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EARLY DIGITAL COMPOSITIONS

1 JÖRG SASSE'S EARLY "TABLEAUS"

Amateur imagery and photographic codification

Jörg Sasse started to experiment with digital retouching tools at approximately the same time as Andreas Gursky, in the early 1990s. At that time, Gursky predominantly knitted images together, creating large-scale montages with rather unsophisticated post-productive interventions, assembling photographic material without retouching it. Jörg Sasse, on the other hand, had constructed complex digital composites from the very beginning of his use of these tools, unconcerned by the obviously digital appearance of his work. This constitutes an important difference in their approach, one that will also be reflected in their reception. Sasse, who had been familiar with various computer programming languages since the 1970s,¹³⁰ started a vast series entitled *Tableaus* in 1993, which includes 168 images as of today¹³¹ and which constitutes his main body of work from the 1990s. Initially exhibited in the Städtische Galerie in Wolfsburg (1996) and the Oldenburger Kunstverein (1995), with some interiors from the early 1990s (which are not digital composites), the *Tableaus* increasingly became his most well-known series. In an exhibition in the Galerie Wilma Tolksdorf in Hamburg (1995) and in most subsequent

130 Biography of Jörg Sasse, in Andreas Keul (ed.), *Jörg Sasse. Arbeiten am Bild*, Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2001, p. 137.

131 See category "*Tableaus*" on www.c42.de. Accessed on June 1, 2012.

exhibitions of importance in the 1990s, such as at the Kölnerischer Kunstverein (1996), the Kunsthalle Zurich (1997) and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1997),¹³² only the *Tableaus* were displayed, and curators overlooked the older images. Technically, the series combines two processes, creating not only an original formal approach in the Düsseldorf context but compounding two features that could easily be interpreted as undermining "photography" itself, if considering the commonly shared dogmas in photo-theoretical thought: the construction of digital composites and the use of recycled imagery. Most images from the series are based on found images, with Sasse only using his own camera scarcely.¹³³ The recycled photographic material used ranges from found family albums or professional slides found in the trash and bought at flea markets to "commissioned" images – he has, for example, asked the employees of a German bank to give him private images for a project¹³⁴ – intended to serve as evidence for vernacular visual cultures and their history. Sasse scans the found material in order to compose images on the computer, often using only fragments of the source material. The images are then "generated" on the screen, and the final result is printed on film negatives in order to obtain the final photographic print.¹³⁵

In terms of artistic strategy, the complex composites can be understood through two concurring mechanisms: the use of amateur images in an inquisitive approach to the photographic apparatus and vernacular visual culture¹³⁶ and their recombination through digital processes. The first step, similar to Hans-Peter Feldmann's "typological" projects or Thomas Ruff *Zeitungsfotos*, strips down found images from legend and context in order to understand their autonomous "signification." In a second step, which we will address in detail in the next chapter, Sasse digitally reconstructs new images using the thousands of photographs he has browsed, 10 to 15 percent of which he digitalizes to constitute a database for his personal work.¹³⁷ The selecting process of these images reflects a core issue of Sasse's positions on the use of photography as an artistic medium. "What we see in a photograph can only be a synchronization [Abgleichung] between an autonomous image which documents only itself,

132 These three monographic exhibitions have been co-organized by the participating institutions, but the selection of the exhibited *Tableaus* slightly differs.

133 See for example Bernhard Bürgi, "Curtains," in Jörg Sasse, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), Paris, Paris-Musées/Les Musées de la Ville de Paris, 1997, p. 34.

134 "Jörg Sasse im Gespräch mit Andreas Schalhorn" (Museum für Neue Kunst – ZKM Karlsruhe), op. cit., p. 57–58.

135 Annette Hürlimann, "In Suspense," in Jörg Sasse, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), Paris, Paris-Musées/Les Musées de la Ville de Paris, 1997, p. 6.

136 Sasse is, for example, interested in the specific formal qualities of images of a specific timeframe [Zeitschicht] or cultural area [Kulturkreis]. See "Bilder-(neu)-Ordnungen. Podiumsgespräch mit Jörg Sasse, Dieter Daniels und Susanne Holschbach" (transcript), at medienkunstnetz.de. Available at http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themen/foto_byte/sasse, accessed on November 14, 2012.

