looking] at historical photographs. And then they discover that [the image before them] is nothing else but the very recent past that they are looking at."¹⁶

Thiel's employment in these works of an aura resembling that found in nineteenth-century pinhole photography preempts aesthetically the production of the aura that would eventually develop from the GDR's cessation, thus using an illusory aura to inhibit the production of another one that would be more closely related to actual historical conditions. In his images the romantic allusions conjured by the pictorial effects of pinhole photography become a veil glossing over the immediate disturbance of a government's end by rendering it too far removed and dreamlike to mourn. In these seamless works the *punctum*, which Roland Barthes describes in *Camera Lucida* as a small yet incisive detail capable of puncturing a photograph's surface and ushering in a sense of the greater reality of which it is a mere fragment, is incapable of being detected because the world it depicts has already been masked by the fictive reminiscences of a more distanced one.¹⁷

Thiel wanted to exhibit his *Guard Regiment "Friedrich Engels"* photographs in the spacious interior of the Neue Wache shortly after the final reunification on October 3, 1990, but was unable to do so. He explains:

"The concept of showing the *Guard Regiment* inside the building they had been standing in front of for many years was based on the fact that there won't be any more guard regiment after the night of the reunification. The idea was to show inside

the building what was once in front of it to intensify this historical caesura in the consciousness of the people."¹⁸

Michel Foucault's Panopticon and a Culture of Surveillance

"The prison is 'natural,' just as the use of time to measure exchanges is 'natural' in our society.... How could the prison not be immediately accepted when, by locking up, restraining, and rendering docile, it merely reproduces with a little more emphasis all the mechanisms that are to be found in our social body? The prison is like a rather disciplined barracks, a strict school, a dark workshop, but not qualitatively different."

Michel Foucault¹⁹

In 1991 Thiel embarked on a new series, the *Prison Gates*, which was his first in color. In these works he provides straightforward views of various prison doors seen from the outside. At the time he was reading in English translation Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.²⁰ Although Foucault's ideas about prisons are crucial to Thiel's understanding, he does not try to turn his photographs into illustrations of Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century model of the *panopticon*, a prison with a central tower permitting maximum visibility, which revolutionized the penal system by creating an architectural framework whereby prisoners might be watched at any time. However, Thiel's series of prison watchtowers can be considered modern-day equivalents of the *panopticon*, except that they appear to survey the world outside the prisons rather than the one inside them. For Thiel the aspect of photographing penitentiaries from this vantage point is a crucial aspect of his series:

"I took these pictures from the outside [because it is] the perspective that everybody does or can at least have on prisons. I didn't want to draw the curtain by explicitly showing the world behind these gates/walls/watchtowers. I wanted to create a kind of metaphor, leaving it to the viewer's imagination or personal knowledge [to ascertain] what is or might be behind these gates. Everybody has an idea about how it is [to be] in a prison by reading books, watching movies or documentaries, and sometimes through personal experiences. So there was no need for a kind of voyeuristic look behind these walls.

The idea was to show or speak about something that is not explicitly shown in the photographs themselves, but does exist in the viewer's mind. For me these gates do also talk about the society that is in front of them, the society we live in.... Somehow these gates do mark exactly the borderline between these two worlds; they function as social membranes, which have a different permeability for each individual. And then there was the aesthetic 'beauty' of these gates that did strike me. By isolating them from their surroundings

I discovered very strong painterly qualities in a lot of them, which puts them near abstract paintings for me. I like the idea that they kind of camouflage their seriousness by being abstract 'beauties' and could be seen as those abstract images... as well."²¹ (figs. 5 and 6)

Between 1997 and 1999 Thiel revisited this topic when he made a series of views of surveillance cameras that he found in various parts of Berlin the subject of the series *City TV (Berlin)*, which permitted him to ferret out "borderline[s] in cities between public and private spaces."²² (fig. 7)

In his correspondence with writer and curator Isabel Carlos undertaken in anticipation of an exhibition of his prison images, which were made in 1991–92 and augmented in 1995,²³ Thiel marked particularly meaningful passages in Foucault's book. Included in Carlos's essay "Within the Prison Net" are a number of his citations, which stress Foucault's clear understanding that prisons have served as particularly cogent metaphors for life itself. On page 228, for example, Thiel notes one of Foucault's rhetorical questions, which doubles back on itself, creating a figurative Möbius strip: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" At the same time that this passage lays out the problem of relying on prototypes, it also points to the fact that models can come to resemble many of the offshoots and variations predicated on them. In consideration of this statement's circularity, one wonders if Thiel was perhaps thinking about both his perpetuation in his *Prison Gates* of the Bechers' ongoing study of such building types as wooden houses, blast furnaces, and water towers and his work's essential difference from their investigations. His *Prison Gates* elaborate as well as critique the Bechers' seemingly objective investigations of building typologies by restricting his subject to the heavily loaded topic of prison entrances, a metaphor perhaps for the reunified Germany, which encloses the wall of the mind within itself, as well as an image of the world at large, which also is predicated on physical, mental, and emotional barricades (figs. 8 and 9).²⁴

Although he had been placed in penitentiaries in Potsdam, Brandenburg, Karl-Marx-Stadt (later called Chemnitz), and Cottbus, where he stayed most of the time, Thiel's prison series includes only the gates of Cottbus and Brandenburg among a number of other penal entrances without any personal associations (fig. 10).

At another point in his correspondence with Carlos, Thiel ponders Foucault's ironic interrogation of the word "natural" (p. 233) when used in relationship to prisons. The statement, cited above as an epigraph, and its emphasis on the ideological "natural" exhibits the same type of chicken-and-egg conundrum that Thiel referred to. He was no doubt fascinated by the problem of whether institutions influence society or vice versa. In Foucault's system

fundamental laws subsume both under their auspices as they disperse power throughout a given society so that it is incumbent on all its members. As a former East Berliner, Thiel was intrigued by the far-reaching effects of power and the fact that different types of prisons exist both within and outside the gates of these institutions.

Toward the end of her essay Carlos quotes Thiel's final citation from Foucault: "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance" (p. 217). If viewed in terms of the *Prison Gates*, as the artist intended it to be, this statement implies looking at the photographs as metaphors of not only Germany's but also the world's internal/external prisons rather than thinking about them simply as architectural variations on a theme, as is the case with the Bechers' work. Differing moreover from the Bechers' camera, which assumes the distanced and noncommittal objectivity to which traditional sociologists and anthropologists aspired, Thiel's camera is not only inquisitive but also assumes the same unrelenting scrutiny that one would expect of surveillance cameras, making his work a comment on both the "Berlin Republic's" increasing conservatism and the entire world's continued preference for ostracism as a primary form of punishment (fig. 11).

The thematic of inside versus outside, found in Thiel's early *Berlin Wall* and *Potsdam/GDR* series as well as in his *Prison Gates*, takes a significantly different turn in his series *Pregnant Women*. He started this series in color but changed to black-and-white. As he has explained:

"After having [taken] a certain number of images, I had the feeling this was going to look like a Benetton campaign and [consequently] changed to black-and-white. I was ... surprised that many people [to whom] I showed these images... immediately started talking about skin color and issues connected with it, probably because Germany still tries to remain the country of the blond and blue-eyed and lacks diversity."²⁵

Although the series was published, it has never been exhibited. During the three-year period from 1992 to 1995, when he was working on the projects already discussed, Thiel found a way to symbolize united Germany's emerging future by making one hundred Polaroids of head-on views of pregnant women's stomachs, which he subsequently edited down to the twenty-five photographs that make up the series. Shot as profiles and cropped so that only the pregnant bellies are evident, the photographs become the organic equivalent of the Bechers' typologies of industrial buildings, and the images themselves foreshadow, with pointed literalism, the emphasis on Deleuze's theory of "becoming," which was to be a dominant theme in Thiel's later images of the rebuilding of Berlin. In this series of images of expectant mothers, the artist employs his camera as an invasive and prying eye that reveals an extraordinary set of highly

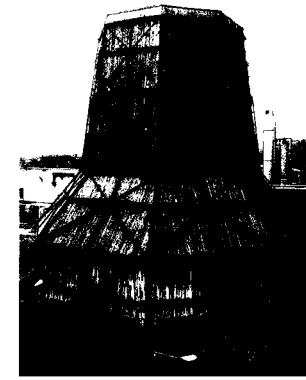


Fig. 8
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Tower*,
Zeche Hansa, Dortmund-Huckarde,
Germany, 1993

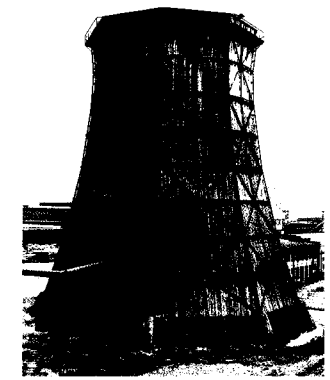


Fig. 9
Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Cooling Tower*,
Zeche Schalcker Verein, Gelsenkirchen, Ruhr,
Germany, 1982

