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Urban Spaces Texts and authors

LUDOVICO PRATESI

Extract 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”.

“I do not want to disturb the public with my work’, declares Candida Höfer. Following the cycle of works on the Turkish community in Germany, the artist abandons black and white photography in favour of colour, she begins to use a large format, and above all, she definitively eliminates the human presence in her work, concentrating instead on public urban spaces for culture, such as libraries, theatres and museums. (...) Höfer points out that these spaces are slowly but surely losing their primary function: the spectators of a theatre are replaced by television-spectators, books in libraries are becoming virtual, and museums are visited by Internet. By means of large-scale images, the artist invites the spectator to look again, to consider every detail”.

“(Axel Hütte’s works) represent panoramic aerial views of buildings in Atlanta, Seattle and Las Vegas, transformed by the artist into mysterious webs of light that present a dreamlike and unfocused

abstraction. (...) ...a space of hallucination, vividly defined by Rudolf Schmitz, who notes the artist's ability to explore the limits of visibility, although always remaining faithful to reality”.

“(Thomas Struth) looks towards the city in order to analyse the cultural coordinates of its evolution, seeking to capture the most secret and less evident traces. (...) he never seeks out the most representative places, such as monuments or museums, but concentrates on the spaces between buildings. He is interested in insignificant streets or public squares, which he considers repositories of an anonymous and unconscious memory. Unlike Candida Höfer, he looks towards the stratification of banal daily life, interpreted as would an anthropologist, and focuses on the subtle relations that link man to his social environment”.

“The main interest of Thomas Ruff is the use of photography to investigate individual or collective perception through the constant flow of images of contemporary society generated by the media. His themes are many and varied, from *Portraits* (portraits of common people) to *Nudes* (pornographic images taken from Internet) to *Jpegs* (enlarged digital images), where the theme of the city is represented in its many social and political aspects”.

“Andreas Gursky first separates himself from the lessons of his masters, pursuing since the early 1980s a process that focuses on the structural aspects of the image, emphasizing the ability to catch the eye. His formal artistic research focuses on the concentration on a single photogramme, printed large scale and with an almost maniacal attention to detail. Conceptually, his works grip the spectator physically and emotionally, recalling the experience of German painting from the Renaissance to Romanticism. (...)Gursky captures this architecture, where the contemporary city is protagonist, with a precision and a farsighted vision that never ceases to amaze”.

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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).

ARMIN ZWEITE

Extracts from the text *The historical importance in photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher**

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“The artistic starts of the first generation of students from Becher’s class result from this point of view, little specific and non-spectacular. The authors disappear behind their works. Originality is avoided, perhaps consciously; in any case, it is clear that nobody sees it as a criterion for his or her own work. Photographs give the impression to be objective and cold in excess, and essentially raise one only thing: indifference.

The fact that, with such distinctive signs, these photographers had operated in ways so entirely akin to the spirit of times appears clearly if we take a look beyond Düsseldorf. Imagine that, for the younger generation, the horizon changes completely around 1980”.

“In retrospect, the 80’s appear as a kind of incubation period for all sort of revolutions, paradoxes, contradictions, disasters and implosions that we are still dealing with today, and that, with all evidence, we still continue to ignore the way to deal with them.¹ What had initially being announced here and there in a completely sporadic way finishes with the collapse of the socialist social systems. (...)No matter how we turn things round, it is impossible not to note that the emancipation horizon was overshadowed and that the utopian ideas no longer exercised any stimulus, but on the contrary, they result suspicious”.

“Against the backdrop of these trends outlined with ever greater clarity, it was inevitable that, after having received the certainly decisive stimulus of Bernd and Hilla Becher, students in the first generation would quickly derogate that reference to get to explore their own paths”.

“The distance that these artists have taken with regard to the Bechers is reflected in the multiplicity of their topics, as well as in the fact that all of them (with the exception of Petra Wunderlich) work in colour. On the other hand, if the *oeuvre* of Bernd and Hilla Becher always suggests the historical character of photography and does never forget that it is a medium, the self-reference to photographic means plays a much stronger role, by contrast, in their students.

In Ruff, who went further in this sense, reality seems to have past by so many specific filters and electronic processing, that the real can only be verified as a trace and specific reasons are perceived solely as *ersatz*, substitutes, such as if the optical signals had lost their referential character²”.

