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Andreas Gursky.
Shanghai, 2000. C-print
mounted on Plexiglas in
artist's frame. 9 ft. 10¼
in. x 6 ft. 6¼ in. (3 x 2 m).
Signed, dated, titled, and
numbered in graphite
(verso): A. Gursky.
GURA.PH.12556.
Courtesy of Matthew
Marks Gallery, New York.

Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime

Alix Ohlin

The German photographer Andreas Gursky takes pictures of enormous spaces—stock exchanges, skyscrapers, mountain peaks—in which crowds of people look tiny and relentless, making their presence felt in the world, like a minute, leisurely colony of ants. Also like ants, these people appear to spend little time examining their own encroachment—architectural, technological, and personal—on the natural world. In their determined, oblivious way, the people in his photographs make clear that there is no longer any nature uncharted by man. In place of nature we find the invasive landmarks of a global economy. Taken as a whole, Gursky's work constitutes a map of the postmodern civilized world.

The vision is not a comforting one. Many of Gursky's pictures, though beautiful, intensely colorful, and wonderfully composed, leave the viewer with an uneasy feeling. Whether because of the spread of architectures or the bustling crowds they show, or because of the equalizing aesthetic treatment given to all subjects, from the Dolomite Mountains to a car show in France, the pictures are both awe-inspiring and disturbing.

What is the nature of this reaction? In 1756, the Irish writer Edmund Burke published "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," a work that influenced aestheticians and other philosophers, most notably Kant. In this treatise Burke set out the first modern definition of the sublime: "Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime. That is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."¹ This terrible emotion could be produced by the grandeur of nature, but it could also be caused by a work of art. If the latter, because the artwork is a representation rather than a direct experience, the sublime could be mitigated. Once moderated, the sublime could transform itself—not into pleasure, exactly, but into "a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (114).

The ultimate source of the terror evoked by the sublime is the Divine, in relation to which human beings are inconsequential:

[W]hilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him. And though a consideration of his other attributes may relieve, in some measure, our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand. If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling; and even whilst we are receiving benefits, we cannot but shudder at a power which can confer benefits of such mighty importance (60–61).

These days, at least in the Western world, such fear and trembling in the face of God are no longer generalized. In place of God, we have a sprawling network of technology, government, business, and communications. These forces of globalization have become our religion. This is not to say that we necessarily subscribe wholeheartedly to a belief in the goodness of the network, yet the network works mysteriously, transecting the world, even as it impinges on our daily lives in specific

1. Edmund Burke, *On Taste, On the Sublime and Beautiful, On the French Revolution* (New York: Collier, 1909), 36. Subsequent page numbers will appear in the text.

ways. There are certainly important benefits to be gained from globalization — few would argue, for example, against exporting the medical care of developed countries to emerging nations. But even the benefits can be puzzling: when we buy an inexpensive cellular phone at a local superstore, there is an entire complex of global factors (economic variables, international trade, technological developments) that bear on the transaction and that we may never consider, or even grasp.

These factors are like the Divine in that they are beyond the understanding of the vast majority of people whose lives they affect. Such globalization is the hallmark of our time; its features, as Fredric Jameson has summarized them, include “the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences.”²

The “vertiginous dynamic” of globalization, the subject of Gursky’s work, is the contemporary locus of the sublime: a grand power in the face of which we feel our own smallness. We are, in Burke’s term, “annihilated.” Gursky’s vast photographs—of the Hong Kong stock exchange, massive ships docked at a harbor, cargo planes preparing to take off, a government building—testify to this power. Although his photographs give us images of globalization, Gursky is seeking less to document the phenomenon than to invoke the sublime in it. He freely manipulates his images, altering the architecture of the built and natural environments, creating repetitions, deepening colors, and collapsing time, in order to heighten the sense of the sublime.

Attributes of the Sublime

In his treatise, Burke laid out several basic attributes of the sublime. The first and most conspicuous is vastness. Things that are small and attractive can be beautiful, but physical greatness is sublime. In his work, Gursky balances large size against the relative smallness and specificity of individual human beings, who are in clear focus. It is possible to take in the subject of one of his gigantic photographs at a glance. It is also possible to look at them for a very long time, examining individual facial expressions, positions, clothing, and gestures. This tension between micro and macro, one of the operating principles of his photographs, acts as a constant reminder to us that people are simultaneously individuals, with a sense of their own importance, and bit players in the drama of globalization.