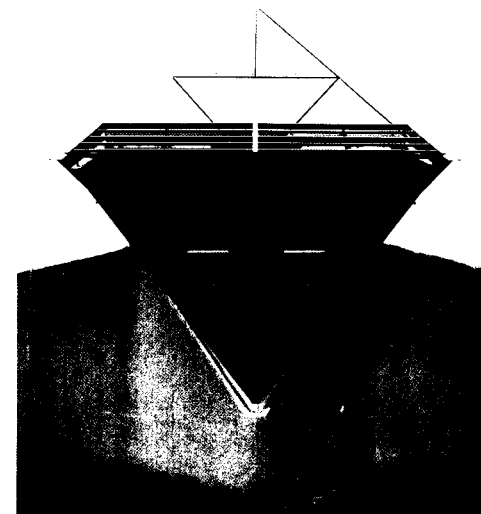


Fig. 6
Frank Thiel,
Cotogne, Tower 5,
1992



Fig. 11
Frank Thiel,
*untitled (City TV
[Berlin] #118/16),*
1997–1999

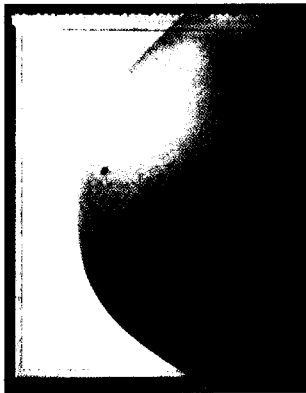


Fig. 12
Frank Thiel,
Jonas Mayr
(born 26.09.1993),
1993



Fig. 13
Thomas Ruff,
Portrait
(O.Müller),
1986

personal yet objective images that most people have witnessed only within the intimacy of their own families. Thiel recalls:

“The skin of the pregnant stomach functions as the membrane between the outside world and the not-yet-born life inside the stomach. Similar to how the *Prison Gates* do speak about what’s behind them without explicitly showing/illustrating it, these *Pregnant Women* images do speak about the babies that one cannot see but imagine behind the skin. So in a way these images are portraits without portraying anybody, somehow the earliest possible portraits in the life of a human, if you don’t use technical equipment that allows you to photograph inside the stomach like the legendary BBC documentary on pregnancy. Portraits before portraits. And obviously a metaphor for the ‘future’.”²⁶ (fig.12)

In 1991, the year he began *Prison Gates*, Thiel met Thomas Ruff, a leader of the Düsseldorf School of large-scale documentary photography. Two years after their meeting, Thiel began a series that plays on differences between individuals and the uniforms that they wear. In order to undertake this series, he looked at soldiers from the former Allied nations that still had a military presence in Berlin. They included France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States. He relates:

“I was primarily interested in doing a work about the relationship between individuality and uniformity. And soldiers have been the perfect ‘material’ to execute this ‘investigation’ with. Wearing a uniform, a piece of clothing that is fully loaded with meanings, symbols, historical, political, and social contents and various associations, does change our perception of an individual. I wanted to ‘investigate’ what is still there from that individual and what might be ‘taken away.’ To make this ‘investigation’ more solid and profound I needed a certain number of individuals. I couldn’t just take one or two examples. I needed a significant number of individuals.

So I decided to photograph around fifty soldiers per country (= two hundred altogether). I thought choosing soldiers from more than one country would make this work even more interesting because all the aspects (associations, etc.) vary from country to country. Is there a typical American soldier? Is there a typical Russian soldier? What is it that makes us believe he is Russian and he is American beside[s] the different uniforms they are wearing?”²⁷

Thiel ended up employing an approach similar to Ruff’s straightforward monumental portraits for his images of the foreign military forces. He explains his process:

“Obviously I needed equal technical conditions for all the portraits [so] that one could compare them later with each other. So I did set up a kind [of] experimental arrangement, ... a laboratory situation.

I made a lot of test shootings (using friends as models) to find the ‘best’ (= most adequate) form [as to] how these pictures should

look like in the end. And kind of unintentionally I did arrive at a point where the portraits did look very much like the portraits of Thomas Ruff. I knew this would probably cause ‘trouble or problems’ in the reception of the works, ... [involving even] the reproach of plagiarism. But I decided I would rather ‘risk’ the nearness to an existing and established artistic position, when I have the feeling this is the right artistic form [rather] than being different just for the sake of being different. In the end everything is related to everything, and nobody starts at zero or is without influence. Even though there are strong similarities between Ruff’s and my portraits, there are also significant differences. ... Obviously Thomas Ruff wasn’t the first photographer ... [to] portray people against an almost white background in frontal view and with very little expression in their faces. His work does also imitate other photographic forms/genres.”²⁸ (fig.13)

Thiel realized that the international forces, which had been stationed in the city for the almost five decades since the end of the Second World War, were to be withdrawn from Berlin in stages. The 4+2 Treaty, which was signed between the two Germanys and the Allies on September 12, 1990, dictated that American, British, French, and Russian troops would leave the new capital in deference to its sovereignty even though only the Russians would depart from the country itself. Working with this idea, Thiel decided to take pictures during the last weeks of concerted Allied presence in Berlin. Because of the shrinking number of soldiers in the capital, his job became increasingly difficult. He ultimately made fifty portraits of enlisted soldiers from each of the Allied forces. The difficulty involved in obtaining permission to photograph members of four distinct armies was considerable:

“After trying to get permissions from each [of] four countries for almost three years, I finally succeeded ... [in setting] up my studio in the military barracks ... during the last weeks before all foreign military forces had been finally withdrawn from Berlin. Getting these permissions was quite an adventure and [a] learning process. The military world is a world ... [of] its own, and different from country to country. Besides [establishing] equal conditions on the technical side of taking these pictures, I ... also insist[ed] on photographing only low-ranking soldiers. I wanted to have the highest possible homogeneity among all photographed soldiers. Beside[s] that I wanted to create a kind of memory to the ‘unknown’ soldier, the soldier who would anonymously die in the case of a war. I mean everybody knows the names of Stalin, Napoleon, or Admiral Nelson, but who ... know[s] the [names] of ordinary soldiers.”²⁹ (fig. 14)

Although his works take advantage of Ruff’s mode of fully frontal views of faces expressing no discernible emotion, they serve distinctly different ends from Ruff’s art by memorializing the soldiers who had maintained a status quo for a divided Germany for so

many years and who had once been a ubiquitous part of the landscape. Dryly presented as smaller and sometimes as monumental images, these photographs also hark back to the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), initiated in the nineteen-twenties by a host of painters as well as by the noted photographer August Sander, who wished to create representative portraits of members of each of the professions and trades. This search for a cool, objective distance—which has imbued the work of first Sander, and then that of the Bechers, Ruff, and Thiel—represents several generations of concerted documentary activity spanning almost the entire twentieth century. Besides participating in this tradition, Thiel's seemingly noncommittal portraits (known as the *The Allies* series) are in retrospect of crucial importance to his later works on the rebuilding of Berlin because they play on the camera's seeming objectivity and its consequent ability to place viewers in the position of having to make up their own minds about the meaning of the images before them (fig. 15).

Sometime after completing *The Allies*, Thiel won the competition for a monument to commemorate Checkpoint Charlie, a familiar site on West Berlin's Friedrichstrasse, running from south to north in both West and East Berlin, which this checkpoint divided somewhere in the middle. For twenty-nine years, before being removed in 1990, it had served as the best-known entryway through the Iron Curtain. Checkpoint Charlie was part of a citywide artistic competition sponsored by the Berlin Senate to commemorate the seven Cold-War era inner-city border-crossing points.

Made several years after the completion of the *The Allies* series, Thiel's images of a Russian and an American soldier for Checkpoint Charlie, which were mounted in a huge light box and situated above a single pylon, seemed a compelling solution, and they were accordingly commissioned to be installed in 1998 in the middle of Friedrichstrasse, where they would be seen by pedestrians, drivers, and passengers.

In this work Thiel reenacts the polarization of the East and the West during the cold war by positioning a photographic image of a Russian soldier so that he would face people moving from West Berlin in the south to East Berlin in the north and then setting up an image of a U.S.-Army enlisted man so that viewers coming from the opposite direction would confront his visage. The work has been ratified by Berliners as a readily identifiable sign of their city's past, as any daytime visitor can see. In addition to the obvious resonances provided by its subject matter, this Janus-faced monument to Cold-War tensions plays on the thematic of inspecting visitors coming from the former West Berlin side of Checkpoint Charlie by those who were given the job of safeguarding the border separating the two Berlins. On the East Berlin side the guards were members of the East German military, not the Russians, as Thiel's monument implies.