“It would not be possible to omit another differential trait, namely, the dimension of the images, which exceeds by far the regular size of photographs, and that can reach a length of 6 meters (and a proportional height). Such dimensions, which grew progressively since the end of the 80’s among artists in question, imply another perception and suggest a greater distance between the work and the spectator. (...)Shortly, the distance between Bernd and Hilla Becher photographs and colour large-formats by Gursky, Struth, Ruff, Höfer, Hütte and many other artists from that circle seems so radical that, in the public perception, economy, rigor and silence are in risk of disappearing behind opulence, outrageousness and seduction”.

* Source: Armin Zweite, “Photografie et/comme art à Düsseldorf 1958-1976”, in *Objectivité-La photographie à Düsseldorf*, exhibition catalogue, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, in collaboration with K20K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, October 4th 2008 – January 4th 2009, pp. 21-55. The original text in German was translated by Jean Torrent. Translated to English by Daniela Gutiérrez. [E.]

¹ On this global phenomenon, there has been a recent exhibition and a catalogue: *Kavalierstart, 1978-1982. Aufbruch in die Kunst der 80er Jahre*, directed by Stephanie Kreuser, Exhibition Catalogue, Museum Morsbroich Leverkusen, 2008. The variety of represented artists included from John Baldessari to James Welling, and related to our topic here, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth.

² See Régis Durand, *Disparités. Essais sur l’expérience photographique 2*, Paris.,2002., p. 47: “In a certain way, just few contemporary pieces are so rigorously photographic as his, aware as he is of all de media possibilities, examined each with detachment, without deference, nor fetishism”.

“If the work of Gursky, Höfer, Hütte, Ruff and Struth met an important and durable echo, their success derives without any doubt from their themes. Instead of large-format portraits and architectural details views (Förg), of complex and multiple representations, therefore difficult to read, that point to a media criticism (Sieverding), these artists put at the forefront of their work equivalent matters, of course; but those matters appear as more cutter, more sweeping and less complex in spite of a manifest taste and pleasure for detail. This applies to Ruff portraits when compared with those of Förg, and the same goes for Gursky, Höfer and Struth’s architectural motives if confronted with Förg work.

The fact that digitalization techniques allow to reinforce certain aspects that seem to be important and modify, or even eliminate certain others, should be also considered. The work of Düsseldorf artists (not all of them, it is true) no longer authenticates reality, but fictionalizes it. The viewer is no longer bound to believe that what he sees in these works truly exists. The reality of the image enjoys a broad autonomy and must be viewed as an aesthetic reality, i.e. emancipated from the mode of representation. The veracity requirement, tied in its origins to the photographic media—namely, the imperative to be a document of reality—is being increasingly erased. On one hand, it is suggested to the viewer that the image reproduces something real. On the other, latent doubt regarding to the authenticity of what is represented is encouraged”.

“On this background, it may be advisable to admit that the power of suggestion of the images by Gursky, Struth, Ruff and Höfer—but also by many other photographers from Düsseldorf—has favoured a broad and generally enthusiastic reception. There is no doubt that the ambition to aspire at the same range of painting is, at least, camouflaged behind it”.

“In short, we cannot fail to note that what began and was carried out for the past four decades in Düsseldorf, and from that city into the field of contemporary photography, has a considerable scope, and is even likely to become of great historic significance.

There is no need to say that Bernd and Hilla Becher had their crucial part in this, and, of course we should welcome also the autonomy and the presence of surprising works by another generation, which has managed not only to confer new visual possibilities to photographic media but also to produce an increased force of impact. It is likely that something like this could not occur this way in any other place but Düsseldorf, because Fluxus—or would we have to say Joseph Beuys?—had tempered the intellectual climate and the aesthetic possibilities there to such a stand, that we should not fear to question the binding nature of conceptual rigor exercised by Bernd and Hilla Becher. It was possible for young artists, therefore, to combine objectivity and imagination, balance calculation and experimentation, as well as cross the passage from analogical to digital photography, with everything that it implied. They dared to change radically the scale and embraced the large format. Thus, the concern about a self-reflection on the photographic media will have been merged with penetrating reasons to create consistent images, of a suggestive immediacy, which not only show us anything, but they have, in addition, the merit to prove themselves”.

