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Thomas Ruff talks to Daniel Birnbaum

Daniel Birnbaum

“Nothing very special happened here. Düsseldorf is always normal.”

Daniel Birnbaum: ***You were a student in photography at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the late '70s and early '80s. Was it clear from the start that you wanted to concentrate on photography, or were you also interested in other mediums?***

Thomas Ruff: No, no. I came from a small town in southern Germany and really had no idea about contemporary art. I wanted to be a photographer, and to me that meant traveling the world in search of great shots of beautiful people and beautiful landscapes. Naive as I was, I said to myself, the most beautiful of all photographs must be taken at the Academy, where the beautiful paintings are painted. So without being at all interested in art per se, I applied for the photography class at Düsseldorf, and strangely enough I was accepted into Bernd Becher's class.

DB: ***He was a rather new professor at the Academy at that point, no?***

TR: He started in 1976; I applied the following year.

DB: ***What were the '80s like in Düsseldorf?***

TR: It was an active time; everyone I knew was busy doing something, mostly art or music. My friends either studied at the Academy or had jobs and played in punk bands. I wasn't involved in the music scene myself, but I knew many people who were. We all went to the same bars.

DB: ***Düsseldorf, of course, became a very important center for photography in the '80s, and the Bechers and their photography class played a crucial role in this development.***

TR: I think the success of the Düsseldorf photographers in the art world has to do with the precision with which we use our medium. Since World War II, photography has been taught in many places in Germany, but there are only a few schools where it was taught in a noncommercial, artistic way. Essen was such a place for a few years, but it never became as influential as the Becher class, in which the German tradition of 1920s Neue Sachlichkeit was taken seriously. We worked with large-format cameras and sharp images. There were a few specific subjects that seemed destined to play a central role in this kind of photography, primarily architecture. The Bechers' first students worked this out very rigorously: Thomas Struth, with his views of streets from all over the world; Axel Hütte, also with architectural images; and of course Candida Höfer, with her interiors.

DB: ***One gets the impression of a rather tight clique of artists working together. Is there such a thing as a Düsseldorf School?***

TR: There was never really a group. Struth was in New York on a stipend when I started my studies. I had little contact with Hütte, who was already a senior. The only photography student I was close

to was Candida Höfer. Most of my friends at art school were in other classes, for instance Gerhard Richter's painting or Klaus Rinke's sculpture classes. Also, Bernd and Hilla Becher were very busy with their own projects and weren't exactly hanging around the Academy all day with us students. The whole thing was much more relaxed. You could reach them over the phone if you needed them; otherwise they would leave you alone. Sometimes I would visit them at their house. Naturally you would discuss things with both, even though officially Bernd was the professor. But when I think of those days I think of students like Katharina Fritsch, Harald Klingelhöller, and Thomas Schütte just as much as people in the photography department.

DB: *How would you explain the sudden success in the '80s of photography in the art market?*

TR: Well, one quite prosaic answer is that we offered the right thing at the right moment. Collectors and dealers were looking for a new product. After the emergence of the Neue Wilde painters in the late '70s, it took six or seven years for a new group of artists to attract attention. First there was a kind of sculpture boom in Düsseldorf, with artists such as Reinhard Mucha, Schütte, Klingelhöller, and Klaus Jung. And then, with some hesitation, dealers and collectors started to get interested in the kind of photography that my generation was producing. After the paintings of the Neue Wilde, people were looking for something more objective.

DB: *I presume it was more or less the same scene in Cologne, as it's so close to Düsseldorf?*

TR: No. Cologne was really developing more and more into a party town and a place where artists could show their work and make money. For most of us it was a kind of parallel universe that we looked on with some skepticism, because the galleries in Cologne in the mid-to-late '80s still showed very little interest in what we were doing. But one cannot really go out and party every night, so we weren't tempted to move to Cologne. But of course we would go to openings there.

DB: *Did the Düsseldorf artists have their own personal style?*

TR: I wore a secondhand jacket, because I didn't have any money, and I carried things around in plastic bags from the supermarket. I looked like some kind of menial worker or clerk rather than an artist. The people we looked up to were American Minimalists, not European bohemian artist types. We didn't want to be dandies, like the famous painters. DB: You saw yourself as even cooler than the dandies. TR: Probably.

DB: *Weren't there a few important galleries in Düsseldorf too?*

TR: Not many. There was Konrad Fischer, who showed my photographs in 1984 but told me that he didn't want to continue showing my work. He didn't know any people who would buy it, he said. He was completely straightforward about it, and I wasn't mad at him. Then there was the Galerie Schmela, where I would have liked to have shown, but I had already started showing in Cologne when the possibility came up.

DB: *At about the same time in New York, a number of artists working with photography – Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Louise Lawler – were understood, and in some cases even understood themselves, in terms of poststructuralist theory. Were those theoretical sources – the writings of Roland Barthes, say – as relevant for the emerging scene in Düsseldorf?*

TR: No, I wouldn't say so. Actually, I still find it a bit strange that artists working in the early '80s would take their theoretical point of departure in philosophical texts from the '60s. I was always optimistic enough to think that artists would stick their noses a little bit further into the future and that the theoreticians would formulate things afterward. Of course, there were theoretical

discussions at the Academy; Benjamin Buchloh was teaching seminars on Minimalist and Conceptual art, for instance. But I guess we were all much more hands-on, more practically inclined, than the New York artists were.

DB: *Did painters like Richter and Sigmar Polke who involve photography in their work, somehow prepare the ground for you?*

TR: I don't know about that. Of course, Richter was well known not only for his large paintings but also for his big Atlas project [1962–] and other photographs that he occasionally showed, though it was really an exception. Polke is basically an anarchist; he never cared much about genre and would show paintings, drawings, and photographs as well. Perhaps one could say that there is a resemblance between Richter's approach to painting and our investigation of the photographic medium. The kind of photography Struth, Hütte, Höfer, and I were involved with at the beginning of the '80s was very immanent to the medium. We explored photography itself without passing beyond it.

DB: *At one point your images became very large.*

TR: I started in the very early '80s with small portraits, which later became much bigger; in '87 I started doing the buildings and in '89 the stars. I had my first gallery show in 1981, with small portraits, and over the next five or six years we all had shows of rather small, clear images. It was in '86 that I blew them up to much larger formats; so did my colleagues a couple of years later. The technology to print such large images was not completely new, but it had just become available to us. No doubt this was of great importance in the perception of our work. At some point it no longer mattered whether the image hanging on the wall was a painting, a silkscreen, or a photographic print. Size really did make a difference, and people started to collect our work.

DB: *Your own commercial success came in the late '80s*

TR: In the very late '80s I started to sell a lot of work. But none of the things that one associates with the art world of the '80s really came to Düsseldorf. My photographer colleagues and I really didn't have commercial success until the '90s. It's easy to project things back onto the '80s, but the truth is we went rather unnoticed through most of the decade. Sometimes I think it was probably a good thing that we were left alone to develop our work without being too disturbed. I had jobs on the side and never thought that I would be able to make a living from art.

DB: *Having never had a real art boom, Düsseldorf probably has fewer reasons than Cologne to be nostalgic about the '80s.*

TR: Nothing very special happened here. Düsseldorf is always normal.