

Johnen Galerie

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Time and space

By Liz Jobey

In a new exhibition by the leading German photographer Candida Höfer, her cool, objective view reveals the inner drama of some of the most spectacular buildings of the Italian Renaissance



Teatro Olimpico Vicenza II, 2010, 180 x 235cm

The precision was not entirely a surprise. The answers Candida Höfer sent to my questions by email (her preferred method) were concise, clear and direct. This much you might expect after seeing her photographs. She confronts the large, ornate spaces with mastery and control. When I asked what the most important quality was that she looked for in a photograph, she replied, “... it is what in German is called *stimmig* – that the image has a sort of balance in itself”.

Höfer’s photographs reinforce that sense of balance, not only accentuating the architectural structure of a building, but also understanding the uplifting effects that space and light can have on the human spirit. Many of the spaces she photographs were designed for public or semi-public use – theatres, opera houses, libraries – and are accustomed to display and spectacle, to crowds and packed houses, or at least to the sound of people reading. But she seems content to forgo any human presence in her pictures.

It is the buildings, their spatial volumes, that are her subjects.

The Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, northern Italy, might have been waiting for Höfer and her cameras to arrive for over four centuries. It was the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio’s last building, a recreation of a Roman theatre commissioned for his home town. Work began in 1580, but Palladio died six months later, leaving only a sketch for the famous *scaenae frons*, the ornate screen at the back of the stage, with its line of arches from which seven painted trompe l’oeil streets recede. Like Höfer’s photograph, the stage needs no figures to add to its drama. The auditorium might have been put there just to allow an audience to admire the skills of Palladio’s interpreter, Vincenzo Scamozzi, who finished the theatre in 1585.



Höfer's photographs dispense not only with actors, but with spectators, too, and as such continue the path she has taken since leaving the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie in 1982. In 1976, at the age of 32, she switched from studying film there to join the new photography course led by Bernd Becher. Becher and his wife Hilla, who taught alongside him in Düsseldorf, are known for their precise black and white photographic "typologies" of industrial structures, and their close, methodical approach has influenced a generation of art photographers. Under the Bechers a new "Düsseldorf school" developed around a core group of graduates who are now major figures in contemporary art – Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Axel Hütte and Candida Höfer.

When I asked her about Bernd Becher's qualities as a teacher, she replied: "He was not so much a teacher but a person you could talk to and talk with. He saw to it that what we experienced and what we saw and what we experimented with was about art, and that the medium we used was secondary to that." But between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, her photographic work underwent a major shift. For most of the 1970s she photographed Turkish immigrant workers and their families in Cologne and Düsseldorf in a fairly traditional social documentary style that might suggest that people, rather than places, were her focus. But by the mid-1980s, people were disappearing from her photographs, leaving the places to stand alone.

"My work with Turkish people in Germany had shown me two things. I felt uncomfortable disturbing people, making them an object of my photographic work, although the Turkish people I had photographed [were always] extremely helpful and friendly. Also it showed me how important spaces were in which people lived, worked, went to shop, passed their free time. This then brought me to spaces, having experimented already with places in my daily routine, like waiting rooms in railway stations."

From everyday public places, she moved to larger, more spectacular interiors where space was an important – and imposing – aspect of a building's character: space as status, space as knowledge, space as self-expression, space as art. Since then, over the past two decades or so she has travelled to many countries to photograph spaces in museums, libraries, theatres and opera houses, each one depopulated and bathed in cold light. For a new exhibition in London, she returned to the Renaissance towns of northern Italy – Mantua, Venice, Vicenza, Carpi and Sabbioneta – where Scamozzi designed another theatre, the Teatro all'Antica, and Höfer photographed the long view down the Galleria degli Antichi, where Vespasiano Gonzaga showed off his sculptures and classical art.



Candida Höfer

In each case, the specific space decides the format of the picture. Often the viewpoint is slightly raised. "I want to share the character of the space as comprehensively as possible with the viewer," Höfer explained. "That, at least, is my intention. What it then does to the viewer is not in my control."

'Candida Höfer: A Return to Italy' is at Ben Brown Fine Arts, 12 Brook's Mews, London W1K 4DG, February 12 to April 12.

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