D THOMAS RUFF'S ANALOGUE AND DIGITAL EXPERIMENTS WITH THE PORTRAIT

1 ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FACE

"Objective" vs. manipulated portraits:
Reception and strategies

Thomas Ruff's *Porträts* have unquestionably played a major role in the association of Düsseldorf photography with a "neutral," "cold," "factual" or "inexpressive" photographic depiction. More than any other early images of the pupils of the Bechers – primarily because of their notoriety and circulation – they have embodied the continuation of a specific German documentary tradition, recalling capturing protocols, serial imagery and typological approaches: "Sachaufnahmen von grösstmöglicher Objektivität" (factual recordings of the most possible objectivity), Julian Heynen exemplarily argues in an early catalogue (1988), drawing parallels between Ruff's "scientific-pragmatic documentary recordings" and identity photographs or typologies used in medicine and anthropology.[171] The examples of Ruff's association with documentation, documentary forms, the Bechers, scientific typologies or more generally a German tradition are countless and won't be systematically explored here, as the relationship of his imagery with his teachers has already been discussed. Rather, it is the ambivalence toward the *Porträts* series that will be highlighted. The regular *Porträts* and the three series of alternative portraits, the

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171   Julian Heynen, "Thomas Ruff," in *Bilder. Elke Denda. Michael von Ofen. Thomas Ruff*, exhibition
      catalogue (Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, 1988), Krefelder Kunstmuseen, 1988.

Retuschen, the *Blaue Augen* and the *Andere Porträts* series, interrogate through different strategies (protocoled depiction of the face, conventional retouching with paint, digital manipulations or image superimpositions) their status either as documents, or on the contrary as constructed images which reflect only their own two-dimensional reality. In this body of work, only the blue-eyed portraits have been digitally retouched, but, as all series engage with similar issues, they will be discussed as a group. Numerous scholars have approached this particular ambivalence, which is central to the understanding of Ruff's work. For instance, as early as 1991, Norman Bryson and Trevor Fairbrother explored his relationship to portraiture and the validity of the idea of a neutral depiction in an article in *Parkett*[172] opposing construction and documentation, surface and depth, a dialectical relationship Ruff's work has been repeatedly analyzed though.[173] The *Porträts* series has also been exhaustively studied in that respect in the doctoral dissertation of Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*[174] or, on a more conceptual level, by Martina Dobbe in her 1999 article "Bilderlose Bilder?"[175]

However important these positions, which cannot be easily summarized, indubitably are in the understanding of Ruff's work, it is not only the strictly scientific historiography of this concept that matters but also a more vague, critical or commonplace understanding of his work, which we would like to explore. In a similar manner as in the historiography of the concept of "Becher School" or "Düsseldorf School," the idea of German documentary forms is very resilient and is postulated without being actually established. Even more so, these interconnections between Ruff and the documentary are accepted even though a critical reading shows that they are often undermined by scientific and critical literature, as shown earlier. Our interest thus lies as much in the scientific reading as in a more indistinct, indeed methodologically insecure character, which postulates the dissociation from the referent but still sees his work as somehow documentary. Ultimately, it is only the combination of such a historiographical evaluation and the examination of Ruff's work processes that shall allow us to pinpoint the role of the various portrait projects in his work.

This unexamined association of Ruff with the documentary is a particularly paradoxical aspect of his early reception. Ruff's typologies are interpreted in the lineage of his predecessors, from Sander to the Bechers, without necessarily engaging with a critical analysis of such heritage. On one hand the portraits are considered documentary because they are reminiscent of Becherian protocols (frontality, uniform background, anti-theatricality, etc.), but there is a concomitant tendency to consider the portrayed individuals as generic, anonymous or de-humanized, as if the referent would disappear on the

172 Norman Bryson and Trevor Fairbrother, "Thomas Ruff. Spectacle and Surveillance," *Parkett*, No. 28, 1991.
173 See for example *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, op. cit.
174 Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit.
175 Martina Dobbe, "Bilderlose Bilder?," in Yvonne Spielmann and Gundolf Winter, *Bild, Medium, Kunst*, Munich, Fink, 1999.

