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In the Future there will be no Past: Notes on the Work of Thomas Ruff

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“In reducing himself to almost nothing Ruff confronts our present world frontally. No one else, it seems, makes art that is so obviously of our times.”

“Sex times technology equals the future,”¹ J.G. Ballard famously claimed long ago (and continues to do so). Would Thomas Ruff agree? His *nudes* are not exactly filled with futuristic hope, but they can probably be seen as examples of work that confronts the ever-intensifying incursions of new technological imaginary, which, in Benjamin Buchloh’s words, “enters and expands into every recess of our conscious and unconscious life.”² Are all recent ideas of new forms of subjectivity emerging through interaction with new technologies – those inspired by Gilles Deleuze, – just hypocritical myths concealing the fact that all emancipatory spaces are being rapidly eradicated by an increasingly merciless global spectacle machine inhabited by ruthless entrepreneurs on the one hand and phlegmatic consumers on the other; i.e., solely by profoundly mutilated subjects? Maybe this is the only thing we have left.

When forms of communication grow old, they become an index of an understanding of a world lost to us, says artist Stan Douglas in response to the question of the role of outdated technologies in his work.³ So many artists today seem interested in the very notion of the outmoded. The chief theorist of obsolescence, Walter Benjamin, had already spelled out most of the key motifs in the 1930s. The emergence of new technology always gives rise to new artistic and political hopes that tend to fade rather quickly. It is not until a technological device is “eclipsed by its obsolescence” that something happens: its “armoring” breaks down and it “releases the memory of its original promise.”⁴ This *Hoffnung im Vergangenen* (hope in the past) has been analyzed by Peter Szondi as the temporal figure that characterizes Benjamin’s thinking on the whole. It is not just a question of ruins and outmoded technologies but, ultimately, of the very structure of history itself: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption.”⁵

¹ See, for instance in H. U. Obrist, *Formulas for Now*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2008.

² B. Buchloh, “Our Own Private Modernism,” in *Artforum*, Vol. XXXVIII, no. 6, New York, February 2000, p. 201.

³ S. Watson, D. Thater, C. J. Clover, *Stan Douglas*, Phaidon Press, London, 1998, p. 9.

⁴ P. Szondi, “Hoffnung im Vergangenen. Über Walter Benjamin,” in *Satz und Gegensatz*, Insel-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1964, pp. 79-97.

⁵ W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essay and Reflections*, ed. by H. Arendt, trans. by H. Zohn, Schocken, New York, 1988, p. 245.

Totally devoid of the kind of optimism typical of most industrial photography, Bernd and Hilla Becher's work could perhaps be linked to the interest in the obsolete artifacts that one associates with the Surrealists. Benjamin wrote of the revolutionary energies that the Surrealists detected in decrepit iron constructions, old factories, early photographs, and generally in things that were slowly vanishing into oblivion. No doubt, Benjamin's own unfinished *Das Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project)*, begun 1927) should be seen in this light. What is the significance of obsolescence in the work of the Bechers? They were hardly in search of the moments of "profane enlightenment" that the Surrealist poets. They talk of a fight against time and of saving a world that is sinking into oblivion. To a certain extent, this is true not only of the objects that the Bechers depict but also of the methods of representation and of the medium itself. Indeed, a real grasp of the project's significance must include consideration of the obsolescence of photography itself. With the rise of the digital image and the new possibilities of manipulation, the very notion of the archive as the honored appliance for systems of certainty and veracity is rapidly being renegotiated.

The Bechers have been drawn primarily to the classic industrial landscapes of Germany, France, Belgium, England, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the US. After the collapse of Communism and the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, their work began to incorporate the countries of Eastern Europe, especially those that were allied with the USSR in the Warsaw Pact, which was established in 1955 and dissolved in 1991. The search for new variations of blast furnaces, grain elevators, and limekilns continued until the very end. Asked some years ago by a German critic whether they would hop on a plane to Korea if they heard about an industrial edifice that they had yet to photograph, Hilla answered, "I would!," but Bernd added, "Hilla was in Siberia ... There weren't any variations there that would contribute a great deal to the whole, let's say, on the subject of blast furnaces. We already have enough of them."⁶ So it may be that the Bechers' mapping project had reached an end in several senses, and the encyclopedia of a past universe of anonymous architecture, seemingly functional but full of visual enigmas, had come to a conclusion – thus making the moment of the archive's completion coincide with a moment that marks the photographic medium's most severe transformation.

How is one to understand the Bechers in our post-medium condition? The question is a pertinent one, given that more than a quarter of a century ago the artists gave rise to a generation of photographers who successfully challenged the hegemony of painting in the German art world. "The success of the Düsseldorf photographers has to do with the precision with which we use our medium," says Ruff, perhaps the most experimental and courageous of their students.⁷ Linking their approach not only to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* but also to Gerhard Richter's critical exploration of painting, Ruff describes his approach to photography and that of his colleagues as a kind of investigation into the medium's specific parameters: "We explored photography itself without passing beyond it." In her programmatic 1999 essay "Reinventing the Medium," Rosalind Krauss includes the Bechers in a group of Conceptual artists, such as Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Douglas Huebler, who used the photographic image as an element in a hybrid practice also involving text.⁸ Photography's structural dependence on a caption makes it heterogeneous from the outset, she argues, and the medium has therefore functioned as the major tool with which to conduct an inquiry into art, without ever descending into specificity.