Transposed to the realm of photography and commemorated in the form of light boxes—a commercial advertising form that Vancouver photographer Jeff Wall had appropriated for his work—the dynamic of see-er and seen is ritualistically enacted in Thiel's piece as a reminder of the Cold-War boundary that once separated the two Berlins. In consideration of the city's "wall of the mind," which perpetuates its former wall of cement block and barbed wire, it is highly ironic that postunification Berlin has chosen to commemorate this place after almost completely getting rid of it.

Thiel has summarized a few aspects of this work that were crucial to its creation, including the reason why he chose to photograph a Russian rather than an East German soldier:

"Checkpoint Charlie was located where the American sector of Berlin did meet the Russian sector. So there is also [a reason for this piece] based on the city's topography.

The idea was to suggest an artwork that could be perceived by people who maybe drive by in a car or bus, and not only by people who walk by. One has to realize that Checkpoint Charlie was... almost a dead-end street, the 'world' [of West Berlin] ended there. After the Wall was destroyed and Checkpoint Charlie [was] erased from the city map, the area became a regular crossroad with regular traffic...

I... wanted to reach this large number of people who cross Checkpoint Charlie with high speed as well. So I had to do something... that also deals with [the] viewing habits of city citizens. That's why there are no texts or interactive installation[s] but a light box... five meters high... in the middle of the street. It does imitate advertising aesthetics but it is not advertisement. It functions as a visualized traffic sign.... Before the Wall came down one could see the signs 'You are leaving the American/British/French sector.' Now these billboard-sized signs[s] have been replaced with my artwork. For me this work is like a... question mark standing in the middle of the street.

An additional aspect for this project was to undermine the common view of the Wall as a German-German subject, as the materialization of the German-German tragedy.... It wasn't East Germany's free decision to build this Wall. Both Germanys have been the cue ball of rival global powers and their interests. So the existence of the Berlin Wall is undeniably connected with the world history after the Second World War. So I wanted to 'describe' the Wall/Checkpoint Charlie from this point of view."³⁰ (figs. 16 and 17)

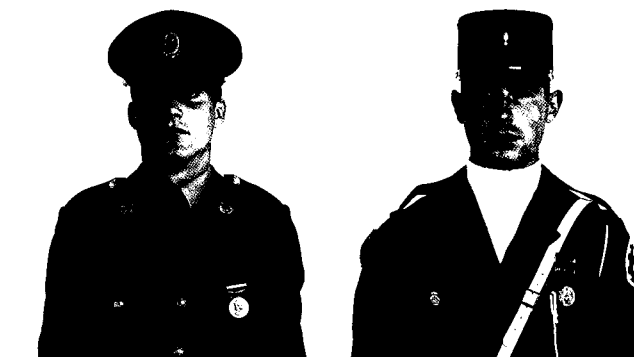


Fig. 14
Frank Thiel, *The Allies* (Soldier 01 USA, Soldier 01 RUS, Soldier 01 GB, Soldier 01 F), 1994

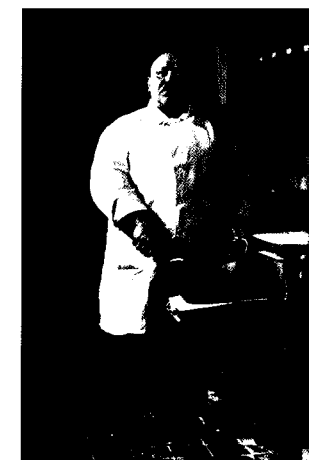


Fig. 15
August Sander,
Pastry Cook,
1928



Fig. 16
Frank Thiel,
Checkpoint Charlie
(*Russian Soldier*),
1994/1998

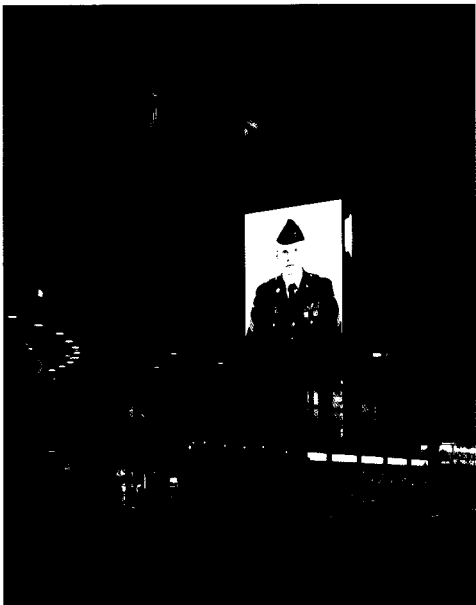


Fig. 17
Frank Thiel,
Checkpoint Charlie
(*American Soldier*),
1994/1998

“Berlin wird” (Berlin becomes)

“Forgetting is equally privileged in an official ad campaign of 1996. Literally written all over the city: ‘Berlin wird’ (Berlin becomes). But ‘becomes what’? Instead of a proper predicate, we get a verbal void. Indeed, this phrasing may reflect wise precaution.... Nobody seems to know exactly what Berlin will become.”

Andreas Huyssen³¹

At the same time Thiel was working on his *Prison Gates* and *Pregnant Women* series, he was also searching for a subject for his next series, and in 1993 he began to reflect seriously on the merits of documenting the city’s rebuilding efforts. The distinct advantage of this subject over his earlier series was its great ambition and immediacy coupled with its undeniable historical relevance. That year he started researching the topic of rebuilding Berlin by first talking to developers, architects, and city planners and then immersing himself in a study of architectural photography over the 150 years preceding Berlin’s reunification. Two years later he began to come to terms with his topic when he decided to focus on “provisional landscapes in the process of transformation.”

He recalled:

“I wanted to photograph the city so that people would not know the final result. I suspected that some of the buildings might be more interesting during the process of constructing them than they would be when completed.” In addition to looking at Berlin as a special set of circumstances, Thiel has regarded the city as emblematic of the problems and challenges besetting the world at the end of the millennium. He predicted: “Berlin will serve as an example to show if we are still capable of building something likely to become a city; a city such as people used to build in past centuries, those we like to visit, those we like to live in.”³²

The decision may have been clinched by the extraordinary amount of energy and money that was being spent on the city at a time when more than 150 architects were at work on various new structures. The seventeen-acre wasteland of the Potsdamer Platz—a bustling commercial center in twenties’ Berlin, which had been devastated first during the Second World War and then later by the Wall—was being transformed into a new office and residential complex for the automaker Daimler-Benz and for a European headquarters for the Sony Corporation. Concurrently a new government district, comparable in size to the Washington, D.C. Mall, was being built in the vicinity of the Reichstag. This impressive 1894 building, which had first housed the German parliament, was to be reconstructed and provided with a massive glass dome by British architect Sir Norman Foster as a widely understood symbol of the new government’s policy of openness.

During the nineteen-nineties Berlin was the single largest construction project in Europe and certainly one of the more extensive in human history, even though the rebuilding of Paris by Baron Haussmann in the eighteen-fifties and sixties surpasses it in terms of its overall scope, cohesive grandiosity, and stately rationality. In the future it may be rivaled by massive urban renewal projects underway in Beijing and Shanghai, but for the present it remains one of the most impressive projects in history. At the end of the twentieth century Berlin was filled with the sounds of cranes, trucks, drills, and jackhammers. At the time, if one listened carefully, one could also detect a cacophony of languages arising from the many foreign construction workers from Eastern Europe and the Middle East who were able to underbid German nationals for work on their own capital, a practice that contributed to mass unemployment in the city. In addition to the notable projects already cited, two different systems of transport, electricity, telecommunications, water, and sewage were being connected, and many old buildings throughout the combined city were either being torn down to make way for new construction or were being modernized in anticipation an infusion of wealth and new jobs that has not materialized.

In October 1995, the same year Thiel began his major series on the rebuilding of Berlin, the city opened an information center known as the Info Box on Leipziger Platz, the square next to Potsdamer Platz, which provided an excellent vantage point for surveying the latter’s many construction projects. An imposing red boxlike structure on black stilts, which appears in one of Thiel’s photographs, this observation area was notable for its gargantuan windows and open-air roof terrace. Enormously popular since its opening, this facility attracted as many as five thousand visitors a day, and it was kept open until 2001, when construction on Potsdamer Platz was winding down. Inside the box, visitors were treated to multimedia displays and interactive computers. Cultural critic Andreas Huyssen described the box’s programmatic escapades in appropriate Pop-inspired prose:

“As a cyber flaneur in ‘Virtual Berlin 2002,’ you can enjoy a fly-through through a computer simulation of the new Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz developments or arrive by rail at the future Lehrter Bahnhof. You can watch the construction site on a wraparound amphitheatrical screen inside, while listening to an animated, Disneyfied Berlin sparrow deliver the proud narrative in a typical, street-smart, slightly lower-class Berlin intonation.”³³

Even though the box itself served as a vantage point for a number of his photographs of Potsdamer Platz, Thiel has remained immune to the temptation to transform his photographs into a visual litany of Berlin’s many accomplishments comparable to the narrative of the Info Box. Instead of celebrating the city, he has maintained in his art a distanced and critical view by focusing on the “dynamics of

becoming,” which according to Deleuze needs no justification other than its preeminent role as key indicator of the life force that must remain unencumbered so that it might remain open to change. For Deleuze, this term connects an ongoing and never-ending dynamic, which transforms this transitive verb into an intransitive one so that it incessantly perpetuates itself, developing over time in different modes without ever reaching a definite conclusion.

