

The Reality of Roland Fischer's Art

Meinrad Maria Grewenig

When viewed fleetingly, Roland Fischer's "Salamanca, 2007" seems to offer a view into the luxurious, flamboyant-style vaulting of the cathedral. A closer look reveals that the work integrates an image of the facade into the view of the interior. A new and comprehensive impression of the Gothic is the immediate result. Roland Fischer's photographs directly attract attention, make us curious, and magically capture our interest. Despite their high-art tone and their charming appearance, the works seduce us into looking at them more intensively. In the course of apprehending the images, the photographs themselves never become exhausted or dispensable — even after repeated analysis over a long period of time. The large scale of the prints always leads to a twofold visual and analytic process. On the one hand, viewers find themselves moving further away from the work in order to perceive it as a whole; on the other hand, they move in closer and trace its visual indices in order to fathom the significance of the subject matter. This photography presupposes viewers in active movement. The photographs' format is large in relation to the human field of vision, and this renders them fundamentally distinct from every form of documentary or journalistic photography — the simultaneous view of the image equally demands a process of successive exploration. Roland Fischer's photographic works are thus pictorial events in the fullest sense of the term.

Upon taking a closer look at Roland Fischer's work between the years 1984 and 2012, it can be organized into seven large groups or series of works: "Nuns and Monks," "Los Angeles Portraits," "Chinese Pool Portraits," "Collective Portraits," "Cathedrals and Palaces," "new architectures," and "Façades." These seven series can be categorized among two larger groups of subjects: views of people and views of architectures. Seven series encompassing various themes and two meta-groups, "people" and "architecture," provide an artistic route from the individual to the whole and back to the individual. The subject matter driving Roland Fischer's work is always people: their state of mind, their self-presentation, and their social identification.

The distinctive dress of the monks and nuns, which — in formal terms — decisively places them outside our everyday experience, already singles them out and identifies them. The hood in N 31 of 1984 (see page 43) radically isolates the surface of the face from the rest of the image and draws our eye to the monk's eyes, nose, and mouth. This process of pictorial concentration is achieved through the monk's habit, whose raised hood envelops his head. Roland Fischer "infinitely" expands the surface of the face, so that the monk looks at us in full face, standing across from the viewer, who is obliged to step back in order to apprehend the image—thus increasing the physical distance between viewer and portrait. The monk's "monumental scale" provides him with an imposing presence. The image conveys a dimension of reality that suddenly reveals the depth of this expression of the human spirit's isolation and concentration. The artist is not interested in the possibility of identifying the person that is Monk N 31. In the photograph, the monk becomes a personification of contemplation and its charismatic presence. Generally, the images take aspects of human states of mind for their subject matter.

Cathedrals and Palaces Salamanca

2007, 254 × 169 cm

Roland Fischer | New Photography | 1984–2012

At first glance, Roland Fischer seems to follow a different route in the “Collective Portraits.” He multiplies the portraits: in “Pilgrims” (see page 86/87), for example, to encompass 1050 views. This great quantity suggests a great diversity, whereby the image comes together into a sort of “tapestry” of faces, whose scale causes the installation to fully surround its viewers. The overall impression of the image as seen from a distance and a detailed inspection from up close convey two states of experience: These are simultaneously present within the image, but viewers can only synthesize them in succession and with the help of their memory. In terms of the experience of reality, successiveness and simultaneity are brought so close together that, although still not interchangeable, they are mutually dependent in their dialectical articulation of the visual statement. In Roland Fischer’s work, insight into the image occurs within the spatial experience at this interstice of the event.

