Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream

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> "And yet, if there is one thing that Ruff's photos seem to emphatically declare, it is that they have no memory."

Thomas Ruff is an artist who uses photography and yet positions himself as a non-photographer and a skeptic. Since his earliest works, he has carefully studied and repeated every typology of photography, each of its promises, and has found them all wanting. In his theatrical self-portrait series *L'Empereur* (*The Emperor*, 1982), he photographed himself in different staged positions in relation to two chairs and a floor lamp. The narcissistic emperor changes position, but no one is interested, nor looks at him, nor engages with him. The gaze onto the scene is a detached one, and the emperor is alone.

The birth of photography in the nineteenth century provided a new tool able to capture the fleeting images of life. Up until very recently, it was invested with a special quality – the ability to inscribe memory materially. At the outset of photography (the technique of recording the image of an object by fixing the light refracted off it onto paper through the various degrees of oxidation of silver powder), there seemed to be the real possibility of "printing" a memory, of creating its analog, something truthful and verifiable for future generations. In particular, photography held three promises: a democratic promise – of representing all human beings equally (as opposed to the pictorial depictions of the upper classes only, typical of the previous aristocratic times); an indexical promise – the possibility of knowing exactly what happened at a given time and place (as opposed to the need of an eye-witness); and a prosthetic/mnemonic promise – the possibility of extending the brain's physical ability to remember innumerable scenes and events, as if archiving them on an external "hard-drive" (as opposed to the narrative and mythic recounting of events whose existence is fleeting). These promises were indirectly suggested in 1931 by Walter Benjamin in *A Short History of Photography*, who describes the medium as playing a role akin to psychoanalysis, by making what he calls an "optical unconscious" accessible to consciousness through its recordings, thus broadening our knowledge of the world.[1]

And yet, if there is one thing that Ruff's photos seem to emphatically declare, it is that they have no memory. They are mute and drained of affect. His works speak of a contemporary subjectivity defined by amnesia, expressed through an amnesiac's gaze that is unable to process and connect the

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[1] W. Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Classic Essays on Photography*, Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Leete's Island Books, Stony Creek, CT, 1980 (originally in German as: "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," *Die Literarische Welt*, no. 38, no. 39, no. 40, September– October 1931).

various mnemonically embedded images in order to create a deep and layered holistic sense of knowledge.

Ruff began to speak with the voice of the amnesiac at a very particular moment in the West – in the 1980s, a time when communication systems and consumer culture fully bonded through photography to create a society of mass advertising and finance that was ultimately disseminated throughout the world during the globalization processes of the 1990s and up to today. During this period, communication began to communicate itself, design became autonomous from the objects to which it was applied, almost taking on a life of its own,[2] and finance began to finance the financial world. The subjectivity of this time is uninterested in performing – or maybe unable to perform – a process of *Trauerarbeit* (elaboration of loss) or any archeology of knowledge. As Alain Badiou asserts, the twentieth century (with its strong agency, its crimes, its desire to create a new "man", its utopias) ended around 1980 with what he calls a "second restoration" and the "economic appropriation of technics":

"The century would thereby express the victory of the economy, in all senses of the term: the victory of Capital, economizing on the unreasonable passions of thought... Today's intellectual hegemony, encapsulated in the slogan 'there is no alternative'... is really just a promotion of a *politics with no alternative, a politique unique.*"[3]

Ruff calmly watched this process, and then proceeded just as calmly to tell us how photography, and perhaps even modernity, had failed us, and how flat our perception of the world had become during this time. He thus took up his skeptical position, expressed through his disenchanted and objective photographic gaze, at exactly the same time as reality was enthusiastically erupting into exaggerated spectacle during the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Looming, gigantic portraits of happy, successful-looking young people began to appear in framed light boxes in airports and in cities for the purpose of advertising cosmetic products and banks. The models were usually positioned from a three-quarter viewpoint or depicted in the middle of performing some apparently meaningful action or gesture, as if engaged with potential consumers in real life. At this time, Ruff began to create his large portraits of his friends in Düsseldorf, frontally portrayed like the coldest and most lifeless of passport images, to advertise nothing at all, thus performing an anti-advertising gesture that ran parallel, yet contrary to the consumer images just described. While the advertisements aimed to suggest that we could all look and be like those young, healthy, and colorful models, Ruff engaged in the obsolete technique of retouching by hand a series of small portraits of sick people that he had found and copied from old color photographs in medical text-books. This 1995 series, *Retuschen* (*Retouched*), is key to understanding Ruff's skepticism of photography – always and inevitably an artificial construction, more akin to painting than to any objective proof of existence.

