CEREBRAL SEER OR CYNICAL CELEBRANT? HOW DOES THE ART OF **ANDREAS GURSKY** STAND IN RELATION TO THE GLOBALIZING, LATE-PHASE-CONSUMERIST MOMENT HIS SPECTACULAR PHOTOGRAPHS REFLECT, REFRACT, AND RECONSTITUTE? IN ANTICIPATION OF THE GERMAN ARTIST'S UPCOMING RETROSPECTIVE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK, HIS FIRST IN THE U.S., KATY SIEGEL AND ALEX ALBERRO CONSIDER THE OEUVRE AND COME UP WITH VERY DIFFERENT ANSWERS.

THE BIG PICTURE
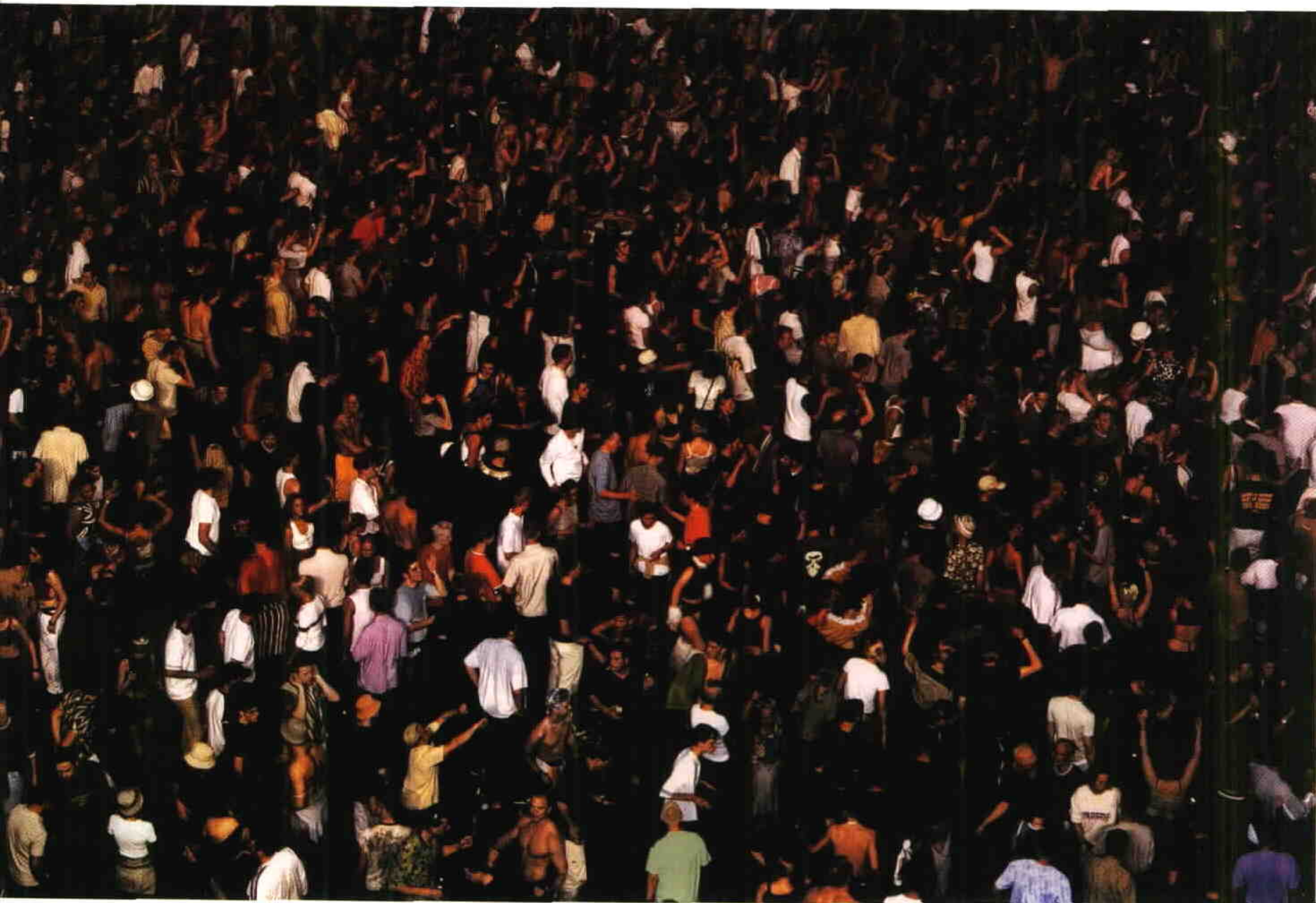
CONSUMING VISION   Katy Siegel

Andreas Gursky makes really big photographs. This is the one thing about his work that everyone can agree on. Why does he do it? The answer seems obvious: to see the big picture, things too vast to take in with either the human eye or a camera fixed at a particular viewpoint (mountains, public architecture, mass leisure, modern industry). The grandness of these phenomena, both natural and un-, begs to be writ large. But Gursky also grinds exceedingly fine, cramming information into his images, as if we were peering simultaneously through binoculars and a microscope. Looking both long and close, he shows us everything.

BLIND AMBITION   Alex Alberro

If there is a group of contemporary artists that has made it a point to reconstitute highly skilled photography in the context of the advanced visual arts, it's the generation that studied at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie under Bernd and Hilla Becher—Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Petra Wunderlich, Axel Hütte. Although each photographer is remarkable in his or her own way, they are unified by an easily recognizable style that privileges meticulously composed scenes produced with the highest possible definition and tonal differentiation. One of the most precocious of this group is Andreas Gursky, whose

A few months ago, I met a man who lives in London and does things with money; he said he solved problems for major wealthy types. He gave the example of a computer king in Seattle who was buying a boat, made only in Holland, that cost the equivalent of $50 million American. He wanted to pay for it all at once, while the dollar was high, but the Dutch yacht company wanted him to pay in installments, over the course of the three years they would need to build the boat. My acquaintance's job was to figure out a way to get the magnate's dollars into guilders before the dollar weakened.