A second attribute of the sublime, in Burke’s conception, is infinity. Seeing a boundless object in nature fills the mind with the delightful terror that is our response to the sublime. The same effect could be mimicked in built structures, particularly architecture, in which “the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so” (66). Burke termed this “the artificial infinite,” an effect produced by succession—that is, a repetitive sequence of identical parts. For example, in a rotunda “you can nowhere fix a boundary; turn which way you will, the same object still seems to continue, and the imagination has no rest. But the parts must be uniform, as well as circularly disposed, to give this

2. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xix.

following pages:

99 Cent, 1999. C-print.
6 ft. 9½ in. x 11 ft. ¼ in.
(207 x 336 cm).
Courtesy of Matthew
Marks Gallery, New
York.

figure its full force" (66). In Gursky's photograph *Shanghai* (2000), this is exactly what happens: the repetition of yellow parts and the vortexlike circularity of the structure cause the building to appear both infinite and self-enclosed, with neither beginning nor end. The architecture develops its own vertiginous dynamic.

The artificial infinite relies upon such uses of succession and uniformity. Gursky's photographs frequently seek to play up the uniformity of colors—for example, in clothing. Often in his images every person wearing yellow (or red, or blue) seems to wear the exact same shade of yellow (or red, or blue), literally highlighting the repetition in the composition of the photograph. In *99 Cent* (1999), the world's spectrum of colors narrows to a palette of yellow, blue, and orange, a sequence repeated in goods, shelves, and signs, as far as the eye can see. Gursky also photographs buildings so as to stress the geometry of uniform spaces. *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993) shows an enormous apartment building—incredibly large, the size of a skyscraper or a mountain—in which individual apartments seem to be repeated. Objects in the windows, such as a pile of books or a music stand, appear in more than one place. Has Gursky manipulated the photographic image to make the apartment building look larger than it really is? Does it matter? The experience of artificial infinity captures the cubbyhole existence of the individual residents, as well as the extensive colonization of our living environment by apartment buildings just like this one.