Berlin’s seemingly interminable development over a decade must have seemed a protracted emergence—a sustained opening to the activities passing through it and a continuously unfolding process, as opposed to a reification of life as static being, which Deleuze would view as a type of death. Thinking about this unprecedented flurry of activity, which Thiel said he wished to memorialize in his art as ongoing energy rather than as completed projects, I asked him if he had read Deleuze. He responded with a quizzical, “Hasn’t everyone?” Thiel’s theoretical approach is also consistent with the widely used advertising slogan “Berlin becomes.”

When one looks at the wealth of photographs that Thiel has created over the past decade, it is apparent that they concentrate on a number of very specific ideas about the rebuilding of Berlin, and he returns to them again and again in his work.³⁴ He has noted, however:

“I almost never go back to the same locations and definitely never shoot from the same perspective twice. What does repeat and goes back and forth is more [a] kind of learning process I go through. For instance I do photograph a remaining wall after a neighboring building has been destroyed in a very abstract way. But I don’t pay much attention to the image because my main visual interest at that time goes in a different direction. Almost two years later I look at this image again and can finally see its beauty, potential, and maybe quality. So I start working on such... images more intensely.”³⁵

Of central importance to many of Thiel’s images and certainly of crucial significance to the stability of Berlin architecture is the problem of the sandy soil on which the city is built and the ground-water that remains a huge challenge to all builders. While constructing buildings on sand is certainly a well-known biblical metaphor, Thiel deemphasizes this moralistic association in favor of the pragmatics of creating structures capable of withstanding the pressures of the city’s high water table and sandy soil:

“Because Berlin is literally built on sand, the ground water level is very high. This [makes] it... very difficult to build a building with more than one basement. You have to block off the ground water on all sides of the excavation. The forces are enormous. So [the foundation] needs quite some amount of construction to withstand this pressure to avoid... water... flood[ing] the excavation. If you dig your excavation very deep and there are buildings on the

neighboring pieces of land as well, the weight of those buildings has to be balanced as well. That’s why you sometimes have very heavy steel supports in some excavations to stabilize the construction site. These supports are removed floor by floor as [soon] as... the building itself is strong enough to withstand all forces.”

This high water table—the artist calls it a “ground water ‘lake’”—is found in a number of his images and can be considered a distinct aspect of Berlin construction (ills. pp. 79 and 127).³⁶

The heavily reinforced foundations that control this “lake” served as one of the major subjects of Thiel’s *Grids*. In these works he tied Deleuze’s “dynamic” to closely cropped and often obliquely shot images of elaborate foundations that present overlapping lattices of rebar, each positioned in several different configurations for reinforcing the concrete that will ultimately cover them (e.g., ills. pp. 148–151, 184–189). The series makes an implicit analogy to Jackson Pollock’s allover drip paintings with their pulsating, coruscating skeins of color, which are themselves fecund artistic models of becoming. Although these photographs have been connected with Gursky’s more abstract works, particularly his images of a carpeted floor, *Untitled I* (1993), and a lighted ceiling, *Brasilia, General Assembly I* (1994), their emphasis on repeated rectilinear patterns ties them to the modern tradition of painting and sculpture notable for its many images of grids.³⁷

Thiel’s exploration of grids represents his goal to move photography closer to the realm of abstract painting and sculpture.

“Indeed,” he has noted, “I became more and more interested in the relationship between photography and other art forms like sculpture, paintings, or drawing over the last years, unlike the beginning of my work when the reference points have been other photographs mainly.” He goes on to point out: “I also was interested in reducing the ‘hierarchy’ within my own works, because some pictures attracted [more] attention than others because they have shown, for instance, important buildings like the Reichstag. A grid is a grid, no matter what kind of building this foundation platform is made for. In addition, the idea of abstraction was somehow always... present in this Berlin series but not intensified until a few years ago.”³⁸ (fig. 18)

The compositional tactic of picturing such foundations so that they achieve a dramatic layered effect, however, has antecedents in the nineteenth-century photography that Thiel studied before initiating his Berlin series. In particular, the multiplication of support systems appears to have its ultimate source in a number of early photographs, including certain images of the iron skeleton of Les Halles (Paris, late eighteen-fifties) and Joseph Albert’s *Glaspalast* (Munich, 1861). Going even further than these prototypes, the steel rebar networks appearing in Thiel’s photographs create perceptual opportunities for contrapuntal arrangements of parts that appear to advance and recede as viewers look at them, thereby creating

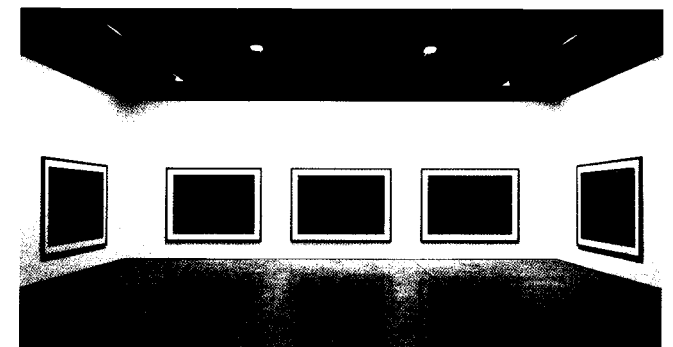


Fig. 18 Exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, USA, 2004



Fig. 19
Joseph Albert,
Glaspalast,
1861



Fig. 20
Delmaet &
Durandelle,
*View of Auditorium
Floor from Stage*,
May 10, 1865

the effect of continued emergence. Some of the rebar in the grids has been treated with zinc, giving it a grayish or silver cast, while other pieces of rebar have been deliberately rusted at the factory as a way of protecting them from further rust from oxygen in the air. Although these pieces of rusted steel are stable, once they appear in Thiel's photographs, they begin to assume a picturesque character that might remind some viewers of ruins that they have seen in older art (fig. 19).

Massive rebuilding efforts often produce the picturesque effects of ruins, which may be temporary or long-term, and this subject suggests yet another dynamic that Thiel has found enormously appealing—mainly Deleuze's "becoming," which is often characterized as becoming different, as opposed to maturing or culminating. When looking at some of Thiel's images, I am reminded of Parisian poet and critic Théophile Gautier's description of the ruins created by the massive destruction concomitant with the creation of Haussmann's grand Parisian boulevards: "High walls, striped like a zebra with brown streaks created by the flues of toppled chimneys, reveal like the cross-section of an architectural plan the mystery of intimate quarters. ... This disorder is not without beauty; the shadow and light interplay in picturesque effects on this debris, on these casualties of stones and beams fallen haphazardly."³⁹

Gautier's description, written in 1855, seems to anticipate by almost 140 years several of Thiel's images of Berlin construction, as do a number of nineteenth-century photographs. These connections underscore Thiel's broad commitment to the history of photography as a cultural resource to mine and perpetuate as well as his sincere desire to connect his project, with its many references to ruins and the picturesque, with a number of similarly ambitious ones antedating his work by more than a century. These include J. Andrieu's *Disasters of War* (1871) and Delmaet & Durandelle's fourteen-year record of the building of the Paris Opéra (1861–75). Charles Clifford's *Construction of the Puente de Los Franceses on the Northern Railway* (ca. 1860), which may be a prototype for some of Thiel's images of scaffolding for government buildings near the Reichstag, similarly substantiates the artist's sophistication and erudition (e.g., ills. pp. 46 and 111). All these correlations draw attention to his recognition that Berlin's current place on the world stage has been occupied many times before by other cities and their architects, engineers, builders, and photographers. This knowledge tempers his imagery, enabling it to become even more a symbol of continued emergence. Whether that dynamic takes the form of a grand edifice or a ruin does not matter in history's grand scheme of things because constancy of change is inherent to the life force (figs. 20 and 21).

Other themes of considerable importance to Thiel's work include scaffolding and construction curtains, which interest him for "the interference between two different structures... a very 'solid' one

(architecture) and a 'soft' one (curtain)." (e.g., ills. pp. 63 and 135) This layering of façades is found in a number of different situations in Berlin whereby old sheathing is updated with new cladding. Sometimes, Thiel notes: "These pictures [meaning his photographs] have been taken after the old façade systems have been removed and after the restraint systems for the new façades have been installed. So the buildings change their 'face' completely during this short period of time."⁴⁰ One dynamic replaces another: some are of abbreviated duration, while others extend much longer (ills. pp. 89 and 112).

