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Urban Spaces

Extracts from the text *A view onto the city*

By Ludovico Pratesi, exhibition curator

Written especially for the edition of the exhibition catalog.

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“If anthropologists, sociologists, architects, urban planners and philosophers have been involved in the last decade in analysing the transformation of the contemporary city from their many and varied points of view, the same issues are addressed by a group of German contemporary artists who express themselves through the language of photography, in order to cast an analytical eye on the urban evolution in the last forty years. Through the works of the five artists invited to participate in this exhibition, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth, emerges the artists’ understanding of urban space as a sum of social and symbolic stratifications situated on the border between reality and its representation.

Through an apparently objective and ascetic approach, which in reality is analytical and interpretative, these artists have concentrated their research on the complex theme of relationships between the human being and the surrounding space, underlining the socio-cultural and anthropological implications. This approach takes as its point of departure the teachings of Bernd and Hilla Becher, considered the masters of the five artists, and known as the Düsseldorf School”.

“The five artists basically follow the fundamental lessons of Bernd Becher, with some variations that however never distance them from the idea of photography intended as a document of reality, analysed conceptually and not descriptively”.

“Finally, one of the formal elements that characterizes the so-called Düsseldorf School is the large-format of the photographs, obtained by means of photographic techniques borrowed over the course of the 1980s from the advertising world and already experimented by various international artists such as Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman and Clegg & Guttman. The principal motivation for this large-format, a distinctive feature since the 1980s of the artists present in this exhibition, relates to their desire to confront themselves with the twentieth-century art historical movements, as for example Futurism, Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, where the work of art was considered a physical space into which the spectator was drawn. These artists considered photography on an equal level with painting, an approach which led them to gradually abandon the Bechers’ necessary, compositional rigor. Their artistic horizon is transformed into an extremely detailed visual landscape, where the presence of the contemporary city becomes an unbounded reservoir of cultural, social, political, anthropological, or simply aesthetic, resources”.

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Ludovico Pratesi

Born in Rome, 15 april 1961, lives in Rome. He has a BA in Law and a BA in History of Modern Art at the University of Rome. He writes art reviews for the newspaper La Repubblica. He wrote for the French newspaper Le Monde from 1994 to 2000. From 2002 to 2005 he was the Artistic Consultant for the city of Bari. Since December 2000, he is the Artistic Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Pesaro. Since 2009 he is curator for Palazzo Fabroni, a contemporary art museum in Pistoia (Tuscany). Since 2004 he is the artistic director of Fondazione Guastalla, based in Rome. From 1998 to 2008 he was professor of History of Contemporary Art at the University of Reggio Calabria. He has curated various exhibits of Italian and international artists such as: Candida Höfer, Giuseppe Penone, Enzo Cucchi, Tony

Cragg, Marina Abramovic, Joseph Kosuth, John Cage, Domenico Bianchi, Mimmo Paladino, Cristiano Pintaldi, Francesco Gennari, Stefano Arienti, and Vedovamazzei. He is currently the president of the Italian section of AICA (International Association of Art Critics).

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Interview to Ludovico Pratesi **Exhibition curator**

How did the idea of mounting this exhibition come about?

L.P.: A few years ago I became interested in the evolution of contemporary German photography. From my place as curator, the idea of mounting an exhibition on the Düsseldorf School became a very interesting challenge. We invited the five artists to analyze the evolution of the contemporary city through a selection of their own works. This goes to say that the works presented in Proa are the result of a close dialogue between the artists and the curator.

As a result of the selection of works that is presented in Proa's exhibition shows how each artist understands differently the relationship of urban spaces in a historical, sociological, political, or anthropologic sense. This is the first time that the artists are invited to reflect of a common theme with different interpretations.

What are the most significant works included in the exhibition ?

L.P.: The selection includes some of the artists' master works, such as May Day IV by Andreas Gursky or the photos of Weimar by Candida Höfer. Also to be seen are lesser known works from the five artists' earliest years, when they were students of Bernd Becher, photography professor of the Düsseldorf Academy during the 80s. At the same time, in the selection made with Candida Höfer there are some important shots taken in Buenos Aires, a city which fascinated and interested her in a very special way.

Considering that the five artists are authorities of photography and international contemporary art, what do you think the repercussion will be from the local artistic community?

L.P.: Due to the conceptual meaning of these images, it will be a singular opportunity to see an exceptional show on five masters of contemporary international photography. The works are not mere site documentations, but rather express a deep thought-process regarding the evolution of the city, a theme which since the Impressionists has constantly been taken on by artists. The strength of these works and the concepts the show forth can be appreciated both by the Argentine public as well as the international one. It is a very big effort that only the Fundación Proa y and its director Adriana Rosenberg could make to present this exhibition in Latin America, of indubitable value.

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Interview to Adriana Rosenberg **Director of Fundación Proa**

How did the idea of producing this exhibition come about?

A.R.: This exhibition is part of the cultural program of FUNDACIóN PROA, in which we present different disciplines of current contemporary art. With photography in mind, we thought of who the leaders or masters of photography, as we have done with the past exhibitions, and we came to the artists that compose the Düsseldorf School. In the same way that we once organized exhibitions of Andrés Serrano or Sebastián Selgado, we now considered that, taking photography as an art, one of the most outstanding groups is the Düsseldorf School; bringing works of these five artists was practically inevitable within the international contemporary context.

Why is the exhibition centered around the theme of the city?

A.R.: The curator Ludovico Pratesi decided to take the concept of city to unify the criteria of the exhibition. Ever since the eighties, the concept of city has become one of the central themes in contemporary art. This exhibition centers around this theme because it shows a different city, always from a new point of view. It is a city in which one dialogues with a viewpoint: the artist's.

How is the show's exhibition design planned?

A.R.: The show's exhibition design presents two situations. There is a first instance represented by the years in which the group was united in the Düsseldorf Academy, under the tutelage of the Bechers. It is the moment of formation, before each one begins to forge their own paths. The second instance all along the exhibition rooms one can see mini retrospectives in which each artist is treated individually. In the case of Candida Höfer, the outline is longer because also included are four of her outstanding works from when she was in Buenos Aires.

¿What is the significance of this show to be done in Buenos Aires?

A.R.: There are few exhibitions around the world in which the five artists are brought together. In other words, for example, it is possible to see Gursky's work in a retrospective, but this exhibitions bring the five of them together after many years, and shows what the Düsseldorf School is, in addition to the individual developments of the artists. So, the photographer, the artist, the connoisseur, and the visitor will have the possibility to stand in front of an artistic dimension, unthinkable for our day-to-day.