⁶ U. E. Ziegler, "The Bechers' Industrial Lexicon," in *Art in America*, no. 6, New York, June 2002, p. 140.

⁷ "Thomas Ruff talks to Daniel Birnbaum," in *Artforum*, Vol. XLI, no. 8, New York, April 2003, p. 218.

⁸ R. Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Chicago, Winter 1999, pp. 289-305.

The Bechers are no Douglas Huebler; a typical caption reads “Siegen-Eiserfeld, D 1972” or “Longwy-Senelle, F 1986.” While this is not an awful lot of text, I suppose one might see the whole encyclopedic oeuvre as an example of photo-Conceptualism that is somehow beyond medium; yet the single image or group of images, all black and white and modest in size, look a lot like classical photography to me. The Bechers teeter on some kind of critical edge, producing photographs in a media landscape that has long deemed their medium outmoded. Their students have proceeded from the modest dimensions of their teachers’ work and have begun to integrate techniques of printing and manipulation step-by-step. There is no doubt that the Bechers have successfully bequeathed a “way of seeing”, as they phrased their approach in the late 1960s, to a generation of artists who now enjoy world renown. The additional steps taken by these younger artists make it even more pertinent to define the unique position that their teachers have occupied for almost half a century, a position that depends on seeing photography as a medium. That obsolescence is a productive force in their work seems clear. A large Bechers exhibition can be as grandiose and mesmerizing as a piece of serial music – cold and detached but still exuding a strange melancholy. This work speaks in the past tense: the industrial world that the Bechers depict belongs to the past, as does the technique they employ. This *was* photography.

The deployment of obsolete devices is one method to evade the reductive force of the culture industry and, in Krauss’ view, a way to get a brief glimpse of an exterior side to the totality of technological space. One can establish this detour through past means of communication in a number of artists’ work today, and it would be easy to produce an extensive list of artists for whom this is a privileged approach. But in the end this might seem a too markedly nostalgic mode of operation – artistically attractive, even seductive, but ultimately incapable of anything but the reproduction of habitual forms of subjectivity, and, hence, fruitless. Are there other options, alternative approaches that invest in the future rather than in futuristic visions that already belong to the past, i.e., in anticipation rather than in intricate forms of recollection? Let us for a moment try to imagine new forms of affirmation of technological space, instead of the well-known yearning to escape into a sphere outside technology via obsolete hopes of a future that never arrived. What forms of subjectivation could develop through an emphasis on futurity and through a search for “weak messianic power”, not in technologies that have lost their function but in those emerging, i.e., instruments still awaiting final interpretation and application?

So again, where do we find works willing to confront the ever-intensifying incursions of a new technological imaginary, which, as Buchloh insists, enters into every recess of our conscious and unconscious life? Is Ruff’s work an example? “We have to promote new forms of subjectivity,” according to Michel Foucault, who specified a program of refusal and resistance: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.”⁹ This is certainly a more risky strategy that demands journeys into uncharted terrain.

Are there artists who confront the technological conditions governing present experience? I do actually think so, and Ruff is a key example, regardless of whether he works with classical portraits or with pornographic material from the internet. His approach is that of frontal confrontation. There is no shying away. Ruff instead takes another step forwards.

⁹ M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in H. L. Dreyfus, P. Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 216.

Go to a European art school or a large group show, and you will see them everywhere: large photographs of expressionless faces. Ruff is not solely responsible for this phenomenon, of course; he emerged in the 1980s as part of a group of artists doing related work, including Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, and Andreas Gursky, all of whom studied under Bernd Becher. For some reason, though, among these artists, who together have shifted the very vocabulary of contemporary art, Ruff seems to be the one with the most diverse output, and the one most willing to constantly chart new territory. To get a sense of the diversity of his art, one must consider the key subject matters: portraits, photos from newspapers, images of stars, buildings, and night scenes; pictures of the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron; stereoscopic images of buildings and landscapes; and a series of black and white pictures that feature two human faces blended into one image by a police composite camera. In spite of the range of his work, one is also left with a sense of the conceptual rigor and the consistency of approach. Ruff emerged as a cold technician, interested in the workings of the camera but not at all in the psychology of his subjects, or indeed in anything interior. He approaches everything with the same cool detachment, buildings and people alike. It is because of this absence of personal charge and involvement that Ruff's art has been christened "objective photography". The portraits are distant and anonymous; even the human face – for Benjamin, the last refuge of the aura – has been drawn into the camera's machinery, leaving no trace of subjective life. The young Germans in the *Porträts (Portraits)* series, 1987–89, appear less as individual people than as samples from some scientific typography.

