



Thomas Ruff, *Portrait (A. Koschkarow)*, 1999, cibachrome, 210x165 cm

THOMAS RUFF

Porträts, 1981-1985 (24x18 cm)



Thomas Ruff, *Porträts*, 1984-85, c-print, 24x18 cm
(exposition au Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2003)



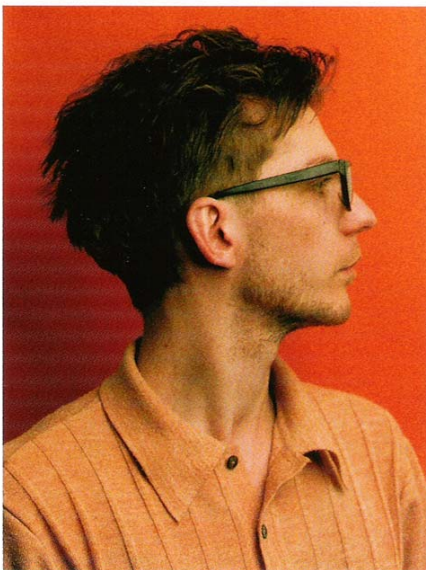
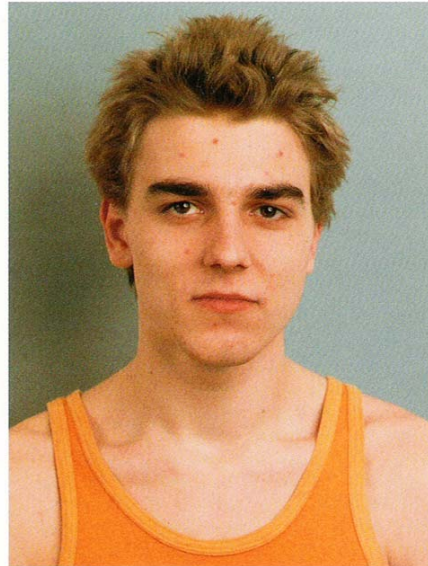
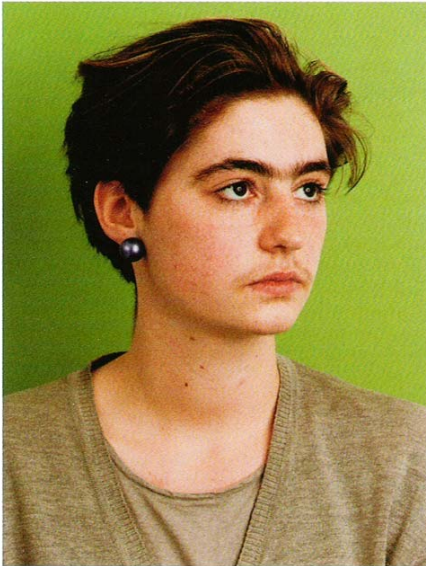
Thomas Ruff, *Porträt (T. Ruff)*, 1983, c-print, 24x18 cm



Thomas Ruff, *Porträts*, 1981-85, c-print, 24x18 cm chaque image



Thomas Ruff, *Porträt*, 1983, c-print, 24x18 cm



Thomas Ruff, *Porträts* (A.Hütte,1986 ; P.Grote,1985 ; V.Pfeiffer,1985 ; J.Sasse,1984 ; T.Ruff,1983 ; P.Fries,1985) , c-print, 24x18cm

Porträts, 1986-1991 ; 1998-2001 (210x165 cm)



005 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (P. Stadtbauer)_1988_c-print_24x18cm.jpg



006 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (R. Hubert)_1988_c-print_24x18cm.jpg



007 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (E. Denda)_1988_c-print_210x165cm.jpg



008 Ruff Thomas_Portrait_1988_ektaolor_210x165cm.jpg



009 Ruff Thomas_Porträt_C.Pilar_1988_210x165cm.jpg



010 Ruff Thomas_Porträt_1990_210x165cm.jpg



Thomas Ruff, *Porträt*, 1988



011 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (Andrea Knobloch)_1990_210x165cm.jpg