surface of the image and in the multitude of the portraits. The process is similar to the common interpretation of the typologies of the Bechers, in which individual buildings disappear in a comparative mechanism and lose their discrete character. This paradox reveals the common equation of documentary rhetoric or style and the supposed absolute ability to document the depictured object, which Thomas Ruff has explicitly reflected upon. He created the *Andere Porträts* series as a "kind of reaction"[176] to the regular Porträt series, overtly arguing that the critics were simply "wrong" in disregarding the individuality of his models. Paradoxically, Ruff's series documents a generation of fellow artists and friends, while an example such as August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit* (1929) establishes anonymous typologies of working categories:[177] but it is rather Ruff's representation, which is considered distant and detached from any existing referent, while Sander commonly embodies the documentary discourse.[178] As these *Porträts* have played a paramount role in the reception of Ruff's work, paradoxically conveying as much the idea of documentary photography, conceptual documentary forms dissociated from their referent or even strictly visual experiments, a comparison between them and their manipulated counterpart seems productive for understanding the re-evaluation of photographic representation and documentary forms by Düsseldorf photography, and for pinpointing the fluctuant historiographical specificities of their "mainstream" apprehension. Interestingly, this ambivalence emerges at various levels. Ruff himself states that his images are not documentary but that they still document, emphasizing that they are only images but that the portrayed individuals are discrete persons. Critics often highlight Ruff's documentary descent while pointing at conceptual dissociation from a referent, emphasis on formal constructions and, as stressed by Isabelle Graw, the importance of Ruff as an author: in this interesting historiographical example, the German critic – one of the first to use the terminology "Düsseldorf School" – reflects in 2009 on her interview with Thomas Ruff in 1989.[179] Looking back at the interview, she explicitly verbalizes her inability to resolve these oppositions and therefore fully grasp the complexity of Ruff's work; "often, the intentions and ideas ascribed to the artist by the critic have nothing to do with the artist's real motivations."[180]

176 Interview Thomas Ruff and Patricia Drück, in Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 240.

177 See Martina Dobbe, "Bilderlose Bilder?," in Yvonne Spielmann and Gundolf Winter, *Bild, Medium, Kunst*, op. cit., p. 182.

178 An evolution in documentary forms which seems to have escaped Peter Galassi's attention, as mentioned in the commented index of Ruff's exhibitions in the Rivoli catalogue: the author (not explicitly identified) notices "the blatant misunderstanding with which a photography expert banalizes Ruff's approach" in his famous text "*Gursky's World*," in which he regrets that Ruff does not follow Sander's footpaths, as his "portraits have rightly become a touchstone of photography's capacity to evoke the unique person who resides in each human body." Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 241 and Peter Galassi, "Gursky's world," op. cit., p. 17.

179 Isabelle Graw, "Interview with Thomas Ruff. Shoot Management," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, exhibition catalogue (Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Conteporanea, Rivoli-Turin, 2009), Milan, Skira, 2009, p. 57 – 59. Originally published in *Artis*, No. 41, Bern, October 1989.

180 Isabelle Graw, "Interview with Thomas Ruff. Shoot Management," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), Thomas Ruff, op. cit., p. 57.

The inherent processes of the retouched portraits, in their opposition with the regular portraits, thus allow an understanding of this ambivalence, as the series embodies an at least seemingly antithetical position. Let's first, at this point, lay out the key features of the regular *Porträts*. They were realized in two main series. The first was predominantly printed in 18 by 24 centimeter format with various colored backgrounds between 1981 and 1985 and contains sixty photographs.[181] In the subsequent series spanning from 1986 to 1991 and resumed in 1998 until 2001, Ruff has systematically replaced the colored backgrounds with white backgrounds – better suited for large formats –, and the images have been printed in either 18 by 24 centimeters, or in bigger sizes, from 210 by 165 centimeters upwards.[182] According to Winzen's monograph there are 126 images in the second series, which makes a total of 186 non-retouched portraits. As mentioned earlier, they were executed according to a strict protocol, which seeks for a uniform, frontal and objectified representation of the subjects. Clearly, these photographs play a central role in the reception and perception of Thomas Ruff's work in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s and can be considered one of the main vectors of Ruff's fame, chiefly through the decontextualizing effect achieved through the blowing-up of the images. The manipulated portraits, while they are coherent with his critical analysis and reconfiguration of photography as a system of representation, can be opposed to the regular *Porträts* in the relationship to the real that they supposedly represent but also in terms of reception, as the reception of their retouched counterparts – the *Blaue Augen* series (1991), the *Retuschen* (1995) and the *Andere Porträts* (1994–1995) – was somehow more discreet.[183] The three series, in their opposition to the traditional *Porträts* with their implied pretention or aspiration to objectivization commonly associated with photographic identification protocols, could be interpreted as an interrogation of portraiture photography and its "normative power"[184] and as a reaction to the reception of Ruff's regular *Porträts*. Every series takes up a specific process undermining the (alleged) stability of the frontal typologies. As mentioned earlier, one of the specificities of early digital retouching in Düsseldorf lies in its explicit connection with the history of such practices. Examples like the famous Lenin photograph in which Trotsky has been removed show a confrontation of Ruff and Sasse with the history of the retouching practices they apply in their imagery. The three retouched portraits series are in that sense exemplary, as two out of three rely on historical types of manipulations: while the *Blaue Augen* (1991) are digitally retouched, the *Retuschen* (1995) are retouched with paint and the *Andere Porträts* (1994–95) are image superimposition. All

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181   Series A according to Winzen's classification. See Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 178.

