

**ROLAND FISCHER**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY, ARCHITECTURE AND ABSTRACTION**

Dieter Ronte

**Grain and Pixels**

Roland Fischer belongs to a generation that has made big contributions to the field of photography, based on the work of pioneering art photographers like Bernd or Hilla Becher (founders of the Düsseldorf school). With their architectural photographs, they paved the way for contemporary photography. They did not extol or interpret architecture. They just aspired to capture buildings on film with as much accuracy as possible, as if they were creating a historical document. And indeed there is a type of architecture, like that of many mining buildings in the industrial area of the Ruhr, which can only be known now through photographs. On occasions, these artists spent the whole day taking one single photograph, given that they did not want a single person or cloud to appear in it: nothing that would alter the building's whole singular image, neither in the foreground nor in the background. Any narrative element that might divert attention away from the building was forbidden. The photographs were analogue black and white ones, developed in a darkroom and then grouped into different series. Artists have always remained true to these principles as an artistic concept and as the basis of their work.

Today, with the fast developments in digital photography that have taken place over the last ten years, this new technique has come to be used increasingly in art photography. Roland Fischer has also adopted digital photography. On several occasions, he has pointed out that the use of digital or digitalized files has played a fundamental role in two of his projects: *Kathedralen* (Cathedrals) and *new architectures*. Digital image files can be manipulated at the artist's whim. The computer is their artist's studio while the darkroom is replaced by a mouse and a tablet pen. This new technique calls for new working methods. Generally speaking, Fischer uses a large-format camera with film (which he later digitalizes by scanning the photos) or, depending on the circumstances, a high-definition digital camera. (Indeed there continue to be situations or specific subjects for which he prefers to use film and more classic materials for aesthetic reasons). However, even in these cases the outcome is no longer dependent on the circumstances or on chance, as was habitual with analogue photography.

Before, the potential for modifying an image captured on film was fairly limited and thus care and attention were mainly focused on preparing the subject of the photograph. Most of the time was spent trying to get the scene right, because once the image was inside the "box", the copy then developed in the darkroom was the final outcome of the process. With digital photography, however, the process has been reversed and far more time is spent editing the image afterwards, during what is known as the post-production process.

Roland Fischer can constantly modify the outcome of his photographic work, touching the photos up by computer to fit in with his envisaged idea or the series' aesthetic premises so that the colour, format, linearity of the light and potential for trimming the original image coincide with its creator's artistic intentions. And spectators know that they cannot control or understand this process, just as before they did not control the outcome of analogue photos. They feel that these new photos make the same impact and have the same aura and aesthetic distance as, for instance, contemplation of a painting.

**Photography and Painting**

Roland Fischer is one of the first artists to have included what are known as *tableaux* in contemporary photographs. That is, large-format painting-photographs. In this way, the presence and significance of certain parts of the photograph are altered. In his film *Blow Up*, the Italian Michelangelo Antonioni reflected on this phenomenon, demonstrating the link between the contents and size of a photograph. The film's protagonist photographs a couple in a park but, when he blows the photo up in the laboratory, he comes across an unintended scene. The bigger the format, the larger the grain, but even so the person looking at the photograph can see a murder being committed in the bushes. In *Blow up*, the photograph is unexpectedly transformed, as opposed to the artist voluntarily and consciously guiding this process by using modern digital techniques.

This idea of enlargement gave rise to the emergence of an effect that we can observe in the history of art today, not just in painting but also in the work of photographers like Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Jeff Wall or Roland Fischer. It has made the impact of a painting more and more similar to that of a photograph. Although, throughout the history of photography,

comparisons have been sought with painting, photography has always attempted to find a place in realist painting and to re-explore related issues from a new perspective. Now, for instance, large photographs no longer portray album-size people but life-size ones, as in painting. The painter's response to the proud photographer, in around 1910 at the New York Photographic Society, who showed him a photo of his wife ("I didn't know she was so small") is a thing of the past. Photographs have become a tool for painters. They can use them as a model instead of making sketches, and photos have moved on to become an equally important medium that is actually exerting an influence on painting in the field of photographic realism or hyperrealism, for example.

As a result, photography is also subject to new forms of assessment. Stylistic issues have become important. Is a photograph a realistic reproduction of the original? Does it enhance what it is portraying? Is it a critical method of expressing reality or is it the immediate expression of the artist's emotions, as abstract painting is? In Roland Fischer's case, questions are automatically posed related to realism, since everything that he portrays, even those façades that look like abstract images, are an exact copy of reality, subjugated to Fischer's artistic desires. The imagery is no longer important. What counts is the artist's contemplative eye.

