"It is surprising that despite the manipulative potential of digital photography, the belief in the suggestive power of the image remains intact."[1] This quote from Mirjam Wittman addressing the medium's transparency in an essay of the *Objectivités* catalogue reveals an often stated but rarely studied paradox. According to its historiography, Düsseldorf photography stems from a German documentary tradition. In the 1990s however, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Jörg Sasse started to use digital retouching tools consistently, in a period of intense theorization of such technologies. Frequently tagged post-photography, these theories argued that the digital forfeited photography's ability to capture reality, thus prohibiting a possible documentary stance. At first sight, the connections between post-photography and Düsseldorf seem rare, except for the occasional inclusion of Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky in later studies of the digital images[2] or projects addressing the body.[3] Methodologically, it thus seems rather unsound to compare a German documentary "movement" to a predominantly Anglo-Saxon theoretical corpus, often exemplified with explicitly manipulated images, in which the representation of the body occupies a central role. Is the use of digital tools argument enough to compare these two entities? The deadpan anti-aesthetic imagery of the 1970s inherited from Bernd and Hilla Becher, which embodies the alleged truth claim of photography defined by the strict indexical relationship between object and representation, seems incompatible with the very idea of retouching images digitally. There is an obvious incompatibility between a commonly shared idea of what documentary photography is and a body of texts and theories advocating a rupture between the photographic and the post-photographic. On the other hand, the depiction of transformations of the body, in a period where plastic surgery or genetic engineering started to question its defining characteristics, technically enacted these alterations. Post-photographic work became the chief output of these interrogations, and as such explicitly rejected that indexical bond.

In the work of the young generation of Düsseldorf photographers, the relationship to the depicted object undergoes a gradual transformation. Several photographers will shift progressively from a type of depiction that can be logically linked – and in fact was – to the Bechers and their rigorous "documentary" approach, to a conception of photography where the image as sheer construction, with its inherent mechanisms, is as important as the depicted subject. Thomas Ruff represents the most extreme embodiment of this development. In the

1 Mirjam Wittman, "Blow-up. Grand format et impact visuel," in Maria Müller, Armin Zweite and Fabrice Hergott (ed.), *Objectivités. La photographie à Düsseldorf*, op. cit., p. 78. Published as a longer version as Mirjam Wittman, "'Das Grossformat lag einfach in der Luft.' Zur Bildwirkung der Fotografie aus Düsseldorf," in Martin Schulz and Beat Wyss (ed.), *Techniken des Bildes*, Munich, Fink, 2010.

2 See for example Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2005.

3 See for example Jeffrey Deitch (ed.), *Post Human*, exhibition catalogue, FAE Musée d'art contemporain, Pully, 1992 or Robert A. Sobiezek, *Ghost in the Shell. Photography and the Human Soul, 1850 – 2000: Essays on Camera Portraiture*, Cambridge and London, Los Angeles County Museum of Art/MIT Press, 2001.

2000s, he produced non-figurative images, resulting from the transformation of photographic found material (e.g., Manga pictures) or from generative processes (e.g., based on nineteenth-century scientific representations of electromagnetic fields), questioning the very idea of photographic imagery by undermining its representational mechanisms. His abstract pictures still *reflect* reality but clearly elude the strictly analogue relationship that the medium is often defined by. Ruff translates objects into visual output, hiding their origin and reproducing them through computations. But the idea of photography as a construction is also present in earlier stages of his oeuvre. For instance, when asked about his relationship to the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers in 1993, he answers that while they believed they had captured reality, he just believed he had created a picture,[4] which shows to which extent the iconic aspect – more than the indexicality – is central to his work. But despite a redefinition of the documentary practices of Ruff and some Becher students and their reliance on digital post-production systems, they have been continuously considered documentary photographers, without the concept being in itself questioned or re-evaluated. Furthermore, they have hardly ever been connected with artistic practices associated with digital technological developments.