Thiel has also observed that façade samples placed before buildings like abstract advertisements for a building's new life have developed into a highly specialized genre in Berlin:

"Investors started to install different façade samples/variations (different types of stones, glasses, designs, colors, types of metal, ... etc.) on or near their construction sites, in their future original sizes. From those 1:1 samples final decisions were made [as to] how the buildings... [are] going to look like in the end. Those samples... perfectly express what I was interested in." (ills. pp. 86–88 and 91) In addition to these installations, which acquaint passersby with the process of renovation and plans for the future, some builders in Berlin have generously commissioned full-scale digital simulations of how the completed structures will look (ills. pp. 143 and 144). To kick off a fund-raising campaign for a complete reconstruction of Schinkel's 1836 Bauakademie—the first architecturally important industrial building in Germany and a forerunner of modern skeletal frame construction with basic supports and non-load-bearing walls—a life-size corner of the building was erected in 1999. It was built, Thiel explains, "in its original material and dimensions to convince a larger audience that this is the right thing to do on this specific piece of land." He goes on to say: "Later a computer simulation of the final building (printed on some plastic material) was hung on a scaffolding construction to simulate the intended building in three dimensions."⁴¹ (ill. p. 145)

Such building practices as surrounding buildings with construction curtains, providing them with a new sheathing, and creating simulations of completed buildings or reconstructions to actual scale represent part of the captivating contemporary folklore of Berlin construction and are important also as documents, testifying to the subject of becoming as a major, ongoing theme of Thiel's work. When recording these recent construction practices, his camera assumes the objectivity of a social scientist, while the subject of continued emergence testifies to humankind's resiliency, its ability to innovate, and its generosity in sharing its discoveries and decisions with others. For Thiel, Berlin is a gigantic outdoor installation piece that changes daily. While his photographs interrupt the process, even as they preserve discrete slices of it, the images themselves are so caught up in the dynamics of change that they seem in medias res, and the photographs look like freeze-frames that point

to a larger, ongoing narrative. In this way Deleuze's "dynamic" continues to be characterized in Thiel's work as an ongoing and open-ended situation. What is captured on-frame relates to still greater off-frame productions that can be intuited from the overall rebuilding process that has been taking place in Berlin, while this off-scene activity can often be discerned if one compares one of Thiel's photographs with others presenting different views of the same subject. Sometimes his straightforward photography of visually complex building façades approaches that of his foundation grids, and when this occurs, becoming is realized as a particularly intriguing perceptual process that depends on viewers' imaginative reprocessing of the visual information before them.

Whenever Thiel gives private tours through Berlin, he always includes in the itinerary several GDR sites of particular interest to him.⁴² He is clearly aware of the prejudice that former West Berliners and former West Germans in general have toward GDR buildings and their architects—an insight that has occurred to others as well. Architecture critic Mary Pepchinski, for example, has described this discrimination:

"In the East... many [older architects], who worked on the rebuilding of East Berlin's center, now witness the destruction of their life's work.... Although architects and intellectuals in East and West now can associate freely, the generation in middle age, which is directing the current boom, remains divided. Architects from the East find themselves closed out of many invited competitions, curated exhibitions, and discussions organized by their Western colleagues." She also comments on "the triumph of the West over the East," lamenting that "many of the GDR's public buildings and other structures, which came into being during the Cold War, will soon disappear."⁴³

Among Thiel's favorite GDR-era buildings are those on the Frankfurter Allee (formerly the Stalinallee), which testify to the intense rivalries between the East and West Berlin governments in the nineteen-fifties, when they were openly competing for citizens. At this time the GDR commissioned architect Hermann Henselmann to design for the Stalinallee palatial apartment buildings, stores, and public spaces to house the proletariat in a socialist utopia. Although the buildings, which were constructed between 1951 and 1960, emulated socialist realist classical architecture from the Stalinist era, they are distinguished from their Russian prototypes by German rococo and neoclassical motifs, which have their ultimate origin in Meissen porcelain and Schinkel's architecture. Clad with beautiful, subtly colored tiles so that each structure exhibits a slightly different hue, the buildings have been disparaged as *Zuckerbäckerstil* (confectioner's style) by Westerners, who are primed to be prejudiced against GDR architecture. Fortunately, the buildings on the former Stalinallee were renovated very carefully and at great expense since replication of the original tiles is a painstaking

process. After completion of the work, the street was given "World Heritage" designation by UNESCO, thus ensuring the continuance of these GDR-era buildings. However, their offshoots in the form of GDR-era apartment buildings in neighboring areas, which were originally covered with similar tiles, have not been properly restored and have been dismally resheathed with metal or concrete plates.

While Thiel expresses regret for these expediencies when driving around the former East Berlin, he usually has not chosen to photograph GDR-era buildings unless they are undergoing tremendous changes, including demolition, like the Hotel Berolina (ca. 1961–63), designed by Josef Kaiser and Günter Kunert in a slightly later variant of this style. Situated at the beginning of the Karl-Marx-Allee and constructed of radiant blue ceramic tiles, this commodious thirteen-story hotel, with its approximately four hundred rooms, was deemed important enough to be designated a protected building in 1996. But the following year it was replaced with a new city hall for this section of Berlin. According to Thiel, "The permission for demolition was only given with the condition that the new building is aesthetically very similar to the old one and has the same dimensions."⁴⁴ Of course, considering the great expense of replicating the tiles on the Berolina, the new structure, clad in an undistinguished material, could in no way compare with the one it replaced (ills. pp. 65 and 66).

On the street that begins as Karl-Marx-Allee and continues as Frankfurter Allee, is the Kosmos cinema (1960–62), which is from the same time period as the Hotel Berolina, also designed by Kaiser, working this time with Herbert Aust. According to Thiel, who photographed details of tiles from the cinema's exterior so that they might resemble some of Gerhard Richter's paintings of around 1962–76 depicting color charts, the Kosmos is "one of the best buildings ever made during the communist times, which perfectly proves that there [have] been visions and incredible talent in contemporary East German architecture that could easily compete with international modern architecture." Thiel's details of the Kosmos's exterior emphasize the staccato rhythms of its randomly placed tiles, creating a composition that certainly recalls Richter's work but also points to the twentieth-century desire to create synaesthetic, staccato-like abstract compositions that analogize the visual arts as music (fig. 22).

Continuing this interest in regional architecture while going beyond it to look at modular designs that are global in principle, Thiel has researched and documented school buildings in the former East Berlin that are composed of modules of prefabricated reinforced concrete fronted with skeletal frame construction. Referred to as "Skelettbauweise SK-Berlin," 164 of these schools were built in the Eastern sector between 1966 and 1981 in three distinct phases: the first from 1966 to 1971, the second from 1971 to 1976, and the third

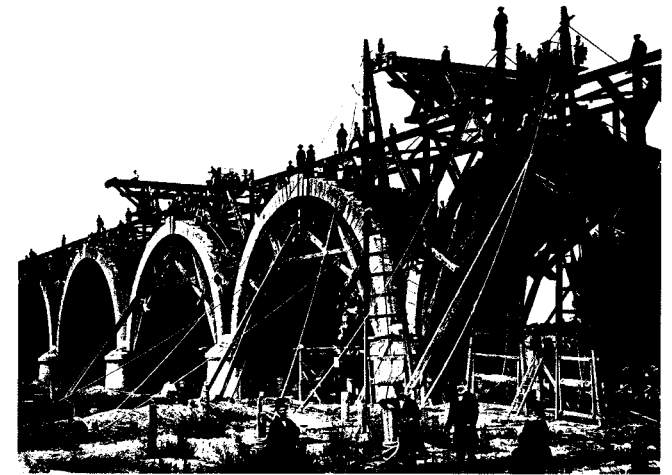


Fig. 21 Charles Clifford, Construction of the Puente de Las Franceses on the Northern Railway, ca. 1860



Fig. 22 Frank Thiel, *untitled (cinema "Kosmos" #04)*, 2002

from 1976 to 1981. The buildings of the last phase—with their horizontal rows of windows and colored panel inserts, resembling both De Stijl designs and Sol LeWitt's Minimalist cubes—are the ones that Thiel has photographed. He has explained both his title *SK 76 / 2-Mp* and his goals for this series of photographs:

"SK: for skeleton construction; 76 for post-1976; 2-Mp because the maximal weight of the prefabricated wall-segments used for this construction system was two megapounds because of technical reasons in terms of transport and construction. The underlying idea of *SK 76 / 2-Mp* is the attempt to 'translate' an architectural module/grid into a photographic one. Each picture shows a precisely defined section of one façade. Since the modular construction of the schoolhouses never varied, the pictures are almost identical in height and width, and can be wall-mounted to (re)construct a fictional building of any desired length. The construction principle of the photographic series thus echoes the construction principle of the architecture. From picture to picture the color of the panels changes, the rows of windows vary, the foregrounds 'jump,' and the skies are slightly different."⁴⁵

Lining up individual photographs of the schoolhouse façades in individual photographs, one next to the other, and then assembling a monumental photograph composed of thirteen sections of schools, Thiel created yet another dynamic, taking the form of his documentation of a vast network of modular-type buildings. The series has special meaning for him because the modular construction of the building enabled him to create a conceptual work playing with abstract components of different buildings (ills. pp. 95–98).

