

Thomas Ruff, Object Relations, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. April 28 to July 31, 2016

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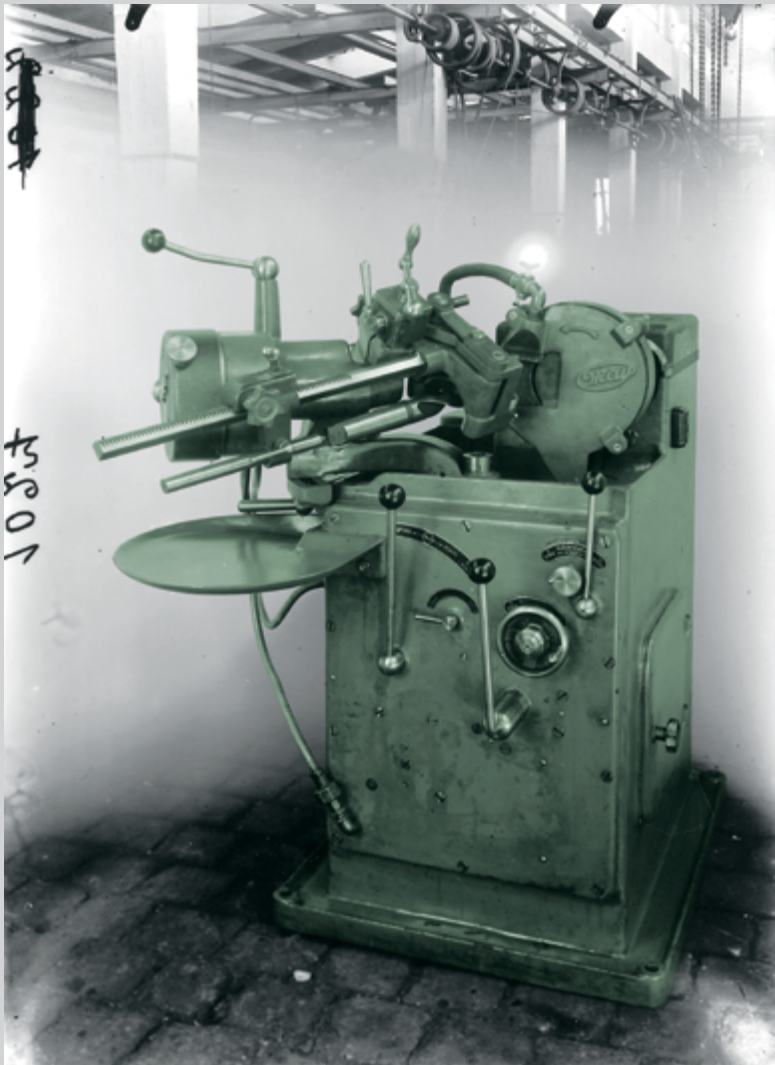
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Maschinen 1027, 2003, chromogenic print with Diasec, 145 x 113 cm, courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London, © Thomas Ruff/SODRAC (2016)

Thomas Ruff

Object Relations

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
April 28 to July 31, 2016

A desire to produce and circulate images drove the invention of photography. Almost two centuries later, the dream verges on nightmare as archivists and image theorists scramble to find space and meaning for all the photographs that have been produced. It's a good time for collectors. One of them – German artist Thomas Ruff – has, for nearly three decades now, been exploring the properties and potential of images made by others. The Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition *Object Relations*¹ emphasizes Ruff's role as artist-collector-curator.

Ruff's appropriation and repurposing of photographs joins a tradition that developed alongside new technologies that facilitated the proliferation of mass-media images. Many engaging in the form – John Heartfield in the 1930s, the Situationists in the 1960s, and Barbara Kruger in the 1980s – sucked the potency out of found imagery to

make hard political critiques. Others, less polemically, used it self-reflexively to explore the nature and history of the photographic medium. Ruff is among these. An eclectic mix of archival and reworked images – none originating in his own camera – engage with diverse media and genres across photographic history: science, photojournalism, industrial photography, and art – all now processed into “art.” Drawn from a much larger oeuvre that also explores pornography, landscape, architectural works, and portraits, the selection in this show exhibits the artist's breadth and openness to diverse inspirations.

Ruff gained art-world recognition in 1986 for his large-scale, museum-friendly colour portraits of his Düsseldorf peers (*Porträts*). The work's straight, typological approach makes clear that Ruff took the instruction of his teachers, Bernd and Hilla Becher, deeply to heart.

