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**THE CURIOUS CASE OF
THOMAS RUFF**

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photographer JULES MOSKOVTCHEKNO





When I spoke to Thomas Ruff—whose large-scale photographs I remember writing about for a university subject called ‘Contemporary Art’, in which I affectedly argued that of all the artists to study in Düsseldorf it was he who was “most rigorously engaged in the relationship between material surface and modern life”—he was wearing a crisp red shirt and black rectangular glasses, which he pushed right up to the bridge of his nose.

Ruff moved to Düsseldorf, a city long associated with a strong photographic tradition, to study at the Kunstakademie, where he trained under Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose systematic approach to teaching photography was grounded in principles of repetition and objectivity. From the start of his career, Ruff, now 68, has worked sequentially. His first ever series, *Interiors* (1979–83), depicts urban apartment spaces whereby closed cabinets and neatly made beds suggest civilian occupation. His second *Portraits* (1981–2001) series includes 100 large-scale portraits, the most famous of which depicts P. Stadtbäumer, who meets the lens with a steady gaze, her grey-blue eyes drifting only slightly beyond the camera barrel. She wears a tan shirt fastened with a Texan-style bolo tie shaped like a daffodil, its centre dipped in silver paint. Ruff tells me that he sees her regularly. Another series, *L'Empereur / La rêverie* (1982), shows Ruff collapsing, balancing, handstanding and crawling across two leather armchairs. The composition is harmonised through a careful tonal balance of his corduroy brown trousers, butter-yellow socks and shirt, and a floor lamp which, like the chairs, is the only still element amidst the chaotic composition. I could go on.

The lineage of German photographers that Ruff belongs to (Thomas Struff, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer) are concerned less with capturing singular moments than with interrogating the conditions of the photographic medium. He comes from a time when something printed over and over and over again was enough; when all you had to do was notice a pattern and run with it. For Ruff, it is not the subject of the image that matters most, but its materiality. Yet where his peers often turn their lens outward, Ruff has, over the past three decades, increasingly turned to images that already exist. Drawn from archives both formal and informal, spanning NASA databases, newspapers and pornography websites, his work questions the meaning and relevance of pre-existing material. Familiar images—whether a

portrait of a leader from the Chinese Communist Party or a widely circulated war photograph compressed until pixelated—are remade or reconfigured to the point where they become inseparable from the systems that once produced and circulated them. His work is shaped by what has come before while gesturing toward what is yet to. He is an artist of then, now and tomorrow.

The act of research extends beyond Ruff’s image-making into the objects he collects and the space he inhabits. In his studio, a warehouse-conversion on the outskirts of Düsseldorf, he surrounds himself with ephemera, photographs, model rockets, a tyrannosaurus head, a meteor from space, hundreds of open or dog-eared books including Helmut Newton’s *Sumo*, world maps, and globes of both the Earth and Moon. For Ruff, the significance of these objects emerges through repeated encounters. On an informal tour of his space with Jules and me, he notes that even just walking by this material can spark new creative ideas. In this way, his archive is active, consistently evolving with new information that continually opens onto new possibilities for artistic exploration.

Ruff’s rigour is tempered by a kind of hubris. His brown toy poodle drifts in and out of the room, barking occasionally to be picked up. At one point, Ruff steps onto one of the three scooters in his studio and glides across the concrete floor, the dog trailing close behind him. He is warm, occasionally self-effacing, even goofy. R1 cigarettes mark the progression of our conversation. One after the other, maybe up to ten within the hour, Ruff stubs the tobacco out just before the filter in a polished spinner ashtray, its chamber imaginably dense with the residue of past exchanges. While we speak, Jules sits at the end of the table, the sounds of his camera, *click, whirr, crack*, cutting through the discussion and returning us, again and again, to the moment.



RACHEL WEINBERG In an interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, you spoke about studying books and magazines from a young age, and about your belief that everyone should be fascinated by the universe, as studying it allows us to better understand both our past and our future. What is your relationship with research?

THOMAS RUFF The first series I made using archival material was the newspaper photographs, around 1991. At that time, though, it wasn't really 'research'. In Germany, we have a very good weekly newspaper called *Die Zeit*, which I used to buy mainly for the crossword puzzles. It was an intellectually and visually strong publication. While I was working on my portrait series, I began cutting out images from the newspaper. There was no real intention behind it at first. I didn't analyse them closely, I just wanted to compare my own photographs with those published in the paper to get a sense of how others were working.