137 "Jörg Sasse im Gespräch mit Andreas Schalhorn" (Museum für Neue Kunst – ZKM Karlsruhe), in *Perspektive Dokumentarfotografie. Dokumentation des Symposiums am 28. und 29. September 2002* (Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Cologne), Steffisburg, Wüstenrot Stiftung, 2003, p. 58.

and things we know or things we have seen before,”¹³⁸ Sasse argues. His approach thus focuses on the visual characteristics of these autonomous images, which he tries to expunge from all textual “confirmation,” as their sense or meaning is commonly derived from the relationship of visual elements and textually expressed knowledge.¹³⁹ Sasse not only means to interrogate the meaning of a photograph; he also argues that the context for which an image has been produced – in the case of documentary photography this is often a “third instance” besides the image and the reality, for example a client, a newspaper, etc. – is a parameter that is often disregarded to understand an image, despite the impact it might have on the image’s signification.¹⁴⁰ But although interested in the various parameters responsible for the construction of meaning, he primarily focuses on the visual evidence of the photographs themselves. Sasse decontextualizes the image in order to carve out its specific visual characteristics. One of the poles of interest of his inquisitive approach is amateur photography, as its formal codification is based on rules the photographer is unaware of but nevertheless submitted to, which guarantees (to a certain extent) a common visual language. Amateur photography as a witness of a specific codification, culturally conditioned, serves his interest in themes such as the contemporary or everyday life, expressed through particular, time-based trends, such as the musty character of these photographs, a feature he is particularly interested in.¹⁴¹

*It is surprising how the conception of an image has changed throughout time. Every generation answers the question of how a good picture is made differently. This conception is shaped by media serving as vectors [Transportmedien], magazines in the 1970s or television after that.*¹⁴²

In order to apprehend these imageries, Sasse argues that he focuses on particular portions of an image, because he sees them as more representative of the visual culture of amateur photography. While the main subject of interest in vernacular photography is usually in the center of the image, the fringes are less subject to the compositional intentions of the photographer and thus reflect a particular, unintentional codification. Edges and backgrounds are consequently the prime material he uses for his composites. If Sasse’s argumentation about addressing images outside of any context yet investigating the historicity of the formal style of vernacular photographs seems

138 Jörg Sasse im Gespräch mit Andreas Schalhörn" (Museum für Neue Kunst – ZKM Karlsruhe), op. cit., p. 55.

139 Categorization through tags will later reappear in the database works such as *Speicher* (2008). See *infra*.

140 *Ibid.*, p. 56. A parallel could be drawn with the theorization of photography, in which images have often been analysed as autonomous objects, disregarding their social, institutional, discursive or technological inscription.

141 Sasse uses the term "Muffigkeit," *ibid.*

142 *Ibid.*, p. 58. The idea of media-specific imageries, a central aspect of his work, will be developed subsequently.

somehow contradictory, it nevertheless provides interesting analytical criteria for understanding his digital compositional strategies, especially in order to grasp the subjects of his *Tableaus*, which are otherwise difficult to define. The idea of a random cropped section of an unimportant part of a vernacular photograph provides a good description of what Sasse's *Tableaus* show. As in Ruff's strategy, the image itself – not the motive – is the central subject of his series. While these fragments theoretically represent a specific object at a specific moment in time, their decontextualization through cropping produces generic picture elements – a kid, a house or a boat –, achieving a similar shift to Andreas Gursky who systematically evades the specific, except for the titles he uses. In Sasse's case, titles generated without connection to the photograph (i.e., numbers) push the schism between referent and image even further.



Fig. 77: Jörg Sasse, *5170*, 1995, (52 × 129 cm), page 34 of the catalogue for the exhibition of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris catalogue (1997), designed by Sasse

An interesting example of his use of cropped image sections can be found in the catalogue for the exhibitions held at the Kölnischer Kunstverein (1996) and the Kunsthhaus Zurich (1997).¹⁴³ Sasse himself designed the catalogue, applying his selective cropping technique to the editorial project. On some pages (Fig. 78, top), he combines thematically close works (in this case the beach) in order to re-inscribe them in a context and create semantic dialectical relationships, or he uses multiple fragments from the same picture (Fig. 78, bottom), suggesting the entire source photograph, emphasizing the specific “signification” of the cut-out parts in relationship to the entire image. The title of the catalogue, “Something you hardly ever see is a black and white depiction of a strawberry,” further engages with the signification a codified representation induces. However, these four images are not part of the exhibition: they are not reproduced in the contact sheet at the end of the catalogue nor are they present in either of the three exhibitions¹⁴⁴ or in the Paris catalogue.¹⁴⁵ Their use suggests Sasse's

143 Jörg Sasse. *Was man übrigens selten sieht, sind Schwarzweissfotos von Erdbeeren*, exhibition catalogue (Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1996 and Kunsthalle Zurich, 1997), Ostfildern-Ruit, Cantz, 1996.