But beneath the portraits' realism lies the perverse tendency of resistance to authority: the evenly lit faces offer up every surface detail, yet their blank expressions bar any deeper access. The series was made in the wake of the “German Autumn,” when officials, roused by the Baader-Meinhof Group, were slipping toward a surveillance state and demanding photo ID at every turn. Beneath what might seem to be a student's adoption of his professors' straight style were critiques of both the aesthetic convention of realist transparency and, in showing all but telling nothing, the state panopticon. These contradictory currents persist through Ruff's oeuvre: his documentary images line up behind the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* tradition, but his polymorphous play promiscuously challenges hierarchies of genre, media, and historical process and undermines the possibility of photographic “truth.”

Anchoring the centrality of archival materials for Ruff are pieces from his collection, including Étienne Léopold Trouvelot's 1885 albumen print of an electrical charge and two stunning photograms made by Arthur Siegel in the 1940s. Examples of Ruff's own 3-D digital photograms, inspired by Siegel's, would have lent illustrative symmetry, but were surprisingly absent.

Most conceptually intriguing were digitally produced negatives based on historical photographs from Ruff's series *negative* (2014–16): one group based on Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographs, from the AGO vaults, and another on late-nineteenth-century prints of artists in their studios, from Ruff's collection. Accentuating Ruff's wanton disregard for purity of process and genre (by intertwining science, photography, and art) are their smaller size – diverging from large-format presentation, almost standard now

for contemporary photographic art, a phenomenon that Ruff himself helped establish – and their blue tones that suggest the historical cyanotype process. Inspiring these works, Ruff explained during an exhibition tour, was his daughter's unfamiliarity with what had been the master of almost all photographs since 1835 – the negative. Ruff asks us to reconsider this primal technology, either in nostalgic tribute or, for the first time, as a unique aesthetic object in its own right.

In addition to antiquated image technologies, *Maschinen* (2003) explores outmoded industrial processes. Ruff's collection of historical glass-plate negatives of factory equipment had been made for reproduction in advertising catalogues. The machines, too large to move to studios to be photographed, were instead isolated from their factory environments by sheets of white fabric that was then airbrushed to a gauzy, ghostly haze. Further delineated by Ruff with colour, the lowly behemoths – appearing as strange beasts from an earlier time or alien monsters – are here made grand through their large-format presentation. Clearly resonant with the Bechers' typologies of obsolete industrial infrastructure, their influence is undercut by Ruff's playful obstruction of authenticity.

The four images from Ruff's latest series, *Press++* (2015), based on archival press images made originally for news media, entered the artist's collection via eBay. Once published on disposable newsprint, they are here transformed into monumental displays, both by their massive enlargement and by the choice of subject – masculine conquests, both military and astronomical, showing soldiers in battle, astronauts landing, and the equipment they play with. The once-discrete fronts and backs of the photographs are conjoined, making a



neg_artist_01, 2014, chromogenic print with Diasec, 71 x 81 cm, courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London, © Thomas Ruff/SODRAC (2016)

dense image-text palimpsest of signs: the original photograph, the coloured lines marking out the edited version, and a nest of textual information – labels, catalogue numbers, and directions for use.

A more diminutive collection of rephotographed newspaper images is encased in a long vitrine in the centre of a third gallery (*Zeitungsfotos*, 1991). Ruff had clipped the originals from newspapers earlier; revisiting them years later, he found that, bereft of their contexts, they were incomprehensible.

The exhibition is beautifully installed overall, but the final room slips into the realm of stunning. It is, no doubt, the four elegant, vertical frames holding deep black skies sparkling with celestial bodies that brings it there. *Sterne* (1989) was the work that first led Ruff into territories of appropriation.

With a keen interest in astronomy, but acknowledging his inability to photograph it properly, Ruff purchased telescopic negatives from the European Southern Observatory in Chile, which he digitally edited. Unlike Ruff's other

series – for example, *Nudes* (2012) and *jpegs* (2004–07), which were obviously distorted through pixilation or softening – the manipulation here is imperceptible, thereby advancing his work deeper into the slippery terrain of appropriation.

Ruff's *Object Relations* offers an intricate and beautiful foray through the history of photographic image making, asking us to consider existential questions about the presentation, mobility, and meaning of this frighteningly omnipresent medium.

