

Size does matter

Seduction and "Post-photographic Abstraction" in the work of Roland Fischer

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However much it might seem like a contradiction, if we analyse Roland Fischer's work as a whole, it becomes impossible to define his monumental photographs in terms of the traditional genres of architecture and portraiture¹. Similarly, I think it's incorrect to associate his style of photography with the Dusseldorf School with which he only shares the use of large formats, a certain rigour in the construction of his images, and the development of exhaustive thematic series that he abandons and re-adopts at will.

In my opinion, the photographic output of the artist needs to be studied on the understanding that nowadays every image is an artifice into which technical circumstance and cultural convention flow, as a way of questioning over and over again our institutional models of representation. As such, I believe that the most important aspect of Fischer's work revolves around his insistent ambiguity. His photographs have a kind of internal intrigue that is born from the dialectic between the declaredly seductive potential of the themes and the observance of its formal rigour, forcing us to 'penetrate' beyond the surface. In this sense, the photographs recollect an old aim of painting: to make us see what we would not otherwise see; to make us know what would otherwise remain unknown...

In his studies on the optical unconscious, Rosalind Krauss recalled how, in this respect, the American painter, Frank Stella said that the person whom he admired most was the baseball player Ted Williams, whose eyesight was supposedly so rapid that he was able to spot the seam of the ball as it flew over the base². The exceptional visual skills of the sportsman attracted the painter because of his ability to enlarge the spectrum of the visible and overcome natural sight by discovering details in the world that we could not otherwise see and thereby accessing a kind of "abstract state" in vision.

This way of seeing could also be ascribed to the work of Roland Fischer. In his photographs of people divested of all artifice, such as his impenetrable portraits "Nuns and Monks" (1984-1986), and also when he depicts them as if they were distant objects of desire suspended in time and space, as in his sensual, though distant, women in "Los Angeles

Portraits" (1990-1994), or even more so when he digitally modifies the architectural details of corporative buildings until they are transformed into something almost abstract ("Facades", 1998-2011), in all of them, Fischer manages to extract the maximum scenographic potential from the photographic medium. But, in contrast to the photographs of Struth or Gursky (to name two of the more conspicuous figures from the Dusseldorf School), which use their large format in order to underline the spatial severity of constructions offering dizzying amounts of information on the places depicted, Fischer's eye "reconfigures" reality under his own rules and the photographic frame is always perceived as an "open window" into that continuous fabric of reality. It isn't just enlarged, it is "supplanted". In this sense, the work of Roland Fischer seems to manifest Oscar Wilde's phrase that "The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible."

Fischer makes us see what is present but what usually remains unseen, by enlarging this "visibility" (or correcting it digitally). The format he uses is both elemental and effective: he simply reduces the frame and enlarges the format. The architectural representation appears with the same apparent objectivity and critical distance as the portraits. Within this rectangle images are crystalised, you might say, but when seen all together they remain dissolved. And it is in this moment that we discover that "size does indeed matter", and that the "post-photographic" abstractions of Fischer almost appear like an enigma – as Baudrillard put it – "like a reality that is more real than what is real."

As such, we would have to agree with those who suggest that in this new century the visual arts have become common ground for a "diffuse pictoriality"³ in which nothing is exactly photography, nor is it painting but rather an "image", plain and simple. And it is, in fact, this polysemic and deconstructive value of images that has recently served to reformulate traditional pictorial styles, as well as to sediment the different strategies of hybridization that typifies postmodernism⁴.

We have already spoken about how Roland Fischer works intensively on series of works, but this work in series is not conceptual; it never consists in the repetition of the same (standardization) but rather on a variation on a theme. The artist also works with easily identifiable iconic genres

which form the base of recognition from which he attempts to establish a complicity and a certain “redundant drive” that raises the inevitable objectivisation of the photograph. The photograph is thus revealed as the only medium capable of demonstrating that genres are based on a classification of acts of language that operate within images. In other words, we can talk about “genres of images” in the same way that we can talk about “genres of discourse”. We can certify the belief that all photographic acts are geared more towards the “production of images” than in the “recording of realities”⁵. So basically, we are faced with an exercise in “paradoxical documentary-making”, because the stamp of verisimilitude that organizes these series into a connotative form, survives beneath the form of a “conscious simulacrum” that turns each image into a source for aesthetic emotion.

