Thomas Ruff's *jpegs ny*: A formalist response to the September 11 attacks

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To mark the 25th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the David Zwirner gallery in New York is exhibiting German photographer Thomas Ruff's *jpegs ny* series. Each of the 12 works on view is an image of the attacks that the artist downloaded from the internet, enlarged and manipulated. The exhibition will be on view until October 17.

Ruff is a prominent member of the Düsseldorf School of photography, alongside other artists such as Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth. These photographers absorbed the premises of Conceptual Art from their teachers Bernd and Hilla Becher, who rejected expressiveness and artistic personality, instead emphasizing an impersonal, quasi-[or pseudo-]scientific approach that included frontal views, even lighting and sharp focus. Social relations, historical context and even human beings were banished from their work. The Bechers also worked in series, accumulating images like specimens.

Compared with that of his fellow Düsseldorf School members, Ruff's work may be the most self-reflexive. His subject can be said to be photography itself. His *jpegs ny* series is part of a larger *jpegs* series that examines digitally transmitted images. Ruff shows less interest in his subjects than in what photography does to them. "What happens when the material world is increasingly encountered through photographs?" he seems to ask. "What happens when historical events become a mass of photographic images?" These are legitimate questions, but Ruff's approach inevitably limits what he can accomplish with his art.

To viewers who remember the September 11 attacks, the images in the exhibition are unmistakably familiar. A jpeg is a type of file that uses significant data compression to reduce its size for easier transmission and storage. The resulting data loss produces a coarse and approximate picture. Ruff enlarged these jpegs to the grand scale of 19th century history painting. He further degraded them by increasing their compression and reducing the number of pixels per centimeter. Ruff also added color to the images.

In its press release, David Zwirner argues that Ruff's manipulations have achieved painterly effects and discovered an analog to the expressiveness of the brushstroke. Speaking more objectively, Ruff's interventions place the technological and formal aspects of each work in the foreground. Each image is still legible, but the blurring is so great and the digital editing so overt that these elements compete with, if not overwhelm, the subject matter.

The first work that the visitor encounters, *jpeg ny05* (2004), is the most imposing. The tall, blurry photo presumably shows the ruins of one of the Twin Towers rising from the ground, strewn with rubble. The bottom of the structure incorporates arches, and without knowing the theme of the exhibition, one might think that the photo showed the ruins of a Gothic cathedral.

A characteristic work is *jpeg ny02* (2004) a grainy photo showing foul black smoke billowing from one of the Twin Towers while white clouds obscure the city streets below. Grays and pale blues predominate, and the image is highly abstract. Ruff's alterations undercut the photo's immediacy, giving it the character of an image from a dossier. The subject is not the terrorist attacks but their presentation. In postmodernist jargon, Ruff is investigating the creation of a narrative.

The stark *jpeg ny11* (2006) shows black ruins against a deep blue night sky. Beams reach purposelessly upward through smoke that spreads everywhere. The photograph has the tone of certain German Romantic paintings that conjure the horrible power of nature. In this work, reality asserts itself despite Ruff's interventions.

Other images have an air of unreality or evince a clinical distance from the disaster they depict. One seems a mere play of positive and negative space. The most affecting work is perhaps *jpeg ny06* (2005), in the left third of which the illuminated Empire State Building rises against a bruise-colored sky. The void where the Twin Towers stood dominates the photo, and smoke is still rising from the hole. Yet the work is indistinct and abstract; line and color compete with the subject.

Significantly, there are no people in any of these photographs. Political, social and historical context is likewise absent. The artificial, pixelated character of these images tends to blunt their emotional force. Looking at them, one has the urge to clear away the distortion and get to the truth. Even the titles of these works are impersonal; they resemble catalog numbers. Yet, at least for viewers who remember the attacks, some of the images seem to resist the artist's treatment.