#### Light and Space

Despite all the potential resources for touching up photographs that computer technology offers, before a photograph is taken, the right light and setting are needed to ensure the desired end results. This is why, when Roland Fischer photographs the inside of a cathedral, he relinquishes the idea of artificial lighting completely, given the risk of its uncontrolled dispersion and the architecture's modification. It is important to reflect the building's original aspect. The camera lens must be able to capture the space in a compelling way, with no intermediaries. The season of the year or time of day when the photograph is taken also play an important role. The artist must analyse and assess all this in order to take the right decision and achieve the desired end goal. The lighting considerations will differ for each photo, even though it forms part of a series. And stricter criteria must be applied for architectural photographs than human ones. Fischer can come up with

more than enough arguments to defend this idea, given his precise knowledge of photography, built up during his long career. He leaves nothing to chance.

One hallmark of all Roland Fischer's photographic work is a breadth that differs from conventional ideas or the usual framing. The artist might be said to avoid anything to do with perspective, which he takes in parallel with the image as an abstract painter would. His eye does not focus on the depth of the space, but on the depth of the object. He manipulates and alters the available space. This is true of his portraits and, above all, of his architectural photographs. In the series devoted to cathedrals, first he takes a photograph of the outside façade and then the interior. Next, with the aid of a computer, he merges both images. In the final composition, spectators see both images at the same time.

In this way Fischer creates a simultaneous view that can only be effective if it is art, comparable for instance to the use of multiple perspectives by the Cubists. This simultaneity almost automatically leads to a loss of space in the portrayal of the photographed object. Hence Fischer shows everything: the direct, unaltered image just as it is. In the case of the cathedrals, these superimposed images give rise to architectural coincidences and often also to contrasts. A gateway opens to a vision of something new, given that we see the front in the same way and at the same time as the back. Consequently, the principle of duality—the idea of Janus' head—is overcome. An archaic language is conveyed to the observer, through which the variety, exactitude, monochrome quality, coincidence and contrasts of the image become perceptible. And historians are also forced to refresh their image of cathedrals, because Fischer's photos allow them to make new, different interpretations of these buildings.

Since at least the Impressionist age, cathedrals have been a recurring subject in relation to architecture and natural light. If, in the Middle Ages, they were mainly places for trading goods and relics, today they have become real or imaginary places for projecting dreams into the hereafter. They can also be places of modernity, like Palma Cathedral, which underwent its biggest architectural reforms in the early 1920s, under the direction of a young Barcelona-born architect called Antoni Gaudí. Now, with Miquel Barceló's chapel, it has become a

contemporary place, like Cologne cathedral with its stain glass windows by Gerhard Richter. Cathedrals fulfil the hopes and dreams of people worldwide. They are architectural realities and, as examples of listed cultural heritage, on many occasions they contribute to the conservation of the historical ensemble that surrounds them: a legacy that is, in turn, a responsibility for the present and future.

### **Gothicism and Diaphaneity**

Fischer's photographs of cathedrals offer a new insight into and interpretation of these buildings other than the usual one. Cathedrals were Middle Age skyscrapers and, in most cases, they continue to prevent the area around them in the city centre from being overdeveloped in their capacity as items of world heritage and for commercial reasons. In the midst of the urban hustle and bustle, they are places for reflection and peace and quiet: a characteristic evoked in Fischer's photos. Through his idea of what a cathedral is, the artist contributes to continued writings on the history of art by altering the way that we look at these buildings. In the photographs, architectural features like clerestories, rose windows, columns, galleries and domes can be observed. By superimposing the building's exterior on its interior, Fischer manages to multiply these architectural structures and, by extension, the fragility of their static quality. The architectural evolution that occurred in the early 12th century, taking us from Romanesque basilicas with their defensive structures to Gothic filigree, was a major quantum leap. The weight of the stone used as a building material could only soar to unsuspected heights by using highly perfected building systems and with good, well-designed, comprehensive plans, as was the case of Cistercian works of architecture.

Among history of art academics who have focused on cathedrals, mention must be made of historian Hans Jantzen. He introduced a new form of terminology that Fischer has managed to capture in his photographs with great accuracy. Fischer shows the space and its solid Gothic outlines in the same way that he shows the weightlessness, verticality, invisible supports and diaphanous structure: all qualities, according to this historian, that are essential in defining Gothic architecture and distinguishing it from the previous, more closed-in architecture. In his book *Kunst der Gotik* (Hamburg, 1957), Jantzen states that Gothic walls have a completely

different structure from the previous stage. To explain this, it does not suffice to say that Gothic ones are mainly "open". A diaphanous structure means that, plastically, the wall takes the form of an architectural relief that is somehow filled in with a spatial background, and that it is the appearance of this spatial background that determines the spatial boundary's Gothic nature. It is impossible to understand Gothic walls unless they are seen as possessing this spatial background, and this is what lends the whole cathedral this effect.