144 The list of all exhibited works in the Paris, Cologne and Zurich exhibitions can be generated at www.c42.de. Accessed on June 1, 2018.

145 Jörg Sasse, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), op. cit.

interest for the intermediary status between the finished artwork and the stock images, a concept which will be further developed in his work *Speicher* (2008), a physical database containing 512 retouched images that can be assembled using generative algorithms, studied in the third chapter of this research. Already in the *Tableaus*, Sasse primarily depicts images, a strategy also exemplified by numerous details, such as the use of drop shadows in the Paris catalogue (also designed by him),¹⁴⁶ which emphasize the image as an autonomous object, rather than the image as reproductive media.¹⁴⁷



Fig. 78: Jörg Sasse, two double pages of the catalogue for the exhibition at the Kölnischer Kunstverein (1996) and the Kunsthaus Zurich (1997), designed by Sasse

Digits and digitalization: possibilities and contingencies

The second step in Sasse's work process is generative. Using the fragments from his database, he creates composites either simply using a cropped section of an image, or by totally reconstructing a credible picture from multiple fragments. One distinctive feature of these images, which we will principally evaluate here, derives from their particular aesthetics. Sasse's ostensible use of the digital picture elements, as in Thomas Ruff's *jpegs* several years later, reveals the origin of his images

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Both the layouts of the Paris and the Zurich/Cologne catalogue contain design elements that emphasize the image selection processes: a drop shadow in the first and the use of small cropped images in the second.

and their manipulation, embodying a very different stance than Ruff or Gursky, whose photographs do not appear digital until the late 1990s. An important percentage of Sasse's series can unhesitatingly be identified as such, bearing unequivocal markers of digital post-production (e.g., pixilation, etc.). The series *looks* digital, embodying the belief that "a photograph can only document its own existence,"¹⁴⁸ an avowedly new stance in Düsseldorf, in a period when the digital was established as manipulative and unphotographic by numerous scholars, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context. While clearly there was a technical restraint at that time – computing power or capturing devices did not allow the production of high-resolution images –, Sasse both embraces the visual "contingencies" of these technologies and their possibilities in his image-making processes. But despite the fact that reception in the 1990s repeatedly stated that his images do not at first appear to be digital, the photographs give away their origin, at least for an observer used to these technologies today. We have to disagree with Andreas Keul, who emphasizes the importance of digital post-production for Sasse in the construction of his images but claims that it is hardly ever conspicuous.¹⁴⁹ We will address this historiographical particularity shortly. Visually, there are various types of digital markers that reveal these processes, ranging from constitutive manifestations of the used technology to painterly effects achieved through them. The most obvious of these processes is connected to technical contingencies and derives from the decomposition of the image into a pixel grid and the use of compression algorithms to decrease file sizes. The picture elements are thus either apparent in their most fundamental form as pixels or as geometrical shapes derived from compression algorithms. Compression is a typical process of the jpeg format, and its main visual outcome is to narrow down an image into a calculation, transforming continuous gradients into an additive pattern of plain colors, an effect particularly visible in some early composites, such as *1546*, created in 1993, especially if the large format – the photograph was printed at 137 by 200 centimeters – is considered. Pixilation and visible shapes or noise derived from compression reappear throughout the *Tableaus*, but the evaluation of the whole series shows that especially early images "suffer" from this characteristic, while later images have a much better resolution and sharpness. *9287* (2010), for example, provides a striking case of an incredibly sharp image, an effect that was costly and difficult to realize technically in the early 1990s.