182   Series B according to Winzen's classification. Ibid., p. 183.

183   Even if Ruff's *Andere Porträts* had been realized for the German pavilion of the 1995 Venice Biennial, one of the key international events of his early career (with his *documenta IX* participation in 1992).

184   Maximilian Geymüller, "Other Portraits," in *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, op. cit., p. 102.

three series provide valuable insight into Ruff's approach to portrait photography and his questioning of representational modalities and their close relationship to the original series (the *Blaue Augen* and the *Andere Porträts* are variations or manipulations of the photographs used in the *Porträts*), and they each constitute valuable comparative examples to use in exploring Ruff's strategy. One of the main points appearing as central in these manipulated portraits lies in the formal and historical confrontation with retouching techniques, auto-reflexive image variations and more generally the relationship between image and identity. In Ruff's overall work of the 1990s, they clearly lean *against* the regular *Porträts* and their reception. The retouched portraits are not, however, a counter proposition as such to their counterparts, but rather a "response" to the discourse associated with them.

Between documentary and post-photography

If the *Blaue Augen* (1991) series is the earliest of the three, we shall at first discuss the *Retuschen* (1995), considering the historicity of the practice they address. The rather rarely explored *Retuschen*, a set of ten[185] color portraits[186] of sick individuals found in a medicine handbook and in which Ruff has hand-colorized cheeks, lips or eyelids with retouching color, reflect one of the oldest retouching techniques in photography (see Fig. 85)[187]. The series holds a particular status in Ruff's work, as it proves untypical in several respects. The prints are extremely small (14.7 × 10 cm), which is unique in the work of Ruff, who is primarily known for his large formats. If many series contain small and large prints of the same image, the smaller prints are still much bigger than the *Retuschen*. Only a few *Zeitungsfotos* and the stereoscopic views approach sizes under twenty centimeters. These retouched photographs are thus reminiscent of very common formats in vernacular photography, contrasting with the "looming" *Porträts*. This formal characteristic thus rather inscribes them in a non-artistic and non-contemporary context, as the format and motive call to mind historical black and white photographs that have been colorized (even though the source images Ruff uses are actually made in color). The commonly invoked source of these images is a retouched image of Sophia Loren that Ruff apparently saw in an exhibition in Venice in 1995, which doesn't give much clue as to how the images ought to be interpreted,[188] as the reference to manual coloring, commonly used in

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185 While Winzen lists ten images in his monograph, the series is only credited with nine images in the Rivoli catalogue. Retusche 10 has apparently been removed from the series. See Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 234 and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 118 – 121.

186 Thomas Ruff dates the original picture in 1993, even though they look considerably older. See Thomas Ruff, "*Retuschen* in Handarbeit," *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, No. 4, April 1998, p. 6.

187 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 234.

188 See for example Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 234. The anecdote is commonly taken up without mention of its origin (most probably an interview), such as in the Castello di Rivoli catalogue, Ruff's most up to date monographic publication. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), Thomas Ruff, op. cit., p. 118.

photography[189] and in silent cinema[190] from the 1840s to the early twentieth century is obvious. A further discrete aspect of the *Retuschen*, besides the size, is the fact that these are the first found images Ruff retouches – the *Zeitungsfotos* had simply been decontextualized and printed at twice their original size – a process consolidated in the *nudes* and *jpegs* a few years later. While the images cannot be compared formally and allude to fundamentally different technologies and positions – a historical retouching procedure *versus* the confrontation with Internet imageries – they nevertheless share an appropriative approach, which emerged in the Düsseldorf context through the work of Hans-Peter Feldmann (in his numerous projects based on newspaper photographs) and Gerhard Richter's recycling of photographs (in his *Atlas* project) or photographic imagery (in his photo-realistic paintings), an aspect which will become increasingly central in the work of Düsseldorf photographers with the generalization of digital aesthetics in the 2000s.

