

Gabriele Rothemann — *Fellzeller*
Between Nature, Abstraction and the Image

What are we looking at? In Gabriele Rothemann's *Fellzeller*, the question is less a prelude to recognition than a condition of looking. Against a pale, unremarkable ground, black, hairy forms appear suspended somewhere between biological specimens and abstract shapes. They suggest cells, seeds, animals, perhaps something altogether less familiar. Their outlines are precise enough to invite identification, their surfaces strange enough to frustrate it.

The title *Fellzeller* brings fur and cells into proximity, joining the bodily exterior to the microscopic structures of life. Yet these photographs offer no reassuring passage from one scale to another. The forms remain stubbornly themselves: dense, dark, and difficult to penetrate. Their apparent similarity gives way to individual differences, as though each specimen belonged to a taxonomy whose rules have yet to be established.

Rothemann's images borrow something of the authority of scientific photography—the isolated object, the neutral background, the promise that careful observation might produce knowledge. But this promise is never quite fulfilled. There is no explanatory context, no definitive classification, no guarantee that recognition will follow from sustained attention. The images are exact without being conclusive.

Their arrangement introduces another uncertainty. The forms seem to belong together, though the principle of their belonging remains obscure. Repetition establishes a pattern; variation unsettles it. What might initially appear to be an orderly inventory becomes an encounter with the limits of ordering itself. The photographs do not simply withhold information. They expose how much looking depends on the categories we bring to it.

This tension between material specificity and interpretive indeterminacy runs through Rothemann's broader practice. Born in Offenbach am Main in 1960, she studied photography at the Kunsthochschule Kassel before pursuing painting with Fritz Schwegler at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. A subsequent scholarship took her to the California Institute of the Arts, where she studied with John Baldessari and Michael Asher. Photography, conceptual art, and an expanded understanding of the image converge in a practice that moves between photography, drawing, and installation.

Since 2001, Rothemann has been Professor of Photography and Fine Arts at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Her work repeatedly attends to objects and forms that resist being exhausted by their appearance. In *Fellzeller*, this resistance takes an especially concentrated form. The photographs offer neither the spectacle of nature nor its straightforward documentation. Instead, they suspend the distinction between what is found and what is made, between the thing itself and the image through which it becomes available to us.

The forms remain still, but looking at them is not. Recognition advances and retreats; resemblance opens onto difference. What these photographs finally make visible is not simply an unfamiliar kind of object, but the instability of the act by which objects become familiar in the first place. Gabriele Rothemann — *Fellzeller*.