

PHOTOGRAPHERS SPEAK

DEAN BRIERLY INTERVIEWS THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE SHAPING THE PARAMETERS OF PHOTOGRAPHY — FROM OLD SCHOOL TO NEW GENERATION, TRADITIONAL TO CUTTING EDGE.

Andreas Gefeller : Subjective Realities

By Dean Brierly , June 2, 2009

Düsseldorf-based photographer Andreas Gefeller deftly manipulates viewers' perceptions of visual "truth" in discrete yet complementary series that reflect a multiplicity of themes and concerns— nuclear disasters, mankind's environmental hegemony, and global transformations of public and personal space, to name but a few. In so doing, he reveals intellectual and spiritual truths about ourselves and our relationship with the environments we adopt and adapt. His latest series, titled "Supervisions," pushes this aesthetic to a surprisingly disorienting degree.

What drew you to photography?

When I was a kid, I was very interested in astronomy. I had a telescope and took many photos of the stars, which I developed myself. In the beginning, I thought I did this for scientific reasons. But I soon realized that I was more fascinated by the possibilities of collecting light to make invisible things visible. And I started to take photos of other things—all that stuff that people photograph when they get a camera: houses, flowers, people. But I retained the idea that photography helps to understand how human perception works in the mind. Later, during my studies at the University of Essen, I again started to make timeexposure photographs, which resulted in my series "Soma."

How has your environment affected your approach and choice of subject matter?

I think everything affects everything. The way that landscapes are destroyed by industrial buildings and by houses for people who like to live in a "natural" environment— not to mention the highways that displace natural landscapes so that people can drive back and forth to work—makes me angry. Although in Düsseldorf, where I live, it's still quite tolerable compared to other places in the world, like Asia, the United States and other developing countries.

Can you briefly discuss the inspiration for "Supervisions"?

To be honest, the inspiration came by accident: A friend and I were having a picnic on the banks of the Rhine River. It was a nice day, and we were a little bored. When my friend fell asleep, I started playing with my film camera and made dozens of photos of the ground. When I combined cut-out images from the contact sheets into a single collage, I realized that with this method I could "fly"—not literally, of course, but photographically. Things on the ground seemed to become smaller, while the distance to the earth seemed to become greater. That was



the start of "Supervisions."

In refining that process, you began to image one square meter at a time with the camera a few feet above the ground, and then digitally stitched all the individual images into one large collective image?

Yes, that's exactly how I make them. The height from which I shoot can vary, depending on the situation. Outdoors, it's up to three meters off the ground. Indoors, it's lower.

I've read that you make up to thousands of exposures for each work. How long does this take? And is there anything else involved in the process, either at the capture stage or when you combine the images in the computer?

My latest work shows the ground plan of the Academy of Arts in Düsseldorf, for which I took nearly 10,000 photos (maybe more, I didn't count them) during a period of some months. But I swear, that will be the last time that I make such a huge work. I was very happy when I had finished it! That image was an exception, however. Normally, the photographing process takes a few hours to one or two days. To stitch the photos together takes longer. But this is difficult to say precisely, as I would go crazy if I didn't take breaks and then return to the process a few days later.

The effect seems to be that they are taken from much higher up, which plays with the viewer's sense of spatial depth and transforms our sense of place and space. The subject matter itself is flat and thus lacks visual depth, yet your technique creates what I might call a false sense of depth.

I agree. In fact, even though I made the photographs, I sometimes can't believe that they were in fact taken from

such a low height. In this, I'm influenced by my love of astronomy. Looking at the surfaces of other planets makes me wonder what it would be like if I was there. But it's mainly technical aspect of astronomy that helps me create my "Supervisions" images. Pictures of the moon, the earth and other planets are often made by dozens of single satellite photos. The satellite circles the planet many times from a lower height, but the result looks as if the distance from the planet was much greater. This is the same effect as in "Supervisions."

What's the thematic intention behind this spatial deception?

