

Trajectories



Marking Time in Contemporary Art

The Art Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park

The Archive's Shadow

A conversation with Lynn Cazabon on
Discard

Jennifer E. Quick

The Dialectics of Time: Reflections
on the Work of Andreas Gursky,
Omer Fast, and Allan Sekula

Jennie A. Fleming

To Remain

Exhibition featuring Kelley Bell,
Mandy Burrow, Cindy Rehm
Steven H. Silberg, and Jason Sloan

Andreas Gursky's photograph *Pyongyang I* depicts the Arirang Festival, an annual celebration in honor of the birthday of North Korea's late Communist leader Kim Il-sung. The elaborate performance, which takes place in a large stadium, involves 50,000 gymnasts and soldiers.¹ From Gursky's vantage point, which is the same as that of spectators seated high in the stadium, the performers are so small that they appear almost as abstract forms rather than human beings. Clad in vibrant shades of pink, white, red, and blue, they create patterns across the field, radiating out from the purple and white model of the earth

conceive of time as unfolding in a linear, coherent trajectory. There is no sense of a specific past or a potential future, but only perpetual, never-ending present, in which it is difficult, or even no longer relevant, to distinguish between the real and the fictional. This "spatialization" of time, as Jameson termed it, represents a significant shift in our understanding of temporality and of our place in the world. Jameson's picture of postmodern reality and time finds a visual equivalent in the highly saturated colors and seemingly infinite rows of performers in Gursky's digitally-enhanced image, which is just slightly too perfect to seem real. At the same time, *Pyongyang I* hints at a concrete, everyday reality that at first seems to be lost within the vast lines of figures. Upon closer inspection, traces of specific details are visible in the photograph: a shoelace, an individual facial expression. The flowers in the background, which seem to be painted on the stadium wall, are created by thousands of Korean schoolchildren holding panels in the air, each square of color melding together to form the image of a blossom.

This essay considers the conflicted and contradictory conception of time embodied in Gursky's *Pyongyang I*. Of particular interest is how the photograph pictures the relationship between temporality and subjectivity, especially in terms of how the individual relates to society as a whole and to the longer trajectory of history. For if on one hand, Gursky's photograph seems to picture the spatialization of time, it simultaneously resists this idea by pointing to the concrete and the particular. The work of Omer Fast and Allan Sekula, which raises similar questions concerning temporality, subjectivity, and postmodernity, provides a complement and also a counterpoint to Gursky's photographs.

It is fitting to begin this discussion with Gursky's work, for it does seem to visualize, or suggest, the cultural conditions that Jameson has identified as concomitant with the economic state of postmodernity. Among these are a decentering

like spokes of a wheel. Large, garishly-colored flowers, bordered by a swath of white mountains, decorate the back wall of the stadium. These simulated natural forms visually echo the uniforms of the performers who are lined up in neat and precise rows across the field.