Over time, I started cutting out other images as well, not just portraits. It became a habit. However, because I had only kept the images themselves, I could barely reconstruct their original context. They were, in a sense, lost. So, I began reproducing these photographs, framing them carefully, and installing them in a dense, salon-style arrangement, a kind of Petersburg hanging. The work became about the way photographs lose their meaning once they are detached from their original context. That was probably the first time I realised I was working with an archive, although it was an unintended one.

In a way, this marked the beginning of a shift in my thinking. I started to feel that, as an artist working with photography, what I could produce myself was limited. There is an immense number of extraordinary images already existing in the world. It seemed important to engage with this material, to work through it, and to use it to show different aspects of what we might call 'the world of photography'.

RW You've spoken about the limits of what you can produce yourself, yet your practice spans a wide range of photographic genres, from interiors and portraiture to landscape, astronomy and even pornography. I'm interested in whether that breadth, this expansive movement across different image worlds, is important to you. Is having a wide artistic range something you consciously pursue?

TR No, not really, it wasn't something I planned. It developed quite naturally and was driven by curiosity. When I was a student, my teacher, Bernd Becher, saw the interior work I was making and said, "Thomas, this is great, you should photograph interiors for the rest of your life," much like he did with industrial buildings. And of course, many artists do work that way. They arrive at a strong idea in their twenties and then spend the rest of their career refining it, producing variations on the same theme. That's a fairly standard artistic

model. But I never approached it like that. I didn't think strategically about developing a consistent genre or style. Instead, I've always been guided by curiosity. I go about my daily life, reading newspapers, looking at images, and occasionally something catches my attention in a way I can't ignore. If an image stays with me, if I can't get it out of my mind, then I feel compelled to begin working with it, to understand what it is. This tends to happen every few years, and that's probably why the work moves across such a wide range of subjects and image types.

RW Across the different bodies of work, there are underlying continuities, whether in scale, approach or materiality. Looking at your portraits from the 1980s compared to your more recent images, it could almost seem like the work of a different artist. I suppose, though, it's not a different artist, but different versions of yourself emerging over time.

TR Yes, exactly. In the beginning, when I was working on *Interiors*, *Sterne (Stars)*, the newspaper photographs, and *Nudes*, people would say, "Thomas Ruff is not a serious artist. He jumps around. He doesn't follow a clear line or idea." Of course, I questioned that myself. I wondered whether I was, in fact, a bad artist. But I continued working, following my instincts. It was only perhaps ten years later that I began to recognise that there was, in fact, a consistent thread running through all of the work. That thread is photography itself, the medium. Its technology, its modes of perception, its systems of distribution. What people do with photographs, and how they look at them. In that sense, I am actually quite conventional. I am doing the same as many other artists, working around a central idea. It's just that the outcomes appear very different.

RW You studied at the Kunstakademie under the Bechers, where typology and systematic observation were central to their teaching. I'm interested in how that environment shaped your understanding of research, not necessarily as a method, but as a way of thinking through different types of images. You mentioned earlier that Bernd encouraged you to continue photographing interiors, this idea of returning to the same subject again and again. Was this approach explicitly taught as a methodology?

TR Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher are very important to me, real heroes. I love their work, and at that time, it felt like a very precise and rigorous way to practise photography. Their approach made clear that a single photograph cannot convey a complete truth. You need multiple images, placed in relation to one another, to compare, to observe variations, and to understand different aspects of the same subject. In that sense, I followed their thinking closely in the beginning, I was very much a student of their methodology. But the Bechers aimed at a kind of totality.

They tried to document entire categories of industrial structures, buildings that were often disappearing. When I began working on *Portraits*, I realised that this logic could not be applied in the same way. If you wanted to describe humanity, you could not do it with a single image. You would need at least two. If I were to follow their idea fully, I would have to photograph every person in the world, which is, of course, impossible. So instead, I made a conscious decision to work with a limited selection, based on the people I had access to at the time.

The photographic technique, in a way, was similar to that of a scientist. You establish a set-up, a kind of controlled framework, and then you carry out the work within those parameters. Unlike Bernd and Hilla, who attempted a kind of completeness, travelling across Europe and even to the United States to document disappearing industrial structures, I had to accept that my approach would be partial. I had to make a conceptual selection. For me, that selection became the one hundred portraits, and with that, the work was complete. It was a limited, but still meaningful, attempt to understand variation within a type. Looking back now, thirty-five years later, it's clear that many people are missing from those works. There are no people of colour, for example. So, the work inevitably reflects that moment and that limitation. If I were to make the same series today, as a young photographer at the academy, it would look completely different.