If we consider the importance of the concept of indexicality in relation to post-photographic theories and the discourse about the end of photography, it is surprising that the work of the Becher students is hardly ever questioned in the light of those theoretical efforts and the (supposedly) new paradigm they proclaim. If so, their production is usually read in relationship to later studies[5] and not to the early debate of the 1990s, whose implications we are trying to explore in this study. The first element that comes to mind to explain this dissociation is a feature that appears naive but that has implications reaching out to theoretical, historiographical and epistemological levels: in the early stages of digital retouching in the 1990s, Ruff or Gursky's photographs did not *look* digital. Thomas Ruff's first digitally retouched image *Haus Nr. 11* (Fig. 7) does not appear to be retouched; on the other hand, most of Nancy Burson's pictures seem manipulated (Fig. 8), but not all actually are (e.g., the *Daguerreotypes* series, 1990 – 1991). As Tom Gunning or William J. T. Mitchell have demonstrated,[6] the truth claim of photography derives from a culturally constructed relationship with reality and its credible representation. Less than strict indexicality itself, it is the plausibleness of the photographic image that defines the ability of the recipient to believe in the depicted object. Since most post-photographic images, on the other hand, explicitly enact some kind of manipulation, it seems logical that they have been read in the light of theories investigating the appearance of digital technologies, a discourse arguing the forfeiture of that truth claim.

4 Interview of Thomas Ruff by Philip Pocock, *Journal of Contemporary Arts*, Vol. 6, Summer 1993, p. 78. Available on http://www.jca-online.com/ruff.html, acessed on January 15, 2018.

5 See for example Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era*, op. cit.

6 See for example Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or Faking Photographs," in *Nordicom Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1/2, September 2004 and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Realismus im digitalen Bild," in Hans Belting (ed.), *Bilderfragen. Die Bildwissenschaft im Aufbruch*, op. cit.

The appearance of the digital in photography is almost systematically associated with manipulative, truth-endangering practices. Düsseldorf photographers, on the other hand, *seem* to comply with what is considered traditional documentary photography. And since they seem to fulfill the alleged truth claim of the photographic representation itself – an implicit agreement between viewer and image producer –, they are consequently not associated with the digital. Apparently, the reception of digitally manipulated imagery hinges chiefly on what the image looks like, rather than the mechanisms it relies upon. Considering the pre-eminence of indexicality in the history of photographic theories and the definition of the medium through its very ability to represent, it seems thus necessary to investigate the odd parallelism between "documentary" images and post-photographic images and to assess the antagonistic reception in the period of emergence (1990s) and recent generalization (2000s) of these two very different types of digitally manipulated photographs.

Fig. 7: Thomas Ruff, *Haus Nr. 1 I*, 1987 (179 × 278 cm)

The photorealism of Düsseldorf photographers, and the documentary discourse they were associated with during the 1990s, seems to be a productive lead to understand why they are hardly ever mentioned during that early period in the discourse on the digital, although they are mentioned more often in recent studies. The art historical concept of the "Düsseldorf School" is commonly associated with the Bechers and with Neue Sachlichkeit. If we were to consider visual evidence of the production of the Becher students from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, we could indeed conclude that it seemingly responds to an archival impulse[7] and constitutes an aesthetic continuation with the neutral, objective and deadpan imagery documentary photography supposedly produces. Moreover, it typically depicts objects suited for documentary photography (architecture, landscape and portraits) in an appropriate conceptual framework (serial representation, typologies, etc.). The fact

7 See for example Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, Vol. 110, Autumn 2004.

that the influence of Stephen Shore on the Becher students has been "spread equally by critics, art historians and the artists involved," but never consequently explored, shows to what extent supposedly established facts became common ground, as Christoph Schaden has recently shown.[8] The recent re-evaluation of the concept of a coherent "Düsseldorf School" itself has opened a breach that calls for a differential reading of the modalities and specificities of the practices of its members. If Thomas Ruff didn't retouch photographs until the late 1980s, he still constructed the image as he wanted it to look, disregarding the notion of imprint or depiction. The *Porträts* series, for example, which has often been read as a clinical documentary approach, has been extensively staged,[9] which, obviously, comes as no surprise. Audiences want to believe in a credible photographic representation, and there seems to be an equivalent proclivity in the critical or art historical discourse to believe in an objectivist paradigm.