The computers were made in Asia and sold in the US. The bank was in London, and the boat was in Holland. There were nuances I didn't grasp. But the moral of the story is that we live in a big, complicated world, where Korean microchips are subject to innumerable permutations at the hands of thousands of people in several nations, to end up (temporarily) as a giant Dutch yacht.

WE NEED THESE BIG BRILLIANT PHOTOS TO SHOW US OUR BIG BLAND, DENSE WORLD, JUST AS GREENBERG ONCE ARGUED WE NEEDED "APOLLONIAN" PAINTING TO REFLECT POSTWAR AMERICAN MATERIALISM.

Gursky's images of global commerce resemble neither the mechanist celebration of technological progress (Strand, Renger-Patzsch) nor the humanist critique of labor (Lewis Hine) of the early twentieth century. When he visited more than seventy prominent industrial companies over the course of the 1990s, he often found, to his surprise, a nineteenth-century romanticism lingering in the worn, looming machinery. In order to render the factories perfectly "contemporary," he cleaned up many of his images digitally, sharpening the grids of architectural design and mechanical placement. Gursky explains this arrangement in two ways, claiming first an aesthetic rationale: "As a person who primarily experiences his environment visually, I am always observing my immediate surroundings. Consequently, I am constantly putting things in order, sorting them out, until they become a whole." The other explanation he offers is more cognitive, less artistic: "My preference for clear structures is the result of my desire, perhaps illusory, to keep track of things and maintain my grip on the world." Order makes a better picture, but it also gives us a deceptive feeling of control—through comprehension—of our environment.

Gursky's static, even antiseptic factories contrast sharply with the chaos of his stock exchanges. They are almost always frenetic, swirling masses of people; with the exception of the hushed arrays of computer operators in his 1994 diptych of the Hong Kong exchange, these pictures look loud. In fact, to emphasize the sense of movement, Gursky double-exposed sections of his most recent image of the Chicago Board of Trade (*Chicago, Board of Trade II*, 1999), blurring many of the figures. And as he often does with these pictures, he digitally tweaked the colors for maximum saturation, to almost hallucinatory effect. The effect does not exaggerate the reality; digital manipulation merely compensates for the short exposure time needed for sharp resolution.

Previous spread:
Andreas Gursky,
May Day IV, 2000,
C-print, ca.
6' 6¾" x 16' 4⅞".

initial work of the early '80s—modestly scaled, infallibly exposed, sharply focused images seen from a central perspectival position located somewhere above the scene—seemed to proceed in step with the Becher legacy. Gursky's panoramic views of quotidian subject matter in the former Federal Republic of Germany were as dispassionate and impersonal as the Bechers' images of blast furnaces and water towers and suggested a similarly objective approach. It's clear that, by now, Gursky's images have changed in several important ways: They're much larger in format, taking on a pictorial grandeur and presence that phenomenologically engages the viewer's body; and the photographer's scope has shifted beyond the German pastoral to encompass a broader geopolitical arena. Indeed, in the last decade Gursky has roamed to sites and locations all over the world, from Cairo (*Cairo*, 1992) to Los Angeles (*Los Angeles*, 1998), from Brasília (*Brasília*, 1994) to Singapore (*Singapore I*, 1997). But through to the present his carefully crafted, broad scenes are characterized by what at first appears to be an objective mode of depiction that registers the modern world in a remarkably detached way.

This is by no means to imply that Gursky's photographs were not from the very beginning a significant departure from his mentors' work. The archival and archaeological approach that has informed the Bechers' projects since the '50s has clearly never been at stake for him. Whereas that pair sought to rescue for historical memory the extraordinary subtleties and qualities of now obsolete industrial-era edifices designed by anonymous engineers in the late

THERE'S AN UNDERLYING ESSENTIALISM AT WORK IN GURSKY'S PHOTOGRAPHS THAT ATTEMPTS TO RENDER VISIBLE THE STRUCTURAL PRINCIPLES AT THE HEART OF THE CONCRETE WORLD.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gursky's photographs focus on the most recent phase of capitalism, apparently commenting on reified leisure, consumerist fantasies, and global transformations of production. And while the Bechers never depicted people working in or around the industrial architecture they photographed, Gursky's pictures, despite an initial impression to the contrary, are almost always inhabited. Furthermore, Gursky has employed color from the start. He is in fact a master colorist, which further contributes to the overall sensuousness and extraordinary visual splendor of his images. Then too, unlike the work of the Bechers, which is firmly, one could almost say classically, embedded in the photographic medium, Gursky's images strain the traditional conception of photography insofar as they include a digital component, mobilizing the possibilities offered by electronic processing techniques. For instance, *Hong Kong, Shanghai Bank*, 1994, fuses images taken from three different floors of a facing building into one composition. Similarly, *Times Square*, 1997, amalgamates interior and exterior shots of a typical John Portman hotel courtyard to create an almost surreal architectural space. This manner of working entails a procedure characterized by utter

These images condense the human, phenomenological experience of being there—moving while looking, seeing through time and space. Gursky makes photographs that are at once superhuman and all too human: images that see more than we can see, in better focus, with more density of detail. Yet whether this leads to greater understanding isn't clear, and the artist isn't saying.

