

Faces and Facades: Rich and Poor Images in the Work of Roland Fischer

Julian Stallabrass

At least since Kodak made photography a pastime for ordinary people, there has been a problem for those who would make distinctive photographs, meant to be kept and treasured: how to keep them separate from the mass of poor pictures? Those masses were flimsy, conventional, badly formed, vulgar, sentimental, and mostly appealed only to those who had taken them or appeared in them. There were also far too many of them, they could be found everywhere, and as fast as they were dumped on the garbage heap, they were replaced — more than replaced — by others just as bad. Digitisation, of course, made things far worse, as the marginal cost of making one more image effectively fell to zero, and as cameras (poor ones, at that) also multiplied beyond belief.¹

What was the photographic artist to do? The obvious move was to restrict supply through limited editions: not to make many but very few. Another was to increase the quality and size of the photographic print beyond that of anything that could be made using poor means. Another was to introduce art-historical references, especially to traditional media other than photography, to assure viewers of the maker's education, and their own. Lastly, photography's indiscriminate ability to record detail was bound and tamed by artistic sensibility, so that the viewer could not be sure what was in the world and what was the product of the artist's imagination.

All of these features are found in Roland Fischer's work, pushed to such an extent that we may begin to doubt whether we are looking at photographs at all. In the 'New Architectures' series, where exteriors interpenetrate interiors, the changed character of photography is made absolutely clear. Old cameras contained a small dark chamber in which a single window was briefly opened to admit a burst of light. Digital cameras mostly let in light the whole time, and the moment of 'exposure', now a cut made through a continual flood of photons, is taken for elaborate processing into the compressed and heavily mediated artefact that is the JPEG. Likewise, Fischer's 'cameras' — the rooms and outer walls of modernism and the old religions — are opened, superimposed, processed data forms.

In the 'Facades' series, the art-historical references are very insistent: here is Mondrian, Stella, Halley or Agam, and more generally the long tradition of geometric abstraction. There is a close connection, naturally, between such painting and the buildings themselves, with influences and knowing references running both ways. Fischer does much to play up the flatness of his photographs, and their status as objects (by not using frames), bringing them formally close to the paintings they refer to. He does this partly by stripping away the contingent detail that photography records: these facades know no inhabitants, no irregularity, no weathering and no dirt. When light and shadow act upon them, it is to emphasise their geometry, never to dissolve it. In

front of the pictures, it is easy to forget that these facades are the skins of business buildings which have been decorated for commercial effect. The abstraction of their composed surfaces masks the abstraction of money. Equally, the pictures bear on abstraction, in both senses, of photography: Fischer's prints are plainly closer to the polished and cleansed surfaces of the dataset than the messy chemical products of the analogue age. Their perfection is that of the sharpening filter, the clone tool and the despeckler.

In the writings about Fischer, the word 'classical' keeps recurring, and it is easy to see why. His work is highly ordered, controlled, linear, symmetrical and a little chilly. In its tense encounter with the modern, classicism reinforced its formalist tendencies to conservative and even authoritarian effect. Modernity is Fischer's main subject: the faces of modern business, the faces of the modern masses and those of modern beauty. The threat of modernity — of massification, standardisation, too great a dynamism, loss of control, of the unforeseen consequences of technological innovation and ever-growing urbanisation, and the erosion of elite culture in mass production — were tempered by classical regulation, bringing about Le Corbusier's calm engines for contemplation and Mies' elegant business towers. Yet the threat — old, burrowing, even Communist — was always present. Wyndham Lewis was one of its most eloquent Cassandras, warning the cultural elite of their imminent extinction by the mass, against which they must armour themselves with hard geometric form, thrusting aside any dalliance with feminine softness and the indulgences of an interior life.²

If these references seem the stuff of ancient history — of a long-dead avant garde and an equally extinct romance with and terror of modern mass production — this is because of a failure to grasp modernity's revival, particularly in the East. (Actually, it never went away, and its apparent slumber was the product of the settling of the TV age, and the quietist, conservative philosophies with which it was cosseted in certain affluent spots of the world.) Above all, in China the dizzying scale and dynamism of modernity is seen in full measure. Already, migration reverses itself, as educated Westerners look for jobs in China and India. One of those migrants, Fischer was unsurprisingly struck by China's vast crowds and apparent social uniformity.³ He made very large grids of individual portraits, 450 to a frame, of farmers, workers, students and soldiers, following Mao's categorisation of Chinese society. The format is rigidly uniform, and from afar the effect is one of a pattern governing the mass. Yet viewers can also move in close to see the faces and clothing in great detail, and to see that each individual is named. Many of the faces seem utterly, and even comically, particular to that person when set in such a stern and stark frame. Social clues are not entirely absent — the students look much better groomed than the farmers, for example — but they are attenuated enough for the focus to fall on physiognomy.

