A COMPLEX COMPOSITES: ANDREAS GURSKY'S GENERIC WORLD

1   FORMAL HOMOGENIZATION AND GRIDS

In the early 1990s, digital technologies used in photography are limited to the collaging of shots (e.g., *Paris, Montparnasse*, 1993) or light retouching (e.g., Thomas Ruff's *Haus Nr. 1 I*, 1987). In the 2000s, photographs such as *Hamm, Bergwerk Ost* (2008), the outcome of much more complex computing systems, are almost constructed from scratch. Gursky's work until the late 1990s and the photographs produced afterwards can consequently be subsumed schematically into two categories: retouched photographs and constructed composites. This can also be resolved in representational terms. Until the 2000s, Gursky has produced images that considerably depend on the depicted reality, even if compositional strategies play an increasingly important role in his work. As described in section two, Gursky commonly opts for particular subjects and camera angles of a chosen scene, which he retouches in order to correspond to his formal requirements. The process of *finding* a suitable subject, one that fits into his mind frame and compositional schemata, tends to be gradually inverted toward the end of the decade. In the 2000s, the concept of *building* images, rather than adapting photographic material, better defines Gursky's image production. Series such as *F1 Boxenstopp* (2007) illustrate that process. The images are made out of numerous shots[7] and enlarged to considerable dimensions; the composites of the series

7   See for example Stefan Beyst, "Andreas Gursky. From a Spirit's Eye View," op. cit.

are more than five meters in width. Gursky composes the image he intends to produce with photographic fragments – racecars with mechanics, audience, etc. – adapting his work to the captured reality and taking more liberties with the concept of photographic depiction.

Fig. 94: Andreas Gursky, *Hamm, Bergwerk Ost*, 2008 (250 × 176 cm)

These transformations and formal changes correspond, to a certain extent, to technological developments and to the availability of retouching tools, although the difference is not solely technical. Gursky correspondingly shifts his relationship to reality. In *Hamm, Bergwerk Ost* (2008), the photographed clothes of the mine workers only serve as a starting point (see Fig. 95) for a painstakingly reconstructed tableau (Fig. 94), which decontextualizes the workers from any specific context, only to retain the allegorical evocation of mining in general. Throughout the decade, Gursky clearly develops a tendency toward the composition of such technically complex tableaus, whose iconic character prevails. Formally, these images based on photographic fragments can often be identified easily as being composites made after 2000. Often highly saturated colors, reconstructed geometrical spaces, limited chromatic environments and high contrasts differentiate them from older images, which retain more "conventional" photographic features (e.g., colors defined by the used film, etc.).

These formal transformations further echo a discursive shift toward documenting practices that occurs throughout the 1990s. Gursky recurrently argues that such iconicity operates *as a document*, while the relevancy of the indexical record of a particular place and moment in time decreases. Commenting on the work process of *Rhein I* (1996) he states that such aestheticized "view of the Rhine cannot be obtained in situ; a fictitious construction [is] required to provide an accurate image of a modern river."[8] Gursky correlates the constructed

8   Andreas Gursky quoted in Annelie Lütgens, "Shrines and Ornaments. A Look into the Display Cabinet," op. cit., p. 9.

image with the idea of accuracy, suggesting his stance toward the representation of the world, where indexicality or protocoled recordings are discarded. In fact, Gursky considers that a more conventionally documentary photograph, with the existing industrial landscape, bears too much connotation, as industries are typically associated with the past (e.g., the work of the Bechers). Such an approach, based on a constructed tableau, embodies a differing relationship with the reality it represents: Gursky's work assumes a painterly and artistic dimension, expressed by the large formats[9] and their implicit "symbolic and subjective" character.[10] His large-scale photographs stand without any possible ambiguity for an explicit artistic position, unlike the Bechers' typologies, whose perception has evolved in time – from sheer industrial documentation to the concept of "anonymous sculptures." Nevertheless, his images clearly endorse a relationship with *a* reality, even if it is not a depicted or recorded reality depending on the technical capturing apparatus. Gursky's depiction of a globalized world, often acknowledged by his historiography,[11] does not aspire to systematically depict or describe a particular moment in time or space – despite the fact that his images often re-enact the formal construction of a pregnant snapshot[12] – but aims rather at confronting the viewer with his preconception of such a potential moment.

Fig. 95: Original picture taken by Andreas Gursky on site (screenshot from Jan-Schmidt-Garre, *Gursky, Fotograf*, 2009)

9   Olivier Lugon, "Avant la 'forme tableau,'" op. cit., p. 7.
10   See Matthew Biro, "From Analogue to Digital Photography. Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky," *History of Photography*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2012, p. 357.
11   See for example Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2012, chapter "Gursky's Ether," p. 69 – 105 or Christopher Williams-Wynn, "Images of Equivalence: Exchange-Value in Andreas Gursky's Photographs and Production Method," *Photography & Culture*, Volume 9, No. 1, March 2016.
12   The paradox between artificial composites and compositional features reminding a decisive moment has been discussed by Thomas Weski. See Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," op. cit., p. 17.

