

## **The Normalcy of Psychiatry**

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Thomas Bruns's photographs, a series commissioned by the Berlin Medical History Museum, are part of an exhibition on the history of the Clinic for Psychiatric and Nervous Diseases at the city's Charité hospital. They show different rooms within the psychiatric ward. At first glance, the waiting, examination or consulting rooms depicted cannot be identified as those of a psychiatric institution. The photographs rather emphasise the familiar aspect of uncharacteristic hospital architecture and furniture. Bruns's camera contemplates anonymous corridors, peeks into furnished chambers and empty smoking cells, or surveys a doctor's office and a canteen.

Two types of rooms can be distinguished: examination rooms for medical therapeutic measures to be carried out, and consulting rooms for dwelling, waiting or recreational purposes, to be used by the patients and their relatives. These rooms look pretty much the same in all wards, regardless of the medical field – internal surgery, cardiology, oral surgery or psychiatry. It would probably be easier to differentiate between various situations if the photographs included actual patients: an eyelid would point to ocular surgery, while a tube sticking out from someone's nose or a bandage or a plaster on someone's neck would indicate the ophthalmology department, and so forth. But could we also differentiate a heart patient from a cancer victim, and deduce from someone's face whether they are suffering from a kidney malfunction, depressions, states of panic or a psychosis? It is a sure guess that it would remain difficult to establish an unequivocal diagnosis; a photograph, if it were to be explicit, would have to resort to an unfettered rendering of suffering or theatrical and unabashedly emotional staging to titillate the spectator's fantasy.

Thomas Bruns's work adopts a discrete and distanced approach. Rather than people, it shows spatial situations. The corridor, the elevator, the waiting room and the hospital bed are obviously part of a clinic, but it remains unclear which particular ward they belong to. Presumably the photographer's intention is not to give an accurate description of a psychiatric station but to evidence a spatial situation that stands in for the hospital in general – a place, which more than any other is associated with unpleasant feelings. Sickness and disease live there. Yet it also stands for hope, cure and care – despite the fact that it also stands for the use

of cutting-edge medical technology and scientific analysis rather than just gentle *caritas*. Hospital stays are by nature unwished-for, wherefore our feelings towards the institution are always mixed.

Thomas Bruns does not allow his work to be overwhelmed by these contradictory feelings. He manages to give a both sober and sensible depiction of a difficult subject. The assessment that the hospital is generally tied to ambivalent feeling is particularly true for psychiatry and neurology. No other therapeutic domain is subject to so much irritation, prejudice, speculation and fear. All too often, psychiatry is trivially and ignorantly equated with asylums. While almost every disease can somehow be traced back, resulting from either physical discomfort or bad luck, mental illness, which is still perceived as a punishment or a threat to society, can quickly become a stain. The representation and perception of psychiatry is frequently one-dimensional and schematic, typifying either a dangerous psychopath who has to be locked away or a neurotic individual whose symptoms are largely invented. Common language frequently uses the words 'asylum' and 'inmate' for 'clinic' and 'patient', a terminology more reminiscent of imprisonment, punishment and alienation than of the daily routine of medical science, therapy and symptomology. Occasionally we think of rehabilitation clinics, places of rest for those who refuse to work, those who are overworked or those who indulge in their private malaise. In any case, the mental clinic and its patients have no connection to the world of seemingly normal people.

But Thomas Bruns is showing a different picture, emphasising the daily routine and normalcy of psychiatry. Using a large format camera, he has managed to produce quiet and unmitigated images. Before taking the pictures, he spoke with the patients, trying to get a sense of the place and find out how they moved through it. Bruns has no pretence to translate the emotions thus recorded into overtly symbolic images. Instead he records a range of details with his camera, and carefully interprets them. He thus shows the refectory, a plain space shared by a fortuitous community, as conveying a mere sense of 'functional cosiness'. Generally speaking, the public places of transit in his photographs, such as corridors or elevators, exude a distinct sensation of coolness and indifference. The furniture arrangements in the communal rooms pictured here look wholly unspectacular, their specificity dependent on the spectator's knowledge that they are part of a psychiatric ward. Rather than in the image, their particularity is enshrined in the viewer, in his tendency to link certain places with certain

projections or insinuations. The photograph “Dienstzimmer Arzt” (The Doctor’s Office) displays a constellation of chairs. Though neither the practitioner nor his patient is in the frame, the image describes a relation. The chairs are turned away from each other; the doctor’s looks more comfortable than the patient’s. Still, the situation shown here does not indicate a clear hierarchy. The relative disorder rather points to a dynamic process conducive to a dialogical and equal relationship. The photograph “Innenhof” (Inner Courtyard), which was suggested to the photographer by a female patient, exemplifies the selectivity of the individual’s perception. The inner courtyard of the Charité’s psychiatric and nervous clinic is a rather extensive green area, a place of quiet and relaxation for many patients. Yet Bruns’s shot, rather than notions of air, light, breathing and steady recovery, evokes a murky and unfriendly place.

In this particular instance, it appears that the photographer has selected, exaggerated and possibly distorted the original situation. But this is both the intrinsic nature and quality of photography: its potential to convey a subjective impression on the backdrop of reality. Thomas Bruns’s work presents a serious and coherent analysis of the mostly unknown spaces of psychiatry. They are more common than we think, and closer to our daily lives than is generally admitted – a point which is irrefutably proven by the photographer’s look at the apparent conditions and spatial constellations of psychiatry.