

# The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.

THOMAS DEMAND, ALEXANDER KLUGE,  
AND ANNA VIEBROCK // FONDAZIONE PRADA

By Greg Foster-Rice



Situated beneath a pediment, surrounded by frescoes in a Venetian palazzo, the door's unexpected metal hinges and rounded edges mimic the way a ship's hatches are designed to withstand water pressure in the event of a hull breach. This facsimile of a naval door serves as an ominous portent that the exhibition, *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.*, will oscillate between scenes of normalcy and catastrophe, like a ship moving from safe harbor to stormy seas and back again.<sup>1</sup> It also temporarily displaces the viewer from the exhibition's location within an eighteenth-century palazzo, creating the improbable sensation of being on a boat. As architecture historian Kurt Forster is quoted in the exhibition catalogue, the experience of buildings is frequently analogous to the experience of ships since "...architecture encompasses much more than what is standing above the ground and is accessible to the viewer. Buildings float in a veritable ocean of conditions, from tacit assumptions to underlying currents, which can be traced only through a real inspection, and sometimes only by intuition."<sup>2</sup> Unlike conventional museum exhibitions, the closed door presents an invitation to engage with the installation, encouraging visitors to open the

passageway and explore the room beyond. The exhibition gestures towards a kind of interpolation, making the audience acutely aware of their subject position within the exhibition space, by virtue of their direct engagement with an object whose status as a work of art is initially ambiguous, although it soon becomes apparent that it is part of an elaborate installation. ——— On the other side of the portal, the interior of the room is lit only by Thomas Demand's video work *Pacific Sun* (2012), in which the artist, known for his photographic recreations of mass media, painstakingly animated 2,400 frames of film depicting 1:1 scaled cardboard replicas of wildly-careening furniture. Taken from a YouTube clip of a ship's interior during a tumultuous storm, the work reinforces the maritime analogy embedded throughout the exhibition. Accompanied by alternating loops of naturalistic sounds and a dramatic symphonic score that elevates the uncanny scene to high tragedy, the experience of deciphering *Pacific Sun* becomes an exercise in perception that extends throughout *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* ——— The exhibition occupies the first three floors of the Palazzo Ca'

Corner della Regina (now the Fondazione Prada), and transforms them into an immersive environment in which historical artifacts and artistic fabrications are provocatively commingled, much like the way Demand's video meticulously recreates a piece of found footage. *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* is distinguished from other immersive and interactive exhibitions by its high degree of ambition, subtlety, and risk in challenging our expectations about the boundary between art and life. ——— Like the Leonard Cohen and Sharon Robinson song that inspired the title, the exhibition is a similarly collaborative effort between the photographer Thomas Demand, filmmaker Alexander Kluge, set designer Anna Viebrock, and curator Udo Kittelmann from the Berlin Nationalgalerie. And like Cohen and Robinson's song, the subject matter of the exhibition's imagery is frequently ominous—including Demand's photographs of traumatic sites, Kluge's films about totalitarianism, and Viebrock's elegantly shabby theatrical sets—yet the success of the artistic collaboration strikes a note of cautious optimism. ——— Given the







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individually successful careers and different disciplines of the three German artists, one of the principle goals of the exhibition is the staging of a site for the exploration of space, experience, and historical memory across and between the different media of photography, film, writing, and theater. *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* is highly self-consciously displaces real space with representations of space through the selected works of Demand, Kluge, and Viebrock, effectively foregrounding its own material reality as a space of exhibition. The artworks operate as both representations of reality and material objects situated within space.

The first of these displacements registers on the site of the exhibition, the palazzo itself, which is periodically displaced—like water overflowing a tub—by the insertion of Viebrock’s theatrical fabrications. This spatio-temporal confusion is dramatized by the fact that the casual observer cannot at first distinguish Viebrock’s interventions from the elements they displace, such as the floor runner that subtly yet ingeniously ties the space of the exhibition together. This confusion is further amplified by the artist’s incorporation of repurposed set designs, such as an enlarged replica of a Zeiss lamp from a 2015 production of Jean-Philippe Rameau’s 1735 opera *Les Indes galantes*, or props specifically executed for the space, such as the Safari Bar door and Hotel vestibule. While a selection of the props on view are operable and dynamic, many of the others remain purposefully dysfunctional and inert, further complicating the visitor’s experience—one that is inevitably marked by attempts at trying to open doors, which in some cases are revealed as clever facsimiles that lead nowhere, while others open to actual passageways. Viebrock already has an established presence within the German theatrical and operatic community, but her participation in *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* is sure to alert an even more diverse audience to her technical and conceptual mastery of space, form, and fabrication.

