

GAGOSIAN VULTURE

Andreas Gursky Predicted the Future — and Present

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Andreas Gursky, Amazon, 2016. Photo: © Andreas Gursky / 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Gagolian."

Artists often channel the future, seeing patterns before they form and putting them in their work, so that later, in hindsight, the work explodes like a time bomb.

In the months before September 11, 2001, in the long stupor following George W. Bush being named president by the Supreme Court, German *Über*-photographer Andreas Gursky — known for his totalizing pictures of atriums, raves, hotel lobbies, and trading floors — made a spectacular color photograph of a Los Angeles big-box store. *99 Cent II, (Diptych)* is all mesmerizing rows of shelves stocked with prismatic inexpensive goods arranged for shoppers' delight. This picture seems to channel the comfortable cherry-cola numbness soon shattered by the attacks, which followed repeated ignored warnings of international foreboding.

Now, Gursky has done it again with *Amazon* — a boat-sized picture made months before the recent U.S. election, in which he foreshadows something in our information systems in a state of such high-complexity and near unmaintainability that they live only on the verge of our understanding.

Amazon is a picture of the almost-unknowable patterns of contemporary mass consumption and the hyper-distribution of goods. Behold its amorphous Sargasso Sea. Over 13 feet long and almost eight feet tall, the picture is simple, recognizable, even banal — the vast interior of an Amazon warehouse in Seattle. It's empty of everything but endless rows of shelves with goods.

Once a year Amazon conducts inventory, clearing all workers. This is the no-ghosts-in-the-machine day Gursky took this picture of the near future.

Amazon is one image, not hundreds tiled together as is often the case in digital photography. Everything is equally in focus, giving the picture an uncanny vividness — like this is the way insects see the world. It's like a modernized Monet painting with a shimmering, undifferentiated, optically equal field of flecked color. There are three pillars in the background, each sporting an almost Stalinist bromide: *Work Hard, Have Fun, Make History*. The bins in the distance become skyboxes or maybe a mountain range.

Even though they picture similar things there's a huge difference between *99 Cent* and *Amazon*. In the 2001 picture, viewers reveled in endless order, looking within a contained space we've all navigated. *Amazon* is another super-species altogether. We are not really looking at a space, let alone one we're familiar with. Instead we are seeing an algorithm made physical, a Borgesian or Kafkaesque labyrinth of causes, effects, rhythms, and ratios. The art critic in me sees an indoor earth work, a consumer-based Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty*. Or a hyper-version of Ed Ruscha's 1966 *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* — a landmark fold-out photographic work that is just that. I glean what Malevich called "the supremacy of pure sensation" where "every real form is a world." The strangest part is, this non-space is where we all live.

A narcotic power radiates from this kaleidoscopic picture. Nothing is arranged alphabetically. Or by product type, size, shape, weight, material, origin of manufacture. A different principle is at work. You could call it *space-time*: Goods stocked to be retrieved as quickly and efficiently as possible, so that what we're seeing are cross-referenced patterns and configurations of consumption — the rhythms of the way we live (and consume), but mapped in ways that are unintelligible to us. I saw Spanx near thermometers next to posters next to Play-Doh near "Jeter Unfiltered," dolls, Japanese calendars, books on hypnotism, construction manuals, toner cartridges, aerobic instructions. An index of e-commerce, a police exam is next to a yoga mat near a fire extinguisher near knapsacks and a book of Jackson Pollock's recipes. Orders I cannot understand.

I knew when I saw it, this work was really thumping with something. And then, the week after the election, I saw the picture for the second time — and saw something that made the hair on my neck stand up. In the lower part of the picture, a *Donald Trump for President* cup. I wondered who else bought items near this one. I saw cups, Christmas cards, Ian Toll's World War II book *The Conquering Tide*, a *Star Wars* game, books on biology and mathematics, toys, a stuffed monkey, boxing gloves, candy bars, a plastic fossil of a beetle, envelopes, a tie rack, a hairbrush, Trojan prophylactics. All the cryptologists and Egyptologists in the world wouldn't be able to discern the political patterns of these physical hieroglyphics. But they are still there: Patterns not only of buying but deeper codes of voting maybe, class, age, gender, geography, race, religion, economics, educational level, sexuality. I yearned to see a preelection 12-month time-lapse film of *Amazon*: individual items and groupings going in and out of stock — appearing, ebbing, flowing, changing placement, reconfiguring, appearing elsewhere — and seeing if they corresponded to other constellations of goods. I imagine the colors of the shelves changing like an octopus skin altering to adapt new environments. It might show us the group mind and multiple patterns of hundreds of millions of people.

But those patterns can't be seen, not at all once, not properly. Only the algorithm knows them — and the algorithm is buggy in ways even it doesn't know and is predicting things that then turn out to be false. Like us, it is failing to see patterns that were there the whole time.

I thought back a week to the night before the election, to the last Hillary Clinton rally, in Philadelphia, where Bon Jovi and Bruce Springsteen both sang sets before the Clintons and Obamas spoke for the last time, preelection. In song and words, both musicians seemed to be imploring their core demographic — undereducated white males — *not* to vote for Trump. Remembering the event now, their melancholic sets reminded me of *Amazon*. The script had been flipped and no one knew it yet, although the patterns were there. Not with any apocalyptic or Romantic sensationalism, a paradigm shift was already in action.