Recently, Gursky has been photographing stockholders' meetings, the annual conferences where corporate shareholders gather to vote on policy. He wants to merge thirty different meetings and corporations into a single image, taking place in a fantastic architectural setting, which he will generate digitally (a first for him). The one picture will literally represent a worldwide network of exchange. (The image will appear in the Museum of Modern Art retrospective if it can be completed in time.) But even when the photographs are, as they say, "straight," Gursky begins with an image in his mind, often waiting years before finding the right situation to start shooting. He used to travel with his camera, finding his images as he went. Now he goes without; he builds the pictures in his mind's eye, waiting until they're fully resolved before he begins to assemble the actual photograph. Like many artists, Gursky relies on his visual sensitivity to navigate. As he told interviewer Veit Görner, "I have the ability to sort out the 'valid' pictures from the images we are inundated with every day and have them ready for use when my intuition tells me the right moment has come, before mixing them with immediate visual experiences into an independent image." He wants to represent the world—not to document it, but to crystallize physical and social reality.

One of Gursky's strongest (and largest) photos, *Untitled V*, 1997, is an arrangement of athletic shoes on six long shelves. He once encountered a similar display but thought that the original "would not have sufficed for a convincing photograph. The real shoe display was pictorially ineffective and harmlessly presented." (Interesting to hear a fine artist criticizing the consumer culture for ineffectuality.) His father was a commercial photographer, and Gursky is comfortable with, rather than wary of or enraptured by, the techniques of advertising photography. The artist built a short double shelf, which he then photographed six times, painstakingly figuring out the proper angles from which to shoot and restocking the shelves with different shoes for each session. The negatives were then pieced together digitally to make a single, monumental image, reflected on the floor. The final picture not only symbolizes the dizzying plenitude of these commodities, their sameness and difference, but re-creates the phenomenological, cognitive experience of visiting a place like NikeTown. The shelf is impossibly massive, impervious, yet clearly registers a subjective perspective, as we pass along the length that approaches the size of the display.

NikeTown isn't the only big show around: Nature is huge and unmasterable too, if no longer sublime—this isn't the eighteenth century, after all, or even the nineteenth. Gursky's work of the '80s, which tended to emphasize leisure and nature, was often placed in the German Romantic tradition of the sublime, in the vein of Caspar David Friedrich. But, much like the stock exchanges, Gursky's '90s nature pictures often feature antlike figures participating in almost humorous social formations rather than braving God's country on

control, which explains why the illusionism offered in Gursky's pictures is so excessive, and why, given the enveloping vastness of many of his photographed scenes, there is a peculiar absence of perspectival distortion. Unless the viewer sprouts eyes like flies, no one single standpoint can be isolated, resulting in strangely alienating, stylized vistas. In turn, though the images never entirely make the shift from simulacrum (a picture of a picture) to simulation (in which the image has no origins in the real), and thus do not entirely cross the threshold into pure virtuality since the final results are composites of photographic documents, one starts to intuit the presence of multiple camera positions or points of view.

One of the questions that comes to mind as we look at Gursky's pictures has to do with the implications of his valorization of photographic skills. For if

THAT FOR GURSKY EVERYTHING HAS BECOME CULTURAL SPEAKS TO HIS AFFINITIES WITH A PROBLEMATIC SIDE OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY GERMAN PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY, NAMELY, THE *NEUE SACHLICHKEIT* WORK OF ALBERT RENGER-PATZSCH.

Conceptualists such as Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham purposefully banalized the documentary approach by employing amateur cameras and cheap development and printing technologies to produce shoddy color snapshots of fleeting vernacular moments, they, like their mentor Andy Warhol before them, still adhered to the principles of seriality to structure their work. For Ruscha and Graham, it was the set of parking lots or swimming pools, or the one-after-the-other serial order of the barrack-like suburban tract houses, that was crucial rather than the particular details of the stock architecture. Similarly, the Bechers suppressed the individual characteristics of the objects or scenes they photographed in favor of what they called "typological systems" within which no one photograph—let alone the relationship between sign and referent—was more important than the interrelationship between images in the series. Thus, for example, in the Bechers' suite of blast furnaces, the individual details composing each image are less significant than the overall effect of the series as a whole. And one can detect the same typological or archival impulse operative in, for instance, Ruff's multiple portraits, or Struth's "randomly chosen" urbanscapes, where once again the emphasis is located in the structure of seriality. However, in the pictorialist aesthetic advanced by Gursky's meticulously calculated images, the primacy and permanence of fine-art photography is reasserted. Each photographic composition is unique in its own way—a characteristic that overwhelms whatever structural parallels the image might have with others like it. Surely it is this persistent effort to produce distinct, singular images that led Gursky to digitally manipulate and control his work. Thus the rigorous dismantling of the autonomous, auratic art object, not only by Conceptual photographers of the '60s and '70s

their own. As he puts it, "The camera's enormous distance from these figures means that they become de-individualized. So I am never interested in the individual, but in the human species and its environment." We see tiny beings in an Olympic skiing parade (*Engadin*, 1995) or out for a frigid dip in the Rhine (*New Year Swimmers*, 1988), evidence of the strange things people do in groups.