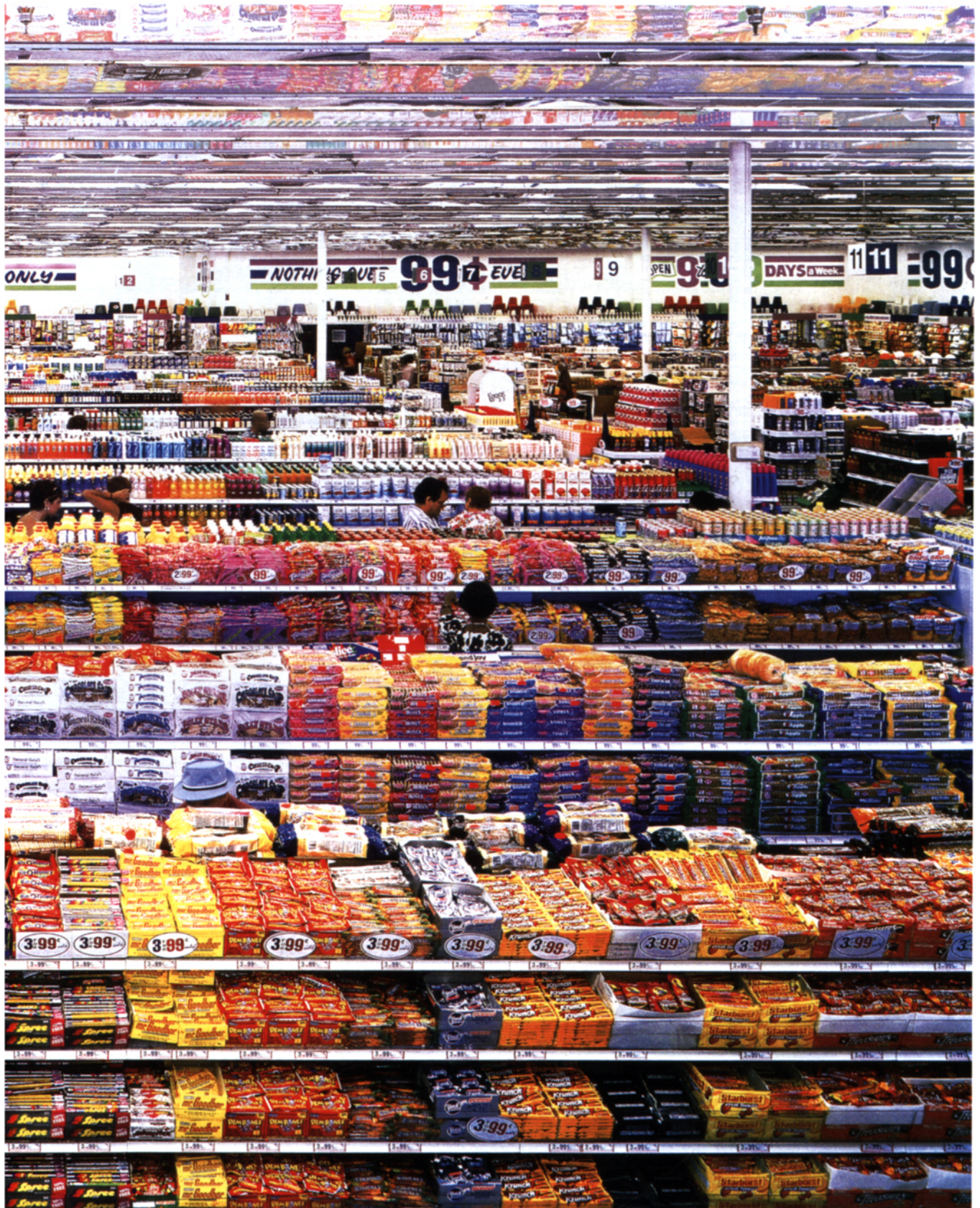
The Global Tourist

Gursky's teachers at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie, Bernd and Hilla Becher, committed themselves to an exhaustive project: photographing modern structures such as blast furnaces and water towers in almost endless repetition. Their black-and-white photographs create a typology of industrial forms. The inside of the form clearly matches the outside; as Norman Bryson has pointed out, "the principle of 'façade'—of a semiotic split between exterior and interior—is wholly absent."³ Gursky's work differs from that of his mentors in ways that mirror the transition from modern to postmodern production. His buildings are see-through, displaying both interior and exterior, but the interior offers little concrete information. There is no façade on either parliament building or Hong Kong bank; people work busily at their desks, tour spaces, talk to one another. Yet being able to see exactly what is going on inside does not necessarily educate the viewer, or explain how political or economic systems actually work. You could look at a photo of the Hong Kong stock exchange for hours and never spot any actual money. This doesn't represent a failure on the part of the photograph; it represents the nature of money in our time.

How then, to show what globalization really is? Maybe it isn't a coincidence that in the mid-eighties—at around the same time that he began to make very large photographs, and to manipulate them at the processing stage—Gursky began to travel more, extending the subjects of his work beyond Germany. The global tourist became the global photographer, from Salerno to Thebes. His images began to refer frequently, in explicit ways, to the international. In *Albertville* (1992), a line of people forms an open circle around a sign showing the Olympic rings and around the same rings repeated on the ground. If the Bechers' is a modernist project, identifying structural purity amid the spread of industrial production, Gursky's is postmodern—international, capitalistic, multifarious.

3. Norman Bryson, "The Family Firm: Andreas Gursky and German Photography," *Art/text* 67 (November 1999/January 2000): 80.







**Paris, Montparnasse,
1993. C-print. 6 ft. 8¼ in.
x 13 ft. 9¼ in. (205 x
421 cm). Courtesy of
Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York.**

And there is surely a connection between this international project and the digital techniques Gursky uses to portray the sublime.

Some critics feel that these digital techniques make Gursky's work too beautiful and serene, divorced from the realities he has photographed, as Alex Alberro puts it, "a highly superficial, aestheticized approach to the sites of labor."⁴ Certainly an air of unreality pervades the spaces he depicts, a sense of sparseness and order that abstracts the picture, even down to areas that one would assume to be messy, like a high-tech workroom. Yet Gursky's manipulation of these images, like his deployment of the artificial infinite, is clearly in the service of an ethereal reality. The connections that constitute globalization—computer networks, international exchanges, trade relations—are less visible and localized than blast furnaces. So Gursky's work forms a striking image of a phenomenon that is in many ways hard to pin down.

In an interview with Veit Görner, Gursky spoke about visiting industrial companies, looking for places to photograph:

Most of them had a socio-romantic air I hadn't expected. I was looking for visual proof of what I thought would be antiseptic industrial zones. If these companies had been systematically documented one would have had the

4. Alex Alberro, "Blind Ambition," *Artforum* 39 (January 2001): 113.



following page:

***Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank*, 1994. Chromogenic color print. 7 ft. 6½ in. x 5 ft. 10¼ in. (2.3 x 1.8 m). Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.**

5. Andreas Gursky, in an interview with Veit Görner. Translated excerpt posted online at www.oasinet/postmedia/art/gursky.htm.

feeling one was back in the days of the Industrial Revolution. After this experience I realized that photography is no longer credible, and therefore found it that much easier to legitimize digital picture processing.⁵

In other words, to show globalization as it really is—to make the invisible sublime—the image must be altered.

