

FRIEDERIKE VON RAUCH

Reduction of Means Deployed On the Photographs of Friederike von Rauch

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Friederike von Rauch is one of those artists whose works surprise us at first glance by their clarity and total reticence. But behind her pictures we can sense that the perceptible simplicity is the result of precise, painstaking preparation and very clear thinking about her own procedure. Von Rauch has set herself rules for her work which she follows, focusing crucially on the question of the truth of the pictures. She exclusively uses analogue photography for her shots. Thus in the age of the total digitalization of images she still adheres to traditional photographic methods. That helps avoid any temptation to hand over all responsibility to the computer and the corresponding programs. She takes only real places as her subjects. She does not invent, she finds. She makes no change to reality as she finds it. She works only with natural light or existing light sources. And lastly, the camera is at eye level, not tilted, and always occupies a point of view an observer could attain under natural circumstances. These self-imposed rules do not imply any dogma or compulsion for her; they are a natural inner propensity. For her, her principles are normal and a matter of course, therefore she remains true to herself and her aesthetic without experiencing any doubts. No disruptive detail is altered, shifted, or covered up; rather she spends as long as it takes looking for the right viewing angle until everything fits into the concept she has developed of a picture. That can take time, and occasionally she does not reach that point because the light or other elements of reality fail to correspond to her concept. If that is the case, she does not take a photograph.

For a long time von Rauch has devoted herself to photographing architecture, or, to be more precise, places determined by architecture. In this, her approach relates directly to the subjects she has selected, the two being interdependent. The process of finding her subjects represents a substantial part of her work. She seeks out suitable places for her pictures in different ways, through asking questions and researching architectural travel guides, books, and in libraries, from which she then arranges her routes. All these methods are only aids, for often she finds the places that seem to her to be suitable for a picture only beyond her predetermined routes. Thus in Brussels, for instance, she accidentally discovered the archive relating to Belgian forced labor in Germany when she was looking for an Art Deco building. She occasionally stumbles across such historically significant places to her own astonishment, but does not make this surprise a theme in her pictures. Almost every one of von Rauch's pictures has a story behind it, whether because it deals with places that are special from a historical or architectural point of view, or because there is a story attached to the finding of the place itself. But von Rauch does not want to tell stories with her pictures; they deliberately refrain from any narrativity.

Friederike von Rauch's way of working is determined by a firm commitment to the utmost precision and extreme restraint: precision in technique and implementation, restriction in selection and means. Therefore when working she prefers to be on her own and with only as much equipment as she can carry herself. She seeks to concentrate on the essential. She fathoms out what that essence of a place or a building is for her by observing them again and again from various angles. It often takes a long time for her to find the right position and the right light for a picture. When she travels, for instance, she takes only a limited amount of film with her which makes clear decisions necessary. This self-imposed restriction is one of the bases of the special strength of her pictures.

Friederike von Rauch's pictures show places and spaces that are made and defined by human beings, but people themselves do not appear in them. A particularly enigmatic aspect of her work lies precisely in this consistent exclusion of the human form. There is a predominant impression of dreamlike emptiness and timelessness. The riddle of how pictures so empty of people can be made in places that are in fact so intensely visited is not raised by her. But von Rauch does not block off any street in order to take her pictures. Only on rare occasions can unambiguous references to the local context be recognized, perhaps some writing or a minimal detail that allows an attribution. For example, the Berlin Wall can clearly be recognized in one picture, yet for most people the place where it ends so abruptly in an aluminum wall remains unexplained.

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The architectonic places that inspire Friederike von Rauch to pictures are occasionally famous buildings, but then she generally chooses a view that is known only to a few people. But she is more attracted by "found" buildings, i.e. places that have come into being without specific architectonic design intent: spaces under bridges, in multi-story car parks, corners of underground stations, power stations, industrial complexes, glasshouses. It is precisely in the seeming insignificance of these places that von Rauch finds special spatial constellations, details, and situations which the average viewer, if he were to be present in these spaces, would generally not notice at all. Anything dramatic or expressive is remote from her in all this. The pictures of these spaces thus gain a special tension because the viewer, as a result of the almost total withholding of context and information, is completely reliant on the few pieces of information that still remain. Surfaces, succinct references to a spatial connection, materials, minimal traces. Even if the completed photographs represent the highly condensed result of a long-lasting search, reduction and selection, they are not picture puzzles which are explained once you have guessed place and context. Identification of the places and buildings shown is immaterial for an understanding of von Rauch's photographs. The essence lies in the viewing angles and atmospheres that she has captured in these places.

Friederike von Rauch's photographs have an unmistakable personal language. As well as her selection of the places and her specific approach, the special light, in particular, is part of this. She prefers a diffuse daylight that occurs only when the sky is overcast. This softly dispersed light makes it possible to achieve the almost shadowless light atmospheres that make all spatial volumes and architectonic bodies appear softer. A very strong diminution of color goes along with the special light. Sometimes it almost seems as if her pictures were in fact black and white photographs. Concrete, aluminum and stone as materials fit in very well a priori to her concept of reduced color in the picture and are often found in her pictures. In order to perfect this so even-seeming, minimalist light and color atmosphere, she deliberately intervenes in the process of developing the pictures. In the exclusively manual preparation of her enlargements she deliberately controls the lighting of the prints and allows part surfaces to be processed precisely so as to enhance the uniformity of the light atmosphere. In doing so she alters nothing in the given, hitherto untouched reality of a subject: she intervenes only in its color atmosphere.

Until a short time ago Berlin represented the most important starting point for von Rauch's shots. As a location scout for major film productions, Berlin, for her, had until then also been the city where she knew her way around better than anywhere else. She has recently just spent three months each in Brussels and Rotterdam as an artist in residence. The question is: how did she react to these strange cities, have her pictures changed? On her stays she has found some places that could equally well be in Berlin. But she has actually discovered many new images which were not in fact possible in Berlin: whether Art Deco in Brussels, or gigantic industrial complexes in Rotterdam. She took her personal way of working developed in Berlin with her, yet also opened up to new influences on the spot. She has not changed her ground rules, but her pictures have received new elements. Thus quite frequently dark spaces occur, and this heightens the enigmatic nature of her pictures still further.

Friederike von Rauch has developed her style with no personal contact with the photographic schools that are well-known today. She has found a quiet, but differentiated language which is the expression of a thought-out and concentrated method of working. Her pictures stand for a photographic minimalism characterized by an outmost reduction of pictorial attractions and the virtually complete exclusion of all narrative and illustrative references. In its compositional unity, each of her pictures stands for itself, yet cumulatively they develop a context which tells us as viewers a lot about spaces and places in our reality which we otherwise do not notice at all. Friederike von Rauch's photographs reflect the very personally formulated idea of the places she has found and in the process shape our perception of reality.

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