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Thomas Ruff in conversation with Friederike Wappler

Friederike Wappler

“When I was working on the portraits (portraits) I suddenly realized that photography is always a construct of the person behind the lens.”

Friederike Wappler: ***When you first set out as an artist, you still believed “in the truth of photography”, as you put it! When and why did you become skeptical about the medium?***

Thomas Ruff: When I was working on the Porträts (Portraits) I suddenly realized that photography is always a construct of the person behind the lens. For the first time in the Portraits, I had to choose how to frame each person, decide what type of lighting to use and how each person should behave in front of the camera. To help me make these decisions, I began by investigating the genre itself, by collecting examples of portraits; and I referred to these images, rather than to reality itself.

FW: ***You experiment with the reproductive function of photography but at the same time you evade it by reverting to pre-existing image models. How do you construct your photographic works?***

TR: I have certain pre-existing formal models in mind, which I refer to in the first instance. I then test and develop the photographs over a one-or two-year period, revising, modifying and working on them until I have produced my own, definitive photograph – one that feels “right” to me.

FW: ***Your photographs are influenced by pre-existing image models that establish a clear relationship between photographer, camera and subject. Which forms have you referenced up to now, and which ones are you currently interested in?***

TR: I prefer to call them photographic genres rather than “forms”. There are many I’m interested in that I have yet to try out. Personally, I think that a good photograph should always reflect the medium too, and probe the relationship between photographer, camera and subject.

FW: ***What’s “required reading” for your type of photography?***

TR: The writings of Thomas Bernhard.

FW: ***When did you start digitally manipulating your photographs? Do you use a digital camera? Has digital technology changed the way you work as an artist?***

TR: For me, digital technology is just a tool for producing photographs with greater precision. The first photograph I digitally retouched was one of the *Häuser* (*Houses*) in 1987, because I wanted a cleaner, more precise result than the analog version. I started using digital manipulation techniques more extensively in 1996, in the *Plakate* (*Posters*) series. On the one hand, digital editing methods are more precise than real ones. On the other, a digitalized image can be enlarged, reduced, reversed or colored more easily.

I haven't worked with a digital camera yet, because the resolution is still too low. I'm waiting for them to develop a more powerful microchip.

Every new piece of equipment or tool – including digital technology – influences the work it's used to produce.

FW: *You studied 1930s American documentary photography, produced your own series of photographs in response to the nocturnal shots taken during the Gulf War, and made heavily politicized posters in the late 1990s. Is your work explicitly political?*

TR: No. Obviously every individual is political – which means that every artist is also political. Fundamentally, every photograph expresses “political concepts”, although some in a more explicit way than others.

FW: *You produce photographic series. But unlike the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, your photography doesn't aim to document architectural structures “in danger of extinction”. What's the rationale behind your series?*

TR: I don't believe that the purpose of Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographic series is just to document architecture in danger of extinction. Each photograph is a visual affirmation. In order to demonstrate that a certain visual affirmation is correct – just as in a series of scientific experiments – I have to produce a lot of analog images.

I'm also convinced that you can't capture the essence of human beings in just one portrait shot. To obtain as complete a picture as possible, you need to photograph as many people as possible. The same goes for houses, constellations, newspaper photos, night photographs and so on, right up to sexual fantasies. A single image is not enough: this is why I produce series.

FW: *Were you interested in American anti-illusionist art of the 1960s and 1970s? If so, how important is it, or has it been, to your work?*

TR: A group of my fellow students at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in the late 1970s and early 1980s were strongly influenced by this type of art, and each of them went on to make their own contribution to the debate. It's important for us – and I mean painters, sculptors and photographers too – to bring a sober, pragmatic approach to a particular theme or subject, and construct something clear and clean out of an image, eliminating what's superfluous.

FW: *You avoid subjective views in your photography. What approach would you say characterizes your art? How important is the equipment you use to produce your images, in this context?*

TR: For me, equipment and cameras are merely different types of image-making tools. I don't think that you can represent the world with just one tool; it's too complex.

FW: *You exhibit your photographs as a figurative artist. How would you define the artistic element of your photography?*

TR: I'm very pragmatic about this. I trained as an artist at art school, so what I create is art. That's the artistic element of my photography.

(*Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, vol. 53, no. 8, Weltkunst and Bruckmann, Munich, January 2001, pp. 14–15)

¹ See Thomas Ruff, in Boris von Brauchitsch: “...die Beleuchtung ist flächendeckend.” *Zu den Fotografien von Thomas Ruff* (“... the lighting is all-encompassing.” *On the photographs of Thomas Ruff*), in *Thomas Ruff*, Frankfurt am Main, 1992, p. 11.