Fig. 85: Thomas Ruff, *Retusche 04*, 1995

The final aspect that clearly sets the *Retuschen* apart is the fact that the set has only very rarely been exhibited. *Retusche 01* to *05* were shown at the Gallery Johnen and Schöttle in Cologne in 1995,[191] along with the *Andere Porträts*. But none of the series has been displayed in the 2001 retrospective curated by Matthias Winzen, *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, despite the fact that they are listed in the catalogue[192] and that the exhibition was shown in multiple locations

189 See article "Coloring (inpainting)," in Anne Cartier-Bresson (ed.), *Le vocabulaire technique de la photographie*, op. cit., p. 413.

190 See article "Coloriage," in André Roy, *Dictionnaire général du cinéma. Du cinématographe à Internet*, Montréal, Fides, 2007, p. 101.

191 According to the most complete and up to date exhibition list of Ruff's solo exhibitions and group shows of the Rivoli catalogue. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., 2009, p. 176 – 301.

192 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 234.

showing different bodies of works.[193] When they were shown again in the Castello di Rivoli exhibition in 2009 in Milan, some critics consequently argued that they had never been exhibited.[194] And the fact that the installation shot of the *Retuschen* in the Rivoli catalogue was taken in Ruff's studio in Düsseldorf in 2009 – while most installation shots are obviously taken in museums and galleries – does indeed suggest that they hardly ever were.[195] Considering the particular (non-) circulation[196] of the photographs for fifteen years, it can be argued that they should rather be interpreted as a personal study or visual experiment reflecting Ruff's inquisitive approach to the medium, only sporadically acknowledged by critical and academic discourse. Undoubtedly, it is the curatorial stance of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, creating a "meta-retrospective" articulated around Ruff's position toward the medium of photography that brought the photographs to light, as they had curiously vanished after Winzen's monograph in 2001[197] and had hardly ever been exhibited. "The 1995 series, *Retuschen (Retouched)*, is the key to understanding Ruff's skepticism of photography – always and inevitably an artificial construction, more akin to painting than to any objective proof of existence,"[198] she argues. While we have to disagree with the finality of her conclusions – in her essay "Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream"[199] she interprets Ruff's work as "denounc[ing] the failure of photography while reclaiming the aura of the unique artwork" –, she nevertheless points at the importance of the *Retuschen* in his interrogation of the medium and his interest for its history. This untypical set of photographs reflects Ruff's interest in the historicity of photographic representation, consistent with his oeuvre.[200] As shown through some *Zeitungsfotos*, Ruff explicitly questions photography as an indexical media through its history, producing photographs referring to its various retouching techniques, or more generally engaging with the semantic and visual potentialities of an image. Yet, the reception of these elements of his work shows that rather than using his confrontation with the history of retouching as an argument to understand his whole oeuvre, critics have either disregarded or paid too little attention to the discussion about these aspects. The approach toward the *Retuschen* is similar to the discourse on the retouching of the *Häuser*: considerations concerning retouching are either dropped or considered irrelevant.

193 After Baden-Baden, the show traveled to Oslo, Essen, Munich, Dublin, Vitorio-Gasteiz, Porto, Liverpool and Warsaw. For details of exhibited works see Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., 2009, p. 234 ff.

194 For example in a review by Augusto Pieroni, "Thomas Ruff," *Aperture*, No. 196, Fall 2009, p. 18.

195 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 118.

196 Paradoxically, some *Retuschen* are shown in the *Contacts* documentary film series on photographers produced by Arte. Jean-Pierre Krief, *Contacts. Thomas Ruff*, film, 13 min., France, Arte, 1997.

197 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit.

198 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., 2009, p. 14.

199 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 14.

200 He explicitly acknowledges the history of photography as an important "subject" of his work. See the interview of Thomas Ruff by Gabriele Naia, "Thomas beyond the Surface," at www.italy. exhibart.com, published on December 6, 2010 on the occasion of his exhibition in Prato, Italy, (site now offline).