However, in Gursky's most iconic image of the river, *Rhein II*, 1999, the human presence is conspicuously absent: The background has been erased, wiped clean of both incidental shrubbery and man-made edifices. The artist expunges not in the name of natural purity but to provide the "most contemporary possible view" of the Rhine, rather than an "unusual, possibly picturesque view." Instead of a split second stolen from a constant flow, he renders the river as a frozen archetype; flattened into bands, the image, as many have observed, becomes a natural Newman. Monumentality and timelessness can, ironically,

GURSKY'S IMAGES OF GLOBAL COMMERCE RESEMBLE NEITHER THE MECHANIST CELEBRATION OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS (STRAND, RENGER-PATZSCH) NOR THE HUMANIST CRITIQUE OF LABOR (LEWIS HINE) OF THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY.

be found as well in one of Gursky's fashion pictures, *Prada I*, 1996. Not only do the immaculate shelves conjure modernist sobriety, but, on taking a closer look (as these images always demand), you can see shoes from both the fall and spring collections, a simultaneity never encountered in a Prada store. Despite the fact that fashion in general (and this label in particular) is all about currency and ephemerality, Gursky creates from it something so paradoxically solid that the image compresses "fashion" to become its emblem.

Shoes aren't the only seemingly slight subject to attract Gursky's monumentalizing attention. He takes an interest in phenomena still more minor, less obviously in need of a large format. Some of these subjects are small in scale, like the details of representational paintings. Others, such as industrial carpet and fluorescent lights, are metaphorically small, normally beneath notice. As Gursky puts it, he sees both microscopically and macroscopically.

In the mid-'90s, while visiting a Bonnard exhibition, Gursky found himself drawn to small areas of the tactile, stucco-ish paintings. He thought about this experience for a few years, photographing in the meantime a group of Turners at the Tate (*Turner Collection*, 1995) and a Pollock at MoMA (*Untitled VI*, 1997), staged as if for an auction catalogue. In 1999, Gursky returned to his original idea, photographing details of paintings by Constable and van Gogh (*Untitled X* and *Untitled XIV*, respectively), perhaps not incidentally two of our most famous nature painters. The artist blew up the passages by a factor of at least twenty; the paintings' materiality comes into focus as the surface images lose resolution, further abstracting already cropped and isolated images. That is to say, we can hardly tell what these paintings are "of."

Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Timber Yard of the Havemann Company, Lübeck*, 1928, black-and-white photograph.

but also by the Bechers and much of their artistic progeny, is dismissed by Gursky in a single Wagnerian sweep. Furthermore, in contrast to Conceptualist photography, which sought to problematize visual experience and perception through the manipulation of photographic means (e.g., by reintroducing the fragment, the fleeting moment, the slightly out-of-focus shot, the mundane document of a predetermined site), there's an underlying essentialism at work in Gursky's photographs that attempts to render visible the structural principles at the heart of the concrete world and, more important, to unearth fundamental affinities between products of the organic world and that of human invention, between nature and technology. How, in this totalizing perspective, these spheres can be reconciled, fused, integrated, and eventually collapsed into each other is precisely the ideological problem at stake.
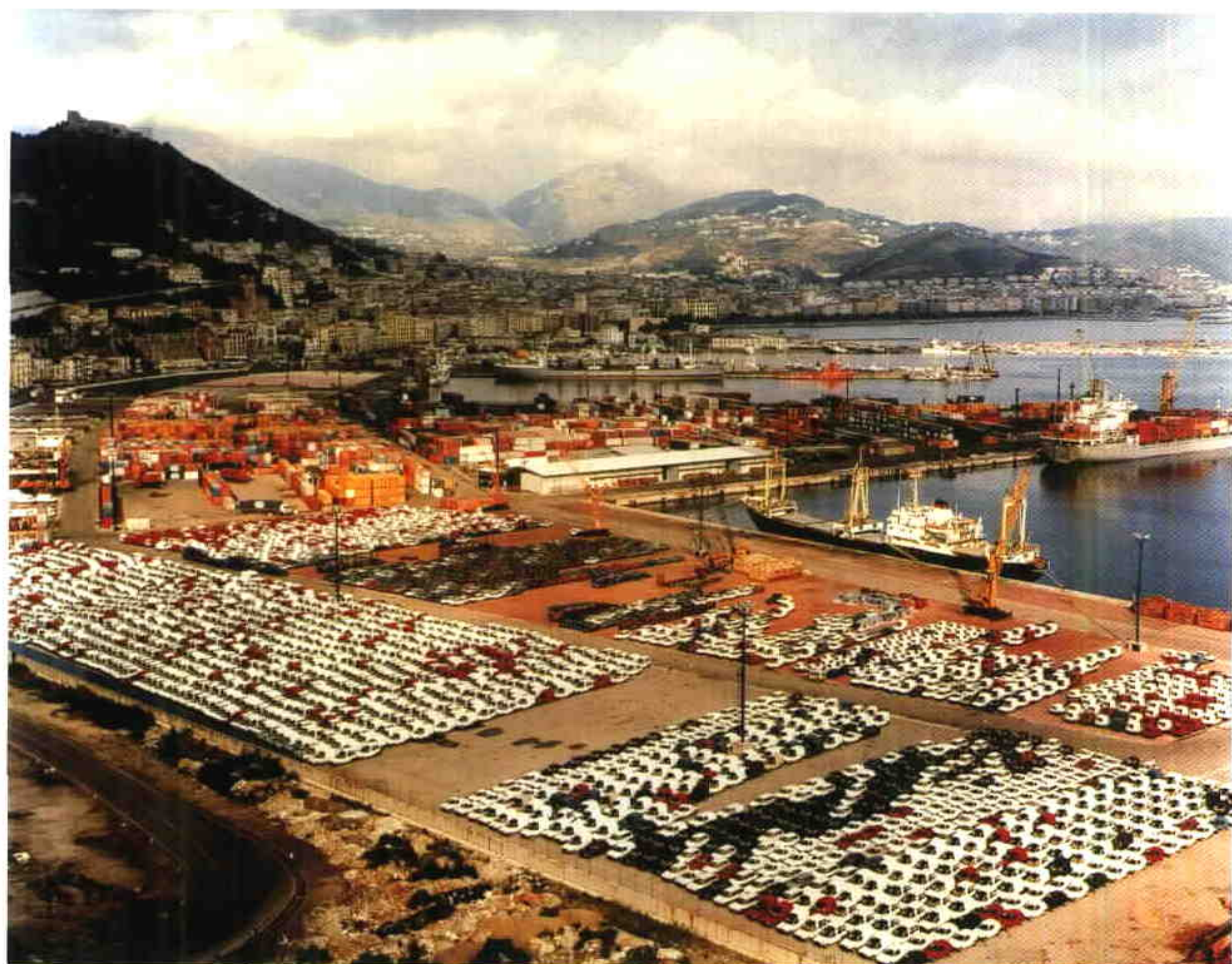
Nowhere is this conflation of the worlds of nature and technology more evident than in Gursky's industrial interiors. Within the highly mechanized factory floors depicted by picturesque tableaux such as *Grundig, Nürnberg*, 1993, *Siemens, Karlsruhe*, 1991, *Mercedes, Rastatt*, 1993, and *Opel, Bochum*, 1994, objects and people appear in an abundance and variety that provides an opportunity for astonishing visual delight, not unlike the experience one has before a spectacular land- or cityscape. And yet, there's an overall sense of imperturbability, of balance, inherent in these banal scenes, as no detail within the broad structural layout of the panoramic compositions is singled out and everything is shown in equal focus. The representations of labor are creatively transformed into elegant visuals self-consciously offered for the eye's consumption. *PTT, Rotterdam*, 1995, is a case in point. The expansive horizontality of this large, eight-and-one-third-foot-wide image is doubled by the horizontal surges of the vast composition. One reads the image from foreground to back, the industrial gray floor followed by systematically ordered rows of gray and blue machines, trolleys, and workstations that recede into the far end of the room, where a gray wall functions as a horizon line. Above the wall, the ceiling is equipped with suspended acoustic panels, arranged geometrically in such a way that they form horizontal bands. Vertical elements such as supporting columns, stacks of crates, table legs, even acoustic sound absorbers punctuate the strong horizontal stratifications, partially gridding the overall composition. Interspersed throughout the tremendous wealth of pictorial incident are deindividualized workers who become continuous with their environment, so much so that they appear as inanimate and cold as the machines they operate.