In the late 1980s, reality television began to dominate the schedules, providing the illusion that the media would usher in a new form of participatory democracy where potentially everyone had a voice, and where we could engage intimately with the lives of real people – people like ourselves – through television. Ruff, meanwhile, created images of the interiors (and later also exteriors) of

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[2] See B. Groys, "The Obligation to Self-Design," e-flux journal, issue #0, November 2008, @2009 www. e-flux.com/ journal/ view/6.

[3] A. Badiou, *The Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, (1st edition, Paris, 2005), pp. 3–4, 6.

empty houses in *Interieurs* (*Interiors*, 1979–83) and in *Häuser* (*Houses*, 1987–91), extremely banal buildings that could belong to anyone, devoid of any eventful life.

By presenting most of his works in a large format,[4] and by consciously using a mounting technique that makes the images both shiny and detached from the space of the viewer, framed in large visible wooden frames (which he considers to be part of the materials of the works), Ruff theatrically stages his production, defining it as "art" even before the viewer can begin to look at the images and consider their relationship to other forms of photography, such as those found in the media or in advertising. The large size of his photographs immediately connects the experience of his work to the experience of "high art" that has existed since the large-scale Abstract Expressionist and color-field paintings of the post-war period. Ruff has a clear consciousness of how the images work in the context of an exhibition as "indicators" of art, in a theatre defined by the art world's rituals. The frame, the glass, the image become one, and together identify his images/objects theatrically as "signs" or "markers" of art. There is, however, also the intention that each individual framed photograph is actually art – in so far as it carries the critical awareness of its status embedded within it – a form of self-awareness and skepticism about photography that is at once celebrated and denied; both art and meta-art at one and the same time.

While using photography – from the early analog photography made with rolls of film, through the more recent digital photography, to the surprising *zycles* (*cycles*) of 2008 that appear to be no longer photographs but paintings (they are both) – Ruff denounces the failure of photography while reclaiming the aura of the unique artwork. And yet, at the same time, cold flatness and absence of emotion in his works, as well as their banality, underline the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction that Walter Benjamin described in an essay that remains one of Ruff's favourite texts.[5] And yet his apparent refusal to adopt a positive stance recalls Theodor Adorno (another protagonist of the twentieth century's School of Frankfurt) and his negative dialectic, more than it does the notion of a politicized art for the masses that Benjamin had heralded (and saw most clearly in Bertolt Brecht). This negativity is the impulse behind creating portraits that tell us nothing about the singular persons portrayed, thus escaping from the forces of surveillance through a form of passive resistance in the subject-matter itself. In his *Porträts* (*Portraits*) series, produced made from 1981 to 1991, for example, the portrait tells us very little of the singular individuals portrayed, and recalls instead a world of passports and ID cards. The friends who posed for Ruff in these works resist the photographic gaze of a surveillance society by being almost expressionless; their attitude repeats on the level of content, the flatness of the form itself. As has been written:

"They say out loud 'I am no-one (special)'; and at the same time, they whisper, 'but I am someone special all the same'. These are the children, the latest generation, of surveillance and spectacle combined. They have grown up within these great social forces. And they know the trick of staying calm under the double pressure: you just have to turn one social force (the spectacle) against

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[4] Notable exceptions are the hand-retouched small images of the *Retuschen* series and the many small images taken from newspapers of his *Zeitungsfotos* (*Newspaper Photographs*) series, made from 1990–91.

[5] W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations: Essay and Reflections*, ed. by H. Arendt, trans. by H. Zohn, Schocken, New York, 1988 (originally: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen zierbarkeit,* 1935– 36).

another (surveillance). No need to be distorted in either direction: to cope, you have neither to be abject (a mug shot) nor mutinous (the photo-booth), you just have to stay cool."[6]

Similarly, the scientific photography of stellar configurations in Ruff's *Sterne* (*Stars*) series made from 1989 to 1992, appears to speak of the power of telescopes and a certain sophisticated technology of photography, but these images tell us nothing of the universe. The stars represented – because of our sheer distance from them and the distance from one star to another and the time it takes for light to travel – existed at different times and not simultaneously as they seem to appear on the photograph. For this series, Ruff bought stellar photographs from ESO (European Southern Observatory) and used them as a basis. But no matter how powerful the telescopic photographic machine used by ESO, these images are inevitably constructed fantasies – fantasies of the photographic age.