Fig. 96: Andreas Gursky, *Bahrain I*, 2007
Fig. 97: Hermann Zschiegner, *After/Before Gursky (Bahrain I)*, 2009

However, how does this dimension accord with the inheritance of documentary photography that the Bechers students have – paradoxically – been analyzed by? According to several scholars – most prominently Michael Fried and Jean-François Chevrier – compositional strategies used in large-scale photography (e.g., Jeff Wall or Düsseldorf photography) have historically contributed to the inscription of the medium in an artistic context. In the history of Düsseldorf photography, how can it be explained that the young generation's work is considered artistic because it relies on compositional strategies associated with painting (i.e., correlated with abstract expressionism), while at the same time being inscribed in a documentary tradition (i.e., Sander or the Bechers) which, although it also has a specific style, originates in an aspiration of objectivity? In Gursky's case, as has been shown previously, the apparently paradoxical co-presence of such strategies is mostly achieved discursively, the photographers and numerous commentators inscribing his work in a documentary rhetoric. However, is there a formal translation of such aspiration? To which extent do digital tools contribute to that rhetoric? And how are they connected to the process of documenting?

The comparative work of Hermann Zschiegner can provide interesting information about aspects of this formal process. The Belgian artist recovered the original images of several photographs Andreas Gursky took in the mid- and late 2000s, using the Google Earth interface. For several recent works by Gursky taken in the United Arabic Emirates and Bahrein, Zschiegner produced original images using same camera angle and scale, revealing the post-production the originals shots have undergone. *Before/After Gursky (Bahrain I)*, created in 2009, shows Gursky's composition (Fig. 96) and the photograph of the original F1 racetrack it is based upon (Fig. 97). The spatial construction of the image first marks the first patent difference. Gursky's photograph offers a plane surface, where various perspectival

shots are sewn together. The common all-over structure balances the image and suggests an abstract pattern. The limited tonal value further enhances, in terms of visual effect, Gursky's characteristic blending of a three-dimensional photograph and a two-dimensional abstract image (see also Fig. 98 and 99).
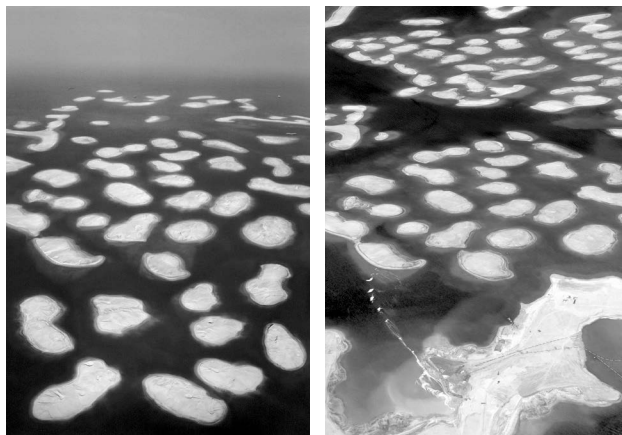

Fig. 98: Andreas Gursky, *Dubai II*, 2007
Fig. 99: Hermann Zschiegner, *After/Before Gursky (Dubai II)*, 2009

As Stefan Beyst argues, Gursky uses a "restricted array" of colors in his images in order to artificially interweave heterogeneous elements, increasing "repetitiveness" and general homogeneity.[13] In the case of Bahrein, some elements with disturbing color values (e.g., concrete structures) were eliminated, and in other examples – Stefan Beyst mentions the *99 cent II* diptych (1999) – the number of colors seems to have been reduced, stacks of merchandise being colorized accordingly.

Colors thus play an important role in the differentiation of Gursky's image in terms of referentiality. If they possess an aesthetic function, their limited use also increases the generic impression the pictures entail. *F1 Boxenstop*, rather than a particular race, team or racetrack, addresses Formula 1 in general (its aesthetics, a potential narrative, etc.), showing a "condensed reality,"[14] as Gursky argues. A core tendency of his image construction strategies in the second phase of his composites thus resides in a general homogenization, resulting from the limitation of tonal values and the continuation of the trend toward bi-dimensional constructions. These processes are already underway in digitally built images such as *Atlanta* (1996), but whole series such as *Bahrein* and *Dubai World*, *F1 Boxenstop*, *Pyongyang* and numerous individual images (e.g., *Untitled XIII*, *Mayday V*, *Kuwait Stock Exchange*, *PCF Paris*, etc.) follow that pattern in later years.