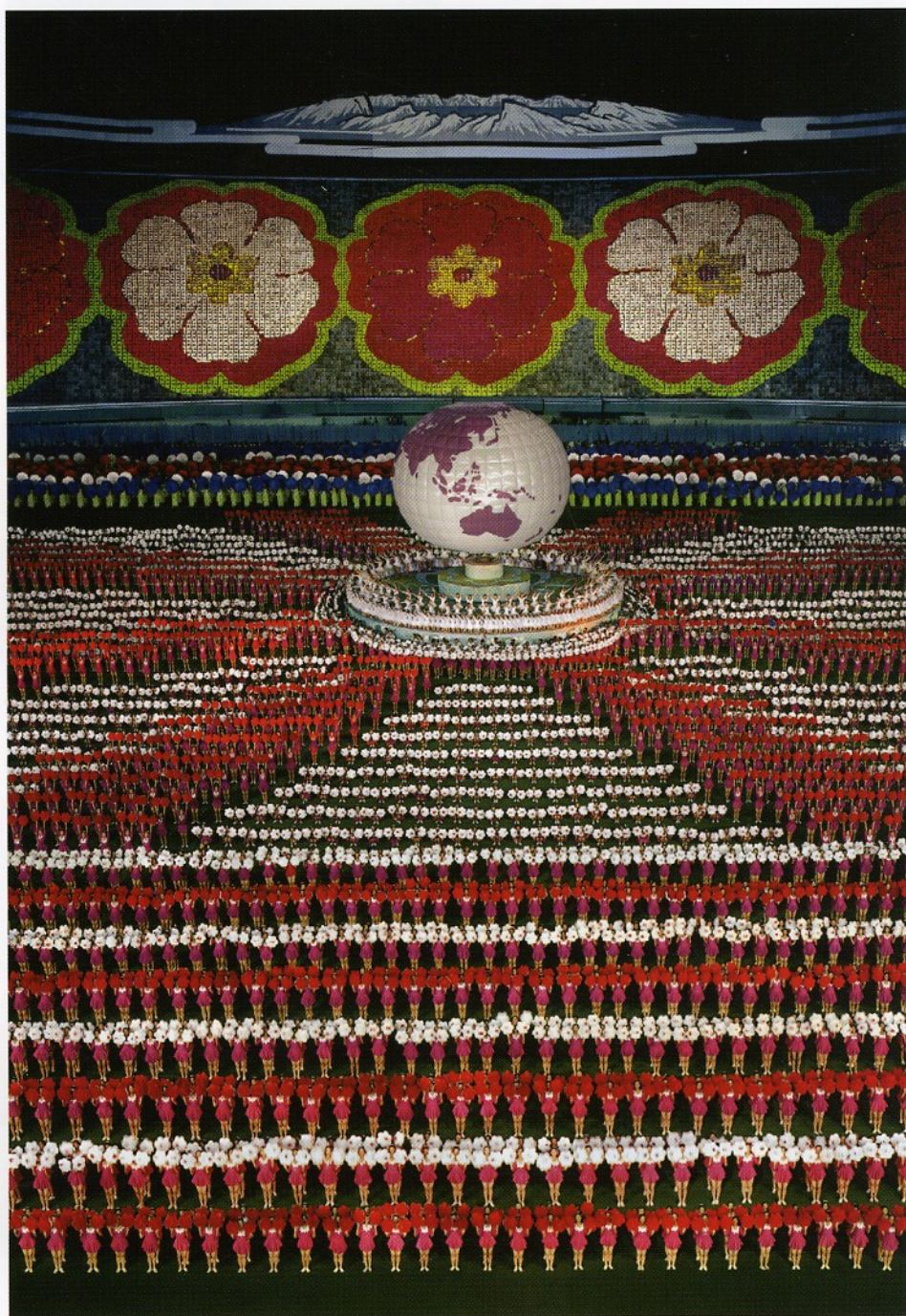
Pyongyang I (right), suggests a dialectical understanding of time and of history. It captures the contrast between East and West, the collision of communism and capitalism, and the tension between tradition and contemporaneity. The spectacular nature of the Arirang Festival, which evokes the Rockettes or a Hollywood movie musical, reminds us that the phenomenon of globalization brings about a certain cultural homogeneity. In this way, *Pyongyang I* seems to demonstrate that our age is characterized by a conflicted, and as literary theorist Frederic Jameson has suggested, schizophrenic, relationship to reality.² The global network of capital, the rapid development of new technologies, and the proliferation of visual imagery have created a fast-paced, instant world. Consequently, it is no longer possible to

The Dialectics of Time: Reflections on the Work of Andreas Gursky, Omer Fast, and Allan Sekula

