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## ***Interview with Thomas Ruff***

**Max Dax**

“As I’ve always said: bad images fall off the wall, and good ones stay there.”

Thomas Ruff (born in 1958 in the Black Forest) is one of Germany’s pre-eminent international artists working in the field of photography. From 1977 to 1985 he studied under Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf,<sup>1</sup> where he later taught photography for six years. While still a student, he began to produce “conceptual” series of photographs depicting domestic interiors and portraits of buildings. Shortly afterwards, he started to manipulate his photographs digitally, removing “intrusive” details and emphasizing elements that typified the “ideology and economy of the Federal Republic of Germany” (Ruff). More photographic series followed, and since 1999 Ruff has pushed the boundaries of the medium even further with his observations on the digital age, for example in the nudes – large-format soft-focus works, based on pornographic images downloaded from the internet, and the jpegs – “cold”, dispassionate large-scale versions of press photos also found online.

**Max Dax:** *Thomas Ruff, as an artist who worked for decades with analog equipment and techniques, how have you responded to the digital revolution?*

**Thomas Ruff:** My working methods haven’t substantially changed with the advent of digital technology. I’ve always tried to reflect the medium in my work. Therefore, if my current work reflects digital media, I don’t see that as a break with continuity. This is why I don’t view digital technology as a revolution, but as a tool, a new opportunity even. However, the new techniques introduced by digital technology are predominantly used to enhance images, to retouch them – whether we’re talking about music or photography, it’s all the same: everything is being enhanced and retouched.

**MD:** *Are you saying that digital technology is primarily concerned with superficiality, the surface of things?*

**TR:** Human beings are obviously attracted to beauty – and digital technology makes it much easier for individuals to create something that looks beautiful. Let’s be clear about this though: retouching has always existed in photography. However, digitized images are much simpler to retouch because of their pixelated structure. Nowadays, photographers and artists work in the same way as advertising art directors used to do: they change the order or position of elements they don’t like, or eliminate them altogether. Another aspect of the digital technology explosion is obviously the ease with which digital content can be disseminated – be this in news, film, music or, of course, images. In every case however, the “tactile” aspect is lost, which for me represents a loss of quality.

MD: *The profound changes brought about by the development of digital technology affect the entire chain of creative production – that is, the whole spectrum of artistic choices.*

TR: But has this influenced my artistic production? Let's analyse this in more depth. Photographers used to aim to take good negative images on celluloid film, develop them in the darkroom, and produce good prints, on Kodak, Fuji or Agfa paper. As far as the principle goes, the working method hasn't changed all that much in the world of digital photography. Images are increasingly being shot on digital equipment. But it doesn't make any difference, because what's produced is still a "negative," a digital file. The artist decides when to stop working on the negative – that is, when the photograph is considered to be a "good" one. Then they make a print from the file – on Kodak, Fuji, or Agfa paper. The print is framed and finally hung on the wall. What's new is the process of "postproduction": the manipulation of images before they become digital negatives.

MD: *Is this why the artist and viewer "see" in a different way? Has our gaze, our "way of seeing," changed?*

TR: I can only speak for photographers. In the past, color and sharpness were determined by the structure of the negative. Nowadays, it's fairly easy to manipulate these elements. Above all, digital technology allows you to modify color. Yesterday's dark room is today's computer screen. When I enlarge my images on-screen, they appear to be backlit. This is just an illusion, though, which creates the expectation that the final print will be as bright, sharp, and richly colored as it was on the screen.

MD: *Three of your photographic cycles thematize the pixelated structure of digital images: in nudes you digitally manipulated pornographic images pulled off the internet to the point where they seemed velvety smooth. In Substrat (Substratum) you transformed Manga cartoons into abstract forms, again through a radical softening process. But you went even further in the jpegs series, by digitally enlarging tiny photographs of catastrophic events – such as 9/11 – to reveal their pixelated structure. Works like these are only possible thanks to the success of digital technology.*

TR: That's right. I was only able to create those works because we now live in a digital age.

MD: *What do you find appealing about the new digital formats?*

TR: I'm a curious person, and I was interested in finding out why digital images are structured the way they are. It's certainly nothing to do with aesthetics: they needed something that was fast, compatible, and user-friendly to work on the internet. So they looked into ways of "compressing" files to achieve just that. The jpeg – just like the MP3 – is a purely technical solution that has nothing to do with aesthetics in the first instance: files are compressed to decrease their size, just as you might fold a sheet of A4 paper in order to send it, and unfold it at the other end to read it. The fact that jpegs possess characteristics that give them a specific "aesthetic" or "look" is a "collateral phenomenon" – a side effect. To me, these characteristics definitely have their own appeal. In this sense, my series of jpegs explores this collateral phenomenon, the aesthetics of an invention that has made it possible for images to be widely distributed via the internet.