This deception itself is the main subject of the work: On one hand, the photos are true in every detail; on the other, the perspective is just a construction. Is my work just an illusion? No, of course not. Everything you see in my pictures was there, nothing was deleted and nothing was added. Is my work just documentation? No, the perspective is completely unreal! This produces a kind of visual "irritation" for viewers that is designed to get them thinking about what lies beyond the surface appearance of our environments, whether they are natural or man-made. It's not only the visual perspective that is false, but also the time perspective, which produces another kind of "irritation." At first sight, viewers might think that these constructed images were taken in one short moment (like 1/125th second), but they eventually realize that this is incorrect. The actual image-capture stage takes hours, sometimes longer. Ultimately, the "Supervisions" series lies somewhere between documentary and fictional photography—maybe it's fictional documentation or documentary fiction. By doing this, my series plays with human perception and the possibilities of digital photography, and with the question of where reality ends and fiction starts.

That last point links "Supervisions" to your previous series.

Correct. "Halbwertszeiten," an early series from 1996, touches on the subject of what is visible and what is invisible. The photos were taken near Chernobyl, where thousand of people had to leave their homes because of the nuclear catastrophe. Radioactivity is still everywhere, but you cannot see or photograph it. Yet just by knowing where the photos were taken, you can sense radioactivity in the pictures. And the images in "Soma," although made with film and without digital intervention, seem to have been generated on a computer. In fact, the "Soma" images reveal our world with more reality than our eyes are able to capture. At night, we see everything in shades of gray. But the camera is able to capture the colors that we cannot see. In this case, our eyes show a false picture of the world, not the camera.

What do the "Supervisions" images say about the environments we create for ourselves?

If you look at the works carefully, you will note that many of them were taken at places where man has put everything in rows. This is one of the most provocative characteristics of modern man: arranging things in

regimented, strict order to try and achieve control. But control over what? We sometimes seem to treat nature as if it's our biggest enemy. In the image "Tree Nursery," the way the trees are situated is completely unnatural, yet the trees try to assert their own character. It's one of numerous examples of how man tries to manipulate his environment while deluding himself that he's improving it.

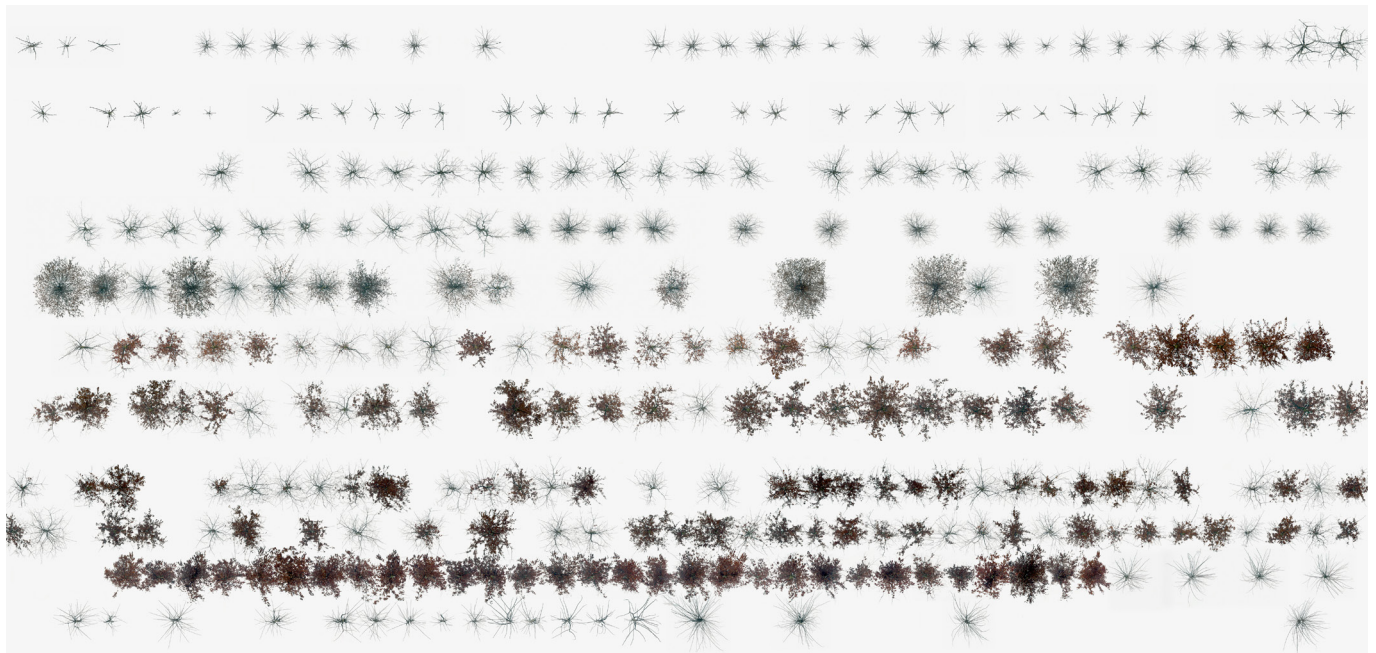
How are these environments modifying our everyday lives?

