

# *FAÇADES*

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Roland Fischer's series *Façades* presents very abstracted images of building façades. Stripped of contingencies of shadow and movement, tightly cropped to eliminate any specification of location or other connection to subject, and reduced to geometric formations, they appear resistant to interpretation. Their subjects are revealed only in their titles: *Suntory, Tokyo; Museum, Munich; nab, Melbourne; Uniqlo, Osaka; Wells Fargo, Dallas; Holiday Inn, São Paulo; Iglesias, Mexico City; High School, Utrecht*—a roster of corporations and institutions from around the globe. In the familiar territory of specifying language, a landscape of globalized culture becomes legible, and the vast, taut surfaces emerge as multivalent references to the abstract and obscured dynamics of late capitalism.

The shallow and repetitive character of the *Façades* images draws attention to the function of the “façades” of the series' title: the designs of these buildings take advantage of abstraction's now-commonplace genericism to offer signs of modernity that are apparently unprovocative and empty of meaning. They obscure the activities of the nominal institutional subjects behind them. The presentation of the façades renders sleek surfaces resistant to penetration or any kind of differentiation, and vision slides along their surfaces, suggesting the expedition of capital's undifferentiated commodity. As examples of neoliberal capitalist production they materialize the displacement of “the space of places with a space of flows.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The phrase belongs to Manuel Castells. See Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

This reading is apt and intentional, but the appearance of these abstract designs also enables a differently sited reference to earlier abstractions, specifically those of modern art movements such as Constructivism, Suprematism, and Neoplasticism. In this project, Fischer continues to expand on an interest that has informed his major photographic series: an inquiry into the nature and function of art, and, particularly in *Façades*, its place in a contemporary society in which a number of dynamics have profoundly altered the ways in which photographs—images of all kinds—are created, distributed, and received.

Fischer's practice has consistently engaged the large-scale image and typological structures, and his work shares some characteristics with that of Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, and Candida Höfer. Their images display an apparent pictorial objectivity that invites scrutiny and restrains it at the same time, holding viewers at the surface and deflecting attention from the ostensible subjects to an array of conceptual operations. Their works have been subsequently theorized through several critical iterations: as a new kind of objectivity, anti-aesthetic and disinterested; as media-critical spectacle; and as "tableaux" designed to create confrontation; and their position has been historicized as a nodal point for conceptual photography.

Fischer's projects, although they have some visual and conceptual similarities, are distinguished from them through the deployment of certain strategic contradictions. In three

series Fischer has fashioned a peculiar and contrarian hybridity by combining typological study with otherworldly imagery. The subjects of *Nuns and Monks* (1984–86) are people who have chosen to join a contemplative order—whose strongly held beliefs are reflected in their choice to inhabit a religious interiority—not anonymous individuals or a cast of types. In *Los Angeles Portraits* (1989–93), the blue water background isolates but is not neutral or inactive; its deep color and aleatory effects provide ambiguous depth and sometimes subtle movement, giving the pictures unexplained, quiet life. In *Chinese Pool Portraits* (2007), the blue water is utilized again, and in this series most of the women look away from the viewer, self-absorbed or distracted by something outside the container of the picture. Or, when they do gaze straight out, they look past the presumed viewer, not confronting but simply being. Instead of presenting disinterested, blank faces to be projected upon, the images of all of these series are somehow gently activated, and gesture towards or literally present some kind of spirit-infused or metaphysical state.

*Collective Portraits* (1997–2005), a project Fischer developed while he was in China, is different from these early series in conception and effect, initially seeming to refer back to typological and archival concerns. The works present different types of people categorized by the work or activity they engage: students, farmers, soldiers, pilgrims, workers. In each piece hundreds of individual portraits are aggregated

into vast gridded arrays. These come the closest to typological manipulation, with their strict alignment, the elimination of most differentiating detail through careful cropping, and their tight focus on the operation of comparison. Their sheer numbers invoke the archive, with its immense resource for meaning-making and potential for multiple interpretations. Yet the *Collective Portraits* also produce effects that exceed expectations of the typology, using huge scale to evoke physical response on the part of the viewer. The arrays, with the presentation of their virtually impossible-to-quantify mass, conjure a sublime effect, one that punctures neutrality and interrupts pure intellectual operation.

In these different series Fischer used strategies and marshaled elements of conceptual practices to explore aspects of the photographic—its indexical status, its archival capacities, its serial extensions—but also experimented with affect. Each series presents elements that elicit some strongly felt if not somatic experience, a dissonance that disturbs exclusively conceptual readings that might preclude metaphorical function. The projects engage an idea of the aesthetic, not as an expression of the beautiful, which these pictures often are, but to articulate an expansive idea of art's symbolic function and production of meaning.

