

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Andreas Gursky's photos visually articulate the world around us, framing modern society

Geoff Dyer



Andreas Gursky's "99 Cent," an exploration of repetition, consumerism and color. (© 2015 Andreas Gursky / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/The Broad Foundation)

Either way, from 1938 onwards, when "American Photographs" was published and exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, this was how America came to look — and what we looked for in America. Documentation doubled as creation. Not just the creation of an observed world but of the terms and criterion by which the results would be judged. And the look was not simply aesthetic; despite Evans' famous claim to the contrary — "NO POLITICS whatever" — it framed, described and reflected larger ideological, economic and political forces that had created the Depression.

With a little adjustment and the odd inversion — for Depression read boom — much of the above can be transferred directly to Andreas Gursky. These days, we routinely find ourselves walking or driving through a Gursky world. That world may have been there — logically, must have been there — before he photographed it, but I, for one, was not conscious that it looked like this. Which seems surprising, given how readily we recognized his ability to visually articulate the world around us, and how frequent the experience of stepping inside or inhabiting a Gursky turns out to be.

Naturally, you don't have to be in the exact same places that the German photographer has photographed in order to have this experience. In fact, you don't even need to have seen an actual Gursky. As with Evans, a way of seeing has become so widespread as to float free of the person who configured and calibrated it. Gursky, these days, is just one person among many doing Gurskys: a product, paradoxically, of having a style that is so readily identifiable.

Of course curators and critics insist that the imitators are serving up sub-Gurskys, trotting out work that might be termed *scuola di* Gursky, but it's not as simple as that. ... A decade ago the critic James Wood asked a related question about Martin Amis: was it possible, he wondered, for a writer to dissolve entirely into influence? Last week I heard a piece of music on the radio and guessed — incorrectly — that it was not Keith Jarrett but someone trying to sound like Jarrett. Do all Gurskys achieve the quality and condition — of Gurskyhood — to which their authenticity testifies and lays claim?

Even if not, we consistently find ourselves in circumstances or environments in which the mode of perception or style of response most appropriate to such places is the one determined and recorded by Gursky. I say places, but it's often “non-places” of the kind described by Marc Augé that come to mind. The original English translation of “Non-Places” featured one of Garry Winogrand's airport pictures on the cover, but the text itself offers extended captions of classic Gursky zones which comprise “two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces.” This is where Gursky's world view announces and displays itself most graphically. In one famous instance, the flight-indicator screens at an airport show city destinations in other parts of the world, destinations which, on arrival look pretty much like the place you've just flown from.

Gursky is drawn — and draws our attention to — endlessly reiterated units of the same thing. These units can be brightly wrapped sweets and drinks in a 99 Cent store ... , offices, apartments or people — it's all the same. (As a consequence, it is almost inconceivable that Gursky could do a full-facial portrait of an individual person.) In a globalized world, nothing lends itself to homogenization as spectacularly as variety on an unprecedented scale.

Gursky's prints are, of course, very large ... They have to be since they are, quite often, about size. More than a few depict interiors so massive as to turn previous ideas of the interior inside out, as it were. (Don DeLillo, in “The Names,” calls a similarly vast space “a container for emptiness.”) You become aware of a similar sensation in venues designed to host bands and acts — Madonna, for example — that have outgrown and gone beyond the confines suggested by what was once quaintly termed stadium rock. These spaces are larger than the human capacity to comprehend their scale.

The architectural seed of such design is, presumably, that everyone should have a reasonable view irrespective of where they're sitting or standing. By definition, this means doing away with perspective As a result of this abolition it is sometimes difficult, in such venues, to tell whether you're far away from the stage or — compared to others who are even further away — quite near. And then, after a brief cognitive struggle, you realise that you'll never be able to compute the matter in these terms because there is actually no such thing as near here. ...

The subtle amendment or cancellation of perspective in some of Gursky's work — technically, the result of merging multiple shots into a single image — creates the impression, as Frederik Stjernfelt has remarked of the 1993 picture of a Paris apartment block in Montparnasse, of a building “seen from nowhere.” Clearly, the most suitable place for observing a non-space, this view from nowhere has the effect of immersing us within the experience depicted (which perhaps explains why the feeling of inhabiting a Gurskyesque world is oddly familiar). It also means that a picture in which conventional perspective is maintained has an allure that is almost

nostalgic, even if it is a night-time view of Los Angeles (1998), the paradigmatic city without a past. ...

Taking things a stage further, the early pictures of a football match in Liège, Belgium, or of a road scene in Ratingen, Germany (both from 1984, before Gursky began digitally manipulating his images), have the homeliness and intimacy, relatively speaking, of family snaps. They also serve as mementoes, reminding us that Raymond Williams' observation about D.H. Lawrence's development as a writer — "what he lost along the way... may in fact be just as important as what he undoubtedly gained" — might also hold good for Gursky.

What has been lost — though the hyper-clarity of Gursky's pictures blurs our awareness of this — is the old and trusted compact between a photograph and whatever-it-is and wherever-it-is-in-the-world that the photograph depicts. The price of omniscience, despite claims made by HSBC to the contrary ("The World's Local Bank") turns out to be the near-extinction of local knowledge (cognitive closeness).

If distorted perspective is a common ... feature of Gursky's work, the extreme depth of field in which everything is as sharply defined as everything else, irrespective of how near or far it is, is ever present. Combined with the scale of the photographs, the result, as Stjernfelt nicely phrases it, gives us "the strange experience of an excess of recorded detail far beyond the point where the viewer's attention is focused at any single moment." The effect is a kind of disoriented stasis, a tranced attentiveness so complete that the possibility of movement — of being elsewhere — is entirely absent. (Particularly striking this, in the picture of the airport departure boards: an image full of named elsewheres!)

There is, in other words, an important temporal dimension and consequence to the spatial effects achieved by Gursky. Looking at Eugène Atget's pictures of Paris, The New Yorker writer Anthony Lane became conscious that "perspective is a matter not only space but of time: in front of your eyes it is high noon, but day seems to be breaking at the end of every street." Take away perspective and you are stranded in a universal present, something akin, weirdly, to the unhistoried — and, at the risk of tautology, perspective-less — art of the Middle Ages. This seems a daft comparison ... until we remember that for a while in the late twentieth century, it was widely believed that we had come to the end of history.

That may have been an idea, ironically, whose time came and went (the end of history turned out to be subject to history, after all), but it defined the era in which Gursky and the so-called Düsseldorf school achieved such critical and commercial dominance as to have generated a new international or globalized style. A distinctive feature of this style ... is the sense of time and history not as force but as state or condition. In an era when the pace of change has accelerated unimaginably — when the period with which it is most frequently compared is the 1930s, to which Evans bore such eloquent witness — the consolations afforded by such views are as valuable as they are immense.

This essay is reprinted from "The Broad Collection," the catalog of the just opened museum; Geoff Dyer is a novelist and critic; his new book, "White Sands: Experiences From the Outside World," will be published by Pantheon in May.