012 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (F. Simon)_1998_c-print_210x165cm.jpg



020 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (A. Koschkarow)_1999.jpg



021 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (A. Koschkarow, B)_1999_c-print_210x165cm.jpg



022 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (A. Roters)_2000_c-print_210x165cm.jpg



023 Ruff Thomas_Porträt (L. Schmöckel)_2000_c-print_210x165cm.jpg

Andere Porträts, 1994-1995 (sérigraphie)



030 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt Nr 71 ' 01_1994-1995_200x150cm.jpg



031 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt Nr 71 ' 65_1994-1995_56x73cm.jpg



032 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt Nr.102 ' 125_1994-1995_56x73cm.jpg



033 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt Nr. 143 ' 146_1994-1995_sérigraphie sur papier_155x205cm.jpg



035 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt_109' 97_1994_1995_sérigraphie_170x119cm.jpg



036 Ruff Thomas_Anderes Porträt_109A' 11_1994_1995_sérigraphie_170x119cm.jpg

Thomas Ruff (1958, Zell am Harmersbach, Allemagne ; vit à Düsseldorf, D)

Série des Porträts, 1981-1985 (format 24x18cm) ; 1986-1991 ; 1998-2001 (format 210x165 cm)

C'est avec ce travail sur le portrait, entrepris au [début] des années 80, que Thomas Ruff émerge sur la scène internationale. Ses images attirent le regard par leur format monumental et par l'impression de froideur et de distance qui s'en dégagent.

Reprenant les codes de la photographie d'identité, il traite le portrait de manière documentaire et objective. L'éclairage est diffus éliminant les ombres, le point de vue est frontal, la composition symétrique et centrale. L'attitude du modèle est insignifiante et toute émotion y est systématiquement gommée. Ruff parvient à faire de la figure humaine un module minimal, un objet à la surface lisse comme la photographie. Ces images ne livrent rien de plus que leur propre réalité, l'image d'une image.

Ruff affirme l'incapacité de la photographie à capturer le réel. Il en souligne un des paradoxes en posant la question : Qu'y a-t-il au-delà de l'image ? En effet, la photographie est considérée comme l'image analogique de la réalité qui ne parvient pas à rendre le réel. Ainsi, en choisissant ses modèles parmi ses amis de l'Académie de Düsseldorf, ici une étudiante devenue artiste, il évacue toute trace de cette relation en réalisant un portrait anonyme.

Dans un entretien donné en 1993 (*Journal of Contemporary Art*), il témoigne du climat des années 70 en Allemagne dans lequel il a grandi. Époque dont il stigmatise « l'hystérie du terrorisme », où les services secrets surveillaient et arrêtaient les militants anti-nucléaires tandis que les professeurs soupçonnés de propagande gauchiste démissionnaient. Il était alors préférable de taire ses opinions et de garder une image proche de celle qui figurait sur un passeport. Face à la surveillance omniprésente de tous les lieux publics, Thomas Ruff opère ici par une forme de résistance, en réalisant des portraits non communicatifs.

Biographie

Après avoir étudié auprès de Gerhard Richter et Bernd et Hilla Becher à l'Académie de Düsseldorf, Thomas Ruff devient, dans les années 80, un des chefs de file de la nouvelle génération allemande. D'abord très influencé par le style documentaire des Becher, il réalise des vues d'intérieur en couleurs. Son travail acquiert de l'autonomie avec ses portraits monumentaux de personnes anonymes, dénués d'expression, et pourtant ses amis de l'Académie de Düsseldorf. Ces portraits suggèrent alors que l'image photographique est incapable de représenter la vie intérieure d'un sujet, que la technique est toujours une manipulation.

Une autre série, *Haus* (Maisons), commencée en 1987, s'inscrit dans la même optique, une photographie objective et distanciée représentant des blocs d'immeubles gris de la période de l'après-guerre.