Another displacement occurs through Kluge’s films, which have increasingly turned towards self-reflective commentary on the process of film making, thereby displacing the audience from the illusionistic experience of cinematic narrative to better understand how film operates as an apparatus of exhibition. For example, *The Soft Makeup of Light* (2007) brilliantly analyzes the use of light to create space, drama, and narrative



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within cinema. Composed of a series of vignettes, in which we see famous German actors being lit by either teams of light-riggers, or by candlelight, the film’s scenes are reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975). Originally shot on 65mm film, before being transferred to digital projection, the installation of *The Soft Makeup of Light* similarly introduces the viewer to the kinds of complex lighting effects employed by Viebrock and Demand throughout later portions of the exhibition.

In yet another striking example of displacement, Viebrock recreates the interior of the courtroom from Kluge’s Silver Lion-winning film *Yesterday Girl* (1966), in which an East German protagonist is detained for a minor theft that is emblematic of her inability to fit into West German society. While the film itself plays in Viebrock’s reconstructed cinema in the adjacent gallery, the courtroom set allows viewers to alternately occupy the position of both the male judge and the female protagonist, recreating one of Kluge’s most renowned scenes in which he innovatively used cross cuts, camera angles, and alternating first-person point-of-view to place audiences in the ambivalent position of both the accused and the accuser. Although these immediate cinematic and historical references are initially lost on the viewer, instead slowly unfolding through the collaborative nature of *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.*, Viebrock’s astonishingly detailed courtroom instills an independently chilling oscillation between disenfranchisement and power as well as the sensation of being placed within one of Demand’s meticulously recreated photographs. This sentiment is punctuated by the display of two of Demand’s photographs on Viebrock’s artificial courtroom walls, *Tavern II* and *Tavern IV* (both 2006), both of which were from a series that sought to recreate evidentiary photographs from a 2001 murder case in Germany.

The final displacement is articulated through Demand’s photographs, in which he displaces reality with its simulation as a way of commenting on the mediated experience of modern life.

In *Backyard* (2014), for example, the image replicates an otherwise innocuous photograph showing the back door and gated area of the home of the Boston Marathon bomber, Tamerlan Tsarnaev. Devoid of human subjects or precise historical references, Demand’s version becomes a subtle meditation on the banality of evil, but



also the unsettling indeterminacy of photographic documentation. Within the context of the exhibition, Demand's multi-tiered displacement of reality through a chain of replications takes on additional urgency, even as the painstaking formal and material qualities of his finished photographs reinforce the significance of first-hand experience. Indeed, *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* dramatically emphasizes the materiality of Demand's photographs through the juxtaposition of their shiny surfaces with Viebrock's cinder blocks, acoustic ceiling tiles, and other mundane building materials, as well as the luxurious marbles and matte-surfaced frescoes of the original palazzo. The effect is a natural extension of Demand's collaboration with architects Caruso St. John on his 2009 exhibition at the Nationalgalerie, in which his photographs hung against contrasting walls of heavy woolen curtains. In both cases, but especially in Venice, the viewer becomes even more highly attuned to the triple-flattening of space in Demand's work—via the sequential acts of photography, fabrication, then re-photography—precisely because the images are juxtaposed against

contrasting environments that do not disappear into the background like the walls of a white cube gallery.

— In this sense, *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* succeeds in eradicating the barriers between art, space, and audience through a series of strategic collaborations between the three artists on view. The exhibition's encouragement of varying degrees of visitor engagement—from open-ended navigation, to touching the objects, to deciphering the sources of the imagery, to intuiting which objects are part of the installation and which are part of the palazzo—makes for a highly self-conscious viewing experience that foregrounds the role of the audience, and the space of exhibition in the creation of artistic meaning. As audiences set sail on this leaking boat of a building, uncertain of where the voyage of the exhibition might take them, the only certainty is the challenge and the pleasure of discovery.

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***The Boat is Leaking, The Captain Lied.* runs  
May 13–November 23 2017.**

- 1 Udo Kittlemann, "The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied. 21 attempts and transformations," in *The Boat is Leaking. The Captain Lied.* exhibition catalogue (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2017), p. 111
- 2 Ibid, p. 112.

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**TITLE PAGE:**

Anna Viebrock, stage design for *Lulu*, 2017 and Thomas Demand, *Backyard*. Image courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

**PAGE 13:**

Thomas Demand, *Backyard*, 2014, C-print Diasec. Image courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**

Installation view, *Power Distributor Door, Hotel Door, Safari Bar Door* and *Temporary Construction Door* designed by Anna Viebrock, 2017; *Floor Runner* from the stage design of Riesenbutzbach *Eine Dauerkolonie*, by Anna Viebrock, 2009; and Alexander Kluge, *The Soft Makeup of Light*, 65mm film transferred to digital projection, 13 minutes 34 seconds. Image courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**

Alexander Kluge, *Yesterday Girl*, 1965–66. 35mm film transferred to digital projection; Anna Viebrock, Cinema room with seats from the stage design for *Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald*, 2007. Image courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

**ABOVE:**

Anna Viebrock, courtroom based on a scene from Alexander Kluge's *Yesterday Girl*, 2017. Image courtesy of Fondazione Prada.