Clearing

Roland Fischer and the Transformation of Photography

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Roland Fischer's work represents a clearing of the space of photography. By clearing (lichtung), we mean both a place where light can enter – a privileged idea of the poet Paul Celan and of Heidegger – and the act of creating an opening, conceptually or physically. The light Fischer brings is to the relation of photography and its objects. The space he creates is a realm of independent appearances, in which the visual disposition of the image takes precedence over its source. This brings us, as viewers, into a new relation with reality-based images, and with representation itself. It is the central reason why Fischer can argue that, in some fundamental way, he is not a photographer. He has used photography to transcend photography.

I want to trace a path to this clearing before I describe its boundaries. There is much talk today about the dominance of photography and its epigones – film and video – as a mode of representation. What is meant here is the triumph of reality-based imagery, mechanically generated through an optical system mediate by a lens.This system maintains what we might call an umbilical connection to the world, and this ontological link has, since the inception of photography, caused a kind of chaos in the discussion and understanding of the medium. All the familiar discursive splits were present from the beginning in the rhetoric of the medium – between "science" and "art" as originating impulses, between "expression" and "document" and "artist" and "operator" in the practice of making photographs. Less obvious were deeper rifts between the conceptual and somatic aspects of the art, which have generated a more or less constant tension.

Concealed above all – because the original desire for photography was so widespread and its popular appearance so sudden – was the paradox that lay at the center of photography. It was a mode of representation that had no codes, none but the structure and minimal coherence of the real, and hence, according to Roland Barthes, the medium could not signify. It had to adopt a series of masks in order to convey meaning – in most cases the conventions of familiar genres such as landscape and portrait. Yet this could never fully disguise the utter contingency of the subject and its profound visual independence in a photograph. Reality as the ultimate found object. Photographs were about seeing and interpreting, and there

was a fundamental incongruity between the two actions. Contemporary photographers are aware of this incongruity and have dealt with it in a variety of ways, which go far beyond the idea of simple indeterminacy or ambiguous reference.

Fischer inherits this situation, and he starts with an awareness of its dimension far beyond that of his contemporaries. We can say this much, that regardless of how Fischer characterizes himself, he participates in a searching examination of photography that currently comprehends every aspect of the medium, including its material conditions, its structural role in the economy of images, its ontology, even its perspicuousness. Because of the serial nature of some of Fischer's projects and the level of abstraction he achieves in many of his photographs, some critics have sought to group him with the Dusseldorf artists, but we will see that he asks different questions and in a number of areas comes to far more shocking conclusions about the ability of photography to represent the world.

I want to begin with the first group of photographs that came to my attention, the series of building facades. We are thoroughly aware by now of the photographic obsession with the built environment. In the paradigmatic cases of Thomas Struth and Stephen Shore, the concern revolves around the intersection of point-of-view and history. The precise position of the camera (and the observer) are seen to correspond to an entry point into history, with its dense information and its interpretive limits. Fischer takes an almost diametrically opposite tack. He is fully aware that the structures he photographs, especially the corporate ones, are at this stage of the game surfaces whose abstract patterns mirror the highly abstract technical structures of capital they house (or conceal). But these are not primarily political or historical pictures, as I had first thought. Following a strategy common to American photographers of the 1950s, Fischer has deliberately decontextualized these facades, wiping out any sense of scale and, wherever he chooses, altering the perspective to displace the image from an observer's (camera's) point of view. We do not know even whether the repetitive fragments represent a small corner of a façade or the entire structure. Fischer further plays with scale by varying the size of the reproduced image, and this can have the unsettling

effect of making even a detail into a seemingly endless and overwhelming repetition.

Perhaps most important, as a result of this destabilization, the photographs begin to lose their photographic quality, that is, they seem not to refer to anything at all but to represent a pattern generated out of the particular occasion of the work. So we are faced with a peculiar situation in which we know we are looking at a representation but perhaps not a sign; that is, the thing that would complete the relationship of signifier and signified is suddenly gone missing. The photographic image has become unhinged, its umbilical cord to anterior reality cut. American photographers of the 1950s only flirted with such radical ambiguity, to spiritualize images and open them up to a wider range of associations. It was crucial that they stay anchored in an actual situation, in order to sustain a bond between psychic and natural realms. For Fischer, no such mediation is necessary or even legitimate for photographs. Fischer does not appear to believe that abstraction is the royal road to transcendence, except transcendence of the momentary. The point is to sever the image's dependence on history (and our tendency to look through the photograph) in order to force us back to the surface, to the unique objects that photography can produce, objects that in showing something, show themselves.

It is paradoxical to talk about photographs as both free-floating objects and representations, but this fractured speech has the virtue of breaking us away from conventional (and rarely fulfilled) expectations of photographic truth and increasing our awareness of both the signifying and aesthetic functions of photographs. Like the earliest photographers, who worked before the experience of photographs was codified, before anyone knew what photographs were supposed to look like, we can touch something essential about photographic pleasure.

The introduction of pleasure as an idea and a goal brings us to a discussion of Fischer's pool portraits. I first saw these displayed along with the facades, and the pairing took me aback. Not that portraits and landscapes of structures had never been equated. At one point in the 1990s, Struth and Thomas Ruff were making virtually identical pairings of such images. Fischer's path is again more aggressive. He does not resort

to an anthropological format, with its rigid frontality, but decontextualizes his subjects by immersing them in water up to the point of a classical bust. His angles vary, almost intuitively, but the subjects hover between particular and general, types and individuals.

To some degree, we are in familiar territory here, opened up by August Sander and his attempted typologies of Weimar-era social characters, but only to a degree. Sander actually gloried in the particularity of his people, as well as in their historical rootedness, evidenced in their costumes and settings, even as he clung to an idea of their inherent stereotypicality. Fischer, I believe, wants to give his subjects a kind of new visual birth, unprecedented freedom – hence the water imagery. He seeks to divest them of any associations whatsoever, especially the notion that they have lives and identities anterior to their appearance in his photographs. It is as if, again, the photographic instance gave birth to these subjects, whom we contemplate in their blank novelty. Their identities, roles, situations, masks (to reference Barthes again) – their "truth" – are all beside the point. They exist as pictures, to be contemplated without prejudice and even, I believe, without association. Again, Fischer creates a unique situation in which the referent of the photograph disappears into the picture, and we are held at the surface the image, with no place else to go and no desire to go any other place.

That was the pull I felt when I first saw these photographs, an attraction toward them and toward nothing and no one else and no other place, no elsewhere. I remember also being deeply unsettled by this because it was so superficial, and it provoked something like an almost pure or abstract desire. The pool portraits are deliberately erotic photographs without referencing any other part of the body except the face. Their erotism is of the face and the surface without antecedent experience, without past or future. Completely guiltless, simply images to be desired, not even bodies, the disembodied experience of pleasure itself. In the series, the experience repeats itself over and over, with slight variations, never yielding more, or less, than the first experience, holding us at the same moment, the same promise.

It is remarkable how Roland Fischer has formulated such a hovering

approach to what has always been a concrete medium, and to do it through its very concreteness and specificity. Perhaps we have reached the point, as human beings, when we can do something far more difficult with images than use them to enjoy the world: we can enjoy them in and for themselves.