

In the presence of absence: inside Candida Höfer's unpeopled public buildings

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The German artist's photographs have acquired a haunting resonance during the pandemic

Some 20 years ago, a friend and I got shut inside Hamburg's Kunsthalle. It was winter, late afternoon and dark. It simply closed on us as we were walking around. The lights went out and silence dropped like a shutter. It was thrilling. Just like that, we had gone from being visitors to trespassers. Errant ghosts. And the space also changed: it became provocative.

Those same unoccupied Hamburg galleries were photographed in the 1990s by Candida Höfer, the German contemporary artist enamoured with bare-but-beautiful chamber pieces. For half a century, Höfer has travelled the world creating inscrutable images of empty museums, libraries, cathedrals, grand cafés and theatres — works that evoke what I felt in Hamburg, something midway between a treat and a transgression.

Höfer delivers geometry in a modest palette, occasionally punctuated with a blood-red chair or a yellow wall — subtle abstractions of spaces untroubled by figures. In terms of composition, these pieces of statement architecture provide a single-minded focus on structural form. Doors and windows provide frames within frames; staircases deliver vertiginous drops; corridors and colonnades lead the eye. Ego doesn't come into the equation.

In a new show at the Museum of Photography in Berlin, Höfer's large-format works are presented "in dialogue" with architectural photographs from the collection of the city's art library. The exhibition ponders what rooms are when they are bereft of guests. Are they cautionary tales or invitations? Places of melancholia or expectation? Are they sinister, sedate or changeable? Or, perhaps, are they all of these things?

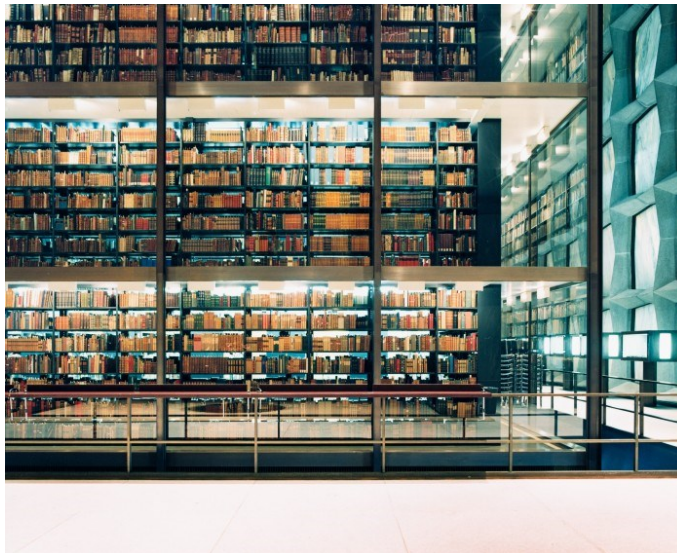
Certainly, the absence of the public neuters an institutional building. Through Höfer's lens, a wing of Berlin's Neues Museum becomes a vacant warehouse; a Moscow library is as glacial as an ice flow. Even with elaborate parquet and marble pillars, the agency of pomp is weakened. They are uniforms left on hangers. In one photograph, a grand stairway in Düsseldorf is reduced to little more than a doodle — the composition entirely white except for a squiggle (the handrail) spiralling downwards. In the home, however, emptiness implies something more personal. An empty home suggests a sadder story.



'Rossiskaya Gosudarstvennaya Biblioteka (Russian State Library) Moskwa II' 2017 © Candida Höfer, Köln/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

The pandemic cast all interiors in a new, sometimes disturbing, light. While houses and apartments were reconfigured to the demands of remote working — folded in on themselves in a domestic origami that pitched office equipment into kitchens and bedrooms — the citadels of commerce, learning and entertainment were drained of life. Opera houses, auditoriums, galleries and library stacks were all locked up.