In recent years, Gursky has grown increasingly bold in his manipulations. *Rhine II* (1999) shows a perfectly straight and undeveloped section of that river, a section that does not exist. Composed of images from different parts of the river merged together, the photograph is both convincing and deceptive. The medium of photography, in Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's words, "has been seen to call into question, especially by virtue of its identity as a machine, the undeniably humanist implications of painting's being handmade."⁶ Gursky's manipulations, though, are just as responsible for his images as his camera is. Photography is supposed to capture a specific place at a particular moment in time; Gursky's process changes the place and collapses the time at will. His work, then, contrasts the documentary nature of photography with an image created by the artist—as if he were as much painter as photographer. Altered photography is a postmodern tool for presenting the postmodern world.





Klausen Pass, 1984.
C-print. 36 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
(92 x 81 cm).
Courtesy of Matthew
Marks Gallery, New
York.

Engadine, 1995.
C-print. 6 ft. 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. x
9 ft. 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (186 x
291 cm). Courtesy
of Matthew Marks
Gallery, New York.

following pages:
**Stockholders'
Meeting (diptych),
2001.** C-print. 6 ft.
10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. x 9 ft. 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.
(2.1 x 3 m).
Courtesy of
Matthew Marks
Gallery, New York.

6. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press), 13.

7. *Ibid.*, 128.

