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That remains to be seen. Many things are conceivable that have little basis in reality¹

Stephan Dillemath

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Some people say that it is the medium that provides the most cogent evidence, that it has the most objectivity and truth: the camera never lies.

Yes, photography swings back and forth between those two poles and it always acts as if it were “normal”.

But actually it's the same thing. The fact that photographs look so genuine makes “naive” people think that they are a piece of themselves or that they are seeing double. You could go even further and say that photographs can give people a soul. Where would all the stars and models be without photography? But you also mentioned objectivity ...

What is realism?

Letting the machine do the work it would do anyway. If things are the way they are, why should I try to make them look different? Are they really? Since the Renaissance, it has been a sign of social status to have your portrait painted. The pose, clothing, jewelry, and the objects in the painting were supposed to illustrate the sitter's social standing, throughout the whole of art history ... up to ... Lovis Corinth maybe. In his case, I sometimes wonder whether he wanted to say something about his sitter, or whether he was carried away by his brushstrokes. I don't give viewers the chance to draw conclusions about the lives of the people I portray anymore.

And that annoys viewers?

I don't know what they want to find out about the sitter whose face they see in front of them. Do they want to know the person's name or address or what they do for a living, or do they want to know something about their inner lives? What good would that do?

Curiosity, gossip, admiration – identification.

Sometimes I think it's outrageous the way people treat my portraits. They think you can just stand in front of them and make up a theory.

But at least you can say that the overall impression of your portraits is like a magnification – politician and star, propaganda and advertising, these photographs are beautified, touched up, but in your work there's also a kind of what you might call “dermatological realism”.

Chalk one up for you.

When you're with other people, there's a barrier, a kind of embarrassment or reticence that keeps you from coming up close to them and looking in their ears. But when you have a photograph, you can get as close as you want and peer at every millimeter. Because the person has been “thingified”... instead of facing the real person, you only have the picture and so you lose your inhibitions; it's fun to look, and you can look long and hard.

But a lot of people don't want to see a so-called unbeautified picture, so they complain: is the person ugly, or is it the art that's ugly? Do you have to eliminate the pimples just because you're a photographer?

Many people seem to treat the pictures like the subjects they depict and don't realize that it's only a picture, so they say: he/it appeals to me – or doesn't.

If viewers want to know something about the subjects, they can only find out through their own projections, which may range from categorical rejection to Lavater.² Or they start thinking about the picture itself.

That's beautifully put!

And you think there's no narrative at all, or only in the face?

You once said that people who still have qualms about photography as an art are a dying breed. In other words, art trickled down to photography and the photographer had to fight for artistic licence without giving up his role as a photographer. In the meantime, I'd say the situation has reversed itself and the photographer ...

... is the true artist?

... is just another more interesting image of the artist; in other words, not one that has to rely on nineteenth-century clichés but rather one that ...

The self-made man.

No, one that couldn't care less about defining what makes an artist.

Photography, that's a so-called decent profession and it makes things much easier when you don't have to say you're an artist; you're camouflaged.

Yes, and then the "true" artists come along and claim that they've chosen the hard way, namely "real" art.

The idea of art as a job is idiotic anyway. Anybody can be an artist regardless of his profession.

But you want photography too. As a photographer, are you like the painter who turns the conditions of painting into the subject matter of his art?

Like a small Richter of photography? A photograph always looks like a photograph, because it is a photograph.

What about the recent silkscreen prints?

If the original is printed, then what follows should be printed too. But you were talking about something else before, namely that you don't want to produce a blurred photograph but rather a grid, so that lack of clarity makes things sharper. You want the pictures to be more textured.

It's probably vanity that keeps me from making blurred pictures, and besides, as a photographer it's interesting not to deliver photographs, for once.

Okay, but then I see these pictures on the wall and heads in them, strange faces, people's identities in each other, over each other. I find it completely bewildering. I don't even know what to ask. I don't even know what I want.

A glass of beer?

Let's try it.

I see the pictures here lined up with your older work but you not only mix up the portraits but also your approach to the different series. Scrambling? ...

Lost the thread?