2   THE "ANDERE PORTRÄTS" AND "BLAUE AUGEN" SERIES

The *Andere Porträts* (1994 – 95), exhibited in the German Pavilion of the 1995 Venice Biennial (Fig. 86), embody yet another explorative visual experiment addressing historical precedents. Aiming to create multiple exposure images as a reaction to the reception of the regular *Porträts*[201] – Ruff argues that to define them through the adjectives "anonymous, objective and anti-individual" was plain "wrong"[202] –, the photographer came across a portrait generator used by the German police, the Minolta Montage Unit (Fig. 87), originally built to assist re-constructive surgery developed in the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The device was discovered by coincidence by a German police officer at the Photokina Köln in 1972,[203] where it was intro-duced and commonly used to provide police forces and press with identikit[204] pictures, especially of terrorists. Ruff's historiography al-most systematically refers to the use of the unit by the German police and the fact that it was lent to him from the historical collection of the Landeskriminalamt [police department] Berlin, but the origin of the apparatus is hardly ever mentioned. Despite an obvious connection with RAF imagery present in the media at that time, the origin of the project is unclear and underexplored. Fellow German photographer Clemens Mitscher created his *Opfer* series with very similar portraits (Fig. 88), using the same Minolta montage unit from the *Landeskrim-inalamt* Düsseldorf in 1987, and he showed them in the Brotfabrik Berlin in 1994 in the exhibition *Staubsaugerbeutel und Phantom-bilder*.[205] The fact that they appeared on the cover of *Kritische Beri-chte, Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* that same year[206] and that Jean-Christophe Amman, curator of the German Pa-vilion of the 1995 Venice Biennale, knew Mitscher's project,[207] might suggest that Ruff saw Mitscher's work, an aspect of the series that Ruff's historiography hasn't reflected upon. The only occurrence in which the two projects have been connected can be found in a text by Theo O. Immisch in the catalogue of a "post-photographic" exhibition

201 Ruff says that he was pursuing the idea to create these kinds of portraits already in 1992. Jean-Pierre Krief, *Contacts. Thomas Ruff*, op. cit.

202 Interview Patricia Drück and Thomas Ruff (Düsseldorf, November 22, 1999), in Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 240.

203 Information on the use of the device can be found in *Der Spiegel*, No. 30, 1978. Available on https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/index-1978-30.html, accessed on June 29, 2018. Information on its technical features in J. A. Slater and T. F. Sullivan, "Minolta Synthetizer as used by the Rockland County (NY) BCI (Bureau of Crime Investigation)," *Fingerprint and Identification*, Vol. 56, Issue 10, April 1975.

204 While identikit is originally a specific technique for criminal identification purposes, it is commonly used generically to describe such composite portraits independently of the used technology (drawings, paper stripes, Minolta montage Unit, digital systems, etc.). See www.cia.gov.

205 Email exchange with Clemens Mitscher, June 29 and July 1, 2012.

206 *Kritische Berichte, Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften*, No. 3, Marburg, Jonas Verlag, 1994.

207 Mitscher had invited Ammann for a lecture for an exhibition of his students at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Offenbach am Main. Email exchange with Clemens Mitscher, June 29, 2012.

project in which Mitscher's work was exhibited.[208] But more than the antecedence of the *Opfer* series, it is the permeability of Thomas Ruff's *Porträts* that ought to be underlined. Although formally very close to Nancy Burson's composites or Mitscher's work, Ruff will rather be inscribed in historical forms of a scientific discourse addressing body typologies (i.e., anthropometry)[209] or contemporary forensic science,[210] while the other two photographers will be associated with contemporary implications of morphological and technological change. The documentary tradition clearly orients the reading of his photographs.

Fig. 86: Exhibition view at German Pavilion, Venice Biennial 1995

For the creation of these other portraits, Ruff dismissed the use of digital technologies, as he sought for imperfect images in which the heterogeneity of visual sources was visible. At the time he showed skepticism toward computer technology, stating that every "idiot" was using it.[211] The Minolta apparatus allowed, through a mechanism based on mirrors, the production of a single shot image with two source photographs. Ruff used his own *Porträts* as he wasn't allowed to use archival material.[212]

208 Theo O. Immisch and John P. Jacob (ed.), *Chimaera. Aktuelle Kunst aus Mitteleuropa*, exhibition catalogue (Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle/Landeskunstmuseum Sachsen-Anhalt/Month of Photography, Bratislava, 1997), Leipzig, Connevitzer Verlag, 1997 and email exchange with Clemens Mitscher, June 29 and July 1, 2012.

209 See for example "Interview of Thomas Ruff by Stephan Dillemuth," in Thomas Ruff. *Andere Porträts + 3D*, exhibition catalogue (Venice Biennial, 1995), Ostfildern, Cantz, 1995.

210 See for example Matthias Winzen, "A Credible Invention of Reality," in *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., 141–145.

211 The German original text is clearly more critical than the translated interview: "inzwischen arbeitet jeder Depp mit Computer" (every idiot now works with computers) became "everybody is fiddling around with computers these days." See interview Thomas Ruff and Stefan Dillemuth, in Thomas Ruff. *Andere Porträts + 3D*, exhibition catalogue (46 Venice Biennial, 1995), Ostfildern, Cantz, 1995, p. 13.