Still, it would be a mistake to read these equivalencies of technology and nature in Gursky's pictures as a commentary on technology's mimesis of nature; instead, Gursky's motivation is the masterwork, the valorization of the fetishized object of high art. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his "museum pictures" (e.g., *Untitled VI*, 1997, *Untitled X*, 1999, and *Turner Collection*, 1995). Unlike, say, the museum photographs of
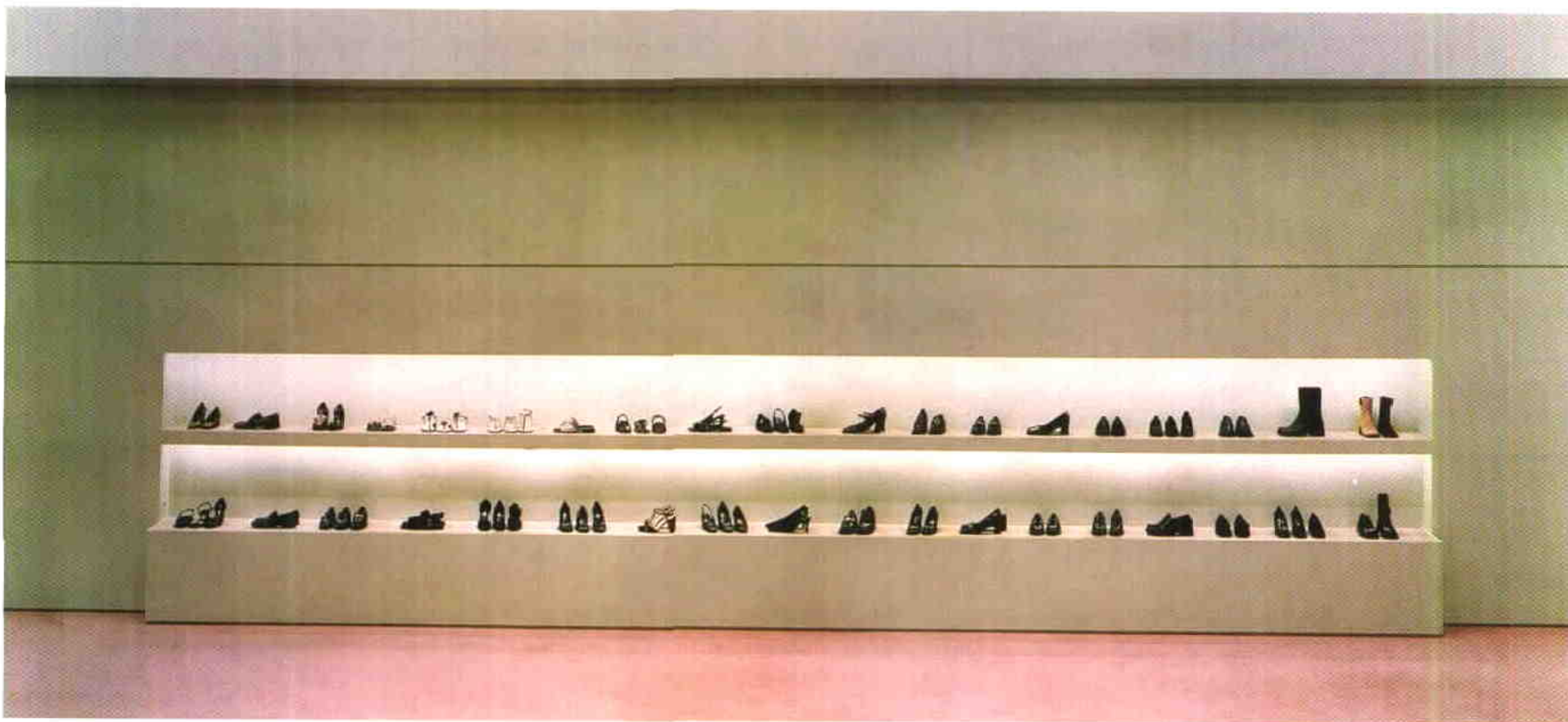
Clockwise from top:
Andreas Gursky,
Prada I, **1996,**
C-print, 57⅜ x 86¾".
Andreas Gursky,
Salerno I, **1990,**
C-print, 74 x 90"
Andreas Gursky,
Untitled X
(Constable),
1999, C-print,
111¾ x 81½".
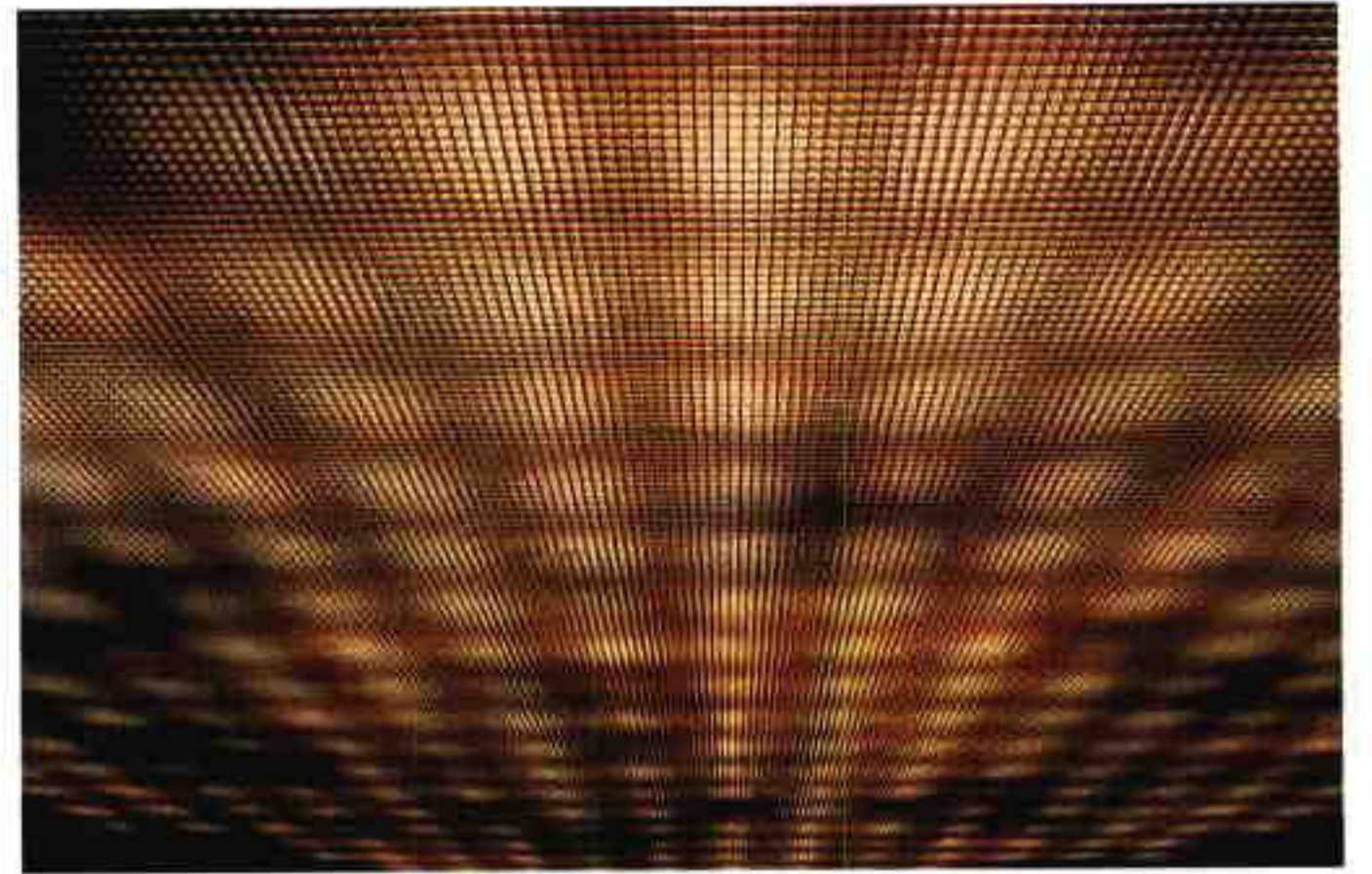
Clockwise from
top left: **Andreas
Gursky,** *Autosalon,
Paris* **(Car show,
Paris), 1993,**
C-print, 69 x 85".
Andreas Gursky,
Brasilia, Plenarsaal, I
**(Brasilia, plenary
chamber, I),
1994,** C-print,
50 x 69".
Andreas Gursky,
Rhein II,
1999, C-print,
6' 9½" x 11' 8½".

