The Ambivalent Gaze of Thomas Ruff

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During the politically traumatic yet economically prosperous period of the 1920s, a debate ensued in Germany about the role art should play in social affairs. The debate was only in part about the potential of art for political agency. It was mostly about defining the correct proximity of art to reality. As an aesthetic counterpoint to the angst of expressionism, and its preoccupation with the individual's responses to modern life, New Objectivity artists such as Otto Dix and August Sander proposed an art based on relative truths.

This debate carried a particular poignancy in the aftermath of Germany's armistice in 1918. As it turned out, the 1920s were also for Germany an antebellum society to an infinitely more terrible inferno.

The almost operatic teeter-totter between reason and sensibility, sobriety, and national self-absorption continues to be the central dialectic of German art. During the 1980s, at the height of Germany's immense influence on international contemporary art, neo-expressionism arrived to form one pole to the other pole of Düsseldorf School photography.

Graduated from the atelier of the noted artist/teacher team of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Ruff (b. West Germany, 1958) emerged at the apogee of neo-expressionism, in other words, at the starting moment of its decline. Ruff has since the mid-1980s developed a body of work that is structured rather like an archive of the most prevalent forms of photographic classification. These include standard portraiture, scientific images, surveillance pictures, photojournalism, and architectural photography.

Ruff’s most celebrated channel of work is his monumentally scaled, view-camera-generated portraits of the artist’s own generation of Germans. These pictures are monumental yet devoid of heroism and symbolic advocacy. In what has become a standard interpretation, Ruff’s portraits are often read as homage to the moral burden that weighs down on the shoulders of Germany’s youth despite their experiential distance from the horrors of a half century ago. Like a true archivist, Ruff does not say whether this is fair or not, it simply is so.

But there is perhaps another meaning to Ruff’s pictures of utterly inert gazes, a meaning that may be difficult to speak. Among many of Germany’s neighbours, among Jews and other targets of Nazi terror, there remains a persistent fear that the dream of the Thousand Year Reich remains, however dim, a burning ember formerly glowing amid the ruins of war—and now flickering faintly within the foundations of reconstruction. Ruff’s portraits of glaciated gazes are an artistic address
to this fear. They are images of absolute arrestment; they are faces that his camera has put into eternal hibernation from the continuing drama of historical unfolding.