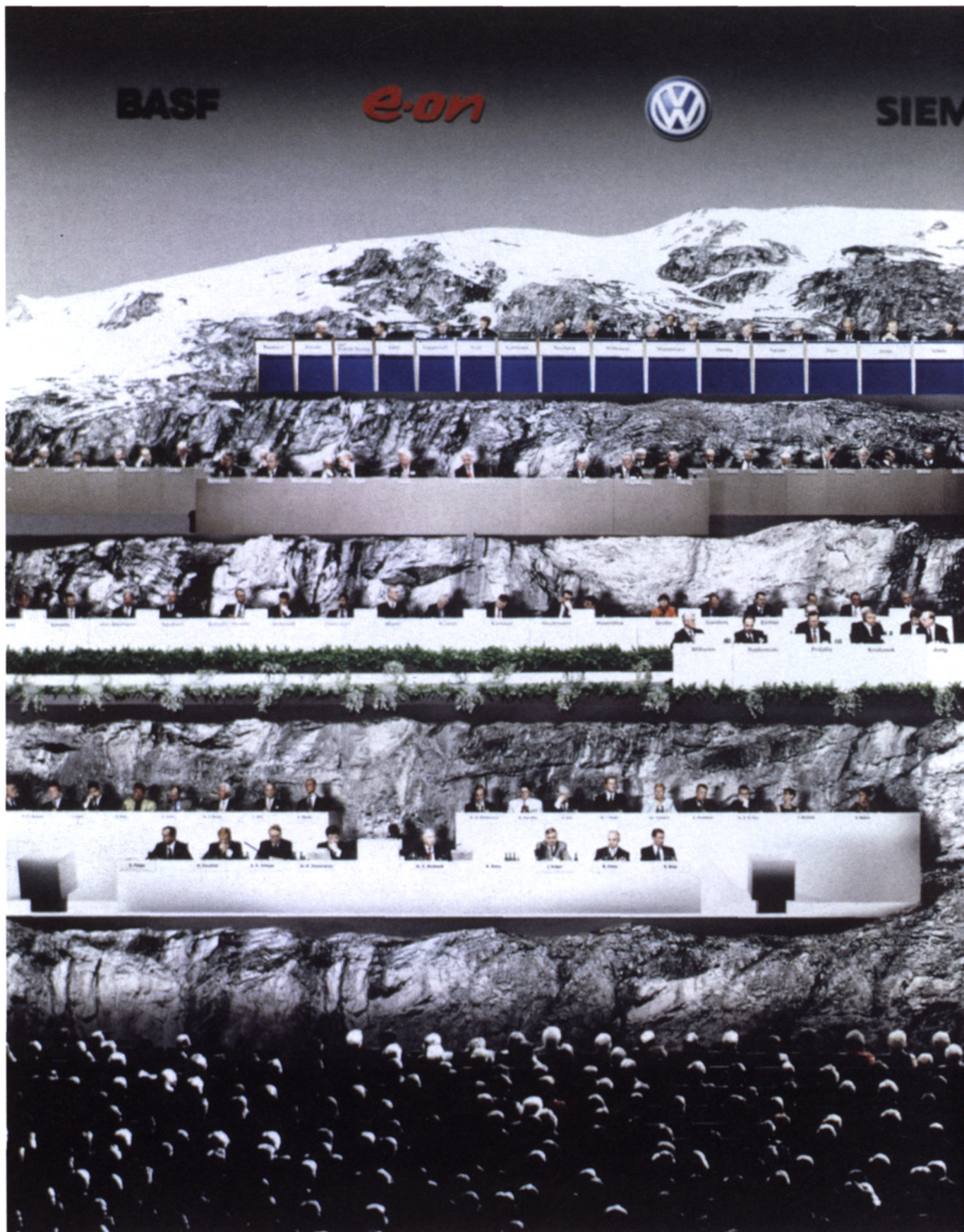
The State of Nature

In the Bechers' photographs there is no intersection between buildings and nature, or even between buildings and people. Gursky, on the other hand, shows nature often, if only to show how little unexplored nature is left. In the eighteenth century people looked to nature for an experience of the sublime, but today, in vast tracts, the natural world has been destroyed, developed, fenced, or commodified for tourist and recreational experience. In *Niagara Falls* (1989) a tourist boat maneuvers next to a massive natural sight that must once have elicited feelings of fright and wonderment. Gursky's images chart this contemporary experience of nature, from *Klausen Pass* (1984) to *Engadine* (1995). In both these photographs, people look small against the mountainscapes, but this serves less to diminish them—reminding us of nature's awesome grandeur—than to show how human beings have managed to invade even the most remote spaces.

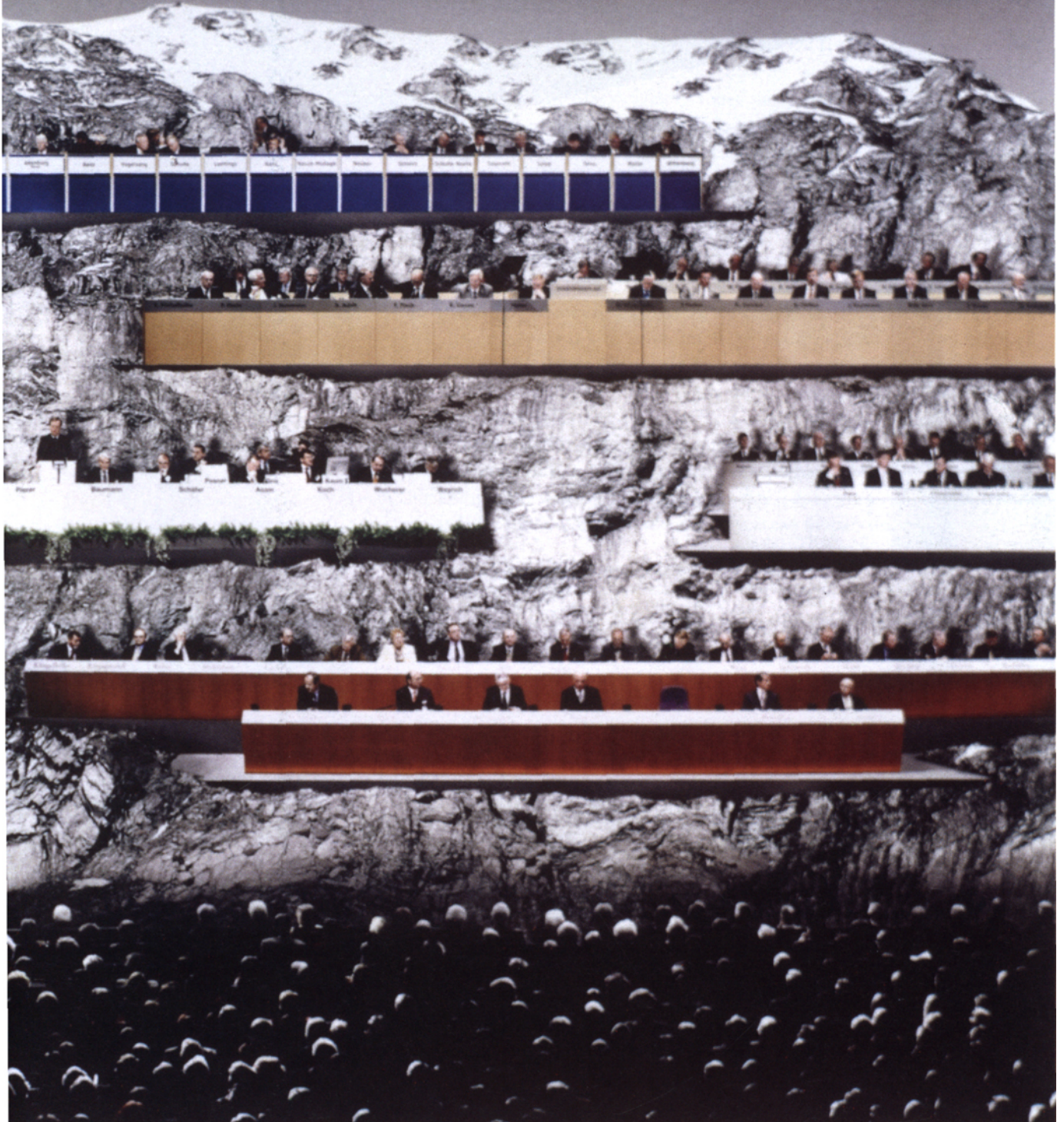
It is worth looking closer at the types of people who appear in Gursky's photographs. If, as Gilbert-Rolfe says, "technology has subsumed the idea of the sublime because it, whether to a greater extent or an equal extent than nature, is terrifying in the limitless unknowability of its potential,"⁷ there are nonetheless people in the world who seek to expand, harness, or manipulate