Continuing this exploration, the series *Façades* (1997–2014) also constructs a complex field of inquiry into aesthetic function, employing the subject of Modernist abstraction not simply as a recuperative project but as a

Brechtian gesture that opens up a productive exchange between past and present. Utilizing the process of abstraction, its potential for metaphor, and its historical position, Fischer generates a multivalent discourse about the possibility of art's agency within a neoliberal culture that has foreclosed its independence. The procedures of that capitalism depend on the continuous abstraction of finance to displace products and labor with financial speculation. *Façades* in literal terms represents neo-liberal capitalism's co-option of modern art as a disguise. The series also gestures toward its own historically complex position within neoliberalism with its multiple operations of abstraction: the formal device of modern art and its specific historical reference to aspirations of transcendence; the process of defamiliarization that takes place in the operation of representation; a social procedure that recodes objects and which photography can be seen to produce alongside the abstraction of financial capital.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the *Façades* photographs are not themselves abstractions. They are depictions of subjects that have been carefully framed and structured to appear non-representational. With this operation Fischer points to the nature of photography as an abstracting procedure, the transformation of three-dimensional subject into two-dimensional image. He compounds this effect by revealing very little depth, or excluding it altogether from the

<sup>2</sup> A far more nuanced presentation of the deployment of abstraction has been made by Mark Godfrey. See Mark Godfrey, "Response to George Baker: Photography and Abstraction," in Alex Klein, ed., *Words without Pictures* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009), 285-87.

photographs; this obscures the actual subjects and emphasizes their flatness. Many of the pictured surfaces are virtually identical to their material matrix, creating confusion and anxiety about them as objects and their meaning, an effect Fischer takes full of advantage of in a related series, *Groups of Five* (1997–2014).<sup>3</sup> The large size of the *Façades* images allows the abstract patterning to accrue as a visual field and also, ironically, to defuse the spectacularity of its scale. Instead, the repetitive rhythm of the geometric patterns generates compositional movement, creating visual play rather than information.

<sup>3</sup> This series (unfinished but projected to be about twenty works in total) consists of groups of five images, much smaller in size than the *Façades* images. There is less indication of depth in each image, and the comparisons that arise from their serial arrangement enable them to be easily read as geometric abstractions, which further emphasizes the relationship to painted abstraction.

Abstraction is an operation in *Façades*, but it is also a subject that is interrogated in Fischer's constructions. His flattened and reductive images make reference to the historical moment of early modern art. Modern artists' development of a nonobjective art was informed by a variety of anti-materialist and spiritual doctrines. Their new visual languages rejected imitation of the visible world; they were, instead, intended to function as sign systems with metaphoric possibilities that would engage the ineffable and produce a new sublime. Fischer's mimicry of abstract motifs and compositions is an experimental construction of reference, one that deliberately aligns his project with the earlier artists' inventions. This suggests an interest in their motivations, and his evocation of them is a strategy to introduce and insert the conditions of abstraction's genesis.

In a statement about *new architectures*, a project that he began while working on *Façades*, Fischer remarked that its multiple-exposure images were transformations of “spaces/structures in a sort of cubist tradition... the result is, in a way, like a ‘third’ reality.”<sup>4</sup> Cubism’s multiple viewpoints, working as a metaphor, might indicate an unfixed or unreal position, an otherworldly perspective. Fischer achieves this in the *new architectures*, generating overlapping planes that make visual reference to the multiplied perspectives of Cubism. In *Façades* he develops something different in his implication of disparate historical moments: the picturing of abstraction becomes a way to refer to those early modern movements and to allude to the values that were invested in their ideal and idealistic forms. The *Façades* images activate a conversation among their institutional subjects and their neoliberal conditions with those of their modern counterparts; various functions of abstraction appear and disappear as subjectivities shift and meanings are continuously replaced.

The allusion to the invention of abstraction also references its earlier moment of representational crisis and the profound shift in forms and in expectations of artistic function. Abstraction constituted a radical break with traditional representation and a turn away from the pictorial. The operation of abstraction expanded the conceptual repertoire of aesthetic forms; in addition to representations of realities and the explication of their potential meanings, art might

<sup>4</sup> Roland Fischer, Artist Statement, “new architectures,” 2009. <http://www.rolandfischer.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/statementnewarchs.pdf>. Accessed July 1, 2014.

provide its own unique experience, prompting intellectual and somatic responses. It proposed art as an exemplary realm, independent of the world and capable of providing unique experiences that could both affect and exceed the conditions of social existence.