Jennifer E. Quick

of the subject, a schizophrenic consciousness, and the onset of the hysterical sublime.³ Critical discussion of Gursky's photographs tends to focus on how his work embodies aspects of contemporary reality.⁴ Alix Ohlin, for example, has described Gursky's work as depicting the contemporary sublime, with the overwhelming landscape of global capital and technology replacing the majestic views of nature from the nineteenth century.⁵ Gursky's photographs of stock exchanges, vast retail spaces, and towering skyscrapers are totalizing views of a world shaped by the globalization, technology, and capitalism. The highly saturated colors, flawless surfaces, and large scale of the images correspond to the picture of reality that he aims to convey. As Gursky himself has said, he is interested in "putting things in order, sorting them out, until they become a whole."⁶ His desire to distill and organize visual information is taken to an extreme in *Pyongyang I*. Critic Matt Lipiatt has noted that *Pyongyang I* is "more Gursky than Gursky."⁷ Recent photographs, such as *Bahrain I* (2005) and *May Day V* (2006), also exemplify a tendency to create even larger-scale, higher-impact images that are clearly digitally manipulated.⁸

The nature of the temporality that is represented in Gursky's work also seems to correspond with Frederic Jameson's theories. According to Jameson, major cultural transformations, including globalization, shifts in labor and modes of production, and a proliferation of imagery, have led to an inability to conceive of time in a continual and ordered fashion. The subject is trapped in a perpetual present, no longer able to comprehend their place in the trajectory of history and unable to connect to a larger story. Without a sense of the past and of a concrete contemporary reality, it is impossible to represent the present moment. This sense of temporal disjunction causes an obsession with history and a tendency towards pastiche and nostalgia, as exemplified in the theatrics of the visually overwhelming Arirang Festival, which functions as a symbolic reminder of a history that is slipping away. The performance is a way of marking time, of situating the nation in relation to its history and to the larger story of the rise



of Communism. The Hollywoodization of the Festival, as well as Gursky's use of digital technology and the bold, slick appearance of the image, is evidence of the influence of Western capitalism and globalization that Jameson cites as the impetus for our culture's obsession with history.

Related to the spatialization of time is Jameson's concept of hyperspace, which he defines as "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and de-centered communicational network in

Andreas Gursky
Pyongyang I
2007
Chromogenic print, 307 x 215.5 cm
© 2008 Andreas Gursky/Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New York/
VG BILD-KUNST, Bonn

which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects.”⁹ Gursky’s work depicts the experience of the individual in the hyperspace that Jameson describes. The human figures in Gursky’s photographs, from stockbrokers (*Chicago Board of Trade*, 1999; *Tokyo Stock Exchange*, 1990) to participants in a May Day celebration (*May Day IV*, 2000), to the Pyongyang performers, are part of a vast sea of humanity. Generally, these figures are small and dispersed across the picture plane, and it is difficult, though not always impossible, to discern their features. They seem to occupy or act within their environment, rather than to influence it. In the case of *Pyongyang I*, the figures become a part of the landscape. In the perpetual present of hyperspace, the subjects are at a loss to situate themselves spatially as well as temporally.

Gursky’s work, which in some ways visually expresses Jameson’s theories about time, subjectivity, and space, also points to the individual and to the par-

dication of how to resist or differentiate oneself within the vast global network. However, *Pyongyang I* does succeed in picturing the tension between totality and particularity and between the historical past and the temporal vacuum of hyperspace. Hints of small, specific details allow us to imagine that the individual is not entirely subsumed by the overwhelming forces of globalization.

Like Gursky, Omer Fast is particularly interested in how media culture has impacted our understanding of time and subjectivity. While Gursky’s work seems to suggest that reality has taken on the look of the unreal, Fast’s film explores how media fictions interact with, and even becomes a part of, our conceptions of reality. For *Spielberg’s List* (2003), a 65-minute, two-channel color video installation, Fast visited Krakow, the setting of Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* (1993), which chronicles the story of Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist credited with saving 1,200 Jews during