that potential. Business executives, scientists, media tycoons, government leaders, Alan Greenspan; all manner of powerful people could be said to (if not fully control) manipulate and influence the global systems that make up our governments and the world's economy. These people do not appear in Gursky's photographs. The people he shows are tourists, consumers, workers, and casual pedestrians out for a Sunday stroll. Their relationships to the global are incidental, not confrontational. The people who work at the stock exchanges are drones dressed in identical outfits; the man standing beneath an underpass in *Ruhr Valley* (1989) did not engineer its construction.

These people are not so much cowed or victimized by global technology as unobservant of it. And it is this very lack of observation or understanding that we see dramatized in Gursky's work. "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions" (90), Burke also wrote, and



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***Ruhr Valley, 1989. C-print. 5 ft. 8½ in.
x 7 ft. 3¼ in. (174 x 223 cm).
Courtesy of Matthew Marks
Gallery, New York.***



Gursky's photographs present our ignorance magnified. It is our own situation we are looking at. This is the source of our unease when we look at a Gursky photograph, and ultimately the source of the sublime.

Gursky's emphasis on the ordinary person may be changing, however, as his work evolves. A very recent diptych, *Stockholders' Meeting* (2001), exhibited in his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, displays a quantum increase in the degree of abstraction and visible manipulation of the image. Boards of directors—powerful-looking people in dark suits—sit behind long tables below corporate logos with the value of flags. The directors appear to be mounted, literally, onto a gray rock cliff above the faceless crowd of stockholders. To make this picture, Gursky photographed thirty different meetings and corporations, collected them into a single fictional event, and placed the composite image against a bizarre landscape. The result is as direct a picture of globalization as Gursky has ever made. It is an extremely jarring image, at once sober and surreal. Nature has become a boardroom, where men in suits meet to hatch unknown plans.

What is especially interesting about this image is that it manifests the alterations it underwent. In fact, the computer manipulations look primitive and obvious, calling attention to themselves; the seams show. The directors' faces look cut out, almost as if by hand, and fit awkwardly against the mountain backdrop. Perhaps the manipulations are so apparent because, in the end, it is impossible to put a human face—or faces—on the sprawling, diffuse phenomenon of globalization. Faces will always be fakes, while the actual forces of the network remain invisible and overpowering—in other words, sublime. Situated against a futuristic vision of the natural world, behind tables that don't exist, Gursky's corporate deities sit stonily, their expressions impassive, as if to remind us both how much and how little we humans can actually do.

Alix Ohlin is currently writer-in-residence at Portsmouth Abbey School in Rhode Island. She has written about books and contemporary art for publications including *Art Papers*, *Boston Review*, and the *Texas Observer*. Her first book, a novel, is forthcoming from Knopf.