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Armin Zweite

Armin Zweite and his family escaped to Flensburg in 1945. Between 1960 and 1967 he studied Philosophy, History, Art History, Psychology and German in the University of Kiel, Tübingen, Göttingen and later on in Brussels and Berkeley. From 1974 until 1990, he directed the State Gallery in Lenbachhaus, München. At age 33, he was the youngest museum director in Germany. In 1990 he was appointed head of the Renania province collection, in the north of Westphalia. In the autumn of 2009, he ceded his place to Marion Ackermann (Stuttgart Museum of Art). Under the auspices of Zweite, the collection was predominated by sculptures, installations, international photography. In the spring of 2002, the institution expanded its collection, which was primarily dedicated to modern art of the Twentieth and Twenty-first centuries. He was curator of the Bienal of Sao Paulo on numerous occasions. Since 2001 he is a curatorial member

of the *Jürgen-Ponto-Stiftung* of the Bank of Dresden. He was also co-curator of the Aktuell 83 exhibition. In November 2007, he assumed the position as director of the Brandhorst collection.

VALERIA GONZÁLEZ

Extracts from the text *New German photography in the context of contemporary art history*.

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“The more conspicuous inheritance of the Bechers’ rigor occurs in a student, who, at the end, becomes independent of it in a very profound way: Thomas Ruff. As can be seen in his portraits, his approach to photography was clearly conceptual since the beginning. (...)Ruff has been the one who knew better how to adapt the legacy of his teachers to the postmodern lesson of his time: more than represent reality, image builds it. Each code, each device, each technology produces its own imaginary logic. An astronomical observatory, the infrared camera that sees in the dark, the photography press, the police records, the websites digitally compressed image: each set of work by the artist poses a consistency between the "toolbox" and the "style" of the resulting image. (...)Ruff’s oeuvre is the most varied and, however, the most systematic”.

“For the members of the School of Düsseldorf a photograph is not taken: it is made, and the model of painting serves to make it important and convincing. The first relationship between photography and painting reached its peak circa 1900 with Pictorialism. Through the use of soft focus and chemical manipulations, photographers imitated the textural presence of the brushstroke. (...)The pictorial revitalization of the photograph in the hands of the young generation of Düsseldorf programmatically avoided this type of artistry linked to the mysterious blur of the image and its transcendent contents. Among them, the only one that took this path was Axel Hütte. (...) When Hütte produces urban photographs, from the 90’s on, prefers the formal indeterminacy of an airy point of view and the light indeterminacy of a night shot”.

“Candida Höfer translated the method requirement of her teachers to the iconographic oneness field. Since very early, and until today, she was devoted to photograph the interiors of public buildings with no people, preferably cultural institutions, such as theaters, auditoriums, museums, libraries. (...)Unlike some architectural images of Ruff or Gursky, digitally manipulated, the spaces shown by Höfer possess an effect of presence and immediate credibility. Höfer, as all her colleagues, has traveled incessantly, picking up in her vision the most diverse cities of globalized world”.

“Thomas Struth was the first graduate from Bernd Becher’s class. (...)Encouraged by his teacher, he won a scholarship to travel to New York in 1978, and that experience led to a turning point in his work. In his new images of the city he abandoned the implementation of an aprioristic method and tried to find, for each take, a balance between the circumstantial cut and some compositional order. Probably influenced by the strong development of the street photography in North America, Struth added the Bressonian model to the conceptual inheritance from his teachers. (...)As most of his peers, Struth turned to color since 1980, and since 1989, to large-scale. By then, technical possibilities and economic resources were available to deal with the real demand of the art market”.

“Andreas Gursky was the last of the group in joining the Academy. (...)In 1981, he had known the work of Jeff Wall and had been extremely impressed. But the more decisive turn in his work came in 1984. (...) Six months later Gursky noted, while copying the aerial view of a landscape, the presence of some people in diminutive size. From this optical unconscious, the artist derives a model of image (...)where the artist confronts the size of man with the impetuous dimension of the landscape (...)In the semantic level, this would be the relationship between the individual and the undifferentiated mass of which he is part in the postmodern social rituals. To achieve this hipervisibility, photographers have turned to the digital fusion of several negatives”

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Valeria González

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PAOLO PERULLI

Extracts from the text *Center**.

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“Does the contemporary city still find itself “established within a territory” and as such, does it form a world, as was the case in ancient times? Because the word “world” means, in etymological terms, that *mundus* or circular pit excavated in the center of the city (...) guaranteeing their sacred value. That world supplied a center and a meaning to all individual and social activity”.

“It is precisely the opposite of what we are doing today, with the formless growth which we imprint upon the urban world, as well as in the increasingly virtual nature of things that penetrates the constructed world”.

“Will *urbs et orbis*, the city and the world, mean, from now on, “everywhere and it doesn’t matter where”, an urban weave strewn across the planet that deforms both, a pure agglomeration? (J.L. Nancy) These are the unsettling, pressing questions that contemporary cities propose to us and that, for our part, we pose in the face of their incessant growth”.