148 Jörg Sasse, "Wo ist Trotzki?," *Living – Das Kulturmagazin*, Braunschweig, No. 8/1, 1995, p. 20.

The text is discussed for example by Herta Wolf, "Objekt objektiv. Zu den technologischen Implikationen von Fotografie," in Ute Eskildsen, et al., *Digitale Bildverarbeitung, eine Erweiterung oder radikale Veränderung der Fotografie? Dokumentation des Symposiums am 12./13. November 2004 in Museum Folkwang, Essen*, Ludwigsburg, Wüstenrot Stiftung, 2005, p. 20.

149 "Der digitale Eingriff ist für die ästhetische Wirklichkeit des authentischen Bildes nachgerade konstituierend, in Bezug auf bildnerische Erscheinung aber kaum je sichtbar, jeder technische Effekt in dieser Hinsicht bleibt bewusst aus," Andreas Keul, "Arbeiten am Bild," in Andreas Keul (ed.), *Jörg Sasse. Arbeiten am Bild*, op. cit., p. 15.



Fig. 79: Jörg Sasse, detail of 5303, 1997 (105 x 150 cm)

Another explicitly digital function and key parameter defining the aesthetics of the series is the use of filtering effects applied to the whole image, achieving painterly-like effects, as in 5303 (Fig. 79). This distinctive formal characteristic, commonly used in computer graphics to blend together dissimilar picture elements (different light conditions, resolution, hue, saturation, etc.),¹⁵⁰ appears in numerous images throughout the series. It can thus be considered a constitutive trait of his imagery, as this particular kind of aesthetic is rather eschewed by photographers, simply because it *looks* digital. Besides being applied in order to minimize the visibility of pixels if needed, there are numerous concrete uses of those filters, most of which have been established by the reference editing software Adobe Photoshop. These tools range from artistic filters to corrective algorithms, trying – at least in the user interface – to differentiate a creative aspect from the editing. The artistic filters thus imitate drawing (e.g., “Charcoal” or “Comté crayon”), painting (e.g., “Paint Daubs” or “Palette knife”) or tessellation and mosaic techniques (e.g., “Crystalize”). The corrective tools are rather used to correct or edit images, like those allowing users to remove dust or scratches on scanned photographs (e.g., “Dust and Scratches” or “Remove noise”) or to decrease the specific crispness of digital photography (e.g., “Gaussian Blur”). The common viewer usually realizes these edited images are not strictly photographic and have been retouched. But the trained eye familiar with Photoshop even recognizes which filters have been applied. In 7515 (1995, Fig. 80), Sasse has applied a filtering method (such as the “paint daub” filter), which blurs the image, giving it painterly qualities. The light-reflecting attributes of vegetation are, for example, decreased; the image is matte. Remaining sharp lines (see Fig. 81) suggest the use of selection tools and thus the integration of heterogeneous image sources.

150 The process allows to hide differences in picture quality (e.g., resolution) by homogenizing the various image fragments.



Fig. 80: Jörg Sasse, 7515, 1995 (44 x 57 cm)



Fig. 81: Jörg Sasse, detail of 7515, 1995

In 5303 (Fig. 79), for example, the pointillist look, especially flagrant in the straight lines, clearly shows the use of such painting filters;¹⁵¹ the decomposition into squares of 1546 (1995) suggests that such a paint filter has been applied to the already present pixilation effects. These irregular squares reflect the compression algorithm applied to the image. Clearly, one resulting effect of these interventions is to undermine the credibility of the image and to induce disbelief in the viewer's mind – an effect incompatible with Gursky's approach, for instance –, for he formally identifies the image as not strictly photographic. While the effect might have sometimes been carried out in order to correct coherence issues between image fragments of

¹⁵¹ It might also be reminiscent of grain effects on very light sensitive (high ISO) film for the untrained eye.

dissimilar origin, it creates a specific stylistic feature and tags the photograph as being digital. A third aspect, maybe less obvious at first sight, that reveals the digital nature of Sasse's images is the repetition or cloning of picture elements. His common strategy, which consists of stretching elements in order to seek for horizontal constructions, makes use of cloning tools to repeat, duplicate or multiply parts of an image. In 8246 (Fig. 82 and Fig. 83) for instance, parts of the building have been cloned in order to extend it across the image: the right part of the barn and the outer wall have been replicated almost *in extenso* on the left – the mound, the building structure or the number of bushes are identical –, only small details have been altered or erased in order to conceal the editing. The technique is certainly not as prevalent as the filter effects in the series, and there are few cases that are as exemplary as 8246, but the result clearly reveals a specifically digital tool strategy, and it concomitantly embodies the fear of unlimited replicability or manipulability, which theorists including William J. Mitchell and Lev Manovich discussed in the early 1990s.