RW In the past you have said that you're not searching for truth, but are interested in testing how images function, as forms and as objects, and how that function produces meaning. Do you actively question how or why we come to know what we know through images, and why we attach meaning to them?

TR Truth in photography is a very complex issue. In the beginning, I genuinely believed that photography captures reality, that it simply records what is in front of the camera. That's also what I was taught. But this belief began to shift already with the portrait series. I realised that I was the one selecting the subject. Sometimes I would even influence what they wore, asking, for example, if they could put on a particular shirt. I controlled the lighting, and I directed their position, asking them to move slightly up, down, left or right. So, while the camera records what is in front of it, there is always a person behind the camera arranging everything.

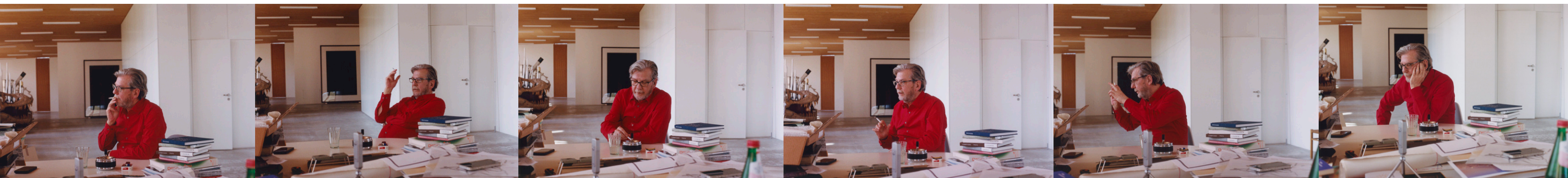
RW What about documentary photography?

TR Of course, I believe in documentary photography. I have to.

RW But do you think it is truthful?

TR Yes, but I would say it ultimately depends on the honesty and authenticity of the author. It's similar to writing in that sense. I have a deep appreciation for documentary and journalistic photography. But as we've been discussing, truth in photography is often





very difficult to define. Even in situations that seem straightforward, there is always a choice being made.

RW Your work has consistently unfolded through series. You've also spoken about needing extended periods of testing and development to arrive at a final image. I'm interested in the role that seriality plays within your practice, what repetition and the construction of a body of work allows you to do. Does presenting a sequence of related images function as a way of discovering something over time? Do you begin with a question or hypothesis and work towards a kind of resolution, or does the understanding emerge only through the process itself?

TR No, it usually begins with a single image that I've seen somewhere. For example, around fifteen years ago, I bought two photographs by Arthur Siegel. He had studied at the New Bauhaus in Chicago under László Moholy-Nagy, where they were working extensively with photograms. I had these works hanging in my apartment and passed them every day for years. At a certain point, I developed the desire to try something similar myself, to take a photograph in that spirit, but also to question, *what is a photograph?*

I began researching and analysing how such images are made. I realised that while Siegel produced these works in the 1950s, the technique itself dates back to the 1920s, developed by artists such as Man Ray and Christian Schad, among others who were experimenting with photograms. At that point, I decided I didn't want to repeat the same process using the same analogue techniques. I wanted to introduce something contemporary. That led me to the idea of creating these works not in a traditional

darkroom, but in a kind of virtual darkroom. I developed a set-up using 3D software on my computer. Together with a 3D specialist, I built the set-up and used a rendering system designed to simulate physical reality, so the resulting images functioned as a precise analogue darkroom simulation. The virtual environment offered possibilities that a traditional darkroom didn't. For example, in an analogue darkroom, photograms are typically produced in black and white, but in the virtual space I could introduce coloured light sources, or construct materials that would be impossible in reality. This process eventually led to the photogram series. And in a way, it all began simply, just from passing those two works by Arthur Siegel every day, until I reached a point where I felt compelled to try it myself.

RW Last night Jules and I were discussing what makes an artist want to take a photograph in the first place. Jules mentioned that when he encounters an image or idea, he feels compelled to work through it, to understand it by sometimes remaking it in his own way. What you've just described seems closely related to that process. That the motivation to produce a new image can come from a desire to revisit, reinterpret, or even remake something, in order to arrive at your own version of it. Is that something you recognise in your own practice?

TR Yes. But I think no artist can fully explain why they do what they do. There is a kind of compulsion. In *M*, the murderer says at the end, "*Ich will nicht, ich muss*", which translates to, "I don't want to, but I have to." In a way, that captures something essential about making art.

RW When you begin thinking about a new body of work, where do you go to find those images?