“...Lewis Mumford was the first to warn of the passage from metropolis to megalopolis: “Formless agglomeration, gigantism, congestion, deterioration, the suppression of nature and the depletion of the environment”. As a counterpoint to this process which conduces to necropolis—the city that dies—Mumford placed a possible “regional structure of civilization” as the essence of culture in cities, based on the idea of interconnected local systems, open to the world; it is a proposal for a new “urban order”, that goes back to the utopia of Ebenezer Howard’s social city and corrects the coercive tendencies of progressive urbanism. (...) So then, there are many centers, the urban universe is pluri-centric and self-contained: it is an extreme summons prior to collapse”.

“Later, during the 20th century, Marshall McLuhan would maintain that the electronic simultaneousness of information produces a global sphere of audio space where the center is everywhere and the circumference, nowhere. The global city would, in the end, inherit this character”.

“Today, on the contrary, the “generic city” by Rem Koolhaas, whose indifference to the place is transformed into a value, quite effectively expresses many architects’ and developers’ tendency toward a single “urban world”, finally freed from its classic ties (to the State, rules, social substrates, stability, slowness...). The mandates are mobility, velocity and fluidity. Beneath the center lives the garbage-space; “Fuck the context!” exclaims the fashionable architect, applauded by the media, anthropologists, critics and specialist magazines”.

“The ‘non-places’ (M. Augé) were the fortunate anthropological definition for the process of estrangement (by becoming strangers) and at the same time, of displacement (the loss of place). It is a shame that the author, fifteen years after his happy discovery, would exalt them as ‘common space, capable of giving those who pass through them as users, travelers or clients, the sensation that they find that neither time nor beauty are missing from their story”.

“Acceleration and an overabundance of events in the way of available information; an overabundance, an excess of spaces in the form of recognizable images and shortened physical distances. On the other hand,

*This text corresponds to Chapter 1, “Centro” (Center), of the book *Visioni di città. Le forme del mondo spaziale* [Visions of the City. Forms of the Spatial World] (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, PBE, 2009). English translation: Tamara Stuby.

these two tendencies multiply the number of non-spaces, installations that are necessary for the vertiginous circulation of people and goods (airports, high velocity roadways, spaces for exchange, malls for shopping and taking strolls...). Globalization's architecture takes on the form of the "landscape", then, of travelers' space (...) So, then, in name of what notion of city can a critique of the generic city be made?

The compact city based on reciprocity (...)"

"The compact city's contemporary urbanism can also be assimilated to the ancient idea of proportion, of equitable distribution and reciprocal exchange. Today, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Barcelona, Monaco, London and Paris follow the idea of compactness. (...)What do they all have in common? Precisely the vision of urban renovation (*renovatio urbis*), understood to be a continuous ability to adapt. "To protect and preserve the *genius loci* means, in effect, to specify its essence in historical contexts that are always new." (Norberg-Schulz). The idea of the city cannot renounce the center. In order to be inhabitable, the city must "remember", conserve-restore, increase, reproduce and multiply, but not dissolve its centrality"

"The rationalist city's geometry makes efforts to capture and organize these aspects of agglomeration that pertain to urban life. However, "the true function of the metropolis is clearly to guarantee positive neighborliness between centers and non-centers", although not in the form of the Super-central that the rationalists conceived of, but in the form of agglomeration and stacking of collectors, businesses and residences, surfaces built out of doors. Yet "agglomeration" is not the same as saying "world" as meaningful space. The challenge lies in putting diverse, multiple communities of meaning together within a single common living space. Living together globally, "now that every place becomes an indifferent point in space, equivalent and isomorphic" (M. Cacciari), knowing how to invent new places and spaces provided with meaning. If this was possible, and to the extent that we make it possible, we will be able to avoid the loss of the homologous and "senseless" center that the champions of the generic city have theorized, whether it be in the proliferation of closed spaces that are identitary and "immune", fenced in and claustrophobic, that contemporary architecture offers us, which, in the end, are the two faces of a single process involving the city's loss of meaning".

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Paolo Perulli

Paolo Perulli is a renown Italian sociologist. He is a professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Piemonte Oriental and a visiting professor of Urban Sociology at the Architecture Academy in Mendrisio (Switzerland). He was a professor at the University Institute of Architecture in Venice, visiting scholar at M.I.T and guest professor at the University of Paris-Sud. He is on the scientific committee of various international magazines on architecture and urbanism.