Fig. 82: Jörg Sasse, 8246, 2000, 103 x 160 cm

A further distinguishing mark of the *Tableaus* resides in their systematic titles, based on four numbers, and only used in this particular series. The methodology implies a digital – to be understood as deriving from digits – categorization, which doesn't follow any logical sequencing, at least not one that could be easily readable. It also involves new production dates,¹⁵² detaching the final image from its source material and its original time-tag. The classification establishes the images as digital, as Sasse's other series bear alternative title methodologies. Clearly, Sasse tags his constructed photographs and concurrently dissociates them from a visual referent, combining photographic and painterly features. He generates numbers, which do not seem to

152 Anette Hüscher, "Artistic Conceptions at the Crossing from Analog to Digital Photography," at [www.medienkunstnetz.de](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/photo_byte/artistic%20concept/). Available at http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/photo_byte/artistic%20concept/, accessed on June 4, 2018.

reflect any order or sequence but rather to express an algorithmic labeling. These computational mechanisms could thus be traced back to the algorithms defining image formats and compression, or they could be correlated to the automated and systematized classification Sasse will develop subsequently through his website www.c42.de or the recent *Speicher* (2008), discussed in the third chapter of this research. These grouping or codification systems, while being per se analogue, prefigure or emulate the computing abilities of computers, showing a shift of the emphasis of digital technologies from sheer retouching tools to more complex digital characteristics and mechanisms.



Fig. 83: Source image for 8246, published in Andreas Keul, Jörg Sasse. *Arbeiten am Bild*, 2001

Between photography and painting:

Sasse, critical reception and art historical discourse

Digital technologies do not play a central role in Jörg Sasse's discourse about his oeuvre, as he considers that retouching is merely a tool among other ways of producing a discourse with photography. He nevertheless explicitly addresses the concept of retouching repeatedly, in what seems to be an attempt to legitimate his position, even though, as will be argued subsequently, the reception of his work has never suffered from the fact that it used digital retouching tools. In "Wo ist Trotzki?," a short text written in 1995 and published in *Living – Das Kulturmagazin* in 1996,¹⁵³ Sasse suggests anecdotic relationships between depicted object and image in order to exemplify the inherent weaknesses of photographic representation. For instance, he mentions the deception the photograph of a beer might enact because of its propensity to induce thirst. His text sounds like a manifesto or justification for his position and suggests his awareness of the dogmatic discourse surrounding image manipulation. The main argument Sasse invokes to address the relationship between meaning and photograph is to state that meaning is always derived from the

153 Jörg Sasse, "Wo ist Trotzki?," *Living – Das Kulturmagazin*, Braunschweig, No. 8/1, p. 30.

interaction of the image and something outside the image¹⁵⁴ – such as a tag or legend (e.g., photo-reportage) or the knowledge associated with a particular kind of imagery (e.g., the relationship with an ID image of ourselves, which we apprehend through our knowledge of our mirror reflection) –, that “the technology used to make an image hardly ever matters” and that the manipulation of photographs has always existed.¹⁵⁵ As evidence he enunciates the various ways a photograph can be manipulated, juxtaposing frame, light, retouching, the singling out of elements (“freistellen”) or the montage, all processes that have always existed. In his opinion, computer postproduction merely offers a refinement of such techniques. The title of the text – “Wo ist Trotzki?” – obviously refers to the famous example of a photograph taken by I. P. Goldstein in which Trotsky has been edited out – also addressed by Thomas Ruff in his *Zeitungsfotos* series – to point toward famous historical examples of photographic retouching or manipulation. In “(Un)sichtbar,” a short text published in a more academic publication on architecture photography edited by Gerda Breuer,¹⁵⁶ Sasse emphasizes another shortage of the photographic image. He argues that a photograph is only a two-dimensional “projection surface,” which is completed by a mental image, by knowledge or experience, thus showing his interest for the mechanisms creating meaning.