MD: *When you zoom into an image's pixels, is what you see similar to the abstract, grainy effect obtained by the photographer in Michelangelo Antonioni's film Blow-Up (played by David Hemmings), when he attempts to produce increasingly large blow ups of sections of a photograph?*

TR: “Minimal” components exist in analog technology just as they do in digital technology. When viewed from a certain distance, my jpeg works look like sharp photographic images. But when viewed from close up, it’s clear that this is an illusion. The image is actually made up of thousands of pixels, and becomes unrecognizable. The closer you get, the less you can make out: it’s a phenomenon that also exists in the analog world, even in painting.

MD: ***During the six years when you taught at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, what did you say to your students about the advantages and disadvantages of digital technology?***

TR: I stopped teaching at the academy in 2006, so it’s right that you should refer to it in the past tense. The “class of Ruff” doesn’t exist any more. I gave up after teaching a generation and a half of students, because I’d become disillusioned. Before, I thought: they’re young and have other images in mind, and I can learn something from them, in terms of how to use new media too. And of course my own style, which can be defined as “investigative”, isn’t necessarily to every student’s taste. There are many different worlds of imagery that coexist on the same level, and that have the same right to exist. No one theory or methodology of creating art is more “correct” than another. What counts is that the students develop their own images. However – and this may be a side-effect of the digital revolution – the majority of students nowadays want, above all, to “create an impression”, to cause a stir, and they’re not particularly interested in developing their own world of images. I got the feeling that many of the students were taking less care of their work.

MD: ***What gave you this impression in Düsseldorf?***

TR: I would continually repeat to my students that they had to be aware of what they were doing at all times, that they must be analytical. Of course, I know from personal experience that being a young artist can be confusing, and the truth of the matter is that they often don’t think clearly enough to reflect carefully on what they’re doing. This is why I laid down my “second rule”, by which every photograph – without exception – must be printed and assessed in 18 24 cm format. But the idea was a failure. The students kept turning up with large-scale prints, wanting to impress me with huge images. They’d always choose the largest size of print that the printer or color copier could produce, as if the “largest” format were the “right” one. That mindset – that size equals quality – was impossible to change.

MD: ***Perhaps it’s a sign of the times. Doesn’t the internet, with its barrage of images, promote the development of critical thinking skills in order to decode and evaluate the content of what we’re accessing?***

TR: Actually, the mass media and the internet promote the notion that students who attend the academy will become famous, well-paid international artists. What’s more, the majority of students I taught didn’t think they needed to work hard for their images, which is obviously untrue. It’s clear that digital technology doesn’t liberate us from having to work at an image, either intellectually or physically – even if the images are “found.”

MD: ***As a famous photographer whose best-known works are based on “found” images, how do you explain to your young students the problems associated with “found” images? What’s the difference between your approach and that of your students?***

TR: I use “found” images whenever I’m unable to take the photographs myself, whether it’s because I wasn’t in situ at the time, or simply because I didn’t have the right equipment for the job – as for example in my *Sterne (Stars)* series, when I had to use shots of the night sky taken from an

observatory in Chile. In these cases, the only problem is copyright, and it's a good idea to protect yourself with a legal contract.

**MD: *In other words, you only “collect” images when you’ve exhausted your own resources, but your students “collect” them a bit randomly?***

TR: I “collect” images too. But when I review them I reject ninety-nine per cent of the material. If I didn't, I'd face the same problems that dogged my students. At the academy exams there were students who couldn't even tell me which images worked and which didn't. They couldn't explain to me what they were trying to say with all of their images. Quite simply, they were incapable of “handling” such a large amount of material. A large amount of material isn't a justification in itself. Thinking purely in terms of quantity is symptomatic of the digital age. Digital images are free to take, produce, save, download. So people take and collect them in their millions. In this respect, the students of my generation had it better. Back then, I worked with a manual plate camera. Every photograph cost ten German Marks, so I had to think very carefully about what I was photographing before pressing the shutter – I had to have a “mental image” of the shot before I took it. I couldn't afford to “throw away” a thousand marks just to see if I'd taken something worthwhile. I'm not saying that the digital explosion has devalued all images, but there is a lot of mediocre digital “trash” out there. Photographs are being produced with less care, with no clear intention, no objective, with less desire for excellence.