We were talking about using a mechanical process to make a picture, about feeling as if you belong

to a special class that has more of a claim to objectivity because of the gear involved. The way you tackle formal problems, size, frame, etc. is part of that as well.

You don't necessarily have to seek out composition; it can also come to you.

Thanks for the stock phrase! But why is this behavior necessary?

Because I don't want to work harder than I have to and because I actually work inartistically. If I have a DIN format why not stick to it instead of interfering and creatively lopping off a centimeter? The proportions of the portraits are 3:4, which corresponds to the size of the negatives. I just use the same format. If there's a street, I use it; I don't drive through the meadow.

But what about the house series in which trees and even entire stories were wiped out.

Yes, making things disappear was a new experience; on the other hand, it made the pictures clearer.

You always emphasize that your decisions are "normal," as simple as possible. Are your portraits so obviously portraits precisely because they aren't portraits?

They're so obviously portraits, as you say, because I play fast and loose with the traditional image of the genre. The picture is as important as its subject, not only because it depicts the subject but also because it embodies a certain type or standard of photography.

Is that pure photography?

Basically, yes.

Aha, the autonomy of the work of art! You say that's nothing but a photograph and that your photographs are about photography and nothing else?

I used to say that the picture has an autonomous existence, apart from what it represents, or that it acquires a life of its own. Maybe when I said that, I meant thinking about how you make pictures, but the reality is still there anyway because there really was someone sitting in front of the camera when the picture was taken. So now, do we have autonomy?

You might say that I'm a good imitator.

Emotional values, which you imitate, thereby eliminating their content?

To begin with, they're simple, formal imitations so that anybody can get the message. In the portraits I was imitating passport photos, in the houses it was these 1950s postcards of new architecture photographed twenty years later, in the stars I was more or less copying the atlas. I did the newspaper photos 2:1, and in the "green" ones I was imitating the "scene of the crime."

And now?

Mug-shots.

Which means the whole business does not go beyond Sherrie Levine or Sturtevant?

So to speak.

Mr Ruff, thank you for joining us today.

But what Lavater wrote is absurd?

Yes, because he insists that if a face has certain properties, then ...

When we talk about the quality of expression, in painting let's say, and there's a thin rising diagonal that energetically breaks off to the right and then descends in a firm perpendicular, when you describe or see that, then you're certainly dealing with the quality of expression.

Like everything else on earth.

When he writes, "the tip of the nose betrays mild feelings, it is pleasurably rounded, the nostrils of appealing indolence and yet showing sensual, forceful tension," you could say that about a line too. "The mouth is less delicate." Well "less delicate" could describe a brushstroke as well. "The tendency to shift from appealing indolence to lustful excitement, which lies in the deeply indented

transition from nostril to cheek, is even stronger around the lips. The lower lip has a rather voluptuous fullness ...” So you find this absurd?

He’s basically descriptive there; he has an odd vocabulary, but he hasn’t drawn any conclusions yet. But listen to this: “In Berthold Schwarz, empathic forces that arouse our sympathy have been destroyed and his association with primal forces is corroded by the thirst for power and knowledge. Whether Berthold Schwarz really looked like this ...”

Aha.

“... and whether he was really the inventor of gunpowder – whatever the case, such an unpleasantly cold and cunning countenance is well matched with this banal invention ...” Now he’s really getting nasty; his interpretation is no longer restricted to physiognomy but is based on what he knows about the person. And he’s supposedly conducting a scientific study, with the distinctions that he makes, but then he goes on to interpret single parts and ends up with the picture he wants to see.

His contemporaries criticized him for the same reason. That’s why he didn’t have a chance at the time – but he’s still quoted today to illustrate peculiar racial theories or the “foundations of human knowledge” or “characterology”.

Are you interested in giving up your subjective gaze, in an objective representation of the other, the other’s features, and then canceling them out, the other, your own? What do you find so exciting about this?

The main problem is the subjective impression that I have when I face someone else. That’s the trouble with portraits. You’re living your life and then you get to know people, you like some more than others, and these emotions surface when you look at pictures that depict a person. In other words, these sensations that you have regarding others are the same when you’re faced with a “dead” picture. I don’t know if you’d call that a mix-up or correct behavior. You probably project your own life experience into the picture.