Sasse’s position, which seems to seek legitimation through the interrogation of photographic representation, somehow contrasts with his reception by critics. While his discourse is marked by a critical reading of the role of retouching and technology, interrogating the photographic apparatus, critics rather subordinate the digital retouching and his overall project to painterly processes.¹⁵⁷ An interesting critical position addressing the relationship of photography and retouching, and more generally the ability of the photographic to depict reality, can be found in a 1996 article written on the occasion of Sasse’s exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zurich by critic Christoph Blase.¹⁵⁸ It reveals an uncommon interpretation of retouching, especially surprising if compared to the dogmatic positions of the post-photographic discourse (which has of course to be considered in the context of an exhibition it was written for):

It is not the artist working with the computer who is dominated by the machine. Rather, it is the photographer who is leashed by the modest potential of the camera and the darkroom. Jörg Sasse is one of the first photographers who has been able to break loose from such contingencies. He did not manipulate

154 He later theorizes that notion as “subtext.” See for example “Vom denkenden Sehen lösen. Ein Interview von Jörg Gruneberg mit Jörg Sasse zum Dokument-Charakter der Fotografie,” *Scheinschlag*, No. 1, 2006. Available at www.c42.de, accessed on April 1, 2018.

155 Jörg Sasse, “Wo ist Trotzki?,” op. cit., p. 30.

156 Jörg Sasse, “(Un)sichtbar,” in Gerda Breuer (ed.), *Aussenhaut und Innenraum. Mutmassungen zu einem gestörten Verhältnis zwischen Fotografie und Architektur*, Frankfurt am Main, Anabas, 1997.

157 This chapter predominantly focuses on the evaluation of the critical discourse from 1990 to 2000.

158 Christoph Blase, “Die Gesamtretusche,” *Kunst-Bulletin*, September 1996.

*fragments or details of his photographs but has adopted retouching technologies as an autonomous image-making process. His images do not look like photographed motives or their surrealist extensions – nothing in them is counterfeit – but everything is made with mouse and keyboard, with honesty.*¹⁵⁹

The use of retouching is interpreted here as a way of escaping the limitations of the photographic medium, constructing images instead of recording them. While discarding the retouching or the importance of technology, Sasse allegedly addresses a higher artistic project, which is made with “honesty,” despite the fact that everything is constructed. There is an aspiration to a somehow honest representation, but on the other hand a focus on the visual experiments, as if the painterly character needed to be legitimized in relation to the photographic. The fact that the digital is often overlooked or discarded, as established earlier, is yet another expression of a tendency to disregard not only the retouching but also the discourse about photography more generally. The fact that the images are not “manipulations” but are “honest” digital compositions reflects a tendency of critics and Sasse himself to legitimate the process, emphasizing the painterly character and the image surface rather than the strictly depictive character of the photograph. The common discourse thus creates the idea of construction, concomitantly stressing the interrogative strategy, reflected in his reception. His work is often interpreted as implicitly pedagogical, aiming at orienting the viewer’s experience toward an interrogative position. The overt rejection of the image’s transparency, while showing obviously photographic images, thus creates a resonance that points at the insubstantiality of the truth claim associated with the medium.

Such an example can be found in an exhibition catalogue on the relationship between photography and painting from 2000. Andreas Kreul¹⁶⁰ clarifies the dialectic arguing that in 8626 (1999, Fig. 84) the strong contrasts between the white and orange house and the green background lead the viewer to question the image, as it seems unreal or unsound. He attributes both painterly and photographic qualities to this new kind of imagery, for which “the present does not yet have a name.” More generally, the reception of Sasse’s work is articulated around the dialectic between photography and painting, ascribing specific abilities to either medium. Annemarie Hürliemann for instance argues that he “lets his pixel-language have a dialogue with painting and photography, e.g., with Claude Monnet and Walker Evans.”¹⁶¹ In this coupling, the digital plays an interestingly progressive role, as Hürliemann emphatically notes: “Sasse has banished the ‘furor antitechnicus’ from his work and demonstrates which artistic liberties can be generated by digital tools, how it makes blossom the potential

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Andreas Kreul, “Allegorien des blinden Flecks,” in Stephan Berg et al. (ed.), *Unschärferektion. Fotografie als Dimension der Malerei*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstverein Freiburg im Marienbad, Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, Kunstmuseum Heidenheim, 1999), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2000, p. 15.

