

Roland Fischer's Photographic Work and Structuralism

Roland Augustin

The beginnings of Roland Fischer's photographic work lie in the early 1980s, the period after documenta 6 (1977), when the German — then West German — art scene was transformed insofar as photography was reinvented within the context of art. The work of the founders of the "Düsseldorfer School of Photography" Bernd and Hilla Becher, was exhibited in Kassel: The new photography, which had initially been inspired by the 1975 exhibition "New Topographics" in Rochester, New York, was able to establish itself. A photography characterized by its "non-engagement" and a "non-judgemental connotation" was celebrated. It was a photography focused on an approach to landscape that was post-industrial, non-sublime, and based on a topographical and detached registration of the motif.

Various photographers also transferred these principles to the depiction of people. Roland Fischer is certainly to be counted among the Germans working along these lines; he photographed the individuals depicted in his portrait series (as is also the case in Thomas Ruff's work) with a calm and serious facial expression, presenting themselves largely neutrally in terms of their temperament. Roland Fischer was the first to create and exhibit larger than life-sized portraits, for example, in the New York Goethe-Institut, where, within a conceptual context, he had shown a series of monumental portraits in the format 190 × 130 cm as early as 1981.¹

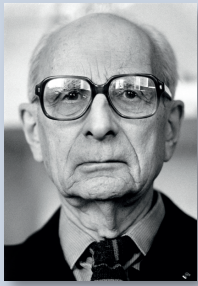
The new photography that was embraced so enthusiastically in the early eighties seemed to represent a decisive shift in photography within the context of art. Particularly in its virtually documentary "objectivity" and neutrality, it no longer sought to emulate Bauhaus-based photographic practice in the sense of the light compositions that László Moholy-Nagy was already demanding before the Second World War had ended. This route, which was taken up by Otto Steinert and the "subjective photographie" movement and then revived after the war, now seemed to have reached its end. It is a telling sign that no work by Steinert is reproduced in the volume on photography, its history, and its influence on the arts that was assembled by Evelyn Weiss and Klaus Honnef and published in 1977 to coincide with documenta 6 — in the text, his preparatory role is mentioned only briefly.² Since then, photographers have looked for the most part (if at all) to models from the history of photography, such as Albert Renger-Patzsch, who — in his role as a protagonist of objectivism — is now often mentioned in connection with the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The same is true for August Sander, who is also known as a photographer of the New Objectivity and is often mentioned in connection with the new photography of contemporary art. One could easily see this situation as another case of history repeating itself on a new level. In the secondary literature, Roland Fischer's work is continually associated with that of the "Düsseldorf School of Photography"; in any case, he played a major part in the programmatic shift in contemporary art photography. It can be declared at the outset that there is absolutely no doubt that Roland Fischer greatly influenced the photography boom in German art. However, the question also arises as to the extent to which his position is distinct from that of the "Düsseldorf School."

In this context, Lyle Rexer's 2011 comment on Roland Fischer's twenty-first-century series "Façades" becomes surprising: "Following a strategy common to American photographers of the 1950s, Fischer has deliberately decontextualized these facades ... and this can have the unsettling effect of making even a detail into a seemingly endless and overwhelming repetition."³ If Roland Fischer's abstracted images of the architectural facades of globalized cities were to have something in common with the strategies of American photographers of the 1950s, this would represent a position opposed to the mainstream, which discovered its new identity precisely by overcoming the protagonists of photographic and artistic subjectivism.⁴ Particularly in the 1950s, the motif's isolation from its

Façades WTC

New York 1999, 180 × 125 cm

Roland Fischer | New Photography | 1984–2012



Claude Lévi-Strauss

Roland Fischer 1983, 190 × 130 cm

¹ Peter Weibel, "Reflexionen ausgelöst von Roland Fischers Fotografien," in Roland Fischer, Portraits: Ausgewählte Arbeiten 1979–1983 (Munich, 1983), pp. 5–7.

² Evelyn Weiss, "Einführung in die Abteilung Fotografie," and Klaus Honnef, "Fotografie zwischen Authentizität und Fiktion," in documenta 6, ed. Manfred Schneckenburger (Kassel, 1977), p. 8 (pp. 7–10) and pp. 11–27.

³ Lyle Rexer, "Clearing: Roland Fischer and the Transformation of Photography," in Roland Fischer—photoworks 1984–2011 [exh. cat.: DA2, Salamanca 2011], p. 12f (pp. 12–14).