Au début des années 90, Thomas Ruff se procure des négatifs auprès de l'European Southern Observatory montrant des constellations d'étoiles relevées dans l'hémisphère sud. Il en fait des agrandissements au format standard de 101,5x73,5 cm pour réaliser une série exposée sous le titre *Sterne* (Étoiles). Son intention est de limiter son intervention, de se restreindre lui-même dans la sélection, la manipulation et la présentation de ses sujets et de ses images. Cette démarche est encore plus probante dans la série des *Zeitungsphoto* (photos de presse), images trouvées et découpées dans les journaux, agrandies sans titre, et sans explication.

Au début des années 90, son travail prend une orientation politique en s'inspirant des images de la guerre du Golfe. Pour *Nacht* (Nuit), il photographie des paysages nocturnes et urbains baignés dans une lumière verte, rappelant les caméras de surveillance utilisées par les militaires. Il ne cesse de s'interroger sur ce que peut véhiculer une image au-delà de la perception rétinienne, recourant de plus en plus souvent à l'image numérique collectée sur l'infinie banque de données d'images fournie par Internet - *Nudes* (Nus), 2000 et *Substrates* (Couches inférieures), 2003.

Textes tiré de : "Tendances de la photographie contemporaine", dossier pédagogique, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Source : <http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-photocontemporaine/ENS-PhotoContemporaine.htm>

Autres textes à consulter :

Alexandre Castant, " Thomas Ruff. Atlas, fictions, nuits ", *artpress*, n°227, septembre 1997, p.46-51

Régis Durand, " L'imagerie laïque de Thomas Ruff ", in *Thomas Ruff*, cat. expo., Paris, Centre national de la photographie / Arles, Actes Sud, 1997, p.3-14 ; réédité in : DURAND, Régis, *Disparités. Essais sur l'expérience photographique 2*, Paris, La Différence, coll. Les Essais, 2002, p.39-55

Thomas Ruff, interview

Philip Pocock, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, n°6.1, 1993, p.78-86

Philip Pocock: Unlike the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of Sander or Renger-Patzsch, there is a clear crisis of belief in the objectivity of your medium in your work. True or false?

Thomas Ruff: It's both. It's true and false. They also used the camera as an instrument to take pictures. The difference between them and me is that they believed to have captured reality and I believe to have created a picture. We all lost bit by bit the belief in this so-called objective capturing of real reality.

Pocock: What do you mean by real reality?

Ruff: Photography has been used for all kinds of interests for the past 150 years. Most of the photos we come across today aren't really authentic anymore--they have the authenticity of a manipulated and prearranged reality. You have to know the conditions of a particular photograph in order to understand it properly because the camera just copes what is in front of it.

Pocock: Why did photography become so important in the art world?

Ruff: Maybe it's a question of generations. My generation, maybe the generation before, grew up with photography, television, magazines. The surrounding is different from a hundred years ago. Photography became the most influential medium in the Western world. So nowadays you don't have to paint to be an artist. You can use photography in a realistic, *sachlich* way. You can even do abstract photographs. It's become autonomous.

Pocock: There's little personality in your portraits, little use in the buildings, and a skepticism in photography's ability to communicate anything real in the Stars. Does this mean photography is empty in a traditional sense?

Ruff: It's empty in its sense of capturing real reality. But, for example, if I make a portrait, people say that there's little personality in it. They say that. But in a way there is because I know all of the people I photograph. Maybe the problem is that if in the same way I had photographed a famous person, it would be a different looking picture because we know another thing about this person.

Pocock: So they're anonymous . . .

Ruff: They're anonymous to you.

Pocock: You're dealing with the absoluteness of the medium, its picture perfectness. Would you agree with this?

Ruff: Photography pretends to show reality. With your technique you have to go as near to reality as possible in order to imitate reality. And when you come so close then you recognize that, at the same time, it is not.

Pocock: And what about your relation to the picture?

Ruff: Well, maybe I can say it's my curiosity that makes me do each one because I want to see them. And then I go on.

Pocock: When I look at one of your portraits, or buildings, it's almost as though I can see more than is actually there.