1 The exhibition was curated by Sophie Hackett, the AGO's associate curator of photography, and was part of the 2016 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

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Marie-Claire Blais et Pascal Grandmaison

La vie abstraite (volets 1 et 2)

Galerie René Blouin, Montréal

Du 5 mars au 23 avril 2016



cette pièce est inspirée d'un écrit du peintre abstrait, *Réalité naturelle et réalité abstraite*. L'eau et le feu dominent dans ces séquences en quatre images. La toile est en effet brûlée, et la surface de l'écran semble souvent être crevée par un incendie ouvrant la toile, ici réduite à un voile noir. Comme Pascal Grandmaison l'a déjà fait dans d'autres œuvres, la progression destructrice du feu se trouve parfois inversée, recomposant la toile depuis les cendres. Le feu détruit et reconstruit à la fois la grille, et l'eau se propage en rides et ondes dont on ne sait d'où elles proviennent ni où elles vont.

Pourrait-on en conclure que le duo Blais/Grandmaison choisit d'illustrer

La première collaboration entre Marie-Claire Blais et Pascal Grandmaison a donné lieu à la création de deux installations vidéographiques assez monumentales. La première, intitulée *Le temps transformé*, est d'une durée de 40 minutes et se présente sous la forme d'une double projection aux images synchronisées reprenant la figure du carré noir du peintre Kazimir Malevitch, fondateur du mouvement suprématiste. La seconde, *Espace du silence*, est composée de quatre projections présentées par groupes de deux sur des murs opposés dans des espaces adjacents. Elles ont été installées de telle sorte qu'il est possible de les voir en même temps pour peu que l'on se positionne entre les deux salles et qu'on tourne fréquemment la tête. On en vient alors à voir comment elles se redoublent efficacement, se reprenant l'une l'autre en des images semblables mais pas tout à fait identiques pour autant.

Dans la première projection, la référence au *Carré noir* est évidente. Une toile noire flexible est présentée dans un décor naturel. Elle chatoie selon les mouvements qui lui sont imprimés

par un manipulateur invisible; elle gonfle, se plie, se tasse même. Elle danse entre les herbes et crépite sous l'action de la pluie. Ainsi suivie par la caméra, elle se présente comme une matière totale, entière, d'intérêt certes, saisie dans sa réalité matérielle, montrant ses effets multiples, dans ses couleurs comme dans ses formes.

Ce n'est pas la première fois que la vidéographie sert à semblable entreprise de mise à distance critique d'un autre médium. Sauf qu'il pourrait être hasardeux qu'une œuvre non figurative aussi déterminante soit soumise à pareille épreuve critique, au moyen d'un médium qui sait si mal, de par sa nature, faire fi d'un certain naturalisme. Or, ici, tous les choix techniques faits pour filmer les contorsions de ce carré noir, que ce soit par l'entremise de l'angle choisi, de la lentille employée, du mouvement imprimé à la caméra, du réglage de la mise au point et de la profondeur de champ; tout, vous dis-je, concourt à la production d'une sorte de travail non figuratif, à la création d'images vaguement abstraites. Ce n'est pas qu'il soit difficile de ramener



La vie abstraite 1 : *le temps transformé*, 2015, 2 projections vidéo synchronisées; La vie abstraite 2 : *espace du silence*, 2016, 4 projections vidéo synchronisées, 6 m ch., 30 min, photos : Pascal Grandmaison, permission de la Galerie René Blouin

celles-ci à des éléments naturels identifiables et recomposables; c'est plutôt qu'on ne sait plus parfois par quel bout, dirais-je, elles ont été prises. C'est par l'intermédiaire d'éléments isolés, de prises en plans rapprochés, de flous aussi parfois, que l'œuvre tend à une certaine non-figuration.

Il en va de même avec *Espace du silence*. La référence prend cette fois la forme d'une toile au quadrillé évident, évocateur des grilles colorées auxquelles Piet Mondrian nous a habitués. Car

une forme de réconciliation entre abstraction et réalité concrète? Ils vont certes aussi loin que faire se peut dans cette direction, mettant la photographie à l'épreuve par une approche qui valorise ses possibilités de création de formes et d'espaces abstraits. Car ils le font au moyen d'un médium dans lequel le référent ne cesse jamais de revenir hanter le résultat final.

Pour eux, les formes montrées peuvent provenir aussi bien du champ de la peinture que de celui de la photographie,