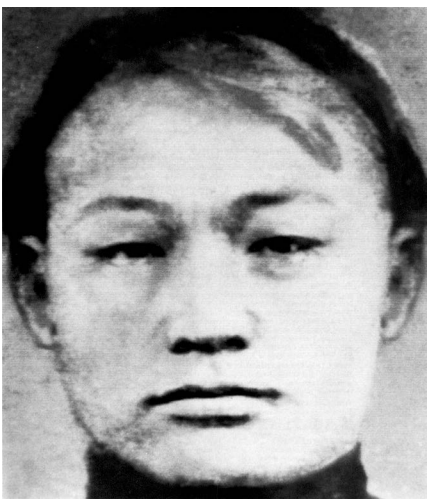

Fig. 8: Nancy Burson, *Mankind*, 1983 – 1985 (b/w, gelatin silver print from computer-generated negative, 28 × 35.5 cm)

Although today it has been acknowledged that Düsseldorf photography doesn't pursue a strictly documentary practice (Matthias Winzen's formulation, "a credible invention of reality,"[10] is in that respect symptomatic), the mainstream critical and theoretical opinion in the 1990s

8 Christoph Schaden, "'To Be Sure, That Is Also the Expression of a Particular Vital Consciousness.' On the Reception of Stephen Shore's Work in Germany 1972 – 1995," in Werner Lippert and Christoph Schaden (ed.), *Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography*, op. cit.

9 "For the large-scale *Porträts*, I had a very big influence on the photographed image by determining the setting, arranging the light, correcting the posture or facial expression of the person portrayed or asking my friends to put on particular clothes," interview of Thomas Ruff by Gerald Matt, in *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, exhibition catalogue (Kunsthalle Wien, 2009), Nuremberg, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2009, p. 232.

10 Matthias Winzen, "A Credible Invention of Reality," in Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979 – heute*, exhibition catalogue (Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden), Cologne, Walter König, 2003. If initially used to describe Ruff's oeuvre, the formulation would also be appropriate for Andreas Gursky, Jörg Sasse or Thomas Struth.

predominantly advocated a reading in which verisimilitude and authenticity, or at least an objectified representation, were not consequently differentiated, as will be explored in part 2. Seemingly documentary practices were thus, logically, received accordingly. If the difference between post-photographic imagery and the work of the Becher students – the overtness or invisibility of digital manipulation –, definitely seems productive to evaluate the reception of the images, it is a much wider discipline-specific discourse that has shaped the idea of what defines digital photography and what delineates documentary photography. In both phenomena, despite obvious differences in conception and reception, the role of indexicality is, as mentioned above, central. The associated notion of photographic truth has been extensively deconstructed by scholars, and the concept of documentary has been increasingly read as a practice in which the discursive, self-legitimizing arguments play a central role: while all photographs could be considered documents, practices which claim their affiliation to the documentary at least offer a somehow smaller circumscription that allows a more concrete approach, even if this categorization also induces a hagiographical misconception of what the documentary might be, limited to its key figures.[11] But through the American postmodern reinterpretation of the index and its widespread influence in the Anglo-Saxon and the French cultural area,[12] the photographic has been re-imprinted with the idea of trace, building a framework that allowed "no reading of [photography] outside representation."[13] The core mechanism we aim to investigate in this chapter addresses the role played by the theorization and the critical discourse of photographic practices in their relationship to representation. Because a reading stressing the importance of the notion of (physical) imprint has played a central role in the history and conceptualization of photography, that very criterion emerges as the key to the understanding of the reception of digital imagery. The importance of the digital per se in art historical discourse on photography gradually loses importance, while technologies are absorbed by mainstream and artistic use. But the history of discourses and the technical history of the apparatus will remain central to the comprehension of the body of images and artists who emerged from this specific technical and epistemological context.

Three discrete phenomena will thus be addressed in this chapter, to understand the (non) reception of the digital in the Düsseldorf context. On one hand, we will sketch out the construction of a specifically German documentary paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s, looking at the 1979 exhibition curated by Klaus Honnef and Wilhelm Schürmann, *In Deutschland. Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie*. In the (now) iconic show Honnef formulated his explicit intent

11 See Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920 – 1945*, Paris, Macula, 2001.

12 See for example Katia Schneller, "Sur les traces de Rosalind Krauss. La réception française de la notion d'index. 1977 – 1990," *Etudes photographiques*, No. 21, December 2007.