In order to realize the three promises of photography mentioned above that could define a new democratic world based on a visual culture of photography – an exchange was made: we gave up *depth* for the *flat* surface of the photographic print, perhaps in more than just a literal way. When speaking about his relationship to the Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, whose buildings he has represented, Ruff stated, "architects think in three-dimensional terms, that is, in volume. They think in terms of buildings and their surroundings, whereas I think photographically... The result is a flat picture."[7]

Photography fails us precisely because it is flat. For it to be truly *indexical*, in some sort of privileged relationship to the real, we would have to have a clear idea of what exists "out there" to index, to indicate; we would need to know that there is something stable to look at, and point to, in the world at large. When we look at the world around us, we look with two eyes. The distance between what the left eye sees and what the right eye sees is what creates all the differences in the world. When our brain combines these two, ever so slightly different, views into the same scene, it creates a sense of depth, so that we understand the world as a spatial and topological field of volumes in a state of continuous change and transaction. This is our normal stereoscopic vision – the way we were made to see – the way we human beings are "hard-wired".

What form of knowledge can we construct if perception is fundamentally based on flat images? What happens to a person who sees so many photographs that he or she loses the natural ability to see stereoscopically? The sheer abundance of culturally produced flat visual imagery has become so great in the age of mechanical photographic representation that we no longer link the right and the left eye stereoscopically, but constantly exercise our ability to create a purely mental image of depth, due to the double remove from reality. We must re-imagine that experience of linkage on the basis of our memory of it, while we observe the flat representation of the photographic print, or today, of the computer screen. This was always true when looking at paintings, but throughout the twentieth century, and especially during the digital age, the balance between these two kinds of vision has been altered so radically that our brains have adapted to the flat agglomeration of bits of information and pixels as if they were forms of volume and depth.

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[6] N. Bryson and T. Fairbrother, "Thomas Ruff: Spectacle and Surveillance," *Parkett*, Zurich, no. 28, 1991, p. 96.

[7] Thomas Ruff in: T. Vischer, "Interview by Theodora Vischer with Thomas Ruff," *Architectures of Herzog & de Meuron*, Peter Blum, New York, 1995, p. 33.

To go back to the three promises mentioned above, what actually occurred was very different from what had been expected, just as the twentieth century was different from the utopian visions on which it had been founded. By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the flood of new images came a loss of the personal art of memory. With the common practice of photographing human beings in science, anthropology, and for forensic purposes, combined with the ability to modify and retouch those photographs at will, came the twentieth-century desire to create a new "man" – humankind as a material to shape and re-shape, discarding its errors and less perfect creatures, as enacted by totalitarian regimes. Ultimately, with the shooting of events, such as war photography and photography of natural disasters, came a dulling of the sense of loss and pain and a pornographic gaze where the body is pure surface and electrical impulse, as in the photograph of the hooded man in Abu-Graib that surfaced on the internet in 2004, the same year Ruff began to exhibit his first *jpgs*. The flood of internet porn that has formed the basis of his nudes since 1999 suggests a mechanistic fantasy of the digital age where sexual desire is unfocused and fleeting, constantly aroused and just as constantly distracted by yet another image, or instant, in the distribution of pixels, which pushes through to the surface of the screen. It is an electronic stimulation where the figures represented blur with the oscillation of bits, as if the body were wired to electrodes and desire were a mere electrical automatism.

Behind Ruff's work lie not only Bernd and Hilla Becher's photographs of industrial plants, but also the memory of the documentary photographer August Sander's early twentieth-century work. Sander is best known for his photographic portraits of ordinary people, which he began in the 1920s. *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the Twentieth Century*) was a lifelong photographic project to document the people of his native Westerwald, near Cologne. Excerpts from the work were first shown in an exhibition of 1927, and subsequently published in 1929 in his first book *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of our Time*). The Nazis banned the portraits in the 1930s because the subjects did not adhere to the ideal Aryan type; *Face of our Time* was seized in 1936 and the printing plates of the book were destroyed.