¹⁶¹ Annette Hürliemann, “In suspense,” in Jörg Sasse, exhibition catalogue (Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), op. cit., p. 20.

of imagination [sic], imparting a new magic to the picture."¹⁶² Technology, as obvious it might be in the *Tableaus* series, is thus often minimized, which contrasts with the common criticism toward retouching or new technologies. Even the role of the photographic is understated, as his visual experiments are deciphered rather as pictorialist experiments, detached from any connection to the represented reality: "Apparently realistic imagery is transformed into a thoroughly fictitious image field, similar to the realization of a painting that produces the illusion of figuration by the application of many strokes and dots."¹⁶³

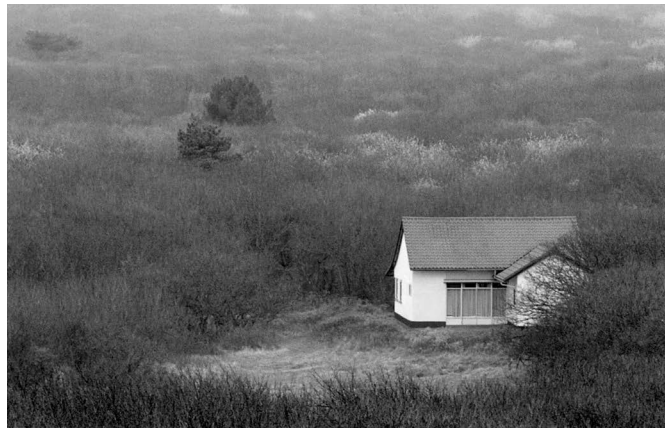


Fig. 84: Jörg Sasse, 8626, 1999, (103 x 160 cm)

While some critics have mentioned the ambivalence between the photographic and the painterly and the fact that it might produce an interrogation of photographic representation, Sasse's work is much more commonly read as a formalist approach, in which photography doesn't play an important role as such. This position also directly influences critical opinion on the use of digital technologies, which are simply interpreted as painting tools and, as such, as unproblematic. The reception of the digital in Sasse's case interestingly differs from Ruff or Gursky, both of whom have been connected with the German documentary context. The fact that Sasse's images are rather acknowledged as pictorialist experiments has conditioned their legibility in that context; the digital is frequently considered irrelevant. His work is often discussed in aesthetic terms¹⁶⁴ ("gorgeous,"¹⁶⁵ "aesthetic shiver,"¹⁶⁶ "magic,"¹⁶⁷ etc.) and deprived of any documentary character. "This work of art is separated by a precipice from anything documentary,"

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Bernhard Bürgi, "Curtains," in *Jörg Sasse*, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁶⁴ Connected with a predominantly critical historiography.

¹⁶⁵ David Levi Strauss, "Jörg Sasse" [sic], *Artforum*, Vol. 38, No. 2, October 1999.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Annette Hürlimann, "In Suspense," in *Jörg Sasse*, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997), op. cit., p. 20.

Hans-Joachim Lenger argues.¹⁶⁸ Clearly, the photographic is present in these texts, but its role or implication is downplayed through various interpretations. Lenger for instance argues that the photographic is “dissolved” into the painterly or “transgressed,” and that its lost aura (Benjamin) is even “rebuilt” in these images.¹⁶⁹ If we consider the art historical sources, only Jacques-Henri Lartigue, Walker Evans or Jeff Wall sometimes attest the photographic origin of the images, while William Turner, Jean-François Millet, Jean-Baptiste Corot, Vincent Van Gogh, Claude Monet, Henri Matisse, Jasper Johns, Color Field Painting and Gerhard Richter repeatedly corroborate Sasse’s supposed impressionistic and expressionistic descent.

The critical reception of Jörg Sasse’s work highlights the fact that transparency remains a key notion in the interpretation of documentary photography. Thomas Ruff’s *Häuser* and Andreas Gursky’s early composites have primarily been interpreted as documentary forms, because of their verisimilar aspect and the specific formal qualities a document presupposes (“the documentary style”). Independent of Sasse’s actual strategy, the overtness of his images as images inscribes his experiments into a necessarily formal-aesthetic discourse, as if his photographs had forfeited their documentary value through the loss of indexical connection. Clearly, the reading of photographs at the time is strongly interrelated with the discourse they are associated to: post-photographic images are necessarily retouched or manipulated because they seemingly reflect technological and morphological transformations. The cultural pregnancy and scopical regime of documentary forms defines the reading of any image that is recognizable as being documentary. Ruff’s *Häuser* are formally quite similar to much older examples and can consequently be interpreted in that “tradition.” Sasse’s experimentations, on the other hand, whose principles lie in the cutting out of (digital) image fragments, do not have a decipherable cultural equivalent. This leads to their identification through a formal and aesthetic interpretation, and its association with painterly models, as they have no visual counterparts outside the fine art context. The early use of digital technologies by Jörg Sasse is consequently subjected to a double “misunderstanding”: he does not fit the tradition he ought to be associated with (i.e., documentary), and his digital images are hardly connected with amateur images they are based upon.