13   See Stefan Beyst, "From a World Spirit's Eye View," op. cit.
14   See Stephan Berg, "Die Ordnung der Welt," in Stephan Berg (ed.), *Unschärferelation. Fotografie als Dimension der Malerei*, op. cit., p. 40.

Another particularly visible formal trend develops throughout that period. Gursky builds a coherent underlying formal system that allows him to generate pictures based on the same architecture: numerous images of the 2000s rely on a small meshed grid, orthogonal to the photograph or leaned on the perspective of the picture, which is "filled" with various types of content – islands, people, cows or umbrellas. *Nha Tran* (2004, Fig. 100), *Fukuyama* (2004) or *Rimini* (2003, Fig. 101) have a very similar compositional pattern. With strictly orthogonal structures (such the *F1* series), this perspective grid constitutes Gursky's main configuration, used and applied in a similar – although less strict – manner to the Bechers' protocol. The grid, depicted from above and often occupying 9/10 of an image, can be seen in that context less as a strategy to formalize reality than as a pre-existing compositional tool, *filled* with various picture elements. Gursky reverses the Bechers' strategy, applying considerable authorial control to the depicted (and often digitally constructed or corrected) scenes.
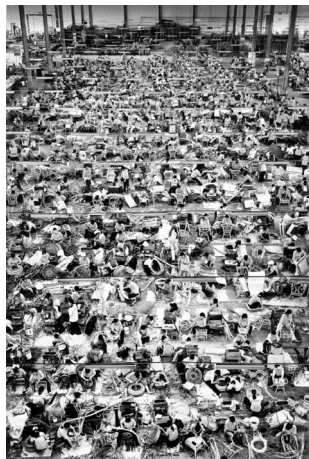

Fig. 100: Andreas Gursky, *Nha Tran*, 2004

While Gursky submits the depicted objects to an orthogonal codification in the 1990s, he progressively fills compositional grids in the 2000s, aided by – but not solely influenced by – increasingly elaborate retouching tools. This grid paradoxically emerges *from* his early interrogative compositional posture: while in the 1990s Gursky bends reality to correspond with the frontal grid structure, he uses an autonomous grid in the 2000s as core architecture and starting point for his tableaus. As such, this rendering mechanism can be correlated with generative principles underlying Sasse's *Speicher* projects or Ruff's generated images, which is particularly evident as the picture elements he positions on his grids are monochromatic (e.g., the orange uniforms in Nha Tran, the white traders in *Kuwait Stock Exchange*, the red gymnasts in *Pyongyang I*, etc.), metaphorically echoing the pixel as a discrete and fundamental imaging component. Digital technologies play a role in the composition of such generated

images. In the *Pyongyang* series, for example, he has composed a grid with pre-existing material, combining fragments of photographs to produce a seamless image of North Korean gymnasts. The scenes are in themselves spectacular, but Gursky increases their impact by creating large-scale tableaus.[15] But these tools also allow excluding elements that do not correspond to the grid or fall outside of its patterns. In *Dubai II* (2007), Gursky has removed the islands differing in size, shape and texture from the round island type he aims to represent, and has also homogenized the ocean depth, in order to create a more consistent background to place the islands onto.

Fig. 101: Andreas Gursky, *Rimini*, 2003

The process of reducing picture elements to monochromatic pixels is almost explicit if considering the frontally depicted color panels, the Arirang Festival[16] gymnasts are holding in front of them in the tribunes in *Pyongyang I* (see Fig. 102) to create giant images, reflecting the country's iconography. The choice of uniforms or color panels, present in most images that depict humans, contributes to a general de-specifying and uniforming process, addressing corporate and generic (rather than specific) views and the image architecture in a digital context. Monochromatic homogenization thus also plays a key role in the process of digitizing content. One aspect of Gursky's work of the 2000s, especially if compared to the two-dimensional construction of photographs of the 1990s, seems to contradict this position, however. If many photographs possess an orthogonal construction – e.g., *Avenue of the Americas* (2001) – a majority of his recent work is based on

15   Jean-Michel Garre,"One-Half Revolution and Everything Turns Red. Andreas Gursky in North Korea," *032c*, No. 13, Summer 2007. Available at https://032c.com/one-half-revolution-and-everything-turns-red-andreas-gursky-in-north-korea, accessed on June 6, 2018.
16   North Korean mass gymnastic performance, celebrating the country, its workers and its leaders, created in the 2000s. See for example "Welcome to the Strangest Show on Earth," October 1, 2005. Available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/oct/01/northkorea, accessed on November 29, 2017.

a perspective grid, with a high viewpoint. Through various strategies Gursky had tended toward two-dimensional constructions in the 1990s (vertical shots, orthogonal grids in the picture, etc.), which remain in some series such as *F1 Boxenstopp*. But most photographs enact a shift back toward a Euclidian space, with apparent or almost visible centered vantage points at the top of the pictures. The generative approach and the codified formal result clearly distance these tableaus from anterior photographs with similar camera angles. Although re-inscribed in a geometrical (rather than a pictorial) space, they reflect a proactive approach in Gursky's image-making processes, which forsake indexical value, replaced by compositional strategies.