TR I should say that I don't begin by deciding to make a new body of work. It comes to me. I might see something or hear something that I either don't believe, or that astonishes me, or that I hate, or love. If I can't get it out of my mind, then I begin to research it properly. In the 1980s and 1990s, that meant going to libraries, or visiting antiquarian bookshops, places where you could find publications from the 1920s, 30s, 40s or 50s. That was a big part of the process. Sometimes, though, an idea doesn't resolve itself immediately. I might encounter something and not yet have the means, whether conceptual or technical, to work with it. It can stay with me for years. For example, the *Tableaux Chinois* series came from a book I bought in 2004. I didn't yet have the idea, or the skills, or perhaps I simply wasn't ready to engage with that material. It was only almost twenty years later that I could return to it and develop something that felt meaningful.

RW So you don't consciously set out to make a new body of work. Do you think about making art in that way at all? Or have you ever felt a pressure to produce something new?

TR No, not in the sense that I feel I have to work every day. And maybe this sounds strange, but I don't constantly think about art as such. For me, it's more that when something is done well, it becomes art. It can be painting, sculpture, photography, but it could also be writing or journalism. Any form of work, if it is carried out with care and precision, has the potential to become something meaningful.

RW And that motivates you?

TR That motivates me, yes.

RW Jules and I were also talking about this idea of doing something because you know you're good at it. I'm curious whether that sense comes from external validation, what other people think, or from an internal drive that keeps you returning. When I ask whether you think about making art, I suppose I'm really asking whether it's something you consciously pursue, or if it's something more instinctive, something you feel compelled to do regardless of how it's received.

TR I would say that I do all the work for myself. Only when I arrive at a result that I believe is worth showing do I make it public. If I don't reach that point, then I don't show it. And for me, that decision is quite clear. I think a good artist knows when a work is finished. They understand what they have achieved, and there is a certain certainty in that. There are no real doubts at that stage.

RW Have you experienced doubt at any point?

TR No, not really.

RW You are confident.

TR Yes. It makes life easy.

RW Much of your work engages with existing images made by others, but you also have a number of self-portraits across your practice, which introduce a different dynamic. In works like *L'Empereur / La rêverie*, you become both the subject and the image. How does it feel to turn the camera onto yourself?

TR I made *L'Empereur* while I was in Paris. At the time, I had already begun the portrait series, but I couldn't continue it there. I didn't know anyone in the city, and I also didn't have access to my usual

equipment. I was there on a six-month scholarship. Walking through Paris, I felt there was nothing I wanted to photograph. Everything is so rooted in the nineteenth century, and for me, at that time, it didn't offer anything compelling. I decided to work more informally. I was spending time with a friend who was a painter, and we started photographing each other. There was a small lab at the Cité des Arts, and we made postcards from the images and sent them to friends. It may sound a bit trivial, but at that time I had fallen in love with someone in Düsseldorf, and she couldn't join me in Paris. So, the work also came out of that situation, a kind of emotional state, of distance, of longing. A sense of being separated from the person you want to be with.

JULESMOSKOVTCHENKO There's another where you appear quite young, with longer hair and an open shirt, forming a kind of dark, triangular shape. I wondered if that might also be a self-portrait. Let me see if I can find it.

[Jules searches his phone]

RW Do you like taking images of yourself?

TR Yes, of course, I also take selfies or photograph myself in the mirror. I think that has always been part of the practising. [Jules shows Thomas a picture of himself]

RW I really like this picture.

TR I have more of those.

RW Do you keep everything?

TR Yes, more or less. I don't think I ever threw away any of the negatives. But it's quite difficult to locate them now. In the early years, my approach to archiving wasn't very organised, so a lot of that material is hard to find.

In the beginning you don't think any

of it will become important. You just take the photographs, keep the negatives, and store them away, usually in boxes that end up stacked on top of each other. Then, thirty years later, you have to go back through all of it, and it becomes a huge amount of work.

RW Scholars sometimes discuss your work in relation to Marcel Duchamp. Like Duchamp, you seem to challenge traditional notions of originality and artistic genius. Do you think about your work in those terms, or does that reading feel imposed?

TR I think every artist works in that way, to some extent. Whether painter or sculptor, everyone has a kind of internal pinboard, a place where they collect images, postcards, references, things they've seen. These can serve as sources of inspiration, or for more personal reasons. I wouldn't frame it in academic terms, like appropriation or the rejection of originality. That kind of language belongs more to art historians.

RW Do you believe in originality?

