

**A VOCABULARY OF
URBAN SURFACES
ROLAND FISCHER'S
UNIVERSAL SYMBOLS
OF A NEW ORDER**

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ICONOGRAPHY OF THE METROPOLIS

Lines, grids, rhombuses; circle, rectangle, and square; color fields characterized by strict reduction and highly aesthetic: an inventory of forms and structures. Photographs resembling painting. Rather than invented and constructed by a creative mind, they are found in cities and captured by camera. They are portraits: countenances of the urban environment, surfaces of buildings. Since the 1990s, Roland Fischer has photographed the façades of banks, corporations, and museums in the metropolises of the world. The images, a series of about a hundred façades, add up to a compendium of contemporary architecture, to a visual grammar of abstract forms. The face of new urbanity is transformed in images, similar to abstract paintings, replete with art-historical references. They tell of the way the world has changed, of a new global paradigm where money, technology, people, and goods flow unchecked across borders. Its aesthetic appearance is not rooted in the specific socio-cultural context; indeed, the iconography of signs is independent of geography, be it in Beijing, Tokyo, Shanghai, New York, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Osaka, Boston, Brasilia, Los Angeles, Paris, São Paulo, Singapore, Dallas, Madrid, Washington, Chicago, Toronto, Chongqing, or Montreal. The “image repertoire of a city,” its “categories of representation”¹ are homogenized supra-nationally.

¹ Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1994), 366.

PHOTOGRAPHY AFTER DOCUMENTARY REALISM

Roland Fischer's interest in architecture is not conceptually different from his interest in the human face. Just as his *Nuns and Monks*, the *Los Angeles Portraits*, the *Collective Portraits of Soldiers, Workers, Farmers and Students* and the *Pilgrims* are not portraits in a traditional sense, the *Façades* do not continue the tradition of documentary photography. Fischer has always been interested not so much in "representation as in the image," in abstraction.² In his series of cathedrals, for instance, he superimposes the exterior walls of a structure on its interior, so as to penetrate the shell and reveal the inside. Or he simultaneously combines, in a Cubist manner, views of secular modern spaces and structures photographed from various standpoints as in the *New Architectures* series. From a distance, his tableau of 1,050 individual photographs of pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela appears abstract like a pattern on a façade.

Roland Fischer already photographed urban surfaces when he was still living in Los Angeles, yet only in the metropolises of China did a conceptual project grow out of his interest in high-rise façades. "I was able to encapsulate two key aspects of the medium of photography here: the fact that each and every pixel of a photograph is always connected to reality, and the independent appearance of a photograph as an image without reference. From a distance one could perceive these photographs

² Roland Fischer, "Interview with Agar Ledo," in *Roland Fischer, Camino* (exh. cat., Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela / Diözesanmuseum Freising, 2003/04), 53.

quasi as Color Field paintings, at the same time however they remain a ‘classic’ picture of an object that can be seen somewhere. In the photographic image both aspects are interwoven and each detail has a dual meaning.”³ On the wall the photographs—technically perfect C-prints on acrylic measuring 180 by 125 centimeters, unframed and reflecting the light—appear like objects.

³ Fischer, 54f.

GLOBAL MASKS OF THE URBAN

What can photography do? What stories does it tell? How can its imagery be read? What statements does it make about the state of the world? When Fischer’s works show façades, they reduce the buildings to their surfaces, to design, décor, ornament. They present the skin that protects and hides the interior—the technology, the function and the people working or living inside—from the public. They do not show dwellings or the human dimension. Their specificity lies in absolute reduction: neither sky nor earth nor any environment serves to frame a subject or provide a backdrop. Rather, the subjects are isolated from any context and transformed into abstract images—each time a section standing for the whole, a *pars pro toto*, each time different and yet strangely standardized, be it an industrial corporation, a bank, a hotel, a university, a prison, the headquarters of a labor union, a city hall or a luxury store. The specific subject, place, and time are only indicated by the title of the work.

These “façades” appear like commentaries on power, appropriation, and assimilation. With the global dissemination of capital and technology the architecture of the city has changed. That is, not just through an “International Style” that developed from a desire to overcome the individual, the local, the national. Interiors seal themselves off—“fortress architecture”⁴—behind impenetrable façades.

⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 337.

GEOMETRY AND INTERPRETATIVE MODELS

Roland Fischer unfurls a wealth of images in the photographs of his *Façades* series—a compendium of symmetries, similarities, and differences. Where do those forms come from and what is behind them? Their affinity to painting is obvious in their allusions to Mondrian, Frank Stella, Peter Halley, and many others. Yet their origins lie well before European Modernism: under certain conditions of civilization and in different periods geometric forms exist—often they are archaic patterns of other cultures—that refer to the spiritual, the magical or the symbolic.⁵ *Patterns That Connect*,⁶ the global linkage of universal signs and symbols, points to the trove of images in collective memory that art and architecture draw on and that they, in turn, add to.

⁵ Jürgen Adam, *Magiciennes de la laine. Marokkanische Teppiche und die Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts* (exh. cat., Pinakothek der Moderne: Munich, 2013), 16.

⁶ To quote the title of a study by American art historian Carl Schuster, *Patterns That Connect: Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

In the 20th century, order, proportion, and balance were charged with transcendental significance. Today that “geometric mystification” has given way to other

associations, such as the structural homology of geometric forms and a geometrization of social space. Inspired by the ideas of the French Structuralists—ideas that also resonate in Roland Fischer’s work⁷—American painter Peter Halley describes in his essay “The Deployment of the Geometric” the transformation of the landscape, society and thought through geometry as regimentation. He sees his own painting as pictures of prisons, cells, and walls.⁸ Geometry as a reference to an interconnected world. And the human aspect? In *Flesh and Stone*, his study on the body and the city, Richard Sennett explains that “order means lack of contact.”⁹

Underlying the surface of Roland Fischer’s *Façades* are thus deeper layers of meaning. Either way, “what pictures want” is our attention, our “scopic drive.”¹⁰ May the viewer find aesthetic pleasure and be amazed by the fascinating visual diversity while perambulating through this volume.

⁷ See Roland Augustin, “Roland Fischers photographisches Werk und der Strukturalismus,” in *Roland Fischer, New Photography 1984-2012* (exh. cat., Saarland Museum: Saarbrücken, 2012), 19-23.

⁸ Peter Halley, “The Deployment of the Geometric,” in *Peter Halley, Collected Essays, 1981-1987* (Culver City [CA]: Lapis Press, 1988), 127-130.

⁹ Sennett, 21.

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want. The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72.