The *Façades* series occupies a similar moment of crisis and reflects anxiety about the function and status of art as meaningful production. Neo-liberal capitalism is informed by the idea of market exchange as society's fundamental dynamic, an ethic that directs all production.<sup>5</sup> Under neoliberalism, absorption into market conditions strips art of its independent critical status and its historical agency; art is merely one commodity indistinguishable from others. The digital forms that enable such a system produce a web of media that erases the differences and separations among art, documentation, text, photography, video, and animation. Untethered from its original purpose, the value of any object is not determined by intention or by its circumstances as real or virtual production but by its availability and capacity for utility at any moment: then art circulates as all images do. Aesthetics are devalued as a special instrument, and art is no longer a plausible other.<sup>6</sup>

Fischer activates several strategies to engage these conditions. There are numerous elisions and confrontations of abstraction and depiction or representation in *Façades*, playfully employed to complicate the material and theoretical operations of his subject and medium. As digitally produced

<sup>5</sup> This is drastically reduced from the description of neoliberalism developed by David Harvey. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital," 2012. <http://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital>. Accessed June 14, 2014.

images,<sup>7</sup> the photographs are both post-media objects and pictures of neoliberal institutions that contain them. Fischer has exploited photography's process of excerpting and flattening to create compositions that render his images' appearance more abstract, yet this also makes more apparent their modern art referents. As images they are not abstractions themselves but point to abstraction as a subject, implicating both its metaphorical function and its historical moment. That moment was precipitated, according to some theoretical accounts, by photography's capacity to represent reality more accurately than painted realism. The *Façades* images refer to this historical situation at the same time as they enact their own, and the alternation of abstraction and representation is iterated across their subtle variations. In some images the picture plane is identical to the surface being photographed, obliterating the difference between subject and object. In others the camera was tilted to a slight degree, allowing depth and creating a sense of space that draws attention back to their photographic status. Fischer uses photography, an abstracting medium, to represent abstraction, and, ironically, through that act of depiction, he also achieves its opposite.

Fischer makes use of the oppositional actions of abstraction and representation in another way. Images generate all types of possibilities: metonym, metaphor; a moment and its infinite extension; the circumstances of their own generation and of a parallel situation in the real world; attachment

<sup>7</sup> The *Façades* images were made with film cameras until 2007 when Fischer switched to digital cameras. All of the prints are digital prints, that is, printed from digital files.

to a subject or a referent as well as complete detachment. They operate as the façades of institutions do—covering, disguising, redirecting—and also critique these operations. As images, photographs do these things, and arguably also present a material difference, as objects, with a surface quality distinct from that of other media, and a capacity, material and conceptual, to produce sensation unlike painting or language. Fischer is interested in the problem of photography's difference, in its “either and” potential; and in each of his projects he has engaged some contradiction that suggests this aspect of real or bare life: the constant exchange of opposites, the “cascade of antinomies” that must be resolved, or at least accommodated, in everyday life.<sup>8</sup> Fischer generates a palpable sense of irreducibility and ambiguity and amplifies it by constructing *Façades* as a continuous exchange between representation and abstraction.

<sup>8</sup> Fischer quoted this phrase by Peter Wollen, the film critic, concerned with film's particular aesthetics and capacity to function as a system of signs, in an interview with the author, August 2, 2014.

These dynamics and their shifting among multivalent possibilities infuse *Façades* with a sense of liveliness and even agency. Different from Fischer's earlier series with their frisson of contradiction between seeming objectivity and the subtle gestures towards the symbolic, it is one that creates manifold affect. *Façades* extends beyond the resistance embedded in the act of exposing a neoliberal strategy, and its deployment of multiple inquiries suggests a dynamic subjectivity, one alluded to in the references to modern abstraction and asserted in the movement among registers of meaning proposed by the *Façades* project.

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A number of theorists have recently proposed that the appropriative activities that generate meaning-making in the neoliberal regime of affective economies constitute a new kind of subjectivity and individual agency. Fischer's *Façades* engages those theoretical positions with the re-introduction of modern abstraction and its positions, inserting them among what Fredric Jameson has called "the less palpable abstractions of the image or the logo, which operate with something of the autonomy of values of present-day finance capital."<sup>9</sup> Among them is the possibility of photographic function inscribed, not only on the level of depiction or information, but in the critical position generated in its alternating operations of symbolic meaning and real affect. In *Façades* Fischer constructs a productive conversation between historical moments and opens up a vigorous and activating interchange among positions and subjectivities.

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," in *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (summer 2003), 703.