TR Yes and no. It's a complex question. Before seeing a famous painting in a museum like the Louvre Museum or the Museo del Prado, you usually already know it through reproduction. You've seen it in books, catalogues, or online, and you've already formed an idea of the image. Recently, I was in Madrid and visited the Prado, where I could finally see the original paintings by Hieronymus Bosch or El Greco. That experience is, of course, extraordinary. You can see the surface, the brushwork, the materiality, how the paint sits on the canvas. But at the same time, I was already familiar with these works through reproductions, and in a way, that had already been enough to engage with them intellectually. So, there is always this tension between the original





and the reproduction. It's a bit like asking what is better, a live concert or listening to music on a CD or through streaming.

RW I think about this a lot, perhaps because I'm from Australia, where you experience so much of culture at a distance. When I studied art history, most of the works I encountered were through books or online, and that's how you learn to see them. Then, when you encounter the work in person, it adds another layer of meaning. But interestingly, I still find a kind of comfort in seeing things from a distance, through images or reproductions. It's not that one version is better or truer than the other, but that each offers a different way of experiencing the work.

TR Yes, of course, I agree. For example, I listen to a lot of classical music, and I have one LP, I think it's Leonard Bernstein conducting George Gershwin. I've listened to it so often that it has become the version for me. When I hear the same piece on the radio, it always feels slightly wrong. I'm not satisfied with other interpretations because I'm so attached to that particular recording. In a way, I feel there should be no other version.

RW We're now in a moment where we are constantly surrounded by images, both real and constructed. What motivates you to keep making work?

TR I think it is tension. My new works, those related to Gaza, Ukraine, Lebanon, and now also Hiroshima, come out of a long line of thinking. Some months ago, I wanted to develop an interpretation of *Divine Comedy*. There is a section where Dante Alighieri descends into hell, encountering a series of intensely vivid and cruel scenes. It's something I had wanted to engage with for a long time. I thought that perhaps AI could offer a way to approach this material. I began experimenting with prompts, even inputting passages directly from the text. But the system refused to generate the images, citing restrictions around violence and cruelty. In that sense, AI seems to represent a kind of controlled world, closer to the vision described in *Brave New World*, where certain aspects of reality are excluded. A large part of the real world, conflict, suffering, violence, is effectively off limits. So, I abandoned that approach and returned to the images, going through them again and collecting material, often just taking screenshots.

I then began working with these images through AI, using prompts to transform them. What emerged were new images that allowed me to approach the subject differently. I wanted to convey the scale of destruction, in places like Gaza or Ukraine, not through direct documentary realism, but through something more interpretive. I removed people and cars, stripping the scenes back, so that what remains are vast, emptied landscapes, spaces where it is clear that life can no longer continue.

After producing a number of these works, I realised that they needed to be presented collectively. In that sense, I returned to a logic

similar to Bernd and Hilla Becher, arranging them in a grid. Not to compare individual images, but to accumulate them, to present a multiplicity of destruction that becomes overwhelming in its totality.

When people first look at the images, they are often drawn in by their surface, the painterly quality, the composition. There is an initial attraction. But then, after a moment, there is a shift. They recognise what they are actually looking at, and realise, this is war, this is real.

I don't want to make money from these kinds of images. What interests me more is the discussion they might generate, the questions they raise about representation, responsibility, and how we engage with imagery.

RW We're exposed to such a constant flow of images and information that, at times, we stop feeling anything in response to them.

TR It's similar, in a way, to how Francisco Goya approached *The Disasters of War*, confronting violence and its consequences directly through imagery. And also, to artists like Hieronymus Bosch, whose works depict scenes of chaos, suffering and moral consequence. There's a long history of artists engaging with the brutality of war and human conflict, trying to give form to something that is otherwise difficult to comprehend.

RW This brings me to my final question. Jean-Luc Godard suggested that the ability to rework images and dialogue might be key to both psychological and political health. You've expressed scepticism about photography as a universal language but also as an inherently emancipatory tool. Do you see the reworking of images as a way of making sense of the world?

TR I agree with Jean-Luc Godard, but perhaps his idea needs to be reconsidered in the present context. He was speaking in the 1960s, and since then, media has become far more complex and sophisticated. What I can say is that I've always wanted to act, in some way, as an enlightener. I want to encourage people to look more carefully at images, and not to trust them blindly. An image may present something appealing, but that same image can also contain something problematic or misleading. It's about recognising that tension and becoming aware of how images operate. I wouldn't frame this philosophically, but photography allows us to engage critically with what we see.