This constructive dimension emerges as an essential and defining element in “Cathedrals and Palaces,” a series that began with the twenty-first century. These works’ production requires not only the photograph taken by the artist, but also the digital post-editing of the individual images, which are then superimposed. In “Barcelona, 2004” (see page 102), the interior and the exterior of the Barcelona Cathedral are united in a way that produces a comprehensive concept of this Gothic architecture. Ignoring the surrounding context of the architecture leads, on the one hand, directly into the heart of the image of the Barcelona Cathedral. On the other hand, this path to insight is not produced through a confirmation of its context. Roland Fischer divorces the view from its localization and then, in a much more comprehensive sense, recombines it into a new image. While doing so, he avoids those fixed mental models anchored in the foundations of human recognition — but without watering down recognizability — and applies a new, fresh strategy of epistemological access to reality. In trying to decipher the image, viewers feel their way from semantic network to semantic network and learn that Roland Fischer has integrated both the semantic associations of the monumental architecture and viewers’ bodily experience of successive insights into the simultaneous structure of the image. This reconstruction of the strategies behind the image’s production should not be allowed to obscure the fact that these result in extremely fascinating and appealing works that reveal previously inaccessible perceptual dimensions of the Gothic and the Barcelona Cathedral.

In the “Façades” (starting on page 132), every form and concept of recognition has been eliminated. While the reference of the series title is plausible on the basis of our previous knowledge about images, it cannot be verified through the work. The fact that this group of works gathers the results of Roland Fischer’s “discoveries” on facades is taken for granted. While Roland Fischer mentions aspects of globalization, which permit a global repertoire of images and forms to appear, these have no bearing on his specific process of abstraction. This form of abstraction is new and is fundamentally different from the abstraction of the early twentieth century. One hundred years ago, art turned its

gaze away from the objective aspect of the world and artists radically simplified its mimetic aspect: The result was that artistic means were used to create new realities. With his own form of abstraction, Roland Fischer does not assault the unity of objective relationships in order to reconfigure them, but to break up the empirical concept consisting of locality and localization and to turn his attention elsewhere. His abstraction renders images of the world in a new elementariness: While its origins are to be found in the facades, it pushes forward into new dimensions in the act of its artistic realization. A reproduction of the complete reality is to be found within the depiction of the motif — stripped of its location, its potential to be located, and its potential to be concretely and specifically identified. For Roland Fischer, the individual image is the medium within a serial process that explores and elevates the concept all the way to its limits. The individual images are both self-sufficient events and a part of an overarching exploratory concept. In this way, Roland Fischer's art opens up an important new path. He creates images that make reference to art as it has already been seen and created, but which are photographs of specific places in the world — without being either reproductions of artworks or their details. With his images, Roland Fischer creates this art in a new form. The process of discovery and thematic distancing in respect to the neighboring work is of decisive importance in this context. The roots of Roland Fischer's art extend deep into the medial possibilities of our world and our time. His art operates using elements of reality; however, it radically intensifies and isolates them and reconfigures them within its creative process. In this way, comprehensive new concepts based on an impression of reality are created through an artistic process that possesses a direct and immediate evidence and greatly expands the spectrum of our epistemological and experiential relation to the world. Roland Fischer's work engages in a process of abstraction, but it simultaneously creates a new synthesis. In this process, the artist persistently avoids those strategies of recognition anchored in the human psyche, but without surrendering recognizability. Roland Fischer has focused his efforts on a new, fresh strategy of epistemological access to imagery. This opens up new dimensions of cognition and our sense of meaning. Three artistic aspects converge in the context of the production of Roland Fischer's art: (1) the potential of photography, as a technical artistic medium, to capture a specific moment, an instant, a series of events within a photograph, (2) the artistic concept that attaches itself to the photograph and that fully defines the structured organization of the time spent in arriving at the motif and creating the photo itself, (3) the possibilities offered by the series for exploring all of those artistic conditions that are the ultimate source of the individuality of each artwork. In the process surrounding the conception of his work, Roland Fischer has combined these three dimensions in such a way that they form extensive independent and defined groups of activities within his art, but he has brought them so close together that they are intimately intertwined and causally related to one another. At every moment, Roland Fischer gives form to and is in complete control of all three dimensions. For him, the art of photography is, on the one hand, the production of a perfect image with medial presence, but, on the other hand, also the mastery of the process leading to the image.

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1984-1992

Saarland Museum Saarbrücken, acting director since 1989

1992-1999

Director of the Historisches Museum der Pfalz in Speyer, executive chair of the Museumsstiftung

Since 1999

CEO of the World Cultural Heritage Völklinger Hütte – Europäisches Zentrum für Kunst und Industriekultur

Since 2011

Executive chair of the Stiftung Saarländischer Kulturbesitz