212 A difference from Clemens Mitscher's project *Opfer*, in which he was allowed to use archive material by the police, provided that he only used one constitutive element (e.g., nose, or eyes, or ears) from every criminal in the database. See Email exchange with Clemens Mitscher, June 29 and July 1, 2012.
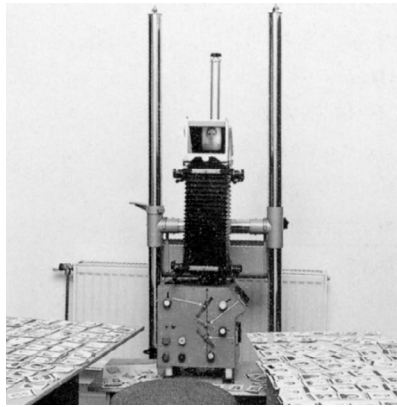
Fig. 87: Minolta Montage Unit

Anderes Porträt Nr. 109A/14, for example, merges *Porträt (A. Knobloch)*, 1990 (Fig. 90) and *Porträt (S. Weirauch)*, 1988 (Fig. 91). The technical specifications of the apparatus implied that "certain margins or structure" remained visible,[213] explicitly displaying the process. The silkscreen prints on paper – contrasting with the more "auratic" chromogenic print portraits – can thus be interpreted as materially reflecting the mechanical genesis of the images, and somehow a disconnection from the regular portraits. The *Andere Porträts* and their original counterparts are not dissimilar in their way of addressing identity through its protocoled representation though, and they engage similar interrogations. Yet, while both series echo historical precedents, the multiplicity of the *Andere Porträts* does so more explicitly. The regular portraits have been interpreted in the wake of the identification of the human being through its physiognomic traits, from Gaspard Lavater's physiognomy to Francis Galton's eugenics, Cesare Lombroso's phrenology and Alphonse Bertillon's anthropometry.

As Allan Sekula has exhaustively shown in "The Body and the Archive,"[214] these imageries, while they all derive from a scientific representation with a fixed protocol, engage differing visions and economies of power, oscillating from the analytical to the utilitarian, aiming either at understanding or on the other hand focusing on conditioning and improvement. While the *Porträts* reflect the identification photography protocols developed by Bertillon and used until recently, the *Andere Porträts* recall Francis Galton's superimpositions and concurrent eugenicist philosophy. In the context of this study, which aims to understand a reconfiguration of photographic representation and its relationship to documentary practices, we shall thus reflect on the mechanisms of superimposition that Galton's and Ruff's images enact rather than the economies of power these images engage with.

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213 Interview Patricia Drück and Thomas Ruff (Düsseldorf, November 22, 1999), in Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 240.
214 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, No. 39, Winter 1986.

Fig. 88: *Kritische Berichte* with Clemens Mitscher series *Opfer*, cover, 1994

As mentioned earlier, the *Andere Porträts* have been conceived by Ruff as a reaction to the reception of the regular *Porträts*. He conceives of and describes them as being "autonomous" from a referent and as having their "own reality";[215] with these words, Ruff resorts to the very same vocabulary that critics have used to describe the regular portraits, considering their two-dimensionality and their dissociation from the depictured individuals, implicitly commenting on the reception of his work. Paradoxically, they have been interpreted at the same time as being part of the German documentary paradigm we established earlier, being both reduced to two-dimensional, autonomous images and documents. Physically constructing new images of non-existing individuals with the Minolta Unit, Ruff seems to draw attention to the fact that images have their own realities, that photography "is less to be seen as documentary or descriptive than as generating reality"[216] but that it obviously retains a certain relationship to the depictured *and* also produces its own reality. In that particular case, the phantom images produced with the Minolta Unit and used by the police have converged with discrete individuals, thus "catching up" with reality[217] or, as Paul Virilio would put it, preceding reality.[218] They enact the uncoupling from the referent, creating a virtual image. But paradoxically they also reflect a process used in a police work context with pictures of real individuals in order to find real suspects and are, as such, fundamentally connected to the "reality" they refer to.

215 Matthias Winzen, "A Credible Invention of Reality," in *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979 – heute*, op. cit., p. 142.

216 Maximilian Geymüller, "Other Portraits," in *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, op. cit., p. 102.