Another prominent monument to the GDR that Thiel has documented since late 2003 is the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic). Initially called the Volkspalast (people's palace), this massive structure, which was built between 1973 and 1976, was the former seat of the East German parliament. In 1998 it was stripped to its skeletal core to undergo comprehensive asbestos abatement, which was completed in May 2003. (Earlier Thiel had documented the destruction of the neighboring Palast-Hotel [1976–79], which also exemplified for him seventies-style East German architecture.) (ills. pp. 122/123 and 128–131) After all this work on the Palast was completed, government officials still wanted to demolish it and to turn the space around it into a park until funds could be raised for the reconstruction of the Stadtschloss, a fifteenth-century castle transformed into a sixteenth-century Renaissance palace, which had once stood on this ground. The idea of undertaking a complete reconstruction of the Stadtschloss, however, was quickly shelved. The most likely scenario for the building, following its demolition which began in early 2006, is the construction of a modern structure, which will be surrounded at least partially by walls that resemble the old ones of the castle. This halfhearted reconstruction effort is no doubt intended as a self-conscious symbol that might help unify the

former Eastern and Western parts of Berlin. Because tearing down the building and leaving its site as a park would jeopardize the foundations of neighboring structures, the monumental skeletal core, which employed almost all the steel and concrete produced in the GDR during the three years it was being built, has remained standing until the demolition of the Palast could be decided by a majority vote of the Bundestag, which was obtained on January 19, 2006.

Tearing down this building and proposing even a partial reconstruction of an earlier one has seemed to be an extraordinarily absurd turn of events for many former East Berliners. As Thiel explains:

"[The] Palast der Republik became one of the most controversial monuments of this reunified Berlin. For the people from West Germany the building was a symbol of socialism and communism, a symbol of that [which] they feared during the Cold War. The Palast is for them—the *Wessies*—a symbol of suppression of a nation, a symbol for the lack of democracy, a building with many negative associations.

For the former inhabitants of the GDR—the *Ossies*—the Palast had a completely contrary meaning. Since [its] erection... the Palast served as a museum of the contemporary culture of the East German republic. The Palast indeed housed the parliament of the GDR but next to this political function the building offered most of its space for leisure and culture. Theaters, bars, restaurants, dancing, concerts, a bowling course, and shops with 'exotic' products offered the citizens of East Berlin something unique in their habitat. The building was the heart of the GDR and an example for the future. It was within this building that the first freely elected parliament decided in favor of the reunification of Germany.

In architectural terms the Palast der Republik is as well a remarkable building by combining a political and cultural program. The futuristic techniques used in the interior of the Palast—like the adjustable balconies in the large theater—make the building a masterpiece of engineering. The current stripped state of the interior is unique and offers the possibility for redefining the monumental value of the Palast for the city of Berlin as a whole."⁴⁶

All Thiel's images of the Palast have been taken from within this mammoth hall (ills. pp. 171–179). The drama of the stripped skeletal frame and the continued debate about the building's future at the time his photographs were taken make it an eminent example of Deleuze's type of emergence, which is an ongoing duration, not a culmination (fig. 23).

One of the artist's more recent projects consists of documenting the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) Field Station, once used for intelligence gathering, which is situated on an artificial hill called Teufelsberg in the former British sector of West Berlin. The station joins a deactivated panopticon with a massively decelerated type of Deleuzian "becoming." Composed of several Buckminster Fuller-

style geodesic domes in combination with a prominent phallic dome made of hexagons, the spy outpost—one of the key places for intercepting Soviet messages throughout the Cold War—hid its far-ranging antenna systems inside these once-futuristic structures, which are slowly decomposing into industrial ruins complete with graffiti.

Far removed from the Bechers' black-and-white studies of specific types of industrial architecture, Thiel's lavish panoramas of the NSA Field Station present the future as a past tense, which intersects with the present as a ruin. A majestic pathos pervades these buildings, with their retrograde science fiction allusions. More Hubert Robert than Mad Max and more elegiac and grand than scruffy and punk (even with the graffiti), these buildings and the burgeoning landscape around them demonstrate that time along the superannuated margins of the present-day world is not so much stopped as it is slowed down, and the velocity of decomposition (another type of becoming) moves at an almost imperceptible pace so that change is defined in decades rather than days and years.

Ultimately, if the NSA Field Station remains, its slowed-down state of change into nature's ruinous adjunct will be marked in centuries instead of decades (ills. pp. 193–200).

The process of slowly weathering while remaining highly picturesque is the subject of Thiel's latest series focusing on walls and ceilings. Playing with similarities and differences between painting and photography, he employs photography as a tool for recording on a monumental scale the ruinous condition of weathered paint surfaces in Berlin's abandoned buildings. Photographs of peeling paint held in delicate and tentative suspension resemble at times both Minor White's and Aaron Siskind's black-and-white studies of the same type of subject from the late nineteen-fifties at the same time that they hark back to Robert Rauschenberg's *Black Paintings* of the early fifties.

However, these memento mori of weathered surfaces, together with images of exterior walls minus their cladding, appear to be luxuriously rich and beautiful testaments to time's decomposing surfaces that also function as metaphors for modernism's continuing decline. Instead of reenacting either Abstract Expressionism's histrionic acrobatics or Robert Rauschenberg's dry parodies of this mid-twentieth-century style's overblown conception of individual genius, Thiel's panoramic paeans to aging paint, decomposed surfaces, and graffiti-despoiled walls are elegiac reflections on the deserted byways of the present-day world. Although they were taken in Berlin, these photographs document ubiquitous relics that can be found in first and third world countries around the globe. They reinforce becoming as an ongoing and painstakingly slow dynamic that continues even in the absence of human intervention (fig. 24).

This expanded sense of time—a dynamic that is almost imperceptible—has inspired Thiel in a recent series that he has been creating for a projected exhibition entitled *O Delírio do Chimborazo*, in which he looks at Frederic Edwin Church's Hudson River School paintings of the Andes in Ecuador in conjunction with both the descriptions of the region by the nineteenth-century Berlin naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who inspired Church, and the terrain itself. His photographs document what can actually be seen, as opposed to the synthetic and idealized views that Church composed. Thiel's works refer to the specific velocity of nature at the same time that these images play off scientific descriptions and artistic views, thus culminating in documentary-type photographs that reflect an actual time even as they allude to earlier historic and artistic precedents (figs. 25 and 26).

Conclusion: The Multiplicities of Time in Thiel's Art

"Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or 'return' in the subject. A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)."

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari⁴⁷

In Frank Thiel's art time is always a factor. In the initial stage of making a photograph, the brief click of the camera's shutter registers the instant of the artist's momentary blindness when the light reflected from a discrete view is registered on the film's light-sensitive emulsion. During this contracted time subjects in the present become part of the past the moment after they are shot. "Taking a shot"—an aggressive ballistic metaphor endemic to the medium, which makes Thiel's photographs the modern equivalent of the proverbial trophies brought back by big-game hunters—reinforces the fact that all his photographs are part of time's ongoing assault on the present. Ironically these shots are occasions where by photography's images repeal the death of its subjects since they sustain in various ways their gerundlike status of becoming. The photograph's relation to its off-frame context or history underscores its inherent multiplicity of meaning (referenced in the above epigraph), which can never be reduced to one origin or to a single definitive manifestation.

