

PHILIP GEFTER

# THOMAS RUFF

NATURE MORTE

Throughout Thomas Ruff's career, the medium of photography has undergone a formidable paradigm shift from the chemical process—light on film—to a now almost fully digital platform. Ruff has been mining this transition in his respective bodies of work, consistently pinching, poking, and prodding the medium, anatomizing it, decomposing it, and reconstructing it in a methodical examination of photography itself. His meticulously resolved imagery shifts from one series to the next in an exploration of photographic genres: portraiture, the nude, architectural, astronomical, and surveillance photography. But equally, he addresses the stages of photography's technological evolution with a focus on the structure of the photographic image, not only in his *jpeg*s and *photograms* series but also, currently, in his *negatives*.

One could say that his entire oeuvre has been a persistent inquiry into the many ways the medium of photography aims for optical precision in its ongoing representation of the actual world. "Regarding seriality, you could say that I work like a scientist," Ruff says. "When a new idea comes into my mind, I begin with research. . . . Then I create a thesis or a concept, which I have to prove. . . . Each of my series has a visual idea behind it."<sup>1</sup>

Years ago, Ruff was asked about his work in relation to the "New Objectivity" of the early-twentieth-century photographers August Sander and Albert Renger-Patzsch. "The difference between them and me is that they believed to have captured reality and I believe to have created a picture," Ruff says. "We all lost bit by bit the belief in this so-called objective capturing of real reality."<sup>2</sup>

Ruff's canny engagement with objectivity and documentation has proved to be less an examination of the actual world than a direct anatomical dialogue with the properties of photography itself. "If you use photography," Bernd Becher

once told him, "you should always reflect the medium. And this reflection should be represented in the photograph."<sup>3</sup>

That seems to have been a guiding lesson. In Ruff's first body of work, *Portraits*, a series he made in the 1980s, he photographed willing friends and classmates in a repetitive and uniform manner: faces straight on, bodies half-length, expressions neutral, lighting without shadow. They were head shots, ostensibly, generic in presentation and absent of affect—not unlike standard-issue passport pictures. When Ruff first showed them in class, his fellow students were quick to identify the individuals in the pictures: "Oh, that's Hans," or "Fritz," or "Greta," they said. Yet it was not Ruff's intention for the pictures to be seen as portraits of individuals; rather, he wanted them to be looked at as *pictures*. This prompted his decision to make wall-size prints, 7 by 5 feet, so the emphasis would shift to the sheer photographicness of the images: for him, the emphasis was on the visual style of precise mechanical repetition, the generic representation of the individual, and the photographic print as an object. The image, then, would be of greater importance than the subject.

"Since my friends and I had all read George Orwell's *1984*, we were very curious about what the year 1984 would be like in Germany, whether Big Brother would be watching us," Ruff says about the motivation for his *Portraits* series. Living in Germany in those years, he was acutely aware of the surreptitious police surveillance of the general public, and that informed his ideas about portraiture. "The look of my *Portraits* is the look back into Big Brother's camera."<sup>4</sup>

While Ruff's current series on the photographic negative might appear to be a gesture toward the past, in fact it is a logical progression from his serialized exploration of the material structure of

the photographic image, following on the heels of his series on photograms. The negative was in service to every distinct photographic genre Ruff has explored in his previous bodies of work. His *nature morte* (“still life”) negative images constitute one of several genres he intends to investigate in this ongoing series of negative images.

The negative, the very backbone of the photographic image throughout the history of medium, was the essential imprint of the actual world captured in material form—the moment an image adhered to light-sensitized glass or film. Ruff’s *negative* series, as in all his work, began with a conceptual idea. Like so many photographers, he had always thought of his negatives as a material step in the process of making final master prints: “I just thought that now in 2015 there is no more negative. It has disappeared. In my own career I have been working for thirty-five years with the negative, but I have never *looked at* the negative. Now that the negative is disappearing, we should look at it.”<sup>5</sup> To underscore the status of the negative as a relic, Ruff likes to cite the example of his young daughters’ blank expressions when he asked them whether they knew what a negative was.