So do these photographs tell stories? Not really. Again, a comparison with the Bechers is relevant. After looking at a few hundred pictures of industrial constructions from the Ruhr area, I still know nothing about the social, economical, or historical significance of these environments. Somehow a photograph alone is not capable of that, as Bertolt Brecht liked to point out. But more specifically, the Bechers' way of presenting collections of variations on a theme doesn't really permit the individual object to "speak," whatever that might mean. Rather, it is the pattern – the larger symmetry of the rectangle consisting of smaller units – that attracts the viewer's attention. However, the experience varies in relation to the different categories. For instance, I love the images of water towers and therefore linger for long enough in front of these photographs to let, not only the group but also the individual object speak. These spherical structures share a very basic function, but the spatial solutions are more than idiosyncratic – some resemble UFOs, others planetariums or utopian domes – and comparing the different models is an amusing prospect. I find myself looking for my own favorite crazy globe and ponder Bernd Becher's category of the "Calvinist Baroque" to capture some of the inexplicable variations among these buildings. On the other hand, most of the gas tanks and grain elevators are so utterly boring that the comparisons between individual one seem pointless. Here, seriality is the redeeming quality. The single object is depressing, but I can enjoy the repetitive quality of the group. The same goes for Ruff's portraits. I do not really care about these people individually.

In installing the portraits, Ruff sometimes intersperses them with large images of the night sky from the *Sterne (Stars)* series (1989–92). The dark spaces of these latter works, with their icily twinkling stars light-years away, create an atmosphere that inflects the human faces and their serious eyes staring out into the room. The people and the celestial bodies seem almost equally remote. The photographs could have been made by an alien, who knows nothing of life among humans. This is true regardless of subject: everything is registered by the same indifferent eye, often slightly from above – cityscapes, buildings, interiors, and the strange creatures inhabiting them. Sometimes the alien's spaceship seems to have glided over nocturnal highways, bridges, and railway tracks. A

night-vision enhancer on the camera has given the pictures a mysterious greenish cast. They are without any practical value for us earthlings, but the spaceman needs to map the infrastructures of our terrestrial existence. They radiate a strange poetic shimmer.

Some of the images are manipulated, but often in a way that is hard to detect. A case in point: the pictures of Herzog & de Meuron's architectures – reliable documentation, one at first believes, but on closer inspection some details just do not make sense. The subtle Sammlung Goetz building in Munich has been photographed by day, yet in the inviting library on the ground floor, night prevails. Once this is noticed, it becomes hard to trust the images as we did before. How do we know the only alterations are those that are apparent? Could these images be completely constructed digitally, without reference in the real world?

The lasting impression of Ruff's works is their dry anonymity. The photographer's vision convinces us to the degree that the photographer hides his hand, as John Szarkowski famously claimed in his book *The Photographer's Eye* (The Bechers believed in a kind of neutrality of photography that deletes all subjective traces. In many ways, the pair's work can be said to represent a photographic parallel to the writing degree zero of the "nouveau roman", especially to Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels from the late 1950s, in which a similar obsession with the material things around us renders objects not just visible but somehow eerily real. The fact that the entire oeuvre is fashioned by two people who can no longer distinguish who was responsible for what in the production process, stresses the irrelevance of psychology to their work. It's all about technique, not about the photographer's expressive ambition or artistic approach. The Bechers achieved their desired effect: their photos always draw attention to what they show, never to themselves. Ruff, it seems, stays loyal to his teachers' philosophy. His general stance toward the world can be characterized as a form of neutralization: he avoids all involvement, creating an air of extreme matter-of-factness. The symbolic and cultural significance of his subjects is gone, everything appearing in a new and unfamiliar light. The approach inverts the phenomenological method, in which one attempts to make sense of the world by "bracketing" its objects. Ruff, it seems, does the opposite: he effaces sense, displaying the world's objects in their bare, incomprehensible presence.

The results could be very dull, but he takes his approach so far that dullness becomes fascinating, and sometimes quite disturbing. For Ruff, psychology and subjectivity are suspect notions, which blur and distort what is actually there, making a "realistic" approach impossible. Asked what "realism" means, he replies, "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?"¹⁰ This is an interesting notion. The machine works; do we need the artist at all? "It is the machine which allows us [to] see in place of ourselves, to produce precise, perfect images, as 'radically objective' as possible," writes Régis Durand, and adds: "Ruff is most definitely an heir to Warhol, dreaming like him of seeing mechanically."¹¹

Questioned as to his own contribution to the creative process, Ruff responds, "After all, I was always involved in the shooting." Involved, yes. But in what way – as an active agent selecting the subjects? As a passive recipient? Says the artist, "I don't pick the subjects – it's the other way around, they come to me."¹² If that really is the case, it seems to leave very little to the artist's

¹⁰ B. Nilsson, U. Levén, eds., *Thomas Ruff*, Rooseum– Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, 1996.

¹¹ R. Durand, ed., *Thomas Ruff*, Centre national de la photographie and Actes Sud, Paris 1997, p. 18.

¹² B. Nilsson, U. Levén, eds., *Thomas Ruff*, cit.

subjectivity, since in the actual production of the images the machine does the job. That is what makes his position so extreme. In reducing himself to almost nothing he confronts our present world frontally. No one else, it seems, makes art that is so obviously of our times.