217 Ibid.

218 See for example Paul Virilio, *La machine de vision*, Paris, Galilée, 1988.

Fig. 89: Thomas Ruff, *Anderes Porträt Nr. 109A/14*, 1994/1995 (b/w)
Fig. 90: Thomas Ruff, *Porträt (A. Knobloch)*, 1990
Fig. 91: Thomas Ruff, *Porträt (S. Weirauch)*, 1988

One of the key processes explicated in the *Andere Porträts* – while remaining implicit in the regular *Porträts* – lies in the relationship between the individual and the plural image,[219] the mechanism that conditions the reading of a single photograph brought into resonance with other similar photographs. This relationship has, for instance, been explored by Martina Dobbe, who confronts Francis Galton's superimpositions and the Becher serial images using Wittgenstein's concept of *Familienähnlichkeiten*. Inscribing the couple's work in the context of the emergence of linguistic and semiological thought,[220] she shows how the single photographic image has been increasingly questioned in its relationship to or as a plural image. Multiplication, serialization and the resulting juxtaposed reading of images have been increasingly understood through dialectical relationships, a phenomenon that has affected artistic production and theory. This plural and comparative formulation,[221] the development of which can be traced back to the nineteenth century – as shown by the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in *Objectivity* (and subsumed by Dobbe) – articulates various "philosophical and notional concepts such as the 'characteristic,' the 'typical,' the 'ideal' or the 'representative-objective.'"[222] The comparative case study confronting Henry P. Bowditch's (a contemporary of Galton) *Composite Photography of Twelve Soldiers* (1894), twelve photographs of individuals and one composite photograph) and the juxtaposition of the Bechers' *Gasbehälter* (1966 – 1983) with Idris Khan's *Every … Bernd and Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholder* (2004, nine photographs of discrete gasholders and one composite image) reveals the conceptual oscillation between individual and plural, as much in its theoretical or conceptual frameworks as in its formal articulations.

219 See David Ganz and Felix Thürlemann (ed.), *Das Bild im Plural*, Berlin, Reimer, 2010.
220 Martina Dobbe, "Fotografische Bildanordnungen," in David Ganz and Felix Thürlemann (ed.), *Das Bild im Plural*, Berlin, Reimer, 2010.
221 Ibid., p. 347.
222 Ibid., p. 343.

Fig. 92: Thomas Ruff, preparative sketch for *Andere Porträts* (screenshot from Jean-Pierre Krief, *Contacts. Thomas Ruff*, 1997)

The mentioned works exemplify the divergent interactions between images. The Bechers' typology confronts one image with a set of images – Dobbe calls it a tableau[223] –, which entails two opposed readings of the singular: while the differences between the buildings appear in every single photograph, a homogeneous type-image materializes when looking at the whole tableau. The first reading remains on a depictive level, focusing on the descriptive features of the photograph; it concentrates on the shown building. The second reading brings about a certain autonomization of the images from their depictive character; it stresses the image rather than the depiction, emphasizing the visual and formal characteristics of the photographs. In Galton's and Khan's composite projects, this second reading prevails, as all photographs are compressed into a single image, a multiple in which only a generic type emerges.[224] The first specific appraisal, focusing on an individual building, is here prohibited. A further feature defining the typology and the composite lies in the fact that they work autonomously, without resorting to external images. Adding a row of gasholders in a Becher typology or adding a gasholder in Khan's composite does not change the reading of the image. The fact that Ruff uses recognizable human faces in the *Andere Porträts* changes that autonomy, as the series relies on its comparison with pre-existing images and on a certain type of portraits, formally homogeneous, and with an easily recognizable cultural connotation. Ruff's portraits are associated with photographs used for identification, which are thereby more loaded than a picture of a building. In this case the articulation

223 See *supra*, p. 137–139.
224 Galton uses the term "generic" to describe these composite portraits as soon as 1879. See for example Francis Galton, *Inquires into Human Faculties and Its Development*, London, Macmillan, 1883. Electronic edition (2001) available at http://galton.org/books/human-faculty/text/human-faculty.pdf, accessed on August 19, 2014 and Francis Galton, "Generic Images. With Autotype Illustrations," *Proceedings of the Royal Institution*, London, 1879.

between individual and plural image works differently, as in Khan's and the Bechers' cases it operates *within* the work, while Ruff's also does *outside* itself. Interestingly, that autonomy is more defined by the use of faces than by the image construction. The regular *Porträts*, which are not conceived as a stable series (even though they might be displayed as such), also recall references outside the displayed images.

