

## Ronald Traeger in Rome 1962

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*Basically I would like to try to reveal what modern philosophy calls existence in opposition to essence; but at the same time, thanks to the cinema, to show that there is no real opposition between the two, that existence supposes essence and vice versa, and that it is beautiful that it be so.*

Jean- Luc Godard – Interview - *Combat 1962*

Ronald Traeger's pictures of Rome, taken between February and June of 1962, look as fresh and contemporary now as when he took them. His work exudes a love of spontaneous movement that went far beyond the needs of a particular effect; it communicates a playfulness, an ecstasy in the very experience of capturing people moving through space. There is a paradox there that remains intriguing; the images are dramatic and quotidian, ambiguous and matter-of-fact. The pictures seem to participate in a holistic sense with the people he photographs. This phenomenology is not so much illustrated as made concrete. The humanism is genuine because it is articulated in the way the pictures are composed, rather than imposed or illustrated. The work of many young photographers in the world of fashion and advertising now look like the kind of tableaux that Traeger and his colleagues so carefully avoided: The theatricality and artificiality of Cecil Beaton and George Hurrell is precisely the sort of kitsch that young photographers were eager to avoid. In contemporary photography those

sorts of tableaux are back with Gregory Crewdson, David LaChapelle and others in the worlds of fine art and advertising who make melodramatic narratives arranged within highly artificial sets. What Traeger and his friends were after was – on the contrary - a sense of immediacy, realism, and vitality absent from the work of the older generation. How did these pictures of Rome in 1962 come about – and what makes them so contemporary?

Before Rome there was Los Angeles. Trained at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, a suburb of Los Angeles, Traeger, along with four friends founded the Globecombers, a group whose reason for being was – explicit in the name! – to get out of L.A. as soon as possible. The school lacked inspiration, and like most art schools then and now was reliant on rules traditions and submission to certain conventions. After a year Traeger and the Globecombers set sail for England. Martin Harrison in his brief but excellent biography of Traeger\* published in England, tells the story:

“Although assignments occasionally came their way...they mostly photographed speculatively in the hope of their work being syndicated...the photographs that Traeger made of the changing influence of Church and State in Rome evolved into an important body of work, his first mature

achievement. The series was completed in four months of intense activity...” Traeger was twenty-five. A short time later he would settle in London where he would work along with colleagues of his own generation: David Bailey, Terence Donovan and Brian Duffy. Photographers who would re-make our view of photography as much as the songs of the “British Invasion” would re-make our sense of what music could be. London is also where he met his future wife Tessa, and worked with models such as Twiggy and Jill Kennington, publishing in Vogue and Elle. Unlike his contemporaries who had very long careers Traeger died tragically of Hodgkins disease in 1968. His wife who wrote a wonderful biography of this period and their time together in Europe survives him\*.

William Klein’s grainy pictures of New York published in the late fifties influenced Traeger. He even used the technique of sandwiching acetate cells over the negatives in the darkroom in order to create a greater density of grain – a technique also favored by Klein. Mario Giacomelli’s high contrast pictures of Southern Italy also influenced him. But Giacomelli, like Cartier-Bresson, was always at a distance with a wide-angle lens. Giacomelli played with formalism, like his French master, but was sympathetic to his subjects in a way that was reminiscent of Italian Neo-Realism, a style that

was both realistic and allegorical. That is, individuals were made to stand in for certain aspects of the human condition. With Traeger the insistent uniqueness of a particular moment – as with Impressionism – makes them poor candidates for allegory.

The Roman pictures work by juxtaposing a graphically imposing foreground, often in silhouette, with a distinct but fragmented background. The long focal length lens flattens foreground and background that then work dramatically together – as in musical counterpoint – by playing interlocking shapes one against the other. Organic shapes mirror man made surfaces; negative spaces come forward and foregrounds recede; the archaic is juxtaposed with the contemporary; Christian iconography is played off against Marxist symbols; people in dramatic movement play off against solid stationary masses. In short the work is about these very urban juxtapositions. They express a philosophy of life – an embrace of paradox and transience - and tell us about the world Traeger saw: a fragmentary space in continuous flux that we can perceive only by being a part of that flux. Perception requires us to be a participant. This phenomenology is made concrete and is expressed in the present tense as a form of play. These kind of juxtapositions were seen before in pictures, such as with Louis

Faurer or Robert Frank. But in their work these urban fragments were often perceived to express alienation and displacement. Even contemporary photographers such as Nick Waplington in his *The Indecisive Memento* work along similar lines as those set by the New York School – that is they are primarily about chance encounters, alienation and the absurd. With Traeger on the contrary these paradoxes are perceived ecstatically - not as a withdrawal from the world but as a way back into it. This is accomplished by Traeger's sense of play and improvisation with his subject rather than with any kind of detachment or voyeurism. The work in many ways resembles the films of the French New Wave: Godard's *Breathless*, Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, and Claude Chabrol's *The Cousins* are Traeger's true contemporaries. The French New Wave traveled across the channel in the late fifties and early sixties and had a profound influence on the kitchen sink realism of British filmmakers and photographers. The films display what (with apologies to Harold Bloom) we might call "the exuberance of influence". The photographs of Traeger followed suit. It is a kind of work that resists conceptual summarizing truths in favor of a fragmented collage aesthetic that wants very much to deal with the present.

While Traeger's work suggests the casualness and "arbitrary" framing of snapshots the work has a graphic sophistication in its interplay of forms, flattened by the use of a long lens, far beyond the aesthetics of the snapshot. Traeger's pictures are eloquent about what Proust called the "tyranny of the particular". The sensual stimulation of direct experience overwhelmed Proust because he made himself be open to it – most people don't – not because they are incapable of it but because they would be too overwhelmed to deal with the business of day-to-day life. These pictures insist on the singular evanescence of particular moments and places, and their overwhelming importance over abstract "truths". Traeger's later fashion work would succumb in part to the process of homogenization characteristic of the conventions of the period. But the images of Rome are another matter. That "tyranny of the particular" that so disturbed Proust haunts Traeger's images. The long lens has flattened and compressed not only space but also time. A picture of a child playing against the light falling on the side of St. Peter's cathedral has the soccer ball and the architecture playing against each other and making connections - and we understand that it's Traeger playing as well. It is as if the time between childhood and the adult world were not only suspended but that it had become a space that one can see. In that sense the images can't help but be an invitation to a life of

engagement, of exchange, of the senses. The “tyranny” of the particular – or perhaps more to the point the delight of the particular - has not been better served since.

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*\*Ronald Traeger: New Angles*  
Martin Harrison and Tessa Traeger  
Schirmer/Mosel 1999