This diffusion into abstraction seems to operate as a metaphor for the materiality of the photograph, the way that photographic images reveal either grain, in straight photography, or pixels, in digital photography, when sufficiently enlarged. (Gursky uses both: His images are conventionally printed, but the negatives are often digitally scanned and manipulated before being output as a large negative.) We can identify a tree in the Constable because the paint is strongly differentiated in size, hue, and value; the paint surface is so astonishingly complex as to verge on the arbitrary. The van Gogh is harder to read; although the marks vary in size, they are more regularly placed and almost monotone in color.

Rhyming with the theme of allover painting, carpets (like oceans and sky) are subjects that beg allover depiction. Because of its anonymous, industrial quality, the Kunsthalle carpet in Düsseldorf (*Untitled I*, 1993) makes a particularly good subject: Not only could this particular allover stretch of carpet extend infinitely, it could easily be any number of identical carpets in various public buildings. Like Gerhard Richter's gray paintings, the image presents a deadpan all-things-being-equal face. Above all, it reminds us of the photographic emulsion itself, blown up; in a double irony, the photograph is itself composed of those grains of silver. This reciprocity echoes in the hyperreal, gritty texture of the foreground road in *Toys 'R' Us*, 1999, and, less perfectly, in the enlarged dirt patch of *Untitled III*, 1996. The scale and structure of the photograph's constituent material elements and the material elements of its subject converge.

A carpet is a grid system: thousands of fibers woven into or knotted to a matrix or a support surface at regular intervals. Carpet, like photographic emulsion, becomes an articulated representation when light is refracted off those tiny fibrous elements. That is, the light picks up certain elements, making some lighter than others, forming a distinct image. Because the light varies, the carpet—its image—fails to completely flatten out.

Refractive light and perspective interact quite literally in the ceiling of *Brasilia, Plenarsaal, I*, 1994. The abstraction "light" becomes banal fluorescent lighting panels in a grid formation (much like the grid of digital pixels that structures many of these images). But the lights are irregular, some of them brighter and some dimmer, creating a pattern rather than a continuous, undifferentiated surface. The irregularity is emphasized by the fact that the ceiling does not parallel the picture plane; its orthogonals recede sharply from the photographic surface, as seen from the photographer's perspective. This perspective is the final element that guarantees the appearance of irregularity in even the most regular subjects—it physically slants them. When Gursky minimizes perspectival effects, as in *Rhein II*, the picture flattens. In *Brasilia*, a straight photograph, human perspective distorts a blandly strict subject; in life, the grid always fails its ideal incarnation. Asked about the common characterization of his work as inhuman, the artist replies that even his unpopulated pictures are made and seen by people.

Gursky works the visual theme of refraction or reflection in many of his photographs, including *Bibliothek* and *99 Cent*, both 1999. He also capitalizes on the effect of light bouncing off a large regular surface in *May Day IV*, 2000,

Louise Lawler, which systematically explore the institutional and discursive conditions that govern systems of value in the art world and thereby problematize the self-sufficient fine-art object, there's not a single image in Gursky's museum-based work that focuses on a noncanonical object or on the interstices between the masterpiece and the trivial detail. Rather, what resonates in his pictures of canvases is a confidence in the continuing relevance of traditional high-art conventions, the centrality of aesthetic objects, and the autonomy and separateness of artistic culture generally. (Here it is telling that even in Struth's museum photographs, including *Museum of Modern Art I*, 1994, which, like Gursky's *Untitled VI*, features Pollock's *One: Number 31*, the viewers contemplating the work are given as much importance as the art objects.) Of course, Gursky's use of the large tableau format, the broad white border around the photo paper, and the thick wooden frames that circumscribe his enthralling photographs all offer evidence of a reformist, restorative

GURSKY'S OEUVRE BECOMES CONSIDERABLY MORE TROUBLESOME, RECALLING BRECHT'S FAMOUS REMARK THAT A PHOTO OF THE EXTERIOR OF THE KRUPP WORKS DOES NOT ATTEST TO THE CONDITIONS OF SLAVERY WITHIN.

agenda, but his recent nonreflexive focus on the masterpieces of Pollock, Turner, and Constable, each of which epitomizes the value of high art in its own way, makes the case even clearer.

When it comes to analyzing the primary concerns of the photographs, then, Gursky's oeuvre becomes considerably more troublesome, in a way that recalls Bertolt Brecht's famous remark that a photo of the exterior of the Krupp Works does not attest to the conditions of slavery within. What do Gursky's pictures reveal about the nature of the existing conditions of production in those locations? The end result is a highly superficial, aestheticized approach to the sites of labor. For Gursky, everything, including industry, shopping, and high and speculative finance, has become cultural. Which would not be an issue in itself if one also found a reflection on the second half of this equation—that culture has become profoundly instrumentalized, subject to the very conditions of use-value governing every other sphere of contemporary experience. That this is not the case speaks to Gursky's affinities with a problematic side of twentieth-century German photographic history, namely, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* work of Albert Renger-Patzsch. For just as Renger-Patzsch fused nature and industry, aestheticizing both in a similar manner, for Gursky as well "The World Is Beautiful," to borrow the title of Renger-Patzsch's best-known book of photographs. Thus the workers at a construction site in the middle of Hong Kong (*Hong Kong, Island*, 1994), a teeming harbor in Salerno (*Salerno I*, 1990), a Portman Hyatt Regency in Atlanta (*Atlanta*, 1996), or a factory in Germany merely serve to give further visual detail to the grand overall

his most recent rave photograph, for which he used a giant flashlight. Here, the even, undifferentiated matrix is composed of human beings, not fibers, and the raking light picks out "irregularities" both formal and social, such as individual faces and gestures. Like paint strokes or the grains of photographic emulsion, the people are both random and ordered, independent and responsive to the demands of a larger, structuring order. This is industrialism set to a human scale, nonetheless overpowering.