ticular. At first glance, we comprehend the group as a collective whole, but upon closer inspection, we can make out individual features: a shoelace, a facial expression, clothing styles. Artist and theorist Zanny Begg has noted that groups in Gursky’s work correspond with the definition of multitude, as defined by Marxist philosopher Antonio Negri; that is, Gursky’s images picture a collective group comprised of individuals, each with their specific, particular qualities (though, as we see in *Pyongyang I*, these differences are less pronounced in some images than in others).¹⁰ It is true that Gursky’s work gives little in-

the Holocaust. Fast interviewed Polish extras from *Schindler’s List* and juxtaposed the resulting footage with shots of the set built for the film, located near the remains of Plaszow, a German labor camp. Memory and reality merge as they narrate their experience of acting out traumatic events, such as entering the gas chambers. For those who had lived through the Holocaust, the narration is not only a recounting of an acting job, but also a retelling of their own life experience. The split-screen format of *Spielberg’s List* allows for a juxtaposition of the interviews with shots of the labor camp, further eroding the boundaries

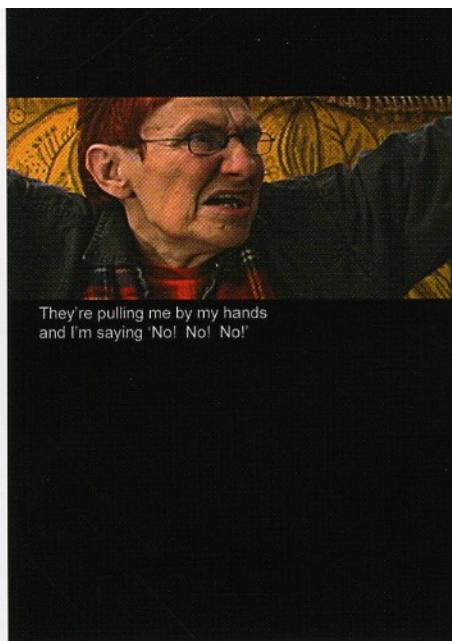
ABOVE & RIGHT: Omer Fast
Spielberg’s List, 2003
(Video stills) two-channel video,
65 minutes, color, sound
© Omer Fast, courtesy Postmaster’s
Gallery, New York

between reality and fiction.

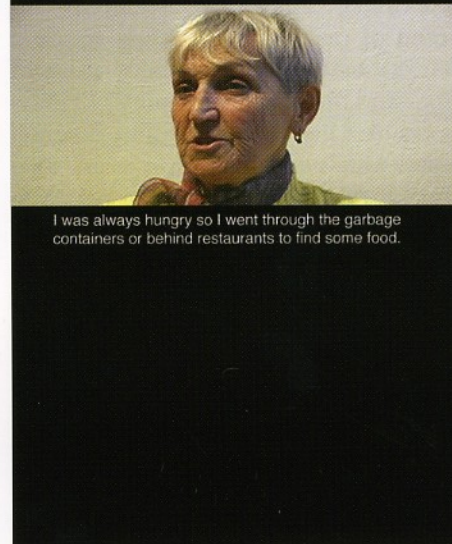
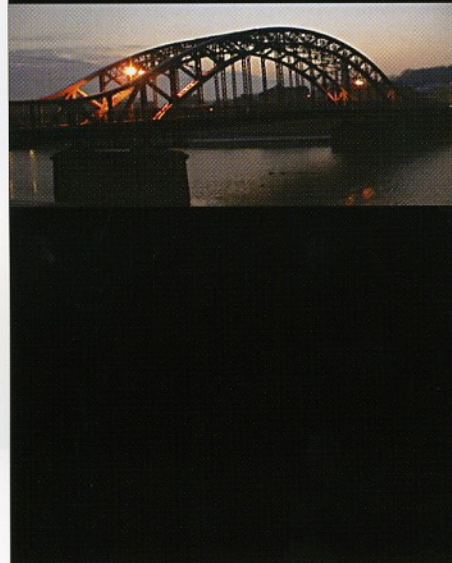
The explosion in popularity of historical fiction films and novels such as *Schindler's List* seems to confirm Jameson's claim that our age is fixated on the past. Like Gursky's work, Fast's film foregrounds the fact that in our own historical moment, our memories and ideas of history are constituted in and through representation. If we cannot formulate our own stories, we can look to Hollywood to supply us with a sense of history. Today, tourists visit the *Schindler's List* film set. Once used to tell a story about the past, the set itself has become a part of history.

