

## Allegories of the City from “Doug Hall: Infinite Spaces”, Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, 2003



WITH his apparently straightforward style, focus on public spaces, and adoption of new technologies, Doug Hall stands in the ranks of leading contemporary photographers. Prominent practitioners of this form of photography include Bernd and Hilla Becher and their German followers Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, and Andreas Gursky. Still others around the world, such as Edward Burtynsky, Gabriele Basilico, Jean-Marc Bustamante, and Naoya Hayatekama, seem to share many of the same formal and philosophical concerns. Like Hall, many of today's photographers have absorbed a broad range of critical theory beginning with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno and extending to Henri Lefebvre, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Victor Burgin, and others. No less evident are links with nineteenth and early twentieth-century photographic artists Édouard Denis Baldus, Charles Marville, Giorgio Sommer, Eadweard Muybridge, and Eugene Atget, as well as American modernist photographers like Charles Sheeler and Walker Evans. All of which is to say that Hall operates within a lengthening continuum of artists, imagery, and issues. In the thick of contemporary practice, finally, he and his peers share a passion for the rapidly evolving technology that allows for a new kind of photography exalting grand scale and crystalline realism. Briefly put, his technique begins with taking a color photograph using conventional negative film with a large-format camera. The negative is then drum-scanned into a computer where alterations are made before the image is finally projected by laser onto the photographic paper.

Hall's subject is the city. The fourteen photographs included in the present exhibition and reproduced here encourage us to reconsider familiar spaces and places, even if we have never actually visited them before. As a realist, Hall deliberately selects, describes, and defines the built environment from the interiors at its heart to the ragged edges at its periphery. Urban society is represented, even when the city is all but missing by way of a number of overlapping social concerns. Some of these relate to the

institutions of modern middle-class culture, the bourgeois world that has its origins in the economic, industrial, and intellectual developments of the nineteenth century. As he remarks in the accompanying interview, Hall is “interested in people seen through the constructed spaces in which they operate.” He also pursues the notion of spectacle in the city as well as the pervasive influence of the culture industry. His long-standing political interests remain but they are presented obliquely, requiring more thought and reflection from the viewer. While one may intuit a critique of modern mass culture in some of the photographs, they are seldom prescriptive. Such concerns are presented with the cool balance and beauty typical of the best Modernist design. The colors and shapes teased out of the urban fabric by Hall are carefully chosen to complement the critical issues.

Hall's photographs originated mostly in serial projects built around rigorously circumscribed themes—opera house interiors, country highways, leisurescapes, and so on—and were initially exhibited as such. For the present exhibition, by contrast, the pictures were extracted from numerous series not with the intention of offering a comprehensive retrospective, but rather to disclose a new vision. The aim is to reveal some of the underlying commonalities of more than a decade of varied picture taking, a set of allegories of the city.

The triptych *Avenida Paulista, São Paulo* (cover; no. 5) is at once a precise record of the skyline of the immense Brazilian city and a representation of all those mega cities that have risen in the developing world during the past half-century with the spread of industrial economies. Without the title, only a few signs in Portuguese and a smattering of pastel hues clue us into the possible location. The nondescript multitude of high-rise apartment and office buildings, the bastard children of Modernist architecture, might just as easily be in Shanghai, Cairo, or Mexico City. For hundreds of millions of people across the globe this is the backdrop of everyday life. The photograph is striking and





anecdotal component: At least one weary tourist looks straight at the camera. Hall presents the city as a stage set, viewed from the wings. He alludes to the particular theatricality of Rome by placing the ancient obelisk and baroque fountain at the center.

Four images from Viet Nam and Brazil delineate alternative urban realities. In *Cua O Quan Chuong (Old East Gate)* (no. 2) the central element is a cylindrical building with Western architectural detailing that suggests a modern rationality espoused by colonial rulers. The inhabitants of this space are close to us but in a slightly unsettling manner their gaze is averted. Again we are in the place but not of it. A different sort of modernism, fully Asian, is revealed in *Red River, Hanoi (Looking South)* (no. 4). The tranquility of the houseboats along the riverbank might seem to evoke a “timeless” way of life but for the uncontrolled urban seepage in the upper right corner. *Rio Negros, Manaus* (no. 7) is a comparable image of the watery edge of a Brazilian city. Here, however, the lonely finger of industrial technology extending out into the river does not seem to pose a threat but rather to enhance the natural beauty of the place. The unfulfilled promise of modernism reappears in *Esplanada dos Ministérios, Brasilia* (no. 8) where the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer and his Brazilian peers, acolytes of the International Style, resulted not in utopia but in emptiness. We might take this as an implicit critique of Benjamin who saw so much promise in the young Le Corbusier: Does Hall see this as another failed colonial enterprise? The images from Brazil and Viet Nam expose the shifting nature of the modern city in places where industrialism has not completely supplanted the old order or nascent industrialism is suffocated by post-industrialism.