Perhaps the contrast between overarching order and its constituent parts is most emphatically underscored in Gursky's photographs of pages taken from Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities*, such as *Untitled XII (Musil)*, 1999. Reading on vacation, the artist experienced a sudden shift in perspective, as the page in front of him lost its meaning as part of a transparent narrative, becoming instead an opaque, whole visual image. To represent this perceptual paradox, the artist chose passages from Musil, a quintessentially modern German-Austrian writer known for his plain, straightforward prose; in order to preserve the writing's general quality, he focused on stretches of text that lack the names of characters. So in the end, the four photographs of pages from the book read not only in terms of the content of those specific pages; they represent language per se.

The Man Without Qualities is not, of course, a sheerly aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) choice; the selection resonates too specifically with Gursky's project. The book describes a network of characters and events that is both extraordinarily intricate and strangely neutral. In a passage photographed for *Untitled XII (Musil)*, Ulrich, the protagonist, senses this: "He basically felt capable of having any virtue and any vice, and the fact that a balanced social system generally, albeit tacitly, regards virtues and vices as equally burdensome demonstrated something for him that occurs throughout nature: namely, that every interplay of forces eventually strives toward a mean value and an average standard, an equilibrium and a rigidification." In 1948, Clement Greenberg described a similar impression of both social and formal leveling, based on his experience of contemporary abstract painting: "the feeling that all hierarchical distinctions have been exhausted, that no area or order of experience is either intrinsically or relatively superior to any other." German critic Rudolf Schmitz uses the wonderful word *Aufmerksamkeitsverteilung*—an even distribution of attention—to describe Gursky's formal response to this phenomenon, one seemingly proper to the medium of photography. As nineteenth-century Pictorialist photographer Peter Henry Emerson inveighed against the new sharpness of photographic printing: "The [subject] is there, but she is a mere patch in all the sharp details. . . . Our eyes keep roving . . . and all the interest is equally divided."

We need these big brilliant photos to show us our big bland, dense world (as Greenberg once argued we needed "Apollonian" painting to reflect postwar American materialism). If Richter both generalizes and personalizes by blurring, Gursky does the same by clarifying, revealing and creating an order of things (however arbitrary) to, as he puts it, keep a "grip" on the scale and complexity of our world. He views his oeuvre as an encyclopedia of modern life; thumbing through it, we might find such entries as Business, Fashion, Hotels, Nature, and Sports. Seen as a whole, the work also catalogues the various elements of representation as it exists today: the digital grid, pattern, value contrast, photographic emulsion, reflection. It's all here—virtue and vice, romance and rational order, nature and culture, analog and digital, image and material. "I have a weakness for paradox," Gursky says, and, like the best modern artists, he refracts the conditions of his time. Sometimes ambivalence is the strongest statement. ☐

composition, filling out the scene in a manner similar to the way in which commuters in a Paris airport (*Charles de Gaulle, Paris*, 1992), parliamentarians in the German Bundestag (*Bundestag*, 1998), tourists in Thebes (*Thebes, West*, 1993), even chickens in a Krefeld farmyard (*Chickens, Krefeld*, 1989) complete the picture.

Indeed, whereas Gursky's pictures initially suggested an intellectually rigorous project, his subsequent work has made perfectly clear that he's less concerned with subject matter than with formal properties and the awe-inspiring potential and power of the images. The high-tech sweatshop in Germany, the cargo-loading area on the tarmac in Hong Kong (*Hong Kong Airport*, 1994), the shiny commodities in a Paris trade show (*Car Show, Paris*, 1993), the stock market floor in Chicago (*Chicago, Board of Trade I*, 1997; *Chicago, Board of Trade II*, 1999) are as separate from the new configuration of global social and economic relations in which they exist as are the stage-managed pictures of marvelously illuminated showcases systematically lined with smart designer clothes (*Prada III*, 1998) and athletic shoes (*Untitled V*, 1997). Here, the fullest potential of Gursky's digitally montaged, densely detailed shots is realized, in a seemingly uninterrupted fusion with advanced forms of advertising.

Defining the mise-en-scène of each of his spectacular tableaux from the carefully selected, elevated vantage point of his sharp-focus camera, digitally suppressing and modulating details according to the demands of the flat, allover compositions (in the process conveniently adjusting reality), Gursky evidently is concerned less with the order of things as they are dialectically manifested in a particular instance than with the formal qualities of a totality. In this sense, his work is of a piece with that of many representatives of neo-Pop in the contemporary art world. But unlike the latter, whose works openly acknowledge their ironic, often highly cynical take on contemporary conditions, Gursky's fascinating images exploit the documentary expectation the photographic medium inevitably carries with it and carefully conceal the artifice at play in their digital manipulation. Thus the patches of colors and forms that typify his highly stylized pictures create a multitude of patterns and clusters more evocative of a meticulously balanced abstract composition than the specific social or economic structures they in fact depict. Gursky, attempting to sum up his working method, may have inadvertently put his finger on the new superficiality that could well be called his signature: "In the end, I decided to digitize the pictures and leave out the elements that bothered me." Rather than reveal something about the unsettling nature of globalization and the social and economic forces that create and govern the sites and objects he photographs, Gursky, in his ultimately nihilistic way, is clearly more interested in another game—a pictorialist celebration of style, craftsmanship, and the perfect photographic image. ☐