

Spotting Jenny in Nine Steps

On Works by Thomas Falkenstein

1. What distinguishes an art photographer from an amateur? The photography theorist Villém Flusser offers an explanation based in metaphor: An artist is in a position to “outwit” the camera. Indeed, this appears to be a category worthy of consideration, since for many years, the existence of the camera and its registering function constituted the most significant objection to recognizing photography as an artistic achievement. Even if the photographer’s intervention in the image has *eo ipso* increased in the age of computer-generated images, the difference between thoughtless documentation and planned construction continues to be a key criterion on the path towards obtaining artistic quality. Of course, planned intent alone is not sufficient. Well-meant is not well-made. But in any case, this cognitive dimension is a *conditio sine qua non*. There can be no good image without a good view. There can be no good view without proper thought.

2. Thomas Falkenstein completed his academic training at the Fachhochschule Cologne in 1995. Over the ensuing decade he produced various photographic series. Although his emphasis and his objectives differed, they all—some with more, some with less blatancy—center around women. It is as if Falkenstein had internalized Marcel Duchamp’s dictum, which the artist programmatically and offensively turned outwards in his famous pseudonym: Rose Sélavy. A name which reads “Eros, c’est la vie!” when one does a semantic transcription of its phonetics. That love and life should not only combine in harmony, but that Eros is, so to speak, existential *élan vital* that makes the lame walk and the blind see, is not only the great Marcel Duchamp’s credo. This notion—regardless of how conceptionally encoded the women are in his series of works—also appears to characterize Thomas Falkenstein’s consciousness.

3. All of the works and photographs being written about here in one way or another measure themselves against women. They are—to borrow a term from Yves Klein—anthropometries. Whatever their conceptional background, they are always a celebration of female beauty and female melody. The *Testbilder* (Test Patterns) from 2000–02 create analogies between the test patterns we are familiar with from television and female nudes. In the same way the needle-sharp television text pattern supplies us with the primary colors which constitute the coloring of the television images, Falkenstein subjects his model to various transformations—as if his figure were a mathesis, a structure to intervene in in order to bring forth all of its

potential singularities and specifics. Computer-supported strategies and inversions produce women as blue, green, or red images, or as black-and-white contours. Their manipulated existence determines the viewer's consciousness.

4. Depending on whether the woman appears as color or as a line, although the identity of the model remains constant, the viewer's reception is decisively altered. We recall the age-old debate during the Renaissance between the schools of Florence and Venice over the issue of what should have priority in painting, *coloriti* (color) or *disegno* (line). Even then, it was more than just an academic dispute. At issue was the primacy of the conception of man. Venice is Tizian and Tintoretto, Casanova and carnival, amore and the gondola, and the ever-changing blue of the lagoon. Florence, on the other hand, is the leaden light of the Arno, Brunellesco and Masaccio, the central perspective and the enormous dome of the cathedral, the mechanics of power of the Medici and ideologists such as Savonarola. Florence is a world in black and white. Reduced to the line. Understood with the intellect, *de more geometrico*. Venice, on the other hand, is a world bathed in light, sun, and color, viewed through the prism of emotion.

5. However—the dispute is pointless. It is the overall view that makes it whole. Head and abdomen, reason and emotion, color and line complement one another to constitute a union. Thomas Falkenstein's photographs, films, and installations want to be seen and read complementarily. Not in opposition. Dialectics continually gives birth to synthesis. The contrast between the artificial and the natural, between human and mannequin, marionette, doll, also necessarily belong to the photographer's analytical series of investigations. From a mythical point of view, the interest is in Golem. From today's perspective, it is in the turn towards computer-generated simulation, towards the simulacrum, towards virtuality. Using render programs, which are also used to produce artificially animated films without actors, Falkenstein creates a female model. Like Venus, who was born of the foam of the sea, she rises out of the circuits of the computer and faces a comparison with the model from reality.

6. Further of the photographer's examinations are devoted to the principles of analogy and metonymy. Metonymy directs one's gaze towards the fragment that bears meaning and means the whole. Analogy sees similarity in difference. The turning to bar code, eyes, and the female genitals fulfills the conditions of both topoi. Bataille has already said what needs to be said about this. Even the Bible equates the sexual act with becoming conscious and cognition: "And Adam knew Eve."

Another series of images operates under the conditions of camouflage. A professional model performs the poses of seduction wearing blue overalls. As a blue-collar worker, she defamiliarizes devotion to new clarity. To the untrained eye, on the other hand, the aesthetic program in Falkenstein' *Gencollagen* (Gene Collages) from 2005 becomes unrecognizable. The human physiognomy is done away with, that is, it is dissolved and preserved at the same time in a script program consisting of abstract signs and abbreviations.

7. The tension between negation and affirmation also characterizes the new series of photography, *Spotting Jenny*. It operates with different contradictions—by no means in an abstract way, but very sensually—which it knows how to intelligently employ in the sense of a successful photograph. Thomas Falkenstein has once again hired a professional photographic model who is accustomed to staging herself according to exact instructions and who has perfect control over her gestures of sensual animation. However, in that the photographer does not give her directions, does not drive her from flash to flash, but rather while he is shooting his camera asks her to undress herself just like she does “at home”—which means to remove her panties in a “normal” way—he creates a situation that is completely unfamiliar and unusual for the model. Because she does not exactly know what the artist wants, she becomes insecure. This ultimately leads to unusual images that are light years away from any conventional strip tease.

8. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes, the French philosopher and phenomenologist, also attempted to find a definition for the successful photographic image. In the process, he concentrates on two terms borrowed from the Latin: *studium* and *punctum*. He does so because he cannot find similar terms in his native language for what he wants to say that are as precise as these. *Studium* (in the sense of eagerness, diligence, effort) includes everything that interests us in an image in a very broad sense. These may be anthropological, cultural, political, social, or economic connections. When the viewer's gaze at the image is determined by *studium*, a kind of collective remembrance is activated, memories more or less shared with everyone. In contrast, the *punctum* (in the sense of point, prick, hole) produces a kind of tear in the image. As a rule, this is based on the contradictory, the disparate, the unbalanced, and makes the image an individual, singular, and distinctive one.

9. The tear becomes a mirror in which I, the viewer, recognize myself. It arouses my personal, and not only my general interest. This confers meaning to an enormous

degree and causes me to “feel my destiny heard” (Aristotle) in the photograph. The *punctum* marks the image in an unforgettable way. When Jenny removes her panties in Thomas Falkenstein’s series of photographs, the self-confident and professional model suddenly becomes the small child in need of protection she once was. Behind the mask, the person enters the image in an inimitable manner. When looking at the photographs we become witnesses of a very personal and very intimate act. Indeed, in the encounter with these images we are suddenly reminded of what intimacy means. Contact with the secret and most innermost nature of human beings. We discover a soul behind the body. We hold our breath, and while we look at the photographs, any voyeuristic proclivity evaporates like a dewdrop in the sun.

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Translated by Rebecca van Dyck