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Thomas Kneubühler, *Office 2000*, Skol, Montréal, du 3 septembre au 2 octobre 2004

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Thomas Kneubühler

Office 2000

Skol, Montréal

du 3 septembre au 2 octobre 2004

The photographic urban landscapes produced by Thomas Kneubühler for his *Office 2000* series are densely packed images overloaded with evidence of human behavioural codes and regulated conduct, tightly constrained by both the picture frame and the grid of modernist architecture. The seven large-scale colour prints conjure up a quiet spectacle of order and convention that is completely mesmerizing. The photographs are presented without a frame and hover just in front of the gallery wall, appearing almost as rigid screens.

The vivid night shots feature generic office-tower exteriors, often providing direct views into the cubicles within. The similarity between the buildings is eased by the variation in range from the subjects. The more distant vantages confront us with the sheer might and space that these monoliths occupy in the composition. In others, windows extend beyond the frame in all directions, and the grid created by the multiple panes draws the viewer closer to scan for differences between the contents of each one. One photo stands as a striking exception; the image is a tight zoom on one single window that is almost completely shielded by venetian blinds but still provides a shimmering mirage of the compartment inside. It strikes me as a kind of residue, a blink of the eye, a space (and perhaps a life) that has made no true impression, remaining elusive yet entirely captivating.

In addition to the aesthetic appeal of so many pixel-like microcosms, there are dazzling abstractions of light and reflection shifting across the sleek façades. The smears of refracted movement and chaotic static "action" can be seen as a nod to Doug Aitken's exploration of acceleration as the prime physical and cultural engine of our times. Although some windows are dark, with lights turned off or blinds closed to conceal the chamber's secrets, most are laid gloriously open to our prying gaze. Long exposure times have exaggerated the amount of light emanating outward, creating an ethereal ambience that at its extreme approaches the supernatural, permeating the edifice and imbuing the scenes with taut dramatic tension.

The angle of the camera's perspective is significant. Our view of these mammoth constructions is always from across or above and ascribes little importance to the street below. This is the modernist architect's preferred vantage, as Robin Metcalf writes in his essay *Specular Towers: Architecture and the Aerial View*.[1]

Links can be drawn between Kneubühler's *Office 2000* and *Neon Tigers: Photographs of Asian Megacities*, the latest work by Hamburg-based artist Peter Bialobrzeski, in that both closely examine the intersection between humanity and technology. Their investigations diverge, however: while Bialobrzeski's seductive photographs of high-rise, high-density living usher the viewer into incredible futurist utopian fantasies, Kneubuhler's images remain belligerently rooted in the generic and the mundane.

Kneubühler's photographs are computer enhanced, but very subtly. His approach to the digital toolbox is more on a par with German-born artist Thomas Demand's application of paste to paper. Demand meticulously fabricates cardboard models in order to erect complex interiors and public spaces. His maquettes share the flat, standardized characteristics of present-day administrations or institutions; they exist only to serve as the photographic subject and have never been exhibited. Demand has said that "photography is less about representing than constructing its objects";[2] although the artists manifest their concerns from opposite ends of the material spectrum, the resemblance in the results is quite remarkable. Demand's *Copyshop 1999* and *Fenster (Window) 1998*, however, belie a heavier, more Orwellian critique of hegemonic spatiality and are so totally devoid of markings or identity that they remained locked in a virtual purgatory, never to be used, or destroyed.

Thomas Kneubühler, *Sans titre* (de la série Office 2000)
tirage lambda, 122 x 152 cm, 2003-2004

Kneubühler's locations, by contrast, are radiating and alive. The images of cluttered, humming towers, charged with the energy of yesterday's and tomorrow's business activities, are what could best be described as a dark ode to enterprise. In her article entitled "Nocturnes," Sarah Thornton articulates the subtle nuances of this emerging genre, whose roots, according to Thornton, lie in music. Thornton goes on to describe Florian Maier-Aichen's *Untitled (Mount Wilson)* (2002), and her characterization resonates through Kneubuhler's series: "Like the classic sublime, it evokes infinity and, in being both nostalgic and futuristic, it plays with our sense of time. But unlike the sublime of old, it no longer depicts the dominance of nature. The alternation of night and day might be the most overt display of nature's power, but the spectacular lights of the urban grid fight back and hold their own."[4]

Upon second inspection of the works in *Office 2000*, the internal game of comparison shifts toward a more focussed scrutiny of the buildings and their exposed contents. What might we discover in this new and entitled position as voyeur into the inert corporate synapse? The subjectivity that each viewer brings to this search is revealing in its tendencies. My eye roves first for evidence of a sex scandal or nudity, then any for type of human activity, and finally for just some sort of disarray in such a sterilized interior.

The desire to bear witness to a small triumph of spirit over bureaucracy (even if it's in the form of bad behaviour) is overwhelming. The absence of blatant weaknesses or chinks in the capitalist armour only encourages a quest to seek it out in the margins. Perhaps traces of individuality may be found in the far corners of a room as a pile of dishevelled papers, too many family photos on the edge of a desk, a filing cabinet left ajar, or a window animated with potted plants. Almost inevitably, the ubiquitous image of a jetliner passing through the shiny membrane of a skyscraper flickers in the back of my mind and is slowly extinguished.

The critique inherently built in to all work that depicts a collision of humanity and technology is evident in *Office 2000*. But as is the case with Edward Burtynsky's photographs, the discrepancy between the feelings that such sumptuous pictures evoke for viewers and our intellectual criticism of the conditions that these representations allegorize remains unresolved. If anything, it illustrates that our modern-day access to the sublime is achieved through the perfection and purity of images; the sombre realities from which they were sourced merely adds to their value in the form of prophetic or nostalgic poignancy.

SB Edwards

1. Robin Metcalfe, (2003) "Specular Towers: Architecture and the Aerial View," *Prefix Photo Magazine*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), pp. 18–19.
2. Quoted in Uta Grosenick and Burkhard Reimschneider (eds.), *Art at the Turn of the Millennium* (Cologne and New York: Taschen, 1999), p. 118.
3. Sarah Thornton, "Nocturnes," *Contemporary Magazine*, No. 62 (2004), p. 33.

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