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To understand *jpegs ny* more fully, it is necessary to examine Ruff's life and career. The artist was born in 1958 in Zell am Harmersbach, a small town in what was then West Germany. His father was a ceramics caster, and his mother had grown up on a farm. West Germany was experiencing its "economic miracle," a rapid reconstruction, expansion of industry and rise in living standards following World War II. Ruff's parents were determined to give him opportunities that they themselves had not had. East Germany, meanwhile, was a Stalinist state, and the Cold War was a concrete, daily reality.

During Ruff's childhood, young people around the world were rebelling against war, racism and governmental authority, and this movement was especially charged in West Germany. The Frankfurt Auschwitz trial that began in 1963 contributed to a renewed public reckoning with Nazism. Confronting their own parents' generation, young people protested the continuity of personnel between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic.

One section of radicalized youth formed or supported the Red Army faction (RAF), also known as the Baader-Meinhof group, which carried out terrorist bombings and kidnappings. The WSWS has described the situation in Germany that produced this political dead-end:

> The Social Democratic Party, which had long since abandoned a socialist perspective, still had significant support in the factories and trade unions. In East Germany, the Stalinist bureaucracy, along with its followers in the West, were also hostile to any revolutionary movement of the working class. At the same time, the student movement was strongly influenced by the anti-Marxist theories of the Frankfurt School, which wrote off the working class as a revolutionary factor, regarding it as a bourgeoisified mass "intoxicated by consumerism," instead glorifying the guerrilla movements in the Third World and other petty bourgeois forces. The RAF was from the outset marked by this contempt for the working class and broad sections of the population.

Ruff came of age as the German "economic miracle" was ending. The 1966 recession and the 1973 oil crisis were followed by skyrocketing unemployment, rising inflation and weak economic growth. The artist entered the Düsseldorf Academy in 1977, which was also the year of the RAF's most dramatic violence, including the murder of industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer. The capitalist state responded with increased police repression and surveillance. Internationally, the student protest movement was ebbing, and a tide of reaction was rising. Young people, as well as artists and intellectuals, were losing faith in the very idea that collective action could change society.

Under these conditions, the "neutral" approach of the Bechers resonated with Ruff and many of his fellow students. Ruff applied it to his first series, "Portraits," which comprises photos of people in the same frontal pose, with the same impassive expression and in the same lighting. In direct contrast to the portraits of German photographer August Sander (1876–1964), Ruff's portraits are devoid of any indication of class, occupation or history. Social reality is dissolved, and only form remains. "A portrait is a portrait is a portrait," Ruff seems to say.

In later series such as "Stars," "Newspaper Photos" and "Nudes," Ruff appropriated photographs from various sources, rather than taking his own, and rephotographed or manipulated them, as in *jpegs*. Ruff's preoccupations became the nature and circulation of images, rather than the subjects of those images. This trajectory represented a further withdrawal from social reality.

Ruff's approach jibes with the postmodernist questioning (or denial) of objective social reality. One thinks of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), who theorized the breakdown of the distinction between the real and its representation and held that signs increasingly circulate without stable referents. This type of deeply pessimistic, passive and consciously anti-Marxist perspective has influenced Ruff's work since his student years.

September 11 is a weighty, complex topic that is difficult to treat artistically. It raises the questions of terrorism, the continuous wars that US imperialism has been waging since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, President George W. Bush's so-called war on terror, the normalization of torture and the attack on democratic rights. For artists who wish to respond to these events but lack an understanding of history and an engagement with the class struggle, it is nigh impossible to produce anything other than depictions of horror or tragedy.

Ruff's self-referential formalism is inherently incapable of exposing any new insights about September 11. Rather, it risks emptying the events of their historical and social meaning. Looking at several of these works, the viewer may even find him- or herself strangely unmoved. This is noncommittal art that has renounced the cognition of social life. Ruff is emblematic of a layer of artists who have been cut off from the working class and who have retreated into hermetic formal experimentation. The ongoing radicalization of workers and youth around the world will produce a new art capable of revealing the true social relations and fueling a movement for revolutionary change.

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