*Wild Blue Yokohama* (no. 9) reveals the contemporary face of the culture industry. Nature is transfigured by the entertainment demands of a highly industrialized society. A spectacle of absurdity is played out in this new arena. Blue water, often a positive element in Hall’s work, here recedes into a cave of darkness,



perhaps anxiety-producing. How can we, or any human being, relate to this space?

Similarly grand but compositionally more tranquil, the view of *Tokyo Bay* (no. 1) spreads out before us, the sweeping curve of the highway fortuitously mirrored by the wisps of clouds in the blue sky. Here the infrastructure of industrial commerce and the tools of global transport seem to float along effortlessly in the dream city. Even with the dark arc from the left, it is a hopeful image in which aggressive technology still seems to be kept in proportionate check by the natural fields of air and water.

*Shinjuku South, Early Evening* (no. 6), a view of a popular Tokyo shopping district, is less optimistic. As [tokyoessentials.com](http://tokyoessentials.com) describes the place: “Streams of screaming neon, high pitched shrieking sounds; people, people everywhere—silent and robotic. There’s no room, there’s no escape—earthquakes yet skyscrapers, it’s hot, it’s humid, it’s calm, it’s still for this is Shinjuku—a business and shopping district in the west of Tokyo and the ultimate, overwhelming experience.” With its cacophony of signs and shoppers, this is the modern high-tech equivalent of the arcades that so engaged Benjamin, a characteristic urban space of our era where commodity rules. As presented by Hall, Shinjuku is indeterminate: What space does the viewer occupy here? In the same way the *Piazza della Rotonda* (no. 3) takes in the scenography of the city, the buildings, and the people. Rome has been the focal point of the tourist industry even before it was an industry. This work is among the few presented here with an





while perspective, another common feature of Hall's photographs, functions subversively. For many, "the image of the convergence of parallel lines at a vanishing point" is directly linked to "Western European global and political ambitions," ambitions that seem sadly and perversely triumphant here.<sup>1</sup> The notion of nature denaturalized comes forth in *Gene Autry Rock, Alabama Hills, California* (no. 10). The site, carefully chosen by Hall, was once the backdrop for Hollywood Westerns, and so carries the name of a cinematic icon. The jarring separation of foreground/background turns a sublime landscape into a sort of diorama, a stagy place for movie houses only.

Although the concerns that inform the four final images are comparable to *Wild Blue Yokohama* and *Gene Autry Rock*, the attitude is more distant and analytical. The subjects of the photographs—a museum, an opera house, a train station, and a stadium—might all be considered emblematic of the triumph of the middle class. They also can be linked with Hall's images of libraries and arcades that together "sum up the golden age of bourgeois society."<sup>2</sup> These types of buildings recall Benjamin's historical critique of what he called "Dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations."<sup>3</sup>

As a modern day *flâneur*, Hall appears to be drawn to these everyday structures. He revels in the various ways of looking and seeing. Readers, travelers, surveyors, cataloguers, spectators, voyeurs, or even glassy-eyed tourists all seem to have a place in the arenas that define their activity. In the *Teatro della Fortuna, Fano* (no. 13), we are presented with the interior of a provincial opera house that one could never actually behold. The details of chairs, loges, and light fixtures can be examined endlessly. In the space of spectacle, moreover, we may consider the populations who occasionally occupy it, the theatergoers and the actors, each beholding the other. The bending of perspective, meanwhile, underscores the importance of the modes of looking. In another Italian scene, *Helena, Wife of Constantine, Capitoline Museums, Rome* (no. 11), we discover a similar set of issues. Here, embodied in the image, is a ghost figure peering at us as we view the ancient marble statue, an exercise in looking that echoes in the matrix of glances from the classical busts lining the gallery walls.

Does any building type exceed the train station as a stage for industrial display? In *Estação da Luz, São Paulo* (no. 12), Hall



serves up the confusing beauty of the station's interior. The arc of girders shelters a site both functioning and under construction, which we view from an indeterminate distance. The *Estádio do Maracanã, Rio de Janeiro* (no. 14), the vast Brazilian soccer stadium, is similarly viewed from afar. Perhaps more than any other single image this one unites the themes critical for Hall. The cage of nineteenth-century iron architecture has been replaced by the graceful geometry of the open oval. Yet it remains a public gathering place, a site of spectacle, a potent symbol of national identity and part of the global culture industry. The stadium is one of the indispensable components of the city and may be taken as a suitable allegory for modern collective experience.

Erik H. Neil

An architectural historian, Erik H. Neil has been Director of the Newcomb Art Gallery of Tulane University since 1999.

## ENDNOTES

1. V. Burgin, *In/Different Spaces*, Berkeley, 1996, p. 143.
2. T. J. Clark, "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?" *boundary 2*, vol.30, no. 1, spring 2003, p. 37.
3. W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999, p. 405 [L1,3]. Subsequently Benjamin adds museums to the list, p. 406 [L1a, 3].