
CONTROL ROOM

In response to the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo displayed the photograph "Control Room" (2011) by Thomas Demand. This introduction was first published on gensojapan.org (now offline).



Thomas Demand, 'Control Room' (2011). C-Print 78 3/4 x 118 inches.

In May 2012, fourteen months after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo displayed the photograph "Control Room" (2011) by the German conceptual artist Thomas Demand. As part of his first museum retrospective in Japan, the show spanned the range of Demand's artistic output, from his early works to his recent videos. Well attended, the exhibition attracted throngs of visitors to see his photographic reconstructions, but it was the detached, eerie clarity of "Control Room" that chimed most with me.

Printed almost two metres tall by three metres wide, its ample scale assures its presence. Full of logbooks and switch panels, phone stations and data displays, is a workplace that speaks of risk assessments and regulatory guidelines, of contingency plans and escalation protocols. It has everything you might expect to find in the control room of a major industrial facility except the engineers to run it. Here, instead, the monitors are blank and the ceiling panels have loosened, hanging precariously above, as though the sky is soon to fall in.

Created during the same year as the history-changing events of 3.11, Demand applied the process he is known for: recreating life-sized, three-dimensional paper models of places he sources from newspapers. Once the photograph is made, he then discards the sculptural components. In selecting images from the mass media, his work deliberately incorporates source material that has been widely circulated, often of places that have specific political or social significance. In this case, Demand has recreated a photograph of Fukushima No. 1 Power Plant Control Room.

Visually, the use of paper has an unnatural effect. Not that this is immediately apparent. At first glance, "Control Room" is quite believable. It's only after while that you begin to see it less as a place and more as a scene. The way the light falls so evenly is too uniform or too flat to be believed entirely. Nothing is old or has become aged either; it's pristine instead.

It's easy to get lost in the layers of artifice of Demand's work; the meticulous process, the authenticity of the source material, the believability of this particular image, or the scrutiny that photographic images are answerable to in general. What makes "Control Room" unsettling is the absence of personnel. No one is in control.