**MD: *Is this carelessness a direct consequence of the possibilities offered by digital technology?***

TR: As a student, I believed that a work of art should be unique and autonomous. In this sense, a limited-edition series comprising a set number of photographs can also be an autonomous work of art. Nowadays I have to ask myself if it's a “generational” thing: perhaps the criteria that I, Thomas Ruff, apply to art are no longer valid for the younger generation. Perhaps the stances I take are now considered outmoded. Nowadays, I often hear people say that the photographs released when a series “closes” are all of equal value and interest: all you have to do is collect a sufficient number of photographs and they'll provide you with a good impression of the world. But whereas these children of the digital revolution believe that they're seeing a good impression of the world, I can only see mediocre digital trash.

**MD: *In the jpegs series you reflect on the iconographic quality of the digital images flooding the media. Your themes are photographs of disasters that you found on the internet.***

TR: I own a computer, so it was only a matter of time before I discovered the world of digital images. The first photographs that interested me were the horrifyingly beautiful images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and these are what inspired me to create my series. I decided to make a “virtual” trip around the world – and collect horrifyingly beautiful images of destruction and disasters from all four corners of the globe. In terms of content, the jpegs series consists of images that have been seared into the collective memory, the “collective archive”: the collapse of the Twin Towers, the burning oil fields of Kuwait, the bombing of Baghdad. All of those images captured our imaginations and have entered the collective consciousness. I've always tried to work with images of the world that are unforgettable.

**MD: *Would you say that this is a naturalistic approach?***

TR: Yes, in a manner of speaking.

MD: ***Isn't the notion of artists taking a moral stance outdated now?***

TR: Artists aren't here to entertain, but to open people's eyes, to contextualize, to make people think. I really can't see anything outdated about that.

MD: ***Does digital reality automatically lead to an inflation of quality? Is the sense of morality lost?***

TR: Digitalization reinforces Warhol's statement that "Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes," because it encourages everyone to think that the whole world is waiting for their book, their photographs, their music composed in their own garage. Beuys' saying that "Everyone is an artist" is no longer true; rather, "Everyone wants to be a famous artist." Or a famous musician. Or a supermodel. And everything is fast-tracked by the world wide web. Incidentally, the first thing my students did was to set up the website [www.ruffklasse.de](http://www.ruffklasse.de) ["class of Ruff"], so that they could post their photographs online and gain instant visibility.

MD: ***Did it bother you that your students pushed your name so aggressively? After all, you were once a member of the "class of Becher" and benefitted from being associated with their name.***

TR: When I was a student the "class of Becher" didn't exist: or rather, there were the classes of Becher, Richter, Uecker, Rinke, Schwegler and all the other teachers at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. The "class of Becher" was a term coined by art historians who evidently couldn't find a better way of describing the large-format Düsseldorf style. In any case, I couldn't even tell you who made whom famous (or well known): did the Bechers make us famous, or was it the other way round? My students and I held a couple of exhibitions as the "class of Ruff," but it was a larger group. And personally, I couldn't stand the fact that some of the students printed "Ruff's pupil" – along with their names in small type – on the invitation cards.

MD: ***What are your new works about?***

TR: The *cycles* (*cycles*) are inkjet prints of three-dimensional curves on canvas. They're no longer photographs, but the product of a 3-D program called Cinema 4D, which is professionally used in the fields of computer-animated games, automobile design and architectural planning. I use the application to create beautiful mathematical curves, which I then flow in with each other – abstract patterns recalling 1970s computer graphics.

MD: ***In cycles you move away from photography.***

TR: I've always had to develop appropriate techniques to illustrate my different figurative ideas. And if today's images require a technique that has nothing to do with photography ... that's fine. I wanted to do what children do intuitively – that is, to "doodle", "imitate digitally". You can't paint these types of curves. To create something that precise you need mathematical equations, formulae and varying coordinates. By the end of the process I have a kind of digital "ball of wool" on my screen, which I can zoom in and out of and view from every conceivable angle. If I find a view that's interesting, then I've found my image. You could say that I use the software for the opposite purpose to which it was intended (as a professional tool for industrial applications), in the sense that I use it to build something non-functional.

MD: ***How do you avoid creating something that's "second-rate" or "banal"?***

TR: Obviously through the quality of abstraction, through the quality of the image, which has always been the opposite of the second-rate or banal. As I've always said: bad images fall off the wall, and good ones stay there.

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<sup>1</sup> The course was held by Bernd Becher (editor's note).