⁴ For example, Aaron Siskind's Chicago Facade 7 or Los Angeles 2, of 1949.

⁵ Max Weber, "Tradition and now," in Photographic Art 3, no. 1 (1916), p. 11. (cited in: Michel Frizot, Neue Geschichte der Fotografie (Cologne, 1998), p. 312.)

⁶ László Moholy-Nagy, von material zu architektur (Mainz and Berlin, 1929; repr., 1968), p. 33.

⁷ Julian Heynen, "Oberfläche als Metapher," in Thomas Ruff, Porträts [exh. cat.: Galerie Mai 36] (Luzern, 1988). See also, e. g.: Boris von Brauchitsch, "... die Beleuchtung ist flächendeckend." Zu den Fotografien von Thomas Ruff," in Thomas Ruff and Boris von Brauchitsch, Thomas Ruff [exh. cat.: Museum für Moderne Kunst] (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 15 (pp. 7–18): "Zerstreut wie die Hängung ist auch ihr Inhalt. Was übrigbleibt, ist der fotografisch eingefrorene Bruchteil einer Begebenheit, eine ‚reizvolle Oberfläche‘ in vergrößertem, vergrößertem Raster, noch ärmer an ergründbaren Inhalten als die Fassaden der Gesichter und Gebäude."

⁸ On the interaction between modernity, museum, and photography, see: Douglas Crimp, Über die Ruinen des Museums (Dresden and Basel, 1996), pp. 34, 37, 123, and 133.

⁹ This trend can also be recognized in the work of Andreas Gursky, for example. Here again, digital alterations — i.e., subjectivistic interventions — have long since been accepted by the artist. In Gursky's work, however, they do not go so far as to dominate the visual character of the motifs; instead, they serve to reinforce the realistic image. Klaus Honnef assumes that digital photography could bring about a renewal of the subjective approach: Klaus Honnef, "Von der Realität zur Kunst: Fotografie zwischen Profession und Abstraktion," in Deutsche Fotografie — Macht eines Mediums [exh. cat.: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn] (Cologne, 1997), p. 191 (pp. 186–192).

¹⁰ Roland Fischer, "Statement," in: Roland Fischer, 2011, p. 18.

¹¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology (New York, 1963), p. 21.

real-world context was seen as a source of subjective-creative potential, one that could achieve a degree of abstraction comparable to that of the abstract painting that was emerging at the time. In Germany, it was primarily followers of Steinert who discovered tendencies akin to Op Art and also the path to seriality in generative photography. This route also led through the concept of structure. Max Weber still considered structure to be identical with an inner world.⁵ This also corresponds to the usage of the term at the Bauhaus, by Moholy-Nagy, for example.⁶ Schmollegger Eisenwerth, who was also a companion of Steinert in photo-theoretical terms, spoke in 1952 of a new ornamental style that had dominated the art of the twentieth century. For him, *Struktur* also ceased to be a concept penetrating to the heart of the material world, but was rather an external phenomenon related to textures, such as tracks in tar, water surfaces, etc. The emphasis on the idea that the new photography — since 1975, a recognized field of contemporary art — concentrates on nothing but the depiction of surfaces particularly stresses the neutrality as well as the intentional lack of content in the motifs. The concentration on surface has become a topos of art scholarship.⁷ One reason for this interest in photography's emptiness in terms of subject matter surely derives from the fact that the origins of the photographic as a field of contemporary art are to be found in the anti-aesthetic qualities of photography. In the 1970s, photography provided a means to attack "high" — i.e., autonomous, auratic, and modern — art. Photography's entrance into the museums must thus be seen as one of the victorious battles in this struggle against modern art. This required that everything "artistic" first be removed from photography, and the qualities described above were surely conducive to this strategy. We should also not forget that photography's large formats, in particular, served to signalize the medium's demands for a place within the museum — and thus to be viewed within that context where photography had once been intended to act as a subversive force against "high" art.⁸ By now, it can be seen that contemporary art's power to assimilate is strong enough that it can incorporate the assaults of originally non-aesthetic techniques into itself and that its aura has also expanded to encompass these techniques. The liberation of photography from the aesthetic also (inevitably) demanded that the subjectivist approach of the 1950s be sacrificed — an approach that constantly had to demonstrate the medium's aesthetic adequacy and was thus still bound to the modernist equation of the aesthetic with the idealization of the artistically active subject. This included not only the "subjective photographie" movement, but also photographic positions oriented toward the more objectivizing approaches of Concrete Art, such as those of Kilian Breier or Gottfried Jäger. With this critical analysis of avant-garde modernism after the Second World War, postmodern contemporary art made its way into the field of photography in the manner described above. With its motifs drawn from the waning Industrial Era, it also introduced the new photographic neutrality into the postmodern museum.