Negatives are ghosts of another era in more ways than one: not only do they reside as remnants of an obsolete chemical process, but Ruff’s *negatives*, in particular, display the seemingly phantom representation of imagery with the past. The articulation of volume and line in a reversal of light and shadow conjures a dream-state appearance of objects as symbols; in his negative images, the still life seems to hail from the collective unconscious. “Photography pretends to show reality,” Ruff said more than twenty years ago. “With your technique you have to go as near to reality as possible in order to imitate reality. And when you come so close then you recognize that, at the same time, it is not.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he was suggesting that *verisimilitude* is the best

result of the optical precision with which photographic imagery reflects the actual world, and if that’s the case, then truth or fact remains a false promise, an impossible goal. By reversing the way objects from the actual world naturally appear to the eye, Ruff is further emphasizing the image itself apart from reality, as if, once again, the image were the very subject, and not the objects within it.

Ruff has been mining the medium of photography, both past and present, in a persistent artistic inquiry that has taken him back to the photogram and the negative, but his interest in the way an image is affixed in the material world must be understood as anything but nostalgic, or even elegiac. “It has something to do with perception,” Ruff observes about his *negatives* series. The mysteries of the world become ever more complex the closer we get to their foundation in fact. Scrutinizing an image at the anatomical stage of the negative form brings us into closer contact with the picture’s structure. “You have to look at a negative more precisely, with greater concentration, to recognize what you’re looking at. A new generation has never seen the negative so they will look at it as if it is a positive, a regular image.”<sup>7</sup>

Ruff conjures Man Ray, who printed photographs as negatives and juxtaposed the positive and the negative, to point out that his own *negatives* series is a logical progression from his previous *photograms* series. “I love the photograms of Man-Ray, Moholy-Nagy, and others. You could certainly see my photograms as an homage to their inventions and a continuation of their ideas,” he says. But he set himself the goal of making the next iteration of photograms—“to make a contemporary version of the photogram.”<sup>8</sup>

Ruff’s photograms are, inextricably, of his contemporary moment. He enlisted the help of an expert in the field of digital technology to build

a virtual darkroom—a simulation of an analog darkroom. Together they used 3-D software to create digital architectural simulations of models and objects that Moholy-Nagy, say, could never have imagined. Each object was assigned a virtual material such as chromium or glass that was conceived and applied in a software program. Then they positioned the computer-based objects on virtual photographic paper, a careful process that took inordinate patience during the many attempts to get successful photogrammic images.

If the virtual exposure of digitally constructed objects onto virtual photographic paper is not enough of a challenge to one’s meta-consciousness, the calculations for rendering each image originally required three Macs and six PCs. Later, Ruff began working with a research center in Jülich, Germany, to compute his renderings. The center’s “super computers” can render a photogram that previously kept Ruff’s computers busy for two weeks in only one hour. Now Ruff has his own “render farm” with eighteen computers. Ruff embarked on this elaborate creative enterprise with the intention of making images that summoned “visual sensation,” as he has called it. “By working with the photogram I have come to realize the importance of the distribution of light and dark in a picture. Doubtless every painter knows that, but it is only by way of the photogram that I have gained a certain amount of experience with this kind of composition.”<sup>9</sup>

It was during his work with photograms that Ruff first began inverting his computer monitor to check the composition of an image. The idea for his *negatives* series had its genesis in his observation of the images on his computer screen in reverse. He inverted some of the historic photographs on his desktop, and they appeared in beautiful cyan blue. He thought that some of them looked better in this inverted form.

The desktop inversions were rudimentary, though, and Ruff found them unsatisfying. He began to play with separation and contrast, in effect turning his desktop into a darkroom. He was able to create a negative from a positive image with the same tonal subtleties and variations he might have once brought out with burning and dodging techniques while making a positive print in an actual darkroom. The desktop itself became the intermediary stage once reserved for the enlarger when illuminating the negative on paper in the process of creating a positive image. Working from a positive image first and mediating its transformation on the computer screen gives Ruff a virtual—as opposed to material—relationship to the negative, adding a layer of modernity to his consideration of the image’s structure in negative form.