So, even when it’s ostensibly an “objective” photograph, the faces still convey a variety of traits?

There’s another reaction, too; some people feel sorry for the subjects.

Okay, but if you lay claim to a certain objectivity, then why do you work with such “romantic” images: passionate youth, houses, stars, pictures taken at night?

If you think in terms of projected surfaces, then the object has nothing to do with it anymore. The reaction to the star pictures is similar to the effect the portraits have. When people look at them, they mix them up with the real thing, holidays in Majorca with beautiful star-studded skies – or the houses, they look at the curtains and try to figure out what sort of people live behind them. “It must be possible to walk around and see it from the back. They’re stage sets ... The doors are open. But when you walk in, it dawns on you, and besides, the people are gone. It was never there! They deceived me, they just pretended.” I copied that from Bernward Vesper’s *Die Reise (The Journey)*. When you observe your own perceptions, you get a clearer idea of the picture and its impact but you don’t go so far as to say that’s what you intended.

There are always misunderstandings. If I wear my jogging outfit to work, my colleagues might think: “He’s not trying to tell us that he has free time but something we’ve always suspected, namely, that when you’re wearing your jogging outfit, you go off and buy a beer, that wanting to show that you have free time is wrong and that you can also go to work in your jogging suit.” So why can’t you go up and say, “Aha, big photograph, big head, take the picture as a picture” and say, “Thank you, Mr Ruff, well done”?

They get the message, go home, don’t come back again, and Ruff can pack up. But people still don’t know exactly what they’re facing, so does that mean the same projecting game all over again?

So you're making huge photographs again, playing the objective Frankenstein, but can you really be unbiased and neutral when you look at the results? Or is it Lavater's turn?

The "other portraits" look so funny because two faces that really exist have been combined, and perverse because that kind of evolution and mutation would never happen in reality. But if someone says, "That's Frankenstein, that's the creation of new human being," or that it's more like the schizophrenia of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde, that's not my business.

Actually I've never seen a real schizophrenic but only illustrations in funny books lying around in postwar living rooms and your pictures remind me of them. Maybe this impression is evoked because the contours are blurred. You could have avoided that by using a computer, couldn't you?

I didn't want to; everybody's fiddling around with computers these days and it's pretty easy to get perfect results, so I wanted to take a more old-fashioned approach and see how you can produce mixtures like that using the conventional means of photography.

The things look to me like 1960s visions of the future, the way scientists might have imagined man-made people in those days, because the vision depends on the technology available at that point.

If the picture is made with state-of-the-art technology, there's no way the viewer is going to be able to see through the deception; he just runs headlong into the trap.

That's the whole point of manipulating the image. Pictures are manipulated in order to manipulate people. I want it to be visible this time.

Counter-manipulation?

Or is it just an act of enlightenment?

In contrast, the 3-Ds show the region you grew up in. Personal, sentimental stuff? No, the exact opposite. Someone told me I was now the official artist of the state, that I was representing Germany. So I wanted to show Biennale visitors a unique German landscape, the Black Forest, or at least its depths. The rest is more private.

I thought it was a gentle kick in the shin ... The moment Ruff drifts off into the classical world, the most idiotic idea ever invented for photography comes popping up out of the classical bag of tricks; namely, wanting to picture things three-dimensionally.

You have two flat photographs and if you look at them properly you see an extra dimension. But your eyes don't do the work, it happens in the brain. It seems to me that if readers haven't noticed by now that everything they've just read is a product of the imagination, then ...

That was easy. What's next?

(Thomas Ruff. *Andere Porträts + 3D*, Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1995, pp. 15-21)

¹ Dr. Spielvogel in Philip Roth's novel, *My Life as a Man*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1974, p. 166.

² In 1775 Lavater wrote (with Goethe's help) *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis* (*Physiognomic Fragments for Conveying Knowledge of Human Nature*), in which he expounds his theory that inherited, mental traits can be deduced from physical features and the shape of the skull.