The border between nature and urban spaces is vanishing. Nature is becoming more and more artificial as modern architecture, garden design, fun parks, etc., attempt to simulate nature. I wonder how upcoming generations will deal with nature. Will they be able to make a fire or catch a fish? Will they know what a fish looks like? Disturbing questions. Another of my concerns is how our lives are controlled and organized by our built environments. For example, "Ceiling" shows everything that sustains a typical office hidden away above the ceiling: water pipes, electricity and gas lines, IT cables, etc. These resemble the blood vessels in our bodies, an indication that buildings are becoming more like humans. Many buildings have even started "thinking"—and perhaps contributing to humans turning into robots. This image makes visible how man is more and more dependent on technical support rather than his own capabilities.

Although people are literally absent from your images, their mediating presence is suggested not only through the way in which urban geography is laid out, but by what they leave behind—the artwork in "Graffiti," the footprints in "Sandtracks." Yet there is something disturbing about showing the absence of people in places meant for the masses.

I too find this disturbing, although I'm not quite sure why. Maybe because I exclude people in a rather ominous way? My photos never give the impression that people have just gone away for a few moments and will soon return. It's more like the images were made at a point far in the future after man has left the earth. It's kind of like documenting a modern archeology: Viewers can read the tracks on the ground and wonder what happened, and who was there. In the case of "Sandtracks," they can also read the brand names





of shoes, which provide even more information: gender, age, social origin and income. This image is a metaphor of the Internet and the modern world, in which everything is connected and information is easily accessible. We all leave our personal footprints by shopping online and paying with credit cards, using our cell phones, etc.

How do you choose which locations to photograph?

Sometimes I have an idea in mind and look for the place by making phone calls and searching the Internet. Sometimes, especially when I'm making a trip in a foreign country, I just take walks, get inspiration and find the locations by lucky accident.

Do you have a sense beforehand of how the finished image will look?

Because it's such an effort to realise a work, I normally do many tests before I start. Therefore, moments of disappointment are luckily quite rare.

Are you ever surprised by the final results?

Sometimes, yes. And that's what makes it fun. By stitching the photos together, I start flying. The longer I work on a photo the more I depart from the ground. Certain optical characteristics are often unforeseeable, as in "Swimming Pool." You can make dozens of tests beforehand, but you can never know how the finished photo will look because the surface of the water is always changing. Incidentally, that was one of the most exciting and exhausting works I did.

The seams in some of these images are more pronounced than in others. Does it matter to you one way or another?

It does. I think it's part of the artistic work. Technically, it would be easy to eliminate all the seams. But I sometimes need these so-called "mistakes" to give the viewer hints how to read and understand the works. Works that have

seams help viewers to understand the works without seams.

When the seams are visible, it calls attention to the artifice of the process, which further complicates the perception of what is real and what is purported to be real. Do you enjoy playing with that dividing line?

Yes, sure. I think one of the most exciting aspects of these images is that they have two sides, or two layers: At first sight, from a greater distance, the picture looks like a "normal" photo and viewers think they understand it. But the closer they get, the more irritating the work becomes. It sometimes happens that someone stands in front of a work and says, "Ah, great. Trees in the snow taken from above. How did you get there? did you use a balloon?" But when he gets closer, he realizes he was wrong. (The trees in "Tree Nursery" are actually taken from below, and the white background is the cloudy sky). But the awareness of being wrong does not help. In many cases, it takes a long time until the viewer really understands what he or she is looking at. In other words, more information (the viewer gets closer and sees more details) sometimes results in more irritation (and less insight)!