2   INDEXICALITY, VERISIMILITUDE AND IDEAL TYPES

Reception of Gursky's realities

In referential terms, this shift can be translated through the emphasis of "the iconic quality" of his images, while the "indexical quality" has been weakened, using Matthew Biro's terminology,[17] which also brings along a more uninhibited position toward the image capturing process: besides using multiple source images to construct photographs, Gursky casts characters, such as some missing "pit stop chicks" (*Boxenluder*) for the *F1 Boxenstopp* series, which are added to the picture.[18] Despite this often mentioned iconic dimension, the fact that Gursky's aim resides in making "images of image" rather than "image[s] of the world,"[19] emphasized by Peter Galassi in the 2001 MoMA catalogue, has hardly been reflected upon until the recent book by Eva Witzel, who reconstructs the relationship of Gursky and model images.[20] More generally, the mention and in-depth exploration of digital technologies playing a role in this process has become a commonplace throughout the 2000s. Numerous critical and several scientific articles and texts have extensively discussed particular images, gathering a certain amount of knowledge – sometimes original, more often cross-referenced – about their genesis and technical specificities. The concept of Gursky's constructions as reflections of reality has been specifically addressed by several scholars, most convincingly by Jens Schröter[21] (2009) and Matthew Biro[22] (2012). Clearly, factual knowledge about the use and role of the digital in Gursky's work has increased, and the first articles published in strictly scientific peer-reviewed journals have appeared. Biro's recent article was written for

17   Terminology used by Matthew Biro. See Matthew Biro, "From Analogue to Digital Photography. Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky," op. cit., p. 358.

18   Ralf Schlüter, "Reporter des Weltgeistes," *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, No. 3, March 2007, p. 51.

19   Peter Galassi, "Gursky's World," op. cit., p. 28.

20   Eva Witzel, *Die Konstitution der Dinge. Phänomene der Abstraktion bei Andreas Gursky*, op. cit.

21   Jens Schröter, "'Wirklichkeit ist überhaupt nur darzustellen, indem man sie konstruiert' (Andreas Gursky)," in Martina Hessler and Dieter Mersch (ed.), *Logik des Bildlichen. Zur Kritik der ikonischen Vernunft*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2009.

22   Matthew Biro, "From Analogue to Digital Photography. Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky," op. cit.

the British journal *History of Photography*, exemplifying the shift from critical to academic literature. While it is too early to ponder the scholarly literature, and while an exhaustive overview of the critical literature is unmanageable, it nevertheless seems necessary to evaluate differences in perception of his oeuvre between the two productive phases we have established, before and after 1999. The relationship between digital compositing and the idea of truthfulness or documentation in photographic representation ought particularly to be discussed in order to understand the reception and status of Andreas Gursky's work of the 2000s. As has been established earlier, his early production is often associated with documentary *because* of digital interventions. Considering the evolution of his work in later years, and the often dogmatic positions toward photographic manipulation, such positions should be re-evaluated. Clearly, the merging of two photographs in order to produce an extended, orthogonal view of a large building (*Paris, Montparnasse*, 1993) could more easily be assimilated to a documentary rhetoric than to an enlargement of an existing Rhine view resulting of extensive post-production work (*Rhein II*, 1999), or a tableau almost composed *ex nihilo* with photographic fragments (e.g., *F1 Boxenstopp* series, 2007). Not only can the study of such discourses inform the understanding of Gursky's oeuvre, but it is also necessary to reflect broader changes and shifts in the understanding of reality and its representation modalities.

One constant parameter in Gursky's reception, independent of comments on formal and aesthetic developments of his work, resides in the connection of his images with the reality it supposedly represents. Surprisingly, reality not only remains an important issue in the discourse on his work. Even more so, the indexical connection to that reality remains extremely resilient, with theoretical articulation and references reminiscent of anterior debates on digital or post-photography in the 1990s. In his 2012 text addressing ideal types in Gursky's oeuvre, Frederik Stjernfelt, for example, uses Peirce as theoretical reference to explain the idealization process, which can be correlated to the concept of generic world, expressed above. Sternfelt explains that process with Peircian terminology, formally defining it by cleaning the "noise" of a picture in order to make it more "precise."[23] He further insists that the use of digital retouching or compositing techniques in order to produce an idealized view "is not a falsification nor the introduction of subjectivity into the work – rather, it is the attempt […] to state something, objectively, about the ideal type of the phenomenon depicted."[24] The idea that Gursky somehow remains a documentary photographer pervades this claim, making it necessary to justify the digital manipulation. In the introduction of his text, Sternfelt interestingly emphasizes that the photographer allegedly "lies close to the central virtues of documentary photography," which is exemplified by

23 Frederik Stjernfelt, "Ideal Types Made Visible," in *Andreas Gursky at Louisiana*, exhibition catalogue, (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebœk, 2012), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012, p. 113. The quotation marks reflect Peirce's words, but their exact source is not mentioned in Stjernfelt's text.