This story of Sander's portraits is not unlike the story of Germany's cities in the twentieth century. Severely bombed between 1941 and the end of the war by Allied forces, most Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and nineteenth-century city centers were destroyed. Bombs fell through the roofs and were followed by incendiary bombs that burned out the interior of houses, leaving only the facades intact. When you see these old facades today in German cities, most of them front an entirely new building, reconstructed behind. It is as if history had been flattened, and looking backwards is no longer possible. The second destruction of Germany took place during the 1950s, when most remaining old buildings were torn down in a frenzy of modernization, to break with the past and start anew. Architectural forms had to be simple, functional and cheap. This is marked by a particular transition in windows and their frames. While most German pre-war buildings had small panes and criss-cross wooden frames, after the war these were substituted by large, square or rectangular windows with metal frames that were easier to clean and let in more light. Ruff's architectural photographs are often views onto these flat surfaces, these facades with no memory. Similar to the repetitive and yet unique portraits, they are silent, mute, and modern like the never-ending windows from the 1950s that mark the facades of the buildings of Germany after the destruction of World War II. It is a world with no memory, a world with no history, a world with no stereoscopic vision; a flat, dull universe.

One of the most apparent characteristics of Ruff's art is the use of classification – of compiling and ordering series. Yet Ruff's classification system is anything but systematic. He does not attempt to exhaust all samples of any category; nor does he reach any conclusion, as a Minimalist would. Every classification creates a form of order, a formal organization, and in Ruff's work this is all that remains – there are no conclusions, no possible statistical interpretations to be made from his "samples". They are a useless set of samples that serve no function – they are "whatever".

And yet, there is something systemically positive and active in Ruff's negativity, and this positivity concerns an ecology and economy in the creation, dissemination and transaction of his images. Far from being passive, pessimistic and negative, Ruff's art has actually acted systemically and emblematically as a form of resistance to the flood of images that characterize the digital age. He programmatically suspends them out of the speed of this flow, in a way not dissimilar to Marcel Duchamp's strategy when he created the ready-made, suspending the flow of consumer goods in the new arcades (or early shopping malls) of modernity by removing them from that system of circulation and time, and from their functionality as objects for exchange. If photography became a flood, and triumphed in large advertising images, airport posters and back-lit images, which are churned out, put up and substituted at incredible speed as this year's fashion gives way to next year's, Ruff has carefully controlled the number of his images, within a relatively small number of series.

It is moving to think that in the face of the thousands of portraits shot and combined with text to launch a new cosmetic, Ruff has made relatively few portraits, and many of these of his friends and acquaintances in Düsseldorf. Or that, in the face of the great number of monthly magazines devoted to architecture photography, Ruff has dedicated himself to a select few images – of buildings by Mies van der Rohe, Herzog & de Meuron and more recently Luigi Cosenza. Even his *jpgs* – enlargements of images taken from low-res images on the internet and thus evidently pixelated – are comparably few if one thinks of the millions of images on the net – a cyber trash of images. Indeed, when one looks at the banality of a Ruff photograph, one imagines that there are innumerable Ruff photographs. When one looks at a work from his *Häuser* series, one imagines that there must be hundreds of works of this sort, since contemporary Germany is filled with light-grey 1950s facades with large, single-pane windows. When one sees a portrait by Ruff, one imagines there could be as many of them as there are portraits by Sander (by 1945, his archive contained 4,500 prints and 11,000 negatives, even though his work had been banned by the Nazis). When one sees a *jpg* or a *nude*, one presumes that there must be millions of similar images on the web, and that certainly Ruff has exploited this infinite resource to make innumerable enlarged, framed and marketable photographic objects. But the numbers tell a different story – there are only 47 *Interieurs*, 29 *Häuser*, 60 *Porträts* with colored backgrounds and 129 with neutral backgrounds. There are only 177 *nudes* and 155 *jpgs*. Of the thousands of possible *Sterne*, there are only 144. The most numerous group of Ruff's works are the *Zeitungsfotos*, images taken from newspapers almost as if he intended them as an elegy to the printed press at the time of the rise of the digital world – yet even these small photos number only 400. There are only 8 *zycles* so far, and only three *cassini*. These are numbers more in line with a painter's oeuvre than a photographer's.