### **Themes, Series and Reliability**

Fischer's work covers a broad range of themes. Over the years, successive different series have been developed and, together with his numerous individual and group portraits and photographs, architectural series like *Kathedralen und Paläste* (Cathedrals and Palaces), the *Alhambra Project*, the *Fassaden* (Façades) series or *new architectures* occupy an increasing part of his repertoire.

All his photographs share the common denominator of an objective vision, clarifying a reality that we do not really see in the same way. The individual photographs form part of a series but each and every one of them also works separately. However, as established by Bernd and Hilla Becher, it is when they are included within the framework of a series that each individual one can be related to the group in a context that opens up the potential for interpretation.

Fischer's works are not photographs that commemorate the past or photos of transitory events, but the "portrayal through images" of a world transformed into a permanent image; one that has gone over the top and can no longer cope with the daily onslaught of images. By giving shape to a series, Fischer establishes a new order: a photographic system for measuring the world.

Series are created one after the other, but his selected themes, such as his cathedrals and façades, persist over the years. Substantial investment into research and trips is often needed. Each new photo that is added to a series confirms that the chosen theme is the right one and that the series can be extended with new works not envisaged in his initial project. Every time Fischer takes a new photo of a cathedral, as is the case of Palma for instance, it

ratifies the series' value and rounds it off in a smooth way. At the same time, the photo opens up the focus of a series that explored other aspects, enriching its discourse. The series, which slowly and very gradually grow in size, are a high-risk game, a duel between affirmation and denial.

The term 'series' is derived from the Latin *serere*, which means to place in succession or unite. A series creates a common framework that offers a certain sense of security. Creating a series, in contemporary art, no longer means repeating something at one's discretion. This last tactic, used by some artists in the past for what were essentially financial reasons, no longer serves. Today, a series is more of a beginning, in the sense in which the concept was used in abstract art, above all in Constructivism, as a way of reinforcing and crowning a message or statement. This abstract defining aspect of a series is needed in order to highlight the notion of inclusion in a category, in addition, too, to the concept of unrepeatability: each theme's unique remarkable facet, which goes beyond mere formal unity. In the architectural photos and abstractions of façades by Roland Fischer, this characteristic is patently clear. And the same can be said of the cathedrals' filigree, presented as abstract photographic drawings.

#### Concept and Structure

The systematic relations that the artist explores as part of his artistic goal allow him to go on creating images. Series are an ongoing process; they can continue to grow; they are potentially endless unless the artist wishes to put an end to them. And this continuity is very clearly evident in Fischer's architectural projects. The multiple forms of the language that he uses might seem contradictory: on the one hand, we can see filigree, part of the rich history that cathedrals represent, and, on the other, the concept of form in its most minimum of expression in the case of the façades, which nonetheless seem to explode before our eyes, dynamiting the support with the strength of their colours. The cathedrals have a certain inner evocative quality that conjures up the past, while the façades are an expressive image of our urbanite present. The complex, complicated images of one series contrast with the great simplicity of the other.

A concept can greatly limit an artist's freedom to make formal changes. This is particularly true in the case of

Constructivism, where the concept was also the theoretical basis on which the correctness of the visual solution was based. Many connotations of Conceptual and Minimalist art that stem from their theoretical bases are both agents in and explanations of an artwork. However, Roland Fischer does not wish to be bound by these imposed theoretical obligations. He continues to act with independence, with a freedom of thought and vision that allow him to make constant headway in his concept, coming up with new alternatives again and again in his art projects. This does not mean that his work does not inspire philosophical discourse or that, in looking at it, associations cannot be made with French Structuralism. Art expert Roland Augustin wrote about this in his article "Roland Fischers fotografisches Werk und der Strukturalismus" (Roland Fischer's Photographic Work and Structuralism)<sup>1</sup>. He takes us back to the early 1980s when, mainly influenced by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, a new type of photography also began to prevail in Germany. Based on precepts derived from the exhibition *New Topographics*, held in Rochester in 1975, this new style of photography was characterized by concepts like "non-engagement" and "non-judgemental connotation". This was the beginning of a documentary post-industrial architecture and notion of the landscape, devoid of any emotional substance. During this period, Fischer's interest turned to French philosophy. He made portraits of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jean Baudrillard.

And this is the root of Roland Fischer's artistic thinking. His presence always lays concealed behind the camera. What counts is not his expressive autobiography, narrated as a public event, but the images that stem from it. The relations between thought and philosophy, structuralism and experimentation, and copies and editions in the creation of a whole image are what guarantee this singular place that the work of Roland Fischer occupies internationally.

---

1. Saarlandmuseum, Roland Fischer, *New Photography*, Saarbrücken, 2012