Andreas Gursky: Global Photographer

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SOMETIMES the essence of a societal moment is well captured by an individual artist. Such is the case for German photographer Andreas Gursky, whose work—displayed this spring in his first retrospective (1984-2000) at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—captures much of the contemporary essence of globalization. Whereas the forms of modernity seem to be imposed forcibly on the world in the work of the pioneers of modernism, they return to us in Gursky's photographs from a world already fully modernized. We experience modernity not only as viewers of these images, but also through identification with our surrogates—the mostly anonymous human subjects—who are depicted.

Gursky's photographs are high-tech productions: they are huge, saturated with color, and call to mind a hyper-naturalism reminiscent of the heightened reality of cinema. Digital technologies have enabled Gursky to create a vantage point that is more comprehensive than what is available to the unaided human eye, both wider in angle and deeper in focus. The images combine the artifice of painting with the naturalism of photography. Their formalism and coolness of approach avoid confusion with all but the best commercial photography. (Gursky was once a commercial photographer.) They refuse advocacy or direct statement, except perhaps in some implicit advocacy of the art of architecture.

Gursky depicts a society of spectacles. Photographed in vast arenas are a rave, boxing match, rock concert, the Winter Olympics in Albertville, and the 2000 Soccer World Cup in Amsterdam. Travel/tourism—now one of the world's largest industries—also figures promi-

nently. There are photographs of Niagara Falls, Schipol Airport, people at a mountaintop ski restaurant (these are almost the only human figures seen close up in the show), and distant lines of skiers in the Alps. There is a memorable photograph of a tiny cable car crossing a snowfield with hardly a visible support.

Although Gursky does not labor the obvious, one does not look long at the photographs without grasping where power lies in this world. He produces images of stock exchanges, vast trading floors, and such architectural icons of global finance as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. There is a stunning diptych of the boards of directors of various German corporations seated in line, politburo-style, against the backdrop of a snow-covered mountain. Looking up at them from below are the anonymous shareholders, seen as if from the back of a hall. Floating above the board members—more substantial and familiar than their names or faces—is a line of corporate logos.

The economic world is also featured in photographs of the Siemens factory interior in Karlsruhe, the port of Salerno, immense horizontal displays of high-fashion shoes and sneakers, and a 99-cent supermarket interior depicted in its horrible synthetic colors. Facing billboards that display the Toyota and Toys "R" Us logos remind us that images like these need nothing else to tell their story. The Olympic logo on an Albertville mountainside makes a reflexive point about the image business, as we immediately infer that the sign was placed there for coverage of the events by the world's media.

Gursky shows an environment dominated by the large geometrical forms of industrial modernism: massive buildings, bridges, a semicircular library (whose books, organized by language, evoke the globe), soccer fields, highways, and the Rhine river seen as a semi-abstract horizontal band. One mountain view is

seen through the aluminium slats of a Venetian blind. The photograph of Salerno's port sets vast lots of new cars awaiting shipment, freight containers, and apartment complexes against the natural curves and colors of the surrounding mountains. Nature is not faring well in the contest with the modern.

THE HUMAN world, too, is shown to possess a definite order but of a less geometric and mechanical kind. At a rock concert, fans' leaning toward the band on the stage is like the tropism of plants toward light. The skiers at Engadine drift across the picture in an immense column, but the minute figures within it also gather in small eddies and clusters. One is reminded of chaos theory, a characteristic intellectual product of the globalized world. The theory identifies a domain of ordered complexity lying between the linear determinism of the classical era and mere randomness and disorder. In the tropisms that bind his massed crowds together, Gursky seems to have found a visual correlate for the "strange attractors" that give coherence to apparent disorder.

Sometimes finding where, if anywhere, order lies is the problem posed by the photographs. What exactly happened on the Amsterdam soccer field, for example, just before the photo was taken? What has the referee with his arm outstretched just decided, and how did one player end up injured on the ground with no one anywhere near him or coming to his aid?

In the Cairo diptych—which appears to be two aerial views of a parking lot taken from the same vantage point—there is another visual and temporal puzzle. How long was the interval between the two shots, and why do the differences in positions of the vehicles and their passengers seem to be so arbitrary and unintelligible?

Where we see more human subjects, as in the ski restaurant at St. Moritz, they appear comfortable enough. Yet the essence of this world seems to be that its human subjects are subordinate within it. They do the things people do—working on a highway or enjoying a rave—but there is little sense that this world is being created by its human subjects. The photographs suggest the opposite: human subjects are being constructed by large, impersonal forces, in particular by the corporations that are the most visible agencies of power.

Indeed, corporations must be among the few institutions, apart from galleries, able to display photographs so large. One can even describe an institution like MoMA, now engaged in a large expansion, as a corporation, branded and merchandised like any other.

As Peter Galassi points out in his informative catalogue essay, Gursky's work has moved from the local to the global—from children playing soccer on a local field to Holland's national team at the World Cup—reflecting his international success. Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Brasilia, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Shanghai, Paris are all global hot spots of different kinds. The "other side" of globalization—the vast agglomerations of the poor in Mexico City, Bombay, or Johannesburg—is largely missing at this point. Given that Gursky refused military service in his youth and chose to work instead in health care, one wonders how long this will go on.

Looking for the "flip side" of global prosperity might pose problems for Gursky's cool aesthetic. It seems important to him above all to show the visual power of this world and its fascination for us. After all, this is a way of understanding it. Still, a hint of how he might approach the other task can be seen in the Cairo diptych, which suggests greater confusion and disorder than any other image in the show. The viewer might think the two photographs depict a disaster of some kind, although this does not seem to be the case. Yet they do suggest possibilities of representing other kinds of order and disorder in a globalized world than those to which Andreas Gursky's travels have taken him so far. ●

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