Ruff: But I think that happens because it's a picture. It's a frozen picture, nothing moves. If you stand in front of a building, maybe you turn your head because there's a noise, something moves, so there is not this concentration. But when a picture is on the wall, frozen, you get a totally different kind of concentration. And with the portraits you cannot stand in front of him or her and see them as you do in one of my photographs. That's impossible.

Pocock: It's well known that you studied photography with the Bechers. Was that the start?

Ruff: At that time I didn't know their work.

I took twenty of my most beautiful slides, landscapes of the Black Forest and holiday pictures. It was very strange because they accepted me. In the first year I had a brief talk with Bernd Becher about the slides. He said that they were more or less stupid because those photographs were not my own photographs but clichés, and they were an indication of the photographs I had seen in magazines. They were not my own.

Pocock: Have you turned that around on your teachers, like the portraits are clearly related to standard ID photos?

Ruff: Yes, sure. The portraits are definitely a construct based on identification photographs.

Pocock: And the newspaper photographs are not your own?

Ruff: I couldn't do all that by myself. It was also important for me that they have already been printed, that they had been so-called important enough to be worth printing, even if they are only illustrations for a text. So the photograph itself doesn't tell you anything; it's the text that does. And if I cut off the text, what happens then?

Pocock: What quality do you look for in an news photograph?

Ruff: You know, all the newspaper photographs are standard, archetypal, like politicians shaking hands, or a rocket blasting off, a landscape somewhere. I can't tell you more than that. I just see it and I know it's the right photograph. Not that it's good but it makes a point for my idea.

Pocock: Some quick questions: What do you think of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon?

Ruff: I like them.

Pocock: Walker Evans, Eugène Atget?

Ruff: In my first years at the academy they were my most important influence. Perhaps Stephen Shore and William Eggleston were of similar importance to me there as the older documentary photographers but within color. And I still like looking at them.

Pocock: How does the American school of the seventies large-format photography differ from the Düsseldorf school?

Ruff: I think it's just a different landscape. America looks different from Europe.

Pocock: Why color in the portraits and not much color anywhere else?

Ruff: Color is close to reality. The eye sees in color. Black and white is too abstract for me.

Pocock: Why stars? Do they mean something extra special to you?

Ruff: When I was eighteen I had to decide whether to become an astronomer or a photographer. I also wanted to move the so-called künstlerische Fotografie boundary. Do you know Flusser?

Pocock: No.

Ruff: He defines isolated categories for photography that sometimes cross over. For example, if medical photography is used in a journalistic way, or with the Stars, a scientific archive isn't used for scientific research but for my idea of what stars look like. It's also a homage to Karl Bloßfeldt. In the twenties he took photographs of plants to explain to his students architectural archetypes. So he was a researcher but the way he represented his intention with the help of photography made him an artist. I like these crossovers.

Pocock: What about the buildings you photograph?

Ruff: I choose the buildings like the people I photograph. I know them from driving around and sometimes it makes click. Then I have to go back and see if it is really something, if it's possible to photograph it. I don't look for high architecture but that average style you find in any suburb of any Western city. It's color, shape, line. It's more geometric.

Pocock: How do you see repetition in your work?

Ruff: I wouldn't say repetition, but I would say I work in series. Not to prove to myself that I was right but I'm not satisfied with one picture but maybe with ten or fifteen or forty.

Pocock: I feel a certain anxiety when I see the portraits hung in a series. I'm reminded of that game as a kid: What is wrong with this picture?

Ruff: It's not "What's wrong?" but "It's a big puzzle." With one photograph there isn't enough information. Even I couldn't explain to an extraterrestrial all of mankind with my forty portraits of my friends. You cannot explain the whole world in one photograph. Photography pretends. You can see everything that's in front of the camera, but there's always something beside it.

Pocock: Have you ever done portrait commissions?

Ruff: Not so much, but when I did portraits, people came and asked me. At that time everything was ready for doing portraits so I said, okay, sit in front of the camera.

Pocock: Is it something you tried to avoid?

