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Interview with Thomas Ruff. Shoot management

Isabelle Graw

“My photographs oscillate between ‘absolute’ portraits and artificial arrangements. An object shot pragmatically can flip itself into an abstract painting with chromatic fields.”

The following conversation with Thomas Ruff illustrates the gap between art criticism and artistic practice. Often, the intentions and ideas ascribed to the artist by the critic have nothing to do with the artist’s real motivations, which are often (and purposefully) quite practical. Any attempt to forcibly assign artistic or critical intentions to a particular context provokes a perplexing reaction, for example when the artist says: “The reasoning behind my work can’t be articulated, but is nonetheless evident.” This refusal to accept intentions linked to, or imposed by, art theory is not just characteristic of Thomas Ruff. To explore the question in depth, we have interviewed other Düsseldorf artists – although the city in which they live and work is not a determining factor. We are more interested in discovering whether artists who work in a similar way, think in a similar way.

Isabelle Graw: ***In your Porträts (Portraits) you limit the viewpoint to a particular segment of the population, which you photograph systematically, following the same rules each time. Is your photography intended to be a study?***

Thomas Ruff: I’m not interested in conducting a study. The study aspect may have been a by-product, in retrospect, in that something appears to have been “studied”. My original intention was simply to produce a collection of photographs.

IG: ***The people you photograph belong to a particular age group – yours – and come from a particular environment – yours. The houses, too, are not random houses, but housing complexes and industrial buildings dating from a particular period. Your choices automatically call to mind a study.***

TR: As I said, the study is a secondary, collateral result – it wasn’t my intention. I didn’t choose the subjects for the *Häuser (Houses)* and *Portraits* based on a particular theory. My choices were made after chance encounters or the chance discovery of particular buildings. Now that I’ve produced around forty portraits, there are times when I obviously feel a bit like a scientist who has been repeating the same experiment for years with different parameters. But the conditions of the experiment are always the same – the only things that change are the people, the ambiance and the procedures of the session.

IG: ***There’s tension between the subject, who wants to be (re)presented in an appropriate way, and your idea of what makes a good photograph. In the Portraits it’s “Ruff’s way” that wins out – each person becomes one of “Ruff’s people”, and the question of whether they’re represented appropriately appears to vanish.***

TR: That's right. Nowadays I don't think that it's possible to make portraits in the traditional sense, to "represent a character." Or I don't feel like doing it at any rate. This is why I imitate portraits. Nonetheless, there's a sufficient dose of "reality" in my photographs. There was always something belonging to the real world in front of the lens: a person, with their eyes, ears, mouth, nose, shirt, hairstyle. My photographs oscillate between "absolute" portraits and artificial arrangements. An object shot pragmatically can flip itself into an abstract painting with chromatic fields.

IG: *Why do you ask your subjects to look serious and keep their mouths shut? On what artistic level does this choice function?*

TR: I want my subjects to appear normal, with facial expressions that are as normal as possible, so that the resulting photograph is "normal". Each session is a bit like a game. I'll say, for example: "Hold your head up higher, don't smile, mouth shut," and they'll do it. At the same time, I try to respect the person in the sense that I don't make them look ridiculous.

IG: *There's a fundamental difference between your photography and the documentary photography tradition with which you're associated as a past student of the so-called "Becher school". Documentary photographers want to investigate the truth and relegate their authorial presence to the background, while you express yourself as the author and take artificial photographs that, although based on truth, have little or nothing to do with it.*

TR: The "Becher School" and the school of documentary photography in general believe in representation – in the immediate, direct image. When a documentary photographer photographs a house, they're certain of having photographed a house. I don't believe in representation, but in the image, and I can't say that I'm objective. Every representation equals a subjective intervention in reality. It's the degree, the intensity of the intervention that may vary.

IG: *Why did you enhance, retouch, two of your Häuser photographs?*

TR: For reasons relating to both form and content: for example, there was a tree in front of the house that spoiled the image, an open skylight, which I closed, a road sign; and I had to "cut" two floors from the adjacent building in order to make the main building stand out more. That intervention enabled me to make a better, cleaner photograph.

IG: *Do you use "enhancement" techniques for aesthetic purposes only? Or are you also interested in drawing attention to the poor state of the buildings?*

TR: The buildings are in a "critical" condition. By photographing houses in a state of deterioration, I'm also demonstrating that the utopian ideals of 1970s architecture have failed. But I don't intend to communicate a particular content. I want to "shoot", "photograph". I'm not in the least interested in social photography, and I don't believe that the photographs should communicate my personal opinions on those buildings: the buildings speak for themselves.

IG: *Yet there is a documentary aspect to your photography. You give your models the chance to represent themselves: they can choose the background color, their clothes, their hairstyles. The result is a "self-portrait with limits", a document on the self-(re)presentation of the person in the portrait.*

TR: You could also see it in these terms. If I let the models choose their clothes or hairstyles, it's actually more to do with my own shortcomings ... I'm not capable of telling a person how to style their hair, whether they should wear a green jacket or whether the background should be yellow. So I let the model decide.

IG: *The large-format print is also the antithesis of documentary photography. It bears no relation to the real dimensions of a person, and is therefore not an authentic, but an artificial representation. Why did you choose the large format?*

TR: In the mid-1980s, photographs began to compete with paintings, and museums and galleries continued to increase in size. Inside, conventional photographs looked like postage stamps, while painters could simply build themselves another wooden frame. The first large-scale photographs were merely enlargements with no autonomy of their own. Then people realized that a proper large-scale photograph is more than a simple 18 24 “blow-up” copy. Large-format photography was then able to develop as a medium in its own right.

IG: *Can the choice of large-format also be equated to a “democratic impulse”, aimed at making people who are “small”, normal, or not famous (in any case) look “big”?*

TR: I have to agree. My friends are more important to me than any president.

IG: *You produce limited editions. Is this to give collectors a sense of exclusivity, in spite of the fact that photography precludes this exclusivity since it can be reproduced to infinity? Why are you so keen on producing limited editions?*

TR: Because they’re quite convenient. When I produce a limited edition, I can consider a job done. No-one can come to me years later and ask me for a photograph that I don’t want to deal with. Apart from this, limited editions obviously sell faster than unlimited ones. A small limited-edition run also increases the price of the works.

IG: *You look at men and women in the same way – this is clear from the fact that your women don’t appear to feel exposed to the male gaze. The impulse to “appear” seems to be lacking; the women in your photographs seem relaxed.*

TR: Everyone wants to look good. It’s a problem for both women and men. Both sexes want to “appear” in the same way. But I don’t give them enough room to “appear”. It happens sometimes, of course, but in those cases I immediately reject the photographs. It’s truly awful when a woman winks at you in the photograph. Aside from this, I look at men and women in the same way because when I work, I have to concentrate so hard that I don’t have time to “look” in a particular way. I’m so involved in setting up the equipment that this sort of thing doesn’t even cross my mind.

(*Artis*, No. 41, Bern, October 1989, pp. 55-58)