24 Ibid.

his "focus on social issues" or "meticulous attention to photographic detail." But his work "exceeds such categorization – to a great extent thanks to the photographic and production techniques used."[25] The idea of digital tools and formal parameters (size of prints, etc.) as improvement emerges, an idea most famously advocated by Michael Fried – as Matthew Biro notes – especially highlighting authorial control.[26] Thomas Weski also emphasizes this particular consequence – or precondition – of digital technologies, which allows Gursky to control his images according to his needs or plans. While he still relies on their photographic character, he (allegedly) creates "fiction out of facts."[27]

The idea of a supplemental value of digital retouching – predominantly discussed in Fried's case in order to exemplify his claim about the importance of photography as an art form in late twentieth century[28] –, thus occupies an important function in the discourse on his work, often using Gursky's own words addressing that issue. Alix Ohlin for example, discussing the sublime and globalization in Gursky's work,[29] quotes an interview by Veit Görner in which Gursky states his position toward documenting industrial companies:

> *Most of them had a socioromantic air I hadn't expected. I was looking for visual proof of what I thought would be antiseptic industrial zones. If these companies had been systematically documented one would have had the feeling one was back in the days of the Industrial Revolution. After this experience I realized that photography is no longer credible, and therefore found it that much easier to legitimize digital picture processing.*[30]

The use of such a quote by Ohlin reflects a tendency to consider that reality as such has to be upgraded or transformed in order to be of interest, a process in which digital technologies are central. Numerous commentators precisely describe how this transformation is achieved, giving very concrete examples, such as spatial transformations, perspectival changes in the images, highlighting of elements and idealization. The connection of such images with visual culture and the fact that Gursky's work might be interpreted as being the depiction of a picture world rather than the physical world, endorsed by this research, is often disregarded. This often leads his historiography to have recourse to index-based definitions of photography (e.g., Frederik Sternfelt[31]), rather than addressing the relationship between

---

25   Ibid., p. 111.

26   Matthew Biro, "From Analogue to Digital Photography. Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky," op. cit., p. 366.

27   Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," op. cit., p. 17.

28   Michael Fried, *Why Photography as Art Matters as Never Before*, op. cit., p. 165 – 166.

29   Alix Ohlin, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," *Art Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 4, Winter, 2002.

30   Andreas Gursky in an interview with Veit Görner, excerpt posted online at www.oasinet.com/post-media/art/gursky.htm, translated and quoted by Alix Ohlin, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," op. cit., p. 28 – 29. The interview was originally published in Veit Görner, "… I generally let things develop slowly," in *Andreas Gursky. Fotografien 1984 – 1998*, op. cit., p. 7 – 10.

31   It ought to be mentioned that Stjernfelt doesn't endorse a strict indexical position, but the mention of C. S. Peirce in a text on photography clearly associates it with a very specific type of discourse connected with semiology.
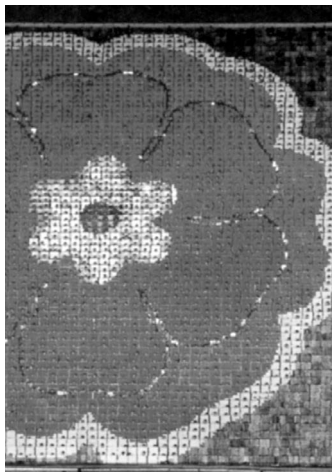
Fig. 102: Detail of *Pyongyang I*, cover of Thomas Weski (ed.), exhibition catalogue (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2007), Cologne, Snoeck, 2007

Gursky's imagery and photographic realities. As Thomas Weski relevantly argues, one of the main reasons for the fame of Gursky's work probably resides in its accessibility, the motives of his images relying on "visual codification of collective experiences."[32] The organization of reality fragments into readable and accessible tableaus thus does not reflect globalization as a physical reality through its symptoms (skyscrapers, stock exchanges, manufacturing industries, luxury goods, etc.) as much as it addresses the globalized perception of such reality, increasingly standardized through shared technologies and economies. As such, his position is one of the few to point at the role of images in that perceptive process, and more generally to address Gursky's work as a reflection of visual culture rather than a physical reality. While the "experience" is often stressed, the notion of transparency through which that experience is mediated often remains central. Interestingly, Gursky explicitly reflects upon the connotations of certain types of images (i.e., photographs of industrial architecture). While the Bechers' images to a certain extent answered to the need for an objectified view of industrial sites, their reading today is historical – their images' non-style can clearly be identified as style – and marks a shift in the perception of the objectified buildings: industrial architecture being a thing of the past, its perception clearly bears connotations (i.e., the "socioromantic air"[33]). As such, Gursky's composites can be interpreted as the attempt to escape a certain type of photographic representation, formulated by his teachers, whose tools he has paradoxically inherited. His oeuvre thus consists in an alternative deployment of the Bechers' protocol.