An East Berliner transported to the West and a documentary-type photographer firmly aware of the role of the aesthetic that opens a subject to imaginative thought, Thiel has made Berlin the primary

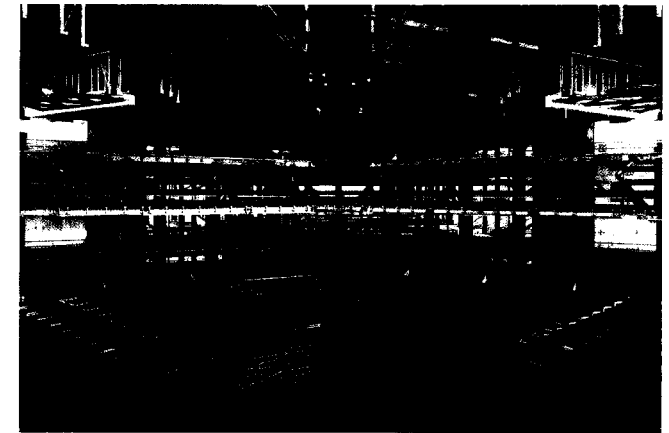


Fig. 23 Frank Thiel, *untitled (Palast der Republik #13)*, 2004



Fig. 24 Aaron Siskind, *Jerome 20, Arizona*, 1949



Fig. 25 Frank Thiel, *Chimborazo (II)*, 2003

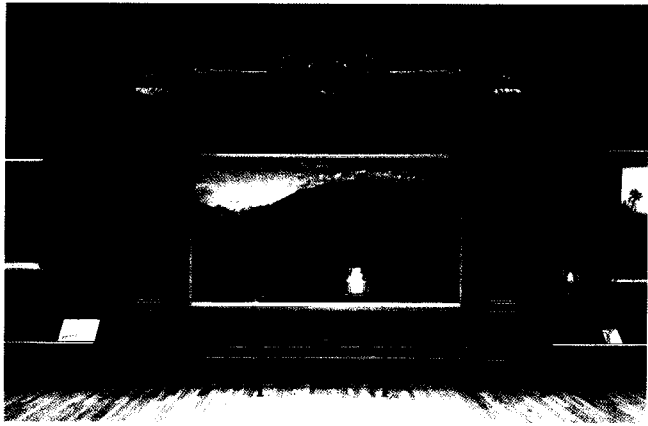


Fig. 26 Frank Thiel, *Frederic Edwin Church (I)*
[*Heart of the Andes*, 1859, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA], 2003

subject of his investigations and the characterization of time the goal of his art. In the course of his work he has invoked time as a mode of looking, so that his early images evoke the dreamworld and aura of early pinhole photographs that look in the direction of the future, which they present as a past tense. As he moved closer to the present-day world of reunified Germany in his *Prison Gates* and *Prison Watchtowers* series, time became both abstracted and suspended so that it is a consequence of the viewer's glance. In his *The Allies* series, time assumed a sense of urgency as the artist worked to record two hundred of the Allied military forces stationed in Berlin before they received orders to vacate the capital. Later, when he "employed" a Russian and a U.S. soldier for his Checkpoint Charlie monument, Thiel established an ongoing dialectic of ricocheting times that oscillate between past and present. In his series on the rebuilding of Berlin—his most extensive to date—time, truncated to an instant, is held in a hairbreadth suspension. In medias res, it is caught between such ongoing operations as excavating sites, constructing buildings, demolishing others, and rehabilitating still others. In recent years, as Berlin's building boom has been winding down, Thiel's time has been protracted to accommodate the then-unresolved status of the Palast der Republik, the abandoned NSA Field Station at Berlin's Teufelsberg, and the peeling paint and decomposing surfaces that can be seen along the margins of this postmodern and somewhat antiquated modern metropolis.

Postscript: On Documentary Photography

Because my work on Thiel's photography depends on my understanding of the "art" of documentary photography, which has joined codes of authentication with strong aesthetic components, even in its earliest phases, I am appending an analysis of this genre, which I needed to undertake prior to writing this essay so that I could clarify my own thoughts about it and thus justify my perspective.

In the nineteen-eighties art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau made concerted attempts to relegate most documentary photography to a bankrupt mode because of a potential disconnect between photographers' often laudable intentions and the aesthetic dimension of the photographs themselves. She based her argument on the assumption that aesthetic pleasure is a sure sign of complicity with an established point of view. She wrote of "the need... to establish a contestatory space in which the *form* of utterance or address speaks to otherwise unrecognized, or passively accepted, meanings, values, and beliefs that cultural production normally reproduces and legitimizes."⁴⁸ Despite the cogency of her argument and the real value of critiquing documentary photography's often tacit and complicit connections with pervasive points of view,

Solomon-Godeau tended to equate aesthetic pleasure with induction into well-established modes of looking, thereby diminishing the open-ended free play that art has traditionally been thought to encourage. Contra Solomon-Godeau, aesthetic apprehension does not always connote viewers' seduction and/or coercion by a preponderant way of thinking. Frequently art's arresting appeal functions as a powerful hook to draw viewers into those uncomfortable "contestatory" or "oppositional" spaces, which she describes as crucial for critical practices.⁴⁹ On the decisive point of observers' potentially creative role, I differ with some aspects of Solomon-Godeau's well-honed and mostly laudable argument because it does not recognize the fact that viewers must figure out their own connection to a given work of art, its form and subject matter, and its potential relationship to their world and cannot simply be inculcated in the artist's point of view because art permits greater latitude of response than scholarly critiques. If the major goal of works of art were simply to place viewers in opposition to dominant beliefs—in itself a worthwhile quest but certainly not the only one—then art unfortunately could be written off as an instrumental device and relegated to the category of simplistic catalyst: mere propaganda for marginalized positions. Obviously the aesthetic component of documentary photography involves much more than the satisfaction of finding it and oneself in accord with mainstream thought and thus in sync with the constructed world one inhabits.

The aesthetic, as Immanuel Kant so clearly understood a few decades after this word began to achieve currency among philosophers in the mid-eighteenth century, is an eminently radical process. It depends on the imagination taking hold of a given phenomenon, either a work of art or nature, and reordering it under its own creative auspices before presenting it to understanding:

"For the imagination ([in its role] as a productive cognitive power) is very mighty when it creates, as it were another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it. ... So the mental powers whose combination (in a certain relation) constitutes *genius* are imagination and understanding. ... When the imagination is used for cognition, then it is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to the restriction of adequacy to the understanding's concept. But when the aim is aesthetic, then the imagination is free, so that, over and above that harmony with the concept, it may supply, in an unstudied way, a wealth of underdeveloped material for the understanding which the latter disregarded in its concept. But the understanding employs this material not so much objectively, for cognition, as subjectively, namely, to quicken the cognitive powers, through indirectly this does serve cognition too."⁵⁰

Kant's phrase "quicken[ing] the cognitive powers" is another way of couching the ongoing free play that he views as crucial for aesthetic experience. Although this gratuitous and open-ended

operation is always in danger of falling under the aegis of assumed beliefs, as Solomon-Godeau suggests, its very freedom militates against such constraint by providing the possibility, but not necessarily the probability, of moving beyond current strictures to discover new possibilities. While I am personally convinced that every world is a constructed one, the fissures and gaps that sometimes can be discerned between competing, overlapping, and oftentimes interpenetrating cultural regimes that usually elide over the substantial differences separating them are profoundly important because they potentially exist in the “Real”—to use Jacques Lacan’s term for phenomena or experiences that have not been subjected to symbolic organization. Therefore, differing with Solomon-Godeau on the aesthetic, I suggest, apropos Kant, that the aesthetic as an improvisational mode of apprehension can and does constitute a critical position because it provides an ongoing dynamic for framing new positions and experiences.

This situation is crucial for understanding the radical potential of documentary photography, which noted curator and scholar Beaumont Newhall first examined in “Documentary Approach to Photography” (1938), in which he discusses tensions between the genre’s duty to fact and its affiliations with aesthetics. He introduces his topic by pointing out that the term came from film, which in turn was indebted to the nineteenth-century French novelist and self-proclaimed naturalist Émile Zola, who famously described his goal to examine life as if he were looking through a microscope. Newhall no doubt was thinking of the fictive devices employed by both documentary filmmakers and naturalist novelists when he asserts that a documentary photographer cannot be “a mere technician.” Almost immediately he qualifies this assertion by raising the alternative proviso, “Nor is [the documentary photographer] an artist for art’s sake. His results are often brilliant technically and highly artistic, but primarily they are pictorial reports,” thus reinforcing the medium’s positivist outlook. Then, Newhall qualifies the full weight of this assertion by claiming: “First and foremost [the documentary photographer] is a visualizer.” Finding documentary photographers to be passionate about their subjects, Newhall endorses the role of “emotion” in their work, which he regards as unproblematic. Because artistic “emotion” in recent years has become such a period term, belonging to an era of bourgeois individualism when it was thought that individual feelings could be reified as artworks, we might substitute for this loaded word “personal perspective” or rely on the French semiotic term *énoncé*, which is customarily employed to indicate the mode through which an artist and subsequently a viewer can assume a viable position within a given discourse. Looking at the Latin word *docere*, “to teach,” Newhall implies that documentary still photographers can marshal their knowledge and point of view to educate and persuade.⁵¹ While Solomon-Godeau regards the instructive role of documentary photographers as the real basis of their work,

she either relegates aesthetic form to a secondary position or renders it suspect in her overall argument.