Fast's focus on the experience of the actors shows the other side of the story that we do not see represented in Spielberg's film. While the seduction of Hollywood encourages us to become absorbed in the storyline, Fast's project reminds us that this is a fictionalized version of history. In *Schindler's List*, time is distilled in a dramatic and entertaining story. This is not to say that there is no value in Hollywood versions of history. Rather, Fast's work offers a counterpoint to *Schindler's List*. His project complicates and nuances our understanding of the past and the mechanisms that we use to record it. *Spielberg's List*, rather than supporting Jameson's notion that we have lost all sense of history, conveys the crucial role that stories play in the way that we remember and represent the historical events. As historian Hayden White has argued, history is a kind of performance, a form of representation that is structured by our sense of the imaginary.¹¹ White contends that narrative is a powerful tool for shaping and ordering the events of the past into meaningful form. It is through stories that we come to understand and vivify the past. The weaving together of different stories in *Spielberg's List*, from the Hollywood version to personal recollections, shows how history itself is comprised of myriad and overlapping narratives.

Like Gursky and Fast's projects, Allan Sekula's photographs from the film set, *Titanic*, raise questions about the way that Hollywood influences our sense of temporality. Sekula's work, as differentiated from that of Gursky and Fast, represents a concerted effort to resist and to counter the idea that time has become



They're pulling me by my hands
and I'm saying 'No! No! No!'



I was always hungry so I went through the garbage
containers or behind restaurants to find some food.



And this was actually water masquerading as slops -
and we're all throwing ourselves on this food.

spatialized, that history has ended, and that concrete reality no longer exists. His photographs exemplify a different take on the possibility (or impossibility) of creating our own stories and histories.

In 1997, Sekula traveled to Popotla, Mexico, to photograph the film set of *Titanic*, the Hollywood blockbuster directed by James Cameron. Popotla, just across the United States border from Baja, California, is a poor fishing village with a tradition of mussel gathering. Sekula's contempt for Twentieth Century Fox, the studio that financed *Titanic*, is evident in *TITANIC's wake*, published in *Art Journal* in 2001.¹² In his essay, Sekula paints the picture of a greedy movie studio, which carelessly causes harm to the ecology of the Popotla area and exploits the cheap labor of the local villagers. The studio hired villagers as extras to play the role of passengers thrown from the massive vessel when it collided with an iceberg in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. The photographs included with Sekula's essay, similar to the one illustrated here (p.19), highlight the hidden side of the film's production, the labor that is not represented on the Hollywood screen. Sekula's focus on the performance of work specific to the Popotla community lends a sense of particularity to his photographs that is absent from Gursky's and Fast's. Juxtaposing images of the film set with photographs of local mussel-gatherers, Sekula draws a contrast between the once-grandiose nature of the *Titanic* set and their quotidian work. The laborious process of mussel-gathering stands in contrast to the instantaneous nature of life in our post-industrial world, and signifies the passage, accumulation, and heaviness of time.