32 Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," op. cit., p. 19.
33 Andreas Gursky in an interview with Veit Görner, op. cit., p. 28 – 29.
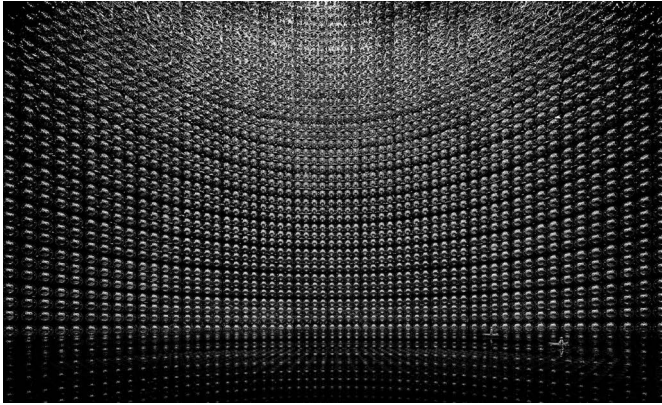
Fig. 103: Andreas Gursky, *Kamiokande*, 2007, (222 × 357 cm)

The global world and the images of the global world
As mentioned earlier, Thomas Weski embodies one of the few positions considering Andreas Gursky's work "as a [possibly] new form of document"[34] in which visual culture – rather than the idea of strict documentation – plays a central role. While most scholars rather connect Gursky to the documentary because of his connection with the German tradition or because of his own statements, Weski rather starts from his images, suggesting the equivalence between "the visual manifestation of the conception of the artist, the constructed evidence of his experience and the collective memory and association of the viewer."[35] This position allows a new interpretation of the aforementioned quote by Gursky on depicting industrial sites: the visual connotation of such photographs of industrial sites through historical examples (e.g., *New Topographics*, etc.), leads him to look for alternatives to the strictly indexical documentary approach. For instance, Gursky addresses the representation of some places and events he considers symptomatic of the (globalized) early twenty-first century – F1 races, club culture, luxury goods, the stock exchange, sports, leisure, highrises – and thus reflects the place these events or places occupy in popular culture and their visual expression, rather than their actual existence. The concept of global world, often used in conjunction with Gursky's imagery, might in this case rather be reflected by a globalized image circulation system, rather than by its physical equivalent. Industry and its depiction clearly symbolize another era (e.g., the industrial, versus the electronic era), an era whose visual symptoms Gursky aims to reject.[36]

---

34   "Bilder [...] die aber auch als eine neue Form von Dokument angesehen werden könnten," ibid.
35   Ibid.
36   Marshall MacLuhan argues that an era is perceived as aesthetically existing, only once considered from the point of view of another era: the taste for nature or gardens is specific to the industrial revolution, the taste for industry specific to the electronic age, etc. See for example Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.

Interestingly, the focus on visual culture or the historicity of photographic representation is hardly reflected upon, despite the fact that Gursky himself and his historiography regularly quote the source images that inspired him in the production of his works. Quite often he mentions seeing an image of a site or a building in a newspaper or magazine, which – although the process is not formalized or visible as in Thomas Ruff's *Zeitungsfotos* – reflects the importance of the photographic depiction of a physical reality. Numerous publications either mention Gursky's recourse to media images or reflect upon particular photographs. *Art: Das Kunstmagazin*, a mainstream art publication, for example, notes in an article on the 2007 Haus der Kunst (Munich) exhibition that "Gursky finds his motives in magazines and newspapers, on television or on the Internet, and sometimes still directly when traveling."[37] Gursky predominantly works with images, which he stores in his "huge photo archive."[38] Some specific images have been particularly discussed from that perspective. *Kamiokande* (2007, Fig. 103) constitutes both historiographically and as a visual model a paramount example for the understanding of the picture-picture relationship in Gursky's work. Both Jens Schröter[39] and Greg Allen[40] address the picture using original photographs of the Japanese neutrino detector[41] in their respective articles, and this particular example is regularly quoted. Made by the *Kamiokande* team, freely available on their website and largely dispatched through various publications and websites, the original *Kamiokande* photograph (Fig. 104) both exemplifies the recourse to specific visual sources available on the Internet and shows what particular formal transformations Gursky undertakes.[42]

While the source image has been made with a fisheye lens, Gursky corrects the geometrical space, producing a more horizontal image, in compliance with his common orthogonal grid structures. The color diversity is reduced to gold and black, which is particularly visible when zooming in on the little boats with their operators (respectively red and white in the source image, yellow-gold in Gursky's). The structure of the water disappears; Gursky only uses it as a reflective surface improving the theatrical effect of the observatory. The point of view is

37 Ralf Schlüter, "Reporter des Weltgeistes," *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, No. 3, March 2007, p. 51.