Ruff is conversant with images from the entire history of photography, and he drew on his own archive of photographs, about forty percent of which are historic images, to create this series of *negatives*. “I noticed that in some of them the light-dark distribution and the composition is far more readily appreciated in the negative than in a paper print. The contrasts were stronger, the figures and objects seemed suddenly more three-dimensional. . . . I could adjust [the tonal values] in such a way that the light-dark distribution was again well balanced. . . . Historical photographs have a brown patina or a brownish tint, as a rule, since for the most part they were printed on albumin paper. If you turn these photographs into negatives, a lovely blue tone results, which I adopted.”<sup>10</sup>

While Ruff approaches the negative’s reverse articulation of line, mass, volume, and space with informed perceptual curiosity, he continues to explore the photographic genre of the still life in this body of work. Look carefully and you might identify images by Baron Adolph de Meyer and

Karl Blossfeldt. Ruff is less than interested in specific references to any one photographer, but their photographs provide a basis of inquiry that grounds the visual meditation on the negative firmly within the canon. Blossfeldt, for example, is something of a hero to Ruff. His scientific photographs of plants rose to the level of art: “Blossfeldt was similar to Bernd and Hilla Becher, because he was an artist who did not intend to make art,” Ruff says.<sup>11</sup> Blossfeldt, too, brought a forensic observation to plants and other organisms that evolved into a body of artwork because of his serial scrutiny and visual precision—not unlike Atget’s methodical documentation of Paris and its environs, or even Ruff’s own unrelenting examination of the properties of photography itself.

Ruff understands that photograms are not so much about the representation of reality and the influence of photography in daily life. And it is with amusement that he claims to have wanted to break the world record for the size of a photogram. Photograms from the 1920s and ’30s are quite small—almost postcard size—so Ruff made his photograms wall size. By contrast, his negative prints in *nature morte* are more intimate, their size corresponding roughly to that of the glass-plate negative of the nineteenth century. The size of his prints may have something to do with his belief that the negative requires greater scrutiny, closer observation for perceptual discovery. While the negative throughout the history of photography was never intended for presentation, Ruff’s instinct to make his negative prints modest in size adds an element of exclusivity to the experience of viewing them, a closer look into the alchemy of a now-extinct photographic process.

In the negatives series, Ruff is addressing the material phenomenon of this object of obsolescence and further examining the way light leaves an imprint—light as the “pencil of nature.”

“Maybe I just want to recall that artists used techniques in photography that enabled them to make completely artificial and abstract photographs and that these techniques are, unfortunately, nearly forgotten,” he says.<sup>12</sup>

Ruff has explored a great many photographic techniques in his thirty-year career; quite intentionally, his work does not conform to a single look or style. Rather, with each series, the resulting imagery maintains a fidelity to his original idea. It is for this reason that, in all of his work, the revelation of the idea is in the image—how it looks, the manner of its construction, the way it renders the subject—or the fluency of meaning to surface. “The technique must result from the idea that you have—and you may have to develop your own technology to bring out the images,” he says. “I’m not much interested in ‘straight’ photography anymore. It has been practiced for more than 150 years, and most of it is too conventional. I’ve always wanted to go beyond the limits. . . . I think photography is still the most influential medium in the world, and I have to deconstruct these conventions.”<sup>13</sup>

- 1 “Thomas Ruff in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist,” in *Thomas Ruff* (London: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), p. 4.
- 2 Philip Pocock, “Interview with Thomas Ruff,” *Journal of Contemporary Art*, June 1, 1993, pp. 78–86.
- 3 “Public Conversation with Thomas Ruff and Philip Gefter,” Aperture Foundation, New York, February 12, 2010, <https://vimeo.com/9740777>.
- 4 “Thomas Ruff in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist,” p. 4.
- 5 Telephone conversation with author, July 3, 2015.
- 6 Pocock, “Interview with Thomas Ruff.”
- 7 Conversation with author.
- 8 “On Photograms and Negatives: Thomas Ruff and Wenzel S. Springer in Conversation with Valeria Liebermann,” in *Thomas Ruff: Photograms and Negatives* (Beverly Hills: Gagosian Gallery, 2014), pp. 9, 14.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.
- 11 “Thomas Ruff in Conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist,” p. 5.
- 12 Michael Famighetti, “Thomas Ruff: Photograms for the New Age,” *Aperture*, Summer 2013, p. 84.
- 13 *Ibid.*