On the one hand, Roland Fischer's photography is a part of this development; on the other hand, it occupies an oppositional position. His work has been shown multiple times with that of Thomas Ruff or Thomas Struth, and it is true that there is an affinity between the monumental portraits of the series "Nuns and Monks" and portraits by Ruff and Struth. The facade photographs — like Ruff's images of architecture — also refuse to convey a sense of what is going on behind them. At the same time, Roland Fischer's work is refreshingly relaxed when it comes to its relationship to those compositional techniques formerly considered to be typically "subjectivist" within the context of photography. These can be recognized in the decontextualizing cropping of the image, but also in the montage techniques, such as the superimposing of two motifs — which, in analog photography, can be achieved by sandwiching and simultaneously enlarging two negatives (or diapositives), for example. In Roland Fischer's

photography, the series “Cathedrals and Palaces” and “new architectures” accomplish this type of superimposition through digital rather than analog techniques. However, this initially plays no role in the completed image, whose results clearly recall montages such as those produced by Steinert in the 1950s. It is true that the conceptual approach is missing in Steinert’s work — he does not work serially, because he is actually interested in autonomous, individual images. Nonetheless, it is easy to see that the explicit rejection of subjectivist techniques no longer plays a role in Roland Fischer’s photography:⁹ “In my recent project ‘new architectures’ I explore these phenomenon by transforming spaces/ structures in a sort of cubist tradition, simultaneously representing different vantage points. This result is, in a way, like a ‘third’ reality and may demonstrate that even in photography meaning is not limited by what is recognizable.”¹⁰ Roland Fischer articulates two key concepts in his statement: simultaneity and structure. With the former, he takes up a train of thought that points back to the modernist avant-garde of Cubism. With the term “structure,” he makes reference to a methodological concept that played an important role in the scholarship, but also in the art, of post-war modernism. At this point, the question arises as to whether Roland Fischer takes a structuralist view of humanity in his photography. Some aspects support this thesis: In his collective portraits, he develops a dynamic relationship between the individual and the whole, and his artwork forms the structure, i.e., it determines the relationship, that ties the plurality of individual images of soldiers, pilgrims, workers, or farmers into a collective whole. The opposite is true of the series “Nuns and Monks”: Here it is the individual image that serves to represent an association of individuals, which forms a collective whole. The “Cathedrals and Palaces” operate along the same lines by defining a relationship between interior and exterior. Beyond this, Roland Fischer sets universally relevant accents: on the one hand, the examination of the facades of a globalized world and, on the other hand, the worldwide character expressed through the continuation in China of the “Pool Portraits,” a series begun in Los Angeles. The artist takes a network of dichotomous systems — interior-exterior, subjective-objective, collective-individual, East-West — as his starting point and uses it to form his aesthetic structure. His motifs are symbolic correspondences, the form of his content. One of the great minds of Structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, once expressed himself very similarly: “If, as we believe to be the case, the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds — ancient or modern, primitive or civilized (as the study of symbolic function, as expressed in language, so strikingly indicates) — it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure underlying each institution or each custom in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and other customs, provided, of course, that the analysis is carried far enough.”¹¹ Perhaps the connection established here between Roland Fischer’s photographic work and the Structuralism of Lévi-Strauss can also be supported by the fact that, in 1983, and thus unquestionably prior to the concretization of the artistic approach that applies to his current work, the photographer created and exhibited a large-format, black-and-white portrait of the scholar — thus documenting the fact that he had investigated this perspective upon the world. Despite the fact that Roland Fischer’s facades have little to say about the form of the buildings, thus intentionally dampening their own referentiality, their symbolic aspect nonetheless represents the giant, worldwide uniformity or interchangeability of buildings linked to globalized big business. The significance of Roland Fischer’s work in no way lies in that which it depicts, in its role as reproduction, but upon another level — whether this is referred to as “structure” or a “third reality.” In this respect, Roland Fischer’s work has the power to overcome Postmodernism.



Goethe-Institut New York, 1981

Roland Augustin

Ph. D. in Art History, Universität Trier

Since 1994

Member of the scientific staff at the Saarland.Museum, responsible for the photographic collection, later also coordinator of the electronic documentation

Since 2012

Coordinator of the modern collections at the Saarland.Museum