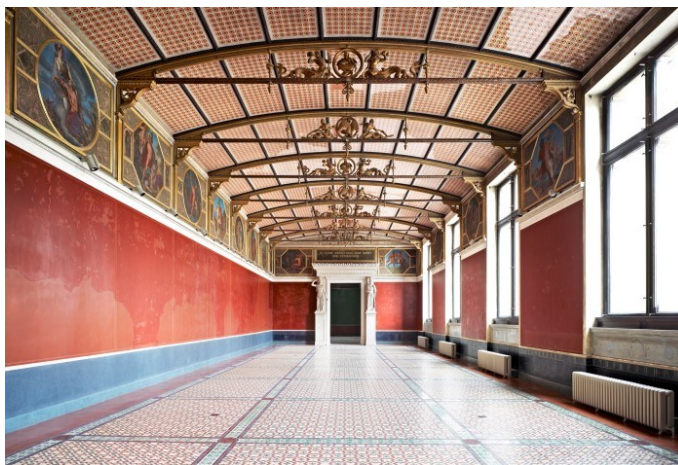
Overnight, these revered but redundant sites became quintessential Höfer subjects, yet they remained out of reach. “Ironically, they may have been empty, but I could not come and see them: health concerns, travel restrictions, organisational issues,” she explains. “So I sat by my window and watched the seasons go by.”



‘Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library New Haven Connecticut’ 2002 © Candida Höfer, Köln/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Quietude provides the subtext to much of Höfer's work. She can turn Yale reading rooms into a modern monastery. Many of her scenes are like sanctuaries. "If and when I have been in a room full of people recently, I have tried to get out," Höfer acknowledges. "I occasionally empty a room mentally if it asks for it, even rooms without people, emptying them from signposts, cordons, benches and other paraphernalia." There is often a large void in the centre foreground of her compositions.

Höfer can take comfort Highlight text in kindred spirits from art history. The 19th-century Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershoi produced canvases of still, near-monochrome, unoccupied rooms — painted in his own apartment in Copenhagen — in which he edited out not just people and furniture but door handles and hinges. In one, the primary focus of the work is a swirl of dust motes caught in the sunlight.



'Neues Museum, Berlin XL' 2009 © Candida Höfer, Köln/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

And, with enigmatic results, the Japanese film director Yasujiro Ozu spliced shots of sets devoid of characters into his mid-century classics *Tokyo Story* and *Late Autumn*. These cutaways of tatami floors and lonely tea services became known as “pillow shots”, a reference to “pillow words” — the stock phrases that set the mood in Japanese poetry. Similarly, Ozu’s moments of silent home comforts act like a visual tuning fork.

The empty room is of a piece with the spare aesthetic shared by Germany, Japan and Denmark — a thread running from the Japanomania of 19th-century Scandinavia to the glacial lines of the Bauhaus. For artists in other regions, however, the interior has often remained a signifier of its occupant’s status — the smug sitter portrayed surrounded by their stuff.



'Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven VI', 2003 © Candida Höfer, Köln/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

In the 1970s, Höfer studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy — home to the famed “Düsseldorf School” of German photographers attracted to blank spaces (Andreas Gursky is another alumnus). In the Berlin exhibition, her compositions appear alongside international examples of architectural vacuums, including fin-de-siècle prints of foyers and naves taken by Eugène Atget and Frederick H Evans. Höfer maintains that her photographs are fine art, rather than structural studies. The same can be said of her predecessors’ pictures.

Höfer’s shots of deserted lecture halls, refectories, ballrooms and palaces are less about stopping time than contemplating its constancy. While figures step out, Höfer’s voids — like Hammershoi’s dust and Ozu’s teapots — remain. A building without people considers the very nature of human existence. The empty interior makes spectres of us all.

‘Image and Space: Candida Höfer in Dialogue with the Photography Collection of the Kunstbibliothek’ is at the Museum of Photography, Berlin, from March 25 to August 28; [smb.museum](https://www.smb.museum/)