38 Andreas Gursky in ibid.

39 Jens Schröter, "'Wirklichkeit ist überhaupt nur darzustellen, indem man sie konstruiert' (Andreas Gursky)," op. cit., p. 208 – 2011.

40 Greg Allen, "Gursky Goods," available at https://greg.org/archive/2013/07/18/gursky-goods. html, accessed on June 27, 2018.

41 The Kamioka Observatory is an underground solar neutrino detector filled with water operated by the Institute of Cosmic Ray Research of the University of Tokyo. See official website of the Super *Kamiokande*, www-sk.icrr.u-tokyo.ac.jp, accessed on September 10, 2018.

42 In a conversation between Christoph Schaden and Franziska von Hasselbach (Sprüth/Magers Gallery), similar examples are discussed; von Hasselbach recalls that Monika Sprüth provided the source image for Gursky's *Fukuyama* (2004), found in a Deutsche Bahn magazine. See "Das Phänomen Andreas Gursky. Sie glauben ja nicht, wie viele Helikopter ich schon geordert habe!," a conversation between Christophe Schaden and Franziska von Hasselbach, at http://www. christophschaden.de. Available at http://www. christophschaden.de/de/schreiben/interviewen/ franziska-von-hasselbach/das-phaenomen-andreas-gursky, accessed on January 23, 2014 (site now offline). Published in a short version as "Phänomen Gursky. 'Die Betreuung von solch einem Künstler ist schon sehr komplex,'" *Photography Now*, No. 2, 2007.

lowered, the angle generating a steep perspective, reinforced by the increasingly bent horizontal lines. In combination with the huge 222 × 357 centimeter print, the image produces a sentiment of awe or a destabilizing effect, conveying Gursky's God topos.[43] The golden structure on the black background further enhances the idealization effect, imbuing the observatory with a mythical aura. In photographic terms, this can be interpreted as an "enhanced" image.
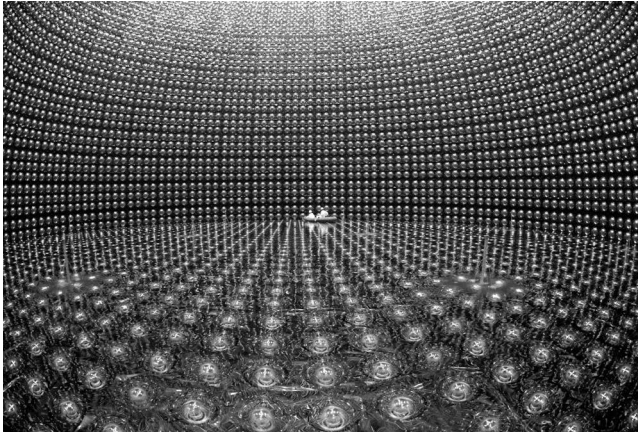

Fig. 104: Official photograph of the Kamioka Observatory, ICCR, The University of Tokyo, No. 15. *Started-Water Filling*, 2006

As Anne-Marie Bonnet (critically) notes, Gursky, with his "virtuosic technical skills," communicates "the magic of the place without construing it, re-auratizes it, [...] underlines its exclusivity."[44] In "economical" terms, the gold can further be associated with Gursky's interest in luxury goods, addressed in the *Prada* series (1996) or though the golden gas tank of *Qatar* (2012). In this recent work, Gursky depicts the inside of an empty liquid gas chamber of a ship. Creating a golden image and tagging it "Qatar" – a very wealthy Arab emirate – he clearly suggests a gold room, although the tank is made out of aluminum.[45] In that particular example, Gursky's "reality" is the projection of what the viewer associates with Qatar and the associations created by the golden structure. The photograph becomes a non-specific, symbolic image, rather than a strict document. It reflects what the viewer thinks

43   The recurrent procedure of reducing human characters to miniatures (i.e., microstructures) populating very large architectural or natural spaces (i.e., macrostructures) has been identified by numerous scholars and is also formulated by Gursky himself. See for example "Andreas Gursky in an Interview with Veit Görner: '…I generally let things develop slowly,'" in *Andreas Gursky. Fotografien 1984 – 1998*, op. cit., p. 5. Gursky's omniscient point of view has consequently been interpreted as a god-like position. See for example Stefan Beyst, "Andreas Gursky. From a Spirit's Eye View," op. cit.