Ruff: In my series of portraits they are all young. Some of those commissions I would never use for exhibitions.

Pocock: When you show so many portraits all at once, are you trying to convince us of something?

Ruff: Convince?

Pocock: To persuade us of something about these people?

Ruff: Maybe I have to say it differently. I've been asked a lot why my portraits never smile. Why are they so serious? They look so sad and like that. And I've been thinking about that. Maybe it has something to do with my generation. Like I use all-over lights, no shadows. We grew up in the seventies. The reality was that there was no candlelight. If you go through a place, through the car park, it's always fluorescent, so no shadows, just the all-over light. And in the seventies in Germany we had a so-called Terrorismushysterie: the secret service surveyed people who were against nuclear power; the government created or invented a so-called Berufsverbot. This meant left-wing teachers were dismissed, so sometimes it was better not to tell what you were thinking. All over we have those video cameras, in the supermarkets, the car park. In big places everywhere you've got those cameras. If you stand in front of a customs officer, you try to make a face like the one in your

passport. So why should my portraits be communicative at a time when you could be prosecuted for your sympathies.

Pocock: This notion of surveillance seems to link nicely with the Night work. How far are you with this new Surveillance series?

Ruff: I started thinking about it at the beginning of last year. I had the idea of combining the surveillance aspect of the portraits with the darkness of the Stars.

Pocock: Are they all that green and black?

Ruff: Yes, I use a light-amplifying lens that is normally installed in tanks or military jets to see at night. It's another prosthetic use of the medium. If you use a microscope or a telescope you always see something you can't see with the naked eye.

Pocock: Why is it green?

Ruff: It's the authentic color from the phosphorescent screen and if it's green, it's green.

Pocock: Do you feel that one day you'll give up photography for electronic processes?

Ruff: I'm happy to work again with my own photographs after being in the studio since 1989 with the Stars and Newspaper photographs. Now I go out at night.

Pocock: They look like pictures of privacy. Are you investigating the idea of privacy?

Ruff: The first pictures I made were of backyards. It was January and really cold so I visited friends and took pictures from their rear windows.

Pocock: Is there a little bit of the voyeur in every photographer?

Ruff: These have been done with a device that detectives are starting to use, so they can work on stealing privacy.

Pocock: To solve crimes?

Ruff: Yes, this picture looks as though it could be a scene of a crime.

Pocock: The crime of photography. Is photography itself a crime?

Ruff: It can be.

Source : <http://www.jca-online.com/ruff.html>

Thomas Ruff

in conversation with Vicki Goldberg, *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2005 [extrait]

The German photographer Thomas Ruff achieved international recognition in the 1980s alongside Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky, all students of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Of these three influential photographers, Ruff is the most experimental in theme and technique. He made his name with monumental, straight-on, emotionally uninflected portraits and went on to photograph—or appropriate and enlarge photographs or Internet images of—architecture, interiors, landscapes, nudes, stars, machines, and newspaper photos; he has also made night-vision photographs, superimposed negatives, and created montages, stereographs, and computer-altered images, including abstractions derived from Japanese manga.

In March, David Zwirner in New York showed Ruff's recent altered photographs based on JPEG photographs from the Internet. This work made Ruff's concern with questions of perception immediately visible: the pictures were nearly indecipherable from a great distance, resolved into recognizable images of landscapes and catastrophes at a middle distance, and dissolved into a mass of pixels up close. This interview was conducted in person in New York and later extended by e-mail.

Thomas Ruff: When I started at the Kunstakademie in 1977, I was an amateur. I took photographs like the ones you find in amateur magazines. I wanted to travel around the world taking beautiful photographs of beautiful landscapes and people. I thought that the most beautiful pictures were made at art academies, so I applied there. At that time Düsseldorf was the only art academy in Germany with a photography class. I applied with my twenty most beautiful slides, and strangely enough Bernd (Becher) took me.