13 Sarah James, "The Truth about Photography," *Art Monthly*, No. 292, December 2005/January 2006, p. 8. In an article overviewing photo-theoretical developments since the 1970s, James argues that "no new paradigm of thinking about photography has emerged" in the past ten years and that documentary photography in particular lacks an appropriate critical and theoretical response.

to legitimate author photography based on documentary forms. As Peter Galassi noted in 2001, commenting on the genesis of the Düsseldorf School, Klaus Honnef's theory of "author photography," formulated for the exhibition, legitimated documentary photographers as artists, despite the "practical functions and passive realism of their work".[14] Connected with various epiphenomena such as the reception of Walter Benjamin's writings in the 1960s and 1970s, the dissemination of "documentary" photography as an art form by collectors such as Ann and Jürgen Wilde, and the contemporary theorization by scholars like Wolfgang Kemp or Rolf H. Krauss, the analysis of *In Deutschland* aims to show the rediscovery of photography in the 1960s and 1970s. As Rolf Krauss notes in the introduction of his 1979 text *10 Thesen zur konventionellen und konzeptionellen Photographie*, "something strange happened in the 1960s: the importance of the medium was discovered, although it had been invented 125 years earlier."[15]

On the other hand, it seems imperative to investigate the theoretical debate arisen amid those technological developments and the discourse of rupture, delineating fundamental geographical differences. Since we are addressing the critical reaction to technological developments and concurrent imagery, it is necessary to discuss the historiography of photography-specific theories, which have evolved quite differently in the Anglo-Saxon, the German and the French context. While those developments are not necessarily linked with the technical aspects discussed in this chapter, or only to a certain extent, it is crucial to confront them with the debate accompanying technological advancements. As we will demonstrate, the reception of digital manipulation in Düsseldorf is closely related to a wider response to those technologies on the one hand, and to particular historiographical developments in Germany on the other.

Finally, the investigation and confrontation of two categories of contemporary artistic practices in Germany – post-photography and documentary photography – should allow a more thorough understanding of the mechanisms of adoption of digital technologies and the resultant discourse. To outline the discursive field of digital imagery, it seems central to mobilize those two initially opposed but eventually converging practices. Post-photographic imagery, because of its visible enactment of retouching and digital aesthetics, can be considered the most obviously perceptible response to technological developments. Düsseldorf documentary photography on the other hand, because of the way it seems to enact an objectivist paradigm, embodies the very opposite of those heterogeneous practices. It seems to epitomize the relationship between photograph and depicted object, exemplifying index-based photography theories, and thus – at least seemingly – embodying a conception of photography stemming from structuralist methodologies. The aim of the forthcoming section is therefore to evaluate the impact of technical manifestations of the

14 Peter Galassi, "Gursky's World," in Peter Galassi (ed.), *Andreas Gursky*, exhibition catalogue (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2001, p. 13.

15 Rolf H. Krauss, *Photographie als Medium. 10 Thesen zur konventionellen und konzeptionellen Photographie*, Ostfildern, Cantz, 1995 (1979), p. 9.

digital in theories and artistic practices. How did a technical, medium-based reading of digital imagery interact with those artists, and how can their images and their reception be interwoven with photo-theoretical developments?

As it is our goal to sketch out the impact of technological determinism in the reception of digital technologies and to produce a critical synthesis of elements potentially relevant to an epistemological framework capable of reflecting these technological changes, our analysis will only be partial, an attempt to outline general tendencies. It is not our aim to make an exhaustive history of post-photographic theories and practices or of the construction of the German documentary paradigm, but solely to understand how the existence of an entity commonly identified as the outcome of those new technologies, combining theories and practices ordinarily associated with the "digital revolution," has influenced the (non-) reception of retouching tools used in Düsseldorf. It is why two important exhibitions will be given particular attention. *In Deutschland. Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie* (1979) and *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* (1996) both possess exemplary character due to their importance and reception, crystallizing discourse and debate on the documentary and the digital, respectively. This path implies methodological shortcuts – an exhaustive study of those developments has yet to be made –, but despite a partial inventory of the impact of technical characteristics in discourse and imagery, the outline of those mechanisms is sufficient to explore the core issue of this study, Düsseldorf photography. The understanding of the *episteme* of the digital,[16] so to speak, implies thinking technology outside "the technological dimension of the media,"[17] through the understanding of the discursive preconditions of those technical developments, in which a newly constructed documentary tradition plays a central role.

16 For a definition of the Foucaldian concept of episteme applied to visual systems, see Maria Tortajada, "Archéologie du cinéma. De l'histoire à l'épistémologie," *CiNéMAS*, Vol. 14, No. 2 – 3, 2004.

17 Ibid., p. 27.