44   Anne-Marie Bonnet, "'Pimp My World.' Zu Gursky's Bilderwelt zwischen Malerei und Photographie, Kunst und Welt," in *Frame #2*, op. cit., p. 103.

45   Press release for the exhibition *Andreas Gursky* (September 23, 2012 – January 13, 2013), curated by Andreas Gursky and Beat Wismer, Museum Kunst Palace, Düsseldorf.

of Qatar, rather than documenting any particular aspect of it.[46] If Gursky's work could be interpreted as having a critical and didactic dimension – I, Andreas Gursky, depict a gas reservoir and you, the viewer, imagine a golden chamber – the ambivalence seems irrelevant compared to the importance of the visual impact. Although Gursky's subjects might be categorized as being symptomatic of a shift of interest toward a globalized world – considering China or the Gulf states –, their formal treatment suggests that his work rather addresses a particular (occidental) view and visual formalization of globalization. The examples of *F1 Boxenstopp*, *Kamiokande* and *Qatar* show to what extent he confronts generic representations with a stereotypical understanding of these "new" territories, whose aestheticization serves both strictly pictorial and "documentational" purposes: in that process, the knowledge of the viewer itself plays a central role, as Gursky's imagery builds on these appropriated stereotypes from a collective visual memory. But their readability also derives from their formal enhancing and aestheticization, a process that participates in their homogenization.

Various image categories

Gursky's formal shift, occurring in the 1990s and consisting in a mathematical representation of the depicted images through a vertical point of view, grid patterns and orthogonal constructions, dissolves his images into picture elements, which become increasingly independent and autonomous in the 2000s. Until the late 1990s, Gursky's relationship to the depicted images relies on formal strategies that position what is captured in front of the lens – or the computer – in order to correspond to a two-dimensional construction, an increasingly autonomous picture world, snapped to a grid. The 2000s are defined by the production of constructed tableaus, with autonomous, often orthogonal, picture elements, resulting in digital composites, which although they might look either realistic – the 2010 *Ocean* series suggests satellite images, but only the emerged continents are photographs; the oceans have been generated – or primarily pictorial, derive from a similar generating process.

Throughout the 2000s, Gursky increasingly formalizes an abstract relationship to the world, which can be schematically broken down into two categories of composites, all proceeding from the reduction of pre-existing images – as much stereotypes and mental images as real images (e.g., found in magazines) – into type-images: the raster grid images and iconic photographs with singled-out elements. Raster grid images process image fragments, combining small elements (i.e., workers, cows, sunshades, etc.) into tableaus based on a structuring grid. More than aspiring to address a particular type of (source) image, these photographs are built upon recognizable fragments, embodying generic images extruded from discrete parts – and

46   An alternative interpretation could correlate the gas with wealth, as Qatar's income is mostly derived from oil and natural gas.

metaphorically comparing with pixel grids. Although some of these images pre-exist in reality – a photograph of the *Fukuyama* beef farm has been found by Monika Sprüth and served as a visual model[47] – these images are chiefly extrusions and multiplications of generic characters such as the trader, the worker, the Japanese cow, etc., somehow symptoms of a globalized economy. If these picture elements correspond to a certain extent to discrete elements that were digitally assembled it is not necessarily the case.

If photographs like *Kamiokande* or *Pyongyang I* possess a similar grid structure, their singled-out elements (e.g., the boat in *Kamiokande*, the globe and flowers in *Pyongyang I*) pose them as iconic images of different status, as installations like the Japanese neutrino detector are both visually and physically unique. Raster grid images fail to address a specific place or moment, despite the fact that titles are specific: *Rimini, Nha Tran* or *Fukuyama* depict *a* beach, *a* factory or *a* farm. Nothing stands out in the formal construction. The iconic *Kamiokande* or *Pyongyang I*, both based on pre-existing depictions of these places and thus output of pre-existing image archives, have a more special status, and a more specific "history." North Korea or a neutrino detector is something singular, while beaches or factories aren't. Similar to Thomas Ruff in the categorial construction of his *jpegs* series (see *infra*), Andreas Gursky works both with reductive strategies (he reduces a particular place of event to one depiction) and with opposite processes (he confronts a generic image with the multiple photographs of the viewer's visual culture). As such, their work could be associated with the two-directional movement of the Bechers' typological system: a specific building is singled out by comparison with similar buildings (differences appear), but its specific character also vanishes when compared to a multitude of similar shapes (differences wane).

---

47   "Das Phänomen Andreas Gursky. Sie glauben ja nicht, wie viele Helikopter ich schon geordert habe!," op. cit.