I was completely shocked when I saw Bernd and Hilla's photographs the first time—I thought they were boring industrial photographs, the complete opposite of my visual world. I was so shocked that I couldn't work. The friends I made at the art academy were painters and sculptors. I started to look at art and realized my idea of images was the kitsch thing; the true thing was the Bechers. Bernd said to me, "Thomas, these are not your own images. They are imitations of things you have seen. They don't come from your soul. But I accepted you because you use color in such a beautiful way." I really believed the documentary photograph could capture reality. My heroes

were Bernd and Hilla Becher, Walker Evans, the FSA photographers, Steven Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, just to name a few.

Vicki Goldberg (Rail): Were the photographs of interiors taken in that documentary spirit?

Ruff: I didn't change anything. I only used light that came through the windows. I started doing interiors in black and white, then changed into color. The students in the Becher class said I couldn't do that because documentary photography has to be black and white. They were more doctrinaire than the Bechers. But Bernd said, "This is beautiful. You should continue in color."

Rail: How did your subjects feel about the deadpan, emotionally uninflected, even affectless nature of the portraits that first brought you international recognition?

Ruff: The people I took the portraits of were very happy with them. They were all proud. As I started that project during my time in the academy, I showed the first four portraits at the Rundgang, the end-of-the-year student show. Nobody said, "I don't want to be photographed" when I asked them. It was just obvious for us to do it in that way. We had all read 1984 by George Orwell and were wondering, How will that year be in comparison to Orwell's visions? We knew we lived in an industrialized society where you can find surveillance cameras everywhere; we looked at the camera in a very conscious way, with the knowledge that we are watched.

If you look at a portrait of a person, it can't give you any information about the life of the sitter, like, is he going to have a visit from his mother in two hours? So what kind of information can a photograph deliver? I have no idea of what kind of information a portrait can convey. I think the possibilities of a photographic portrait are very limited. If there are photographers who say their portraits give more information than mine, I say they only pretend.

When you take a portrait of a little girl laughing, it tells that the girl is happy. What else? It doesn't tell us that she loves her parents. We can only guess that she must and they're good to her. Maybe she's living with her grandparents because her parents are dead.

[August] Sander had this kind of sociological project of society: the boss, the employee, the worker, the farmer, the craftsman, all these kinds of professions, at a time when the differentiation had started to disappear, more or less. He really thought he could capture them and make a sociological encyclopedia about his time. When I started the portraits I excluded that immediately, [the implication that] if somebody's wearing a worker's clothes he's a worker, if he is wearing a suit he is an employee. The dress code has changed so much; there is no recognizable code any more. I decided to concentrate on the face because that's the most expressionistic part of the whole person.

When I made the portraits I thought, "We are all even, equal, nobody is more important than anybody else, and at the same time everybody is unique." I wanted to treat all my friends equally, but I was conscious that every one of my friends is unique. Twenty years ago I said photography can only capture the surface of things. It cannot go beyond the skin of a person.

Rail: Do you still feel that?

Ruff: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. The portraits are about mediated images, about photographic portraits, but at the same time it's the person portrayed.

Rail: There is something stark in the clarity and isolation of those faces.

Ruff: If I make portraits, you can see only faces; if houses, only houses; stars with no planets or astronauts, pure stars...

It was very convenient to do the portraits because it happened in the studio, where you have no factors distracting you from the work. When you take a photograph outside of the studio, you have to depend on the weather and the circumstances of the motive, as cars could be parked in front of a house you want to photograph, or trees could be in the way, or other problems appear. As I was more interested in the image of the house than in photographing it in a documentary way, I waited until I had the right circumstances. But even so I had to manipulate two images out of the thirty I took.

My idea was architectural photography questioning the nature of reality. It wasn't really a deliberate decision. It came from my everyday life. I was nineteen or twenty when I did the interiors. I had left my parents' home. The work was probably about leaving home.

When I settled in Düsseldorf, my new friends studied at the academy also. I didn't know old people or babies, so it was obvious [from the portraits] that I chose my nearest acquaintances. Then I worked on the image of architecture, the architecture surrounding my generation when I grew up. So it all was autobiographical. [...]