In my discussion of Thiel’s documentary photography, I consider the aesthetic as a substantial element in his work, primarily because it provides the crucial means of qualifying the perspective that viewers encounter when they see these photographs. Their positions vis-à-vis these works of art are analogous to the camera’s angle as well as the artist’s social, political, and aesthetic viewpoint. When viewers look at Thiel’s photographs, they see them from the perspective that he has selected. In addition, their *énoncé* potentially parallels Thiel’s. His means of assuming a justifiable role in various contemporary photographic, critical, philosophical, and historic discourses potentially becomes theirs, unless—as so often happens—their imaginations, as Kant points out, reconstruct this information and provide scenarios or forms for understanding that differ from those the artist developed.

In Thiel’s photographs of Berlin—his major focus to date—his *énoncé* moves from a critique of Walter Benjamin’s “aura” in his early works to a consideration of Michel Foucault’s analysis of power, particularly its manifestation as a panopticon, an omniscient vantage point, in his series on prison entryways and watchtowers as well as his works focusing on urban surveillance cameras and global intelligence gathering. Moreover, Thiel’s perspective expands into the realm of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s extensive photographic records of building types, which they initiated in the sixties, as well as Thomas Ruff’s monumental reconceptions of passport portraits, which he began in the mid-eighties. Most recently Thiel discovered a fecund *énoncé* in French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s theory of “transversal becoming”—an ongoing dynamic without any perceived goal that permits him to employ it as a generative metaphor for a reunified Berlin searching for a new identity.

In each of these series Thiel sets up tensions between viewing the world as undeniable fact and looking at it as social, historic, and aesthetic construct. His view of an emerging reunified Berlin is more often than not dialectical; it depends on his looking at the world first as an East German and then as a West Berliner, taking in the situations that both *Ossies* and *Wessies* might find acceptable, and thereby placing his viewers in the enviable position of being able to rise above these parochial views and speculate on change itself without the encumbrance of tying it to particular international or global objectives. With the exception of his first groups of work, from 1989 to 1990, in which he commemorated East Germany’s passing, Thiel’s images are poised on the same tensions of authentication and aesthetics besetting all documentary work, thereby correlating with American photographer Walker Evans’s laconic definition of this genre as “deliberately wrought visual poetry disguised as plain prosaic fact.”⁵²

Notes

- 1 Steve Harding, "Berlin in Transition," *Soldiers* 45 (September 1990), p. 28.
- 2 Frank Thiel, interview with the author, June 5–6, 2002, Berlin. All personal information about the artist's life, unless otherwise noted, comes from the interviews conducted during this two-day period.
- 3 Although Thiel was born in Kleinmachnow, near Berlin, in 1966 and grew up there until he was arrested, East Berlin fascinated him for its size, its diversity, and its promise of anonymity.
- 4 Although the Bechers' straightforward studies of nonarchitectural building types provided the starting point for the next generation, Thomas Ruff's initial mid-eighties forays into large-scale color photography, which were financed by the then Lyon-based American expatriate gallerist Philip Nelson, forged the new direction that his generation would take.
- 5 Cf. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), pp. 32–51, and Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, transl. Richard Howard (New York, 1981).
- 6 Christian Metz, "On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York, 1974), p. 6.
- 7 Gilles Deleuze's ideas are developed in a number of his writings. Particularly pertinent for Thiel is his early collaboration with Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York, 1977), and their later *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987), which begins with an important essay on rhizomes and repeats information from the earlier text.
- 8 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 1, 2005.
- 9 Simon Green, "Immigration, Asylum, and Citizenship in Germany: The Impact of Unification and the Berlin Republic," *West European Politics* 24 (October 2001), p. 110.
- 10 For a discussion of the frustrated search for dominant images cohering the rebuilding of Berlin to a united front, see Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas, "Re-imagining Berlin: World City, National Capital, or Ordinary Place?" *European Urban and Regional Studies* 6, no. 2 (1999), pp. 145–164, and Mary Pepchinski, "Perspective: Report from Berlin," *Progressive Architecture* 74 (November 1993), pp. 78–85.
- 11 Frank Thiel, interview with the author, June 5–6, 2002.
- 12 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 1, 2005.
- 13 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.
- 14 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 13, 2005.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13 (spring 1972) p. 20.
- 16 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.
- 17 Barthes 1981 (see note 5). An important source for Barthes's *punctum* is Walter Benjamin, who wrote: "However skilful the photographer, however carefully he poses his model, the spectator feels an irresistible compulsion to look for the tiny spark of chance, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the character in the picture: to find that imperceptible point at which in the immediacy of that long-past moment, the future so persuasively inserts itself that, looking back, we may rediscover it." Benjamin 1972 (see note 15), p. 7.
- 18 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.
- 19 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), p. 233.
- 20 Originally published under the title *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975). The page numbers cited in the text refer to the English edition of the book, cited in note 17 above, which is the one that Thiel read.
- 21 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.
- 22 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 1, 2005.

- 23 Isabel Carlos, "Within the Prison Net," in *Frank Thiel: Prison Gates* (Kraichtal, 1995), unpaginated. References to Thiel's citations are found in Carlos's text.
- 24 More distant prototypes are Charles Sheeler's photographs of the rural architecture of rural Pennsylvania from the second decade of the twentieth century, when he made studies of naturally distressed barn siding photographed in a straightforward manner.
- 25 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 5, 2005.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin," *Critical Inquiry* 24 (autumn 1997), p. 62.
- 32 Frank Thiel, "Berlin: 1995—1998," in *Frank Thiel: Berlin* (Galicia: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 1998), p. 59.
- 33 Huyssen 1997 (see note 31), p. 71.
- 34 Frank Thiel, letter and notes on the works, August 15, 2005. Much of the information that follows comes from these notes that Thiel so generously prepared.
- 35 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.
- 36 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 13, 2005.
- 37 For a discussion of the ubiquity of grids in modern art, see Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 19 (summer 1979), pp. 50–64.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Cited in Alisa Luxenberg, "Creating Disasters: Andrieu's Photographs of Urban Ruins in the Paris of 1871," *Art Bulletin* 80 (March 1998), p. 119.
- 40 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 1, 2005.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, February 7, 2006. Surprisingly the Nationalist Socialists' major contribution to modern-day Berlin was the demolition of buildings to clear space for Hitler's grandiose Germania, which was never realized but was intended not only to rival Rome but also to dwarf it. The cleared-away area was situated along a north/south axis bordering the Tiergarten on the East and just West of Potsdamer Platz and Leipziger Platz. At the end of the Second World War this area served as a natural border when Berlin was separated into separate districts under Allied forces. Perhaps in consideration of Germania's north-south orientation and also for more immediate reasons, late twentieth-century Berlin, which unites the former East and West Germanys into one country, is situated in an east-west direction.
- Asked what role, if any, Germania assumes in his thoughts and work about Berlin, Thiel responded:
- "'Germania'!?"
- A BIG subject. Honestly for my work this topic has never been an issue. Which does not mean that I have not studied this part of Berlin's history. It is indeed an essential chapter to understand the city's topography and history. Both the Nazis and the Second World War winners had a strong sense for [the] symbolism and iconography of power. That's why the division of the city after the Second World War does reflect partly the "Germania"-plans of the Nazis. It was very much about "occupying" or destroying certain symbolic places (that have survived the Second World War) and giving them a new meaning. For instance Tempelhof Airport became [the] US Air Base and later [the] main airport for the *Luftbrücke*, when the Soviets did close West Berlin's borders.

Or look at the Olympic Stadium.

I wouldn't say Nazi-history is totally erased from the city's map. There was a lot of damage during the Second World War and more demolition afterwards. But I would say the Germans (when they had a "say" again) have finally found a quite remarkable way... to deal with their own history and its darkest times (unlike other countries), including the remaining Nazi-architecture. As I always used to say Berlin suffers from an overdose of history... yet it does not suffer from it's sediments like other European cities, but from the consequences of its eruptions. That's why the level of erasure is most probably higher than in other cities. But generally speaking I would say the Germans have [a] very strong sense about their own history and how it does reflect in architecture for instance."

43 Pepchinski 1993 (see note 10), pp. 82, 84.

Similarly Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas opine, "It is a vision of the future that explicitly draws on capitalism's victory over the drab reality of East German communism," in "Re-imagining Berlin" (see note 10), p. 149.

44 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 13, 2005.

45 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 4, 2005.

46 Frank Thiel, e-mail correspondence with the author, October 13, 2005.

47 Deleuze and Guattari 1987 (see note 7), p. 8.

48 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions: Critical Practices in the Age of Supply-Side Aesthetics," *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989), p. 207.

49 Ibid., p. 192.

50 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), pp. 182, 185, from section 49, "On the Powers of the Mind Which Constitute Genius."

51 Beaumont Newhall, "Documentary Approach to Photography," *Parnassus* 10 (March 1938), pp. 3–5.

52 Walker Evans, "Selected Letters, Memoranda, Interviews, and Notes," in *Walker Evans at Work*, ed. Jerry Thompson (New York, 1982), p. 12.