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China represents a dangerous political and economic experiment for the West and its values. Its economy is highly successful, and has so far withstood the financial crisis better than any in the West. Against neoliberal orthodoxy, it is heavily managed and strategically governed. It offers the dynamism of a market economy without democracy. Its autocracy seems more modern and efficient than democracies hobbled by public opinion and business interests. Fischer's artistic response bears on that threat by making a sublime spectacle of an individually diverse range of people bent to a uniformity that is imposed upon them. Contingency is not eliminated here, and while it does give the effect of the data sublime in which the viewer is flooded with such a magnitude of data that it is impossible to make sense of, the detail remains under rigid control. It is as if the artist took on the role of the ordering state.

Fischer's response to the new world offered by China is clearly seen when he returns to an old series using Chinese subjects. In 'Los Angeles Pool Portraits' (1989-93), he photographed women immersed up to their shoulders, their bare skin cut by the waterline, with backgrounds uniformly coloured. The subjects looked directly at the camera. Despite the setting, these were not people stripped of their social being. Indeed, they were meticulously made-up and coiffeured.

The Chinese subjects show less variety than the Los Angeles residents, though, as if to compensate, they are given names rather than numbers: aside from their greater racial homogeneity, they are younger and more flawless in appearance. There are no breaks in the cosmetic façade. They do not necessarily look at the lens, and quite a few of them gaze upwards, as if alert to or inspired by something. Once again, individuality — which is a far more powerful factor in each single picture than in the grids — competes with the uniformity of the series. The Los Angeles subjects look at the camera, at the viewer and, it seems, inside themselves. The Chinese often look upwards and outwards — as in Socialist Realist painting (in which there were quite a number of bathers) — to a future dawn, or a future at least.

¹ Hito Steyerl has recently used the very useful term 'poor images' to refer to the low-resolution digital files that are shared online. See 'In Defense of the Poor Image', e-flux: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>

² Much of Lewis' work explored such themes. See, for example, Wyndham Lewis, *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society, 1914-1956*, ed. Paul Edwards, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Rosa 1989. See also Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1979.

³ Alix Rozes, 'Interview with Roland Fischer', in *DA2. Domus Artium, Roland Fischer: Selected Works from 1984-2011*, Salamanca 2011, p. 66.

⁴ Catherine Francblin, 'Roland Fischer oder der Anspruch der Form', in *Pinakothek der Moderne, Roland Fischer*, Munich 2003, p. 23.

In an essay about Fischer's photography, Catherine Francblin makes the point that the grids of Chinese social types and the pool women could be seen as facades or architectural interiors and exteriors.⁴ Equally, buildings can be read as portraits. This thought takes us close to the old modernist and Surrealist insight that buildings act as metaphors for minds. The clean, ordered, airy rooms of Le Corbusier's houses are reflective and productive of classical mental order. In the Surrealist imagination, the well-presented décor of the bourgeois living room or library squats above the darkness, chaos and filth of the basement below. Fischer sometimes puts together building facades in short sequences, though not in anything like the scale of the Chinese social types. What this suggests is that the standardising and massifying effects of modernity may also apply to its aesthetic products. The facades of corporate buildings show some variation, but within the guidelines of the determining grid; they are no more various or free of genre than the standardised beauty of models.

No artist or dealer or museum has much control over their images anymore. 'Poor' images of Fischer's work, in Steyerl's use of the word to mean low-resolution digital files, circulate online, jostling with billions of others in the massive and fast-changing image commons. With the 'Chinese Pool Portraits', there is a lot of uncertainty about what we are looking at. It is tempting to read them as people, out of habit. Yet, as with adverts, we know that they are not that: more a dataset, some element of which includes the light given off a carefully chosen portion of flesh at a certain moment in highly controlled circumstances. In this way, no matter how touched we may be by the way a chin is raised, eyes are narrowed or hair falls, the contingent and the individual are infected with the standard and the processed. Classical regulation is of no help here — indeed, it is part of the problem. Standardisation washes back from subjects to art works. Fischer's perfection enacts and thematises the uniformity of museum photography. The rich images may turn out to be poor, after all.

Julian Stallabrass

Ph. D. in Art History, The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London

Julian Stallabrass is Professor in Art History at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. He is also a writer, curator and photographer. He lectures in modern and contemporary art, including political aspects of the globalised contemporary art world, postwar British art, the history of photography and new media art.

He is the author of *Art Incorporated*, *Internet Art and High Art Lite*, and is currently working on a book about photography and war. He curated the 2008 Brighton Photo Biennial.