2 DECONSTRUCTING PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Until the late 1990s, Thomas Ruff made numerous series interrogating photographic representation, questioning its code, aesthetics and apparatus through stereoscopic views, composite and retouched portraits (see *infra*) and night views. However, until 1999 none of his photographs actually appear digital. On the other hand, throughout the

¹⁶⁸ Hans-Joachim Lenger, “Introduction Speech of the Exhibition Jörg Sasse,” Oldenburger Kunstverein, Oldenburg, 1995. Available on <http://www.c42.de/hjlokiv.html>, accessed on June 1, 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

1990s Jörg Sasse produced digital images that bear obvious markers of their technical origin. Critical reception and Sasse himself have rather downplayed the role of the digital, however. Historiographically, there are several perspectives on his work that can be invoked to understand his relationship to the digital. Sasse has exhaustively written and talked about the relationship between digital retouching and the pretention of truthfulness of photography, but he claims that retouching does not play a paramount role in his work process – a claim that ought to be further evaluated. The reception of his work has engaged with its digital nature – the mention of the digital tools is almost systematic – but its implications have been downplayed and subordinated to the painterly process his work is commonly analyzed by. Paradoxically, curators and critics have increasingly narrowed Sasse's exhibited works down to his digital images, and every series he has made since the first *Tableaus* has been composed digitally. Although Sasse acknowledged in the mid-2000s that he is taking pictures again,¹⁷⁰ he considers it an “exercise” and it doesn't directly affect his work. At this stage of the emergence of digital tools in Düsseldorf, only Sasse produces overtly digital images, even if they are often not necessarily perceived as such, suggesting that critics have responded differently to images that were not obviously manipulated and those that were, emphasizing once again the fact that the perception of the digital rather relies on the aspect than the technical process it is based upon. While the digital in the reception of the *Tableaus* is interpreted as part of his painterly experiments, its photographic aspect is neglected, as only few critics have emphasized Sasse's interest for the modalities of photographic representation. In this case the overtness of the retouching, while deemphasized in the discourse, and the seemingly non-photographic visual output, resulted in a very different reception, as Sasse is hardly ever directly connected to a German documentary tradition. But despite these differences, Sasse's strategy shares several features with contemporary projects of Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky in his confrontation with photographic representation, which are consequently hardly ever reflected upon. The recourse to generic representational modalities clearly appears as a key feature in the work of these three Düsseldorf photographers – a tendency that can be traced back to the Bechers, but whose application takes on new forms in their students' work. The creation of the generic requires serial constructions in the Becherian typologies, while other mechanisms such as cropping, decontextualizing and the enlarging function are used in single images, often addressing the visual culture of the beholder. A further common modality the three artists share lies in the inquisitive approach to the medium of photography, whose apparatus is questioned through various interrogations and whose connection with documentary abilities is evaluated through various criteria, although indexicality, the chief vertical

170 “Streichhölzer, Sperrmüll und Van Gogh. Ein Gespräch zwischen Jörg Sasse und Jan Seewald in Düsseldorf,” in *Imagination Becomes Reality, Part I. Expanded Paint Tools*, Munich, Sammlung Goetz, 2005. Available at www.c42.de/text.php?tid=5, accessed on April 11, 2018.

point of reference, is rejected. Sasse's renouncement of photographic capture might be interpreted as symptomatic of a shift from a subjective (or personal) analytical approach to photography in which he interrogates modes of depicting still lifes or interiors, to a more experimental method in which vernacular image-making processes and the historicity of such practices is questioned through the revelation of their formal and cultural mechanisms, a posture his work was only scarcely acknowledged for in the 1990s.