On occasions, above all when Fischer works with architecture, and especially in his series “Facades”, the referential and descriptive reasoning behind the motifs chosen is made redundant, thereby creating the sensation that we are looking at virtually abstract modules, that multiply under the principles of fractal seriality and unlimited auto-production. This in turn becomes a crude metaphor for the loss of identity of the polis beneath the tautological seduction of capitalism. This abstract city, abandoned to its own devices, can no longer be defined by its urbanistic, social or communal functions. Instead, it is in some ways a city that has been alienated from its duties. This has turned Roland Fischer into a photographer from what Peter Sloterdijk calls the “epilogue age”⁶.

But Fisher doesn’t just extract buildings from their urban context, he also takes them from their time-space connotations, even subjecting them to a formal examination that accentuates the tensions that exist between “time in history” and “time in the image”. This is especially evident in the historical reconfigurations of his most recent photographic series, “Cathedrals and Palaces” (2004-2009) and “New Architectures” (2005-2011) in which he deconstructs “à la cubism” emblematic buildings from modernist architecture, like Barragan, Le Corbusier or Oscar Niemeyer. More than any of his other works, they seem to be calculated pictorialist attempts and support the statement of the French film director Eric Rohmer that “Any organisation of shapes within a flat surface derives from pictorial art...”⁷

But the visual seduction that enlivens the majority of these works is a trap that the artist sets for us in order to warn us against any kind of interpretative Manichaeism⁸. Fischer is conscious that nowadays the power of an image does not come from the link that it establishes with reality or with history – which are concepts that are in a constant state of recession. Instead it comes from the relationship that is developed between a mysterious surface and ourselves, beginning with our retina, but passing immediately into our brains. Fischer’s images “feign” and interrogate the viewer on their own way of seeing and this sensation grows when the use of digital media comes into play, which isolate them even more from their historical and functional context. Because digital images represent the ability to free yourself from the clutches of history and the limitations of geographical space. This creates its own paradox in the life of an artist who travels compulsively across all five continents.

¹ In an interview also included in this volumen, the artista himself states: “When the object that I photograph is, for example, an architectural object, the final image cannot be reduced to a category labeled architectural photography...”

² Rosalind Krauss: “The Story of the Eye.” *New Literary History* (Winter 1990), 21(2), pp 283-298.

³ Valerie Picaude. “Clasificar la fotografía, con Perec, Aristóteles, Searle y algunos otros...” in *La confusión de géneros en fotografía*. Ed. Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2004.

⁴ Javier Panera: *Emociones Formales. Reflexiones sobre el inconsciente pictórico en la fotografía contemporánea*. Junta de Castilla y León. Salamanca, 2004.

⁵ Víctor del Río: *La fotografía objeto. La superación de la estética del documento*. Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2010.

⁶ Peter Sloterdijk: *Crítica de la razón cínica*, 1983, Ed. Siruela, Madrid, 2003. Quoted by Ivan de la Nuez: “Fotografía después de la ciudad” in Sergio Belinchón. *Ciudad*, Lunwerg, 2003.

⁷ Eric Rohmer. “Les citations picturales dans les contes moraux et les comedies et proverbes” in *Pauline à la plage d’ Eric Rohmer*, Paris, Yellow Now, 1990.

⁸ We are referring to seduction in the sense described by Baudrillard in his work *On Seduction* (1979), whereby part of the etymology of the Latin word *Seducere* refers to “being apart” or “deviating from the path”. In the words of the writer, “... it refers to what deviates, what leaves the path, that makes it enter in the great game of simulacra, what appears and disappears... More than anything else, it is a strategy of displacement..”