The visual strategy of juxtaposition Sekula uses in *TITANIC's wake* is crucial to what he calls his *critical realism*:

"I wanted to construct works from within concrete life situations, situations within which there was an overt or active clash of interests and representations. Any interest that I had in artifice and constructed dialogue was part of a search for a certain "realism," a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism."¹³



Above: Allan Sekula
 Titanic set and mussel gathers, Popotla,
 (diptych) From *Dead Letter Office*, 1997
 © Allan Sekula, courtesy of the
 Christopher Grimes Gallery

Sekula's images of workers and of an abandoned *Titanic* set exemplify his brand of realism in that they set up a contrast between the concrete reality of labor and the simulated reality of Hollywood. Art historian Benjamin Buchloh sees Sekula's critical realism as an "allegorical (re)construction of the possibility of understanding history in the age of electronic media."¹⁴ Buchloh notes that Sekula uses a variety of photographic styles, from documentary photojournalism to amateurish snapshot, in combination with written texts in order to reinforce the idea that images and text are never fixed in meaning. Memory can be recovered within a vast network of text and image that mirrors, but also seeks to reveal, the hidden relationships that structure global capitalism. Sekula works within the structures of contemporary existence in order to picture everyday actions and concrete realities.

TITANIC's wake, along with *Pyongyang I* and *Spielberg's List*, reveal important

aspects of how we conceive of and represent temporality in an age when our understanding of time, subjectivity, and history is ambivalent. The dialectics at play, the suggestions of totality and particularity, the real and the unreal, and the historical and the present, communicate this ambivalence. These three works demonstrate that a collective is formed by individuals, that the particularities of individual experience still exist, and that the past is still accessible. They show us that amidst the networks of information, the mountains of imagery, the overwhelming new technologies, is everyday life: specific, particular, and eminently real.



1 Lippiatt, Matt. "Andreas Gursky: *Pyongyang*," *Flash Art* 252 (May / June 2007).

2 Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991. My discussion of Jameson's theories and his concept of the spatialization of time are drawn mainly from this seminal publication.

3 Jameson elaborates on all points in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991.

4 See Ohlin, Alix, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," *Art Journal* 61 (Winter 2002): 22-35; Begg, Zanny, "Recasting Subjectivity: Globalisation and the Photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula," *Third Text* 19 (2005): 625 - 36; Jacobs, Steven, "Andreas Gursky: Photographer of the Generic City," *Exposure* 37 (2004): 25-33; and Galassi, Peter, *Andreas Gursky*, exh. cat., New York: Museum of Modern Art, Dist. by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001.

5 Ohlin, Alix. "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime."

6 Andreas Gursky, quoted in Katy Siegel and Alex Alberro, "The Big Picture: The Art of Andreas Gursky," *Artforum* 39, no. 5 (January 2001): 104-114.

7 Lippiatt, Matt. "Andreas Gursky: *Pyongyang*."

8 Gursky's use of the medium also raises interesting questions concerning the ontology of the photograph and its relationship to the real. Whether or not Gursky's visual strategies and use of digital technology allows for a more accurate way to depict contemporary reality is open to debate. For

more on opposing views of Gursky's work, see Katy Siegel and Alex Alberro, "The Big Picture: The Art of Andreas Gursky."

9 Jameson, *Postmodernism*. 44.

10 Begg, Zanny. "Recasting Subjectivity: Globalisation and the Photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula," *Third Text* 19 (2005): 625 - 36.

11 For more on White's theory of narrative, see White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

12 Sekula, Allan. "TITANIC's wake," *Art Journal* 60:2 (Summer 2001): 26 - 37. *TITANIC's wake* was first exhibited at the Centre Création Contemporaine, Tours, France (November 18 - March 4, 2001). Since then, Sekula has edited and reconfigured the project, which has been shown in its subsequent iterations in Los Angeles (Museum for Contemporary Art), Santa Monica (Christopher Grimes Gallery) and Lisbon (Centro Cultural Belém). This recycling and recontextualizing of photographs is characteristic of Sekula's brand of realism.

13 Sekula, Allan. *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 - 1983*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984.

14 Buchloh, Benjamin. "Allan Sekula: Photography between Discourse and Document," in *Fish Story*, rev. English ed. Düsseldorf: Richter, 2002, 199. Though Buchloh's words here are written specifically in reference to Sekula's *Fish Story*, they apply equally to *TITANIC's wake*.