

Thomas Ruff

(Zell am Harmersbach, Germany, 1958)

A significant portion of Thomas Ruff's production consists of series of works that stem from a reflection on certain specific photographic subjects and on the traditional codes with which modernity has represented them throughout the twentieth century.

The portrait is the first genre to which Ruff turned his attention, beginning in the early 1990s. A fully resolved method of appropriation and intervention emerged from that group of works, one which the artist has gone on to apply, with variations, in subsequent series.

Ruff modifies the modern practice of the frontal, passport-size portrait and expands its dimensions to those typical of the celebratory portrait. However, he completely disregards the personalizing nature of the portrait, removing any individual traits. The faces and the little clothing that appear in the constrictive rectangle of the image end up being completely purged of any personal sign of either subject or author. Only a revived study of physiognomic classification could rival the impermeability of these faces.

The same aseptic frontality is found in Ruff's works dedicated to the photographic reproduction of architecture. The series began with a commission to document some of Mies van der Rohe's buildings, and then expanded into a more general analysis of the codes and practices of the modernist architectural portrait. The two works in the collection belong to this group. *m.d.p.n.*, 2003, an acrostic of "mercato del pesce di Napoli" (Naples fish market), shows a typical example of Italian rationalist architecture, reproduced in numerous archival photos. Ruff has appropriated these photos of record, to interpolate and combine them, manipulating his work to annul many of the authorial aspects employed by photography in its long-fought struggle to gain a place among the arts. The method Ruff uses does not call for the deconstruction of traditional modalities, but rather their overabundant use, in order to amplify them to the point of hyperbole, stopping just before they fall apart. The distance between the photographic imagination that has inhabited our perception of architecture for decades and Ruff's works is nearly imperceptible, and indeed his images are included in the open archives of the digital era, along with traditional documentation. In reality, his photographs and those of proven authenticity effectively have something in common, not in terms of what is true, but rather what is false. (EV)