Alternative portraits and the body

As in Francis Galton's and Henry P. Bowditch's projects aiming to create a composite type-image, Ruff's *Andere Porträts* produce a type of portrait whose definition fluctuates between the individual and the general, the specific and the generic, blurring the "documentary" factor of the normal *Porträts*. Addressing such a famous example as Galton's superimpositions and reflecting on the understanding of his own body of work, Thomas Ruff combines his own compositional strategies with an inquisitive approach to the medium of photography, in this particular case much more explicitly than in other series. The surprisingly didactical enterprise carries on his interrogation of identity and representation. Interestingly, the reception of this alternative portrait series further echoes the dissociation between a "documentary" corpus and a "post-photographic" corpus. Ruff's various portraits are commonly read in the lineage of a German documentary tradition, while very similar works, such as Nancy Burson's composite portraits from the early 1980s based on similar image superimpositions,[225] are rather connected with post-human or digital imageries. Using combined video signals, Burson created work that is formally and conceptually similar to Ruff's superimpositions. Her *Beauty Composite* series for example, merges beauty ideals represented by figures like models or actors (Fig. 93) and the *Warfare* series, which compounds pictures of presidents. Some of Ruff's regular or retouched portraits have in fact been connected to post-photography. *Porträt (S. Weirauch)* and *Porträt (M. Vössing)*, both from 1988, were, for instance, displayed in the inaugural exhibition *Post-Human* of the FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain in Pully in 1992. The exhibition was one of the first to use the terminology "post-human" and remains as such one of the most commonly quoted examples in the historiography of post-photography. Generally, the other portrait series is rather read as a reflection on identity, on RAF imageries, as documentation necessarily read in relation to his "typologies" and the Düsseldorf context. Burson, on the other hand, is almost systematically connected to the post-human, despite an explicit interest in similar issues, and is reduced by her historiography to a formal confrontation with digital technologies and corporality in a context of gene manipulation and beauty ideals. She has exhibited in some of the paradigmatic exhibitions addressing such issues, such as *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*. Despite similar

225 See for example Vilém Flusser, "Nancy Burson. Chimaeras," in Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel and Nikolaus G. Schneider (ed.), *Photography after Photography. Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, op. cit. p. 150 – 155.

technical and formal construction and similar discourse, and despite the fact that both series are perceived as digital manipulation (which isn't technically true), Burson is labeled post-photographic and connected to the post-human, while Ruff is rather attached to the documentary context he emerges from, at least until a period of re-evaluation of digital images in the 2000s (see *infra*). The confrontation further crystallizes the schematic opposition of post-human or post-photographic imageries, which are rather Anglo-Saxon, and digitally retouched projects connected to the documentary discourse, which are rather German.

The *Blaue Augen* series (1991) is the earliest of Ruff's retouched portrait series. Considered individually, it could very well be seen as a post-photographic experiment addressing post-human bodies, despite the fact that the retouching is rather inconspicuous. In *Blaue Augen* (1991), Thomas Ruff retouched twelve of his portraits, digitally manipulating the eyes of six male and six female models in blue by using a cut-out iris from one of his photographs. The project is a response to *Galeries Magazine* critic Jean-François Chevrier and *Flash Art* critic Klaus Ottman, who in 1990 accused his *Porträts* of reflecting questionable conceptions of race. His images supposedly resemble social-realist or even national-socialist art, showing only blonde individuals with blue eyes.[226] Except for the retouching, Ruff has also changed the titles, using instead of the generic word Porträt with the name of the model, the words *Blaue Augen* with the initials of the model and the initials B.E. for every image, which stands for "blue eyes." *Porträt (R. Huber)* (1988) is for example switched to *Blaue Augen R.H./B.E.* (1991). The small size c-prints (29.5 × 39.5 cm) could very well be associated with the main concerns of the post-photographic debate – digital image retouching, photographic truth and post-human bodies – but as transformations of an existing series, they obviously have to be appraised as such. Rarely exhibited,[227] the series probably became known primarily through the response of art historian Jörg Johnen (a gallery owner representing Ruff) to the claims of eugenics in number 28 of the 1991 *Parkett*. And maybe on a more anecdotic level, through an edition in 1991 of a new blue-eyed portrait (the thirteenth), *Porträt Josef Strau*,[228] produced as an edition of one hundred prints by *Texte zur Kunst* in Cologne. Similar to the *Retuschen*, the project seems to have dodged curatorial and scientific interest. Ruff's images that use explicit digital retouching seem to be incompatible with the documentary paradigm and are consequently – this remains hypothetical at this point – unheeded. It ought to be clarified how the overtly digital jpegs became illustrious and omnipresent in Ruff studies, while every series of the 1990s in which the

226 In *Galeries Magazine*, No. 36, April/May 1990 and *Flash Art*, Vol. 23, No. 154, October 1990, respectively. See Jörg Johnen, "Street and Interior. On the Work of Thomas Ruff," *Parkett*, No. 28, 1991.
227 One of the few exhibitions took place at the Wilma Tolksdorf Gallery in Frankfurt in 1998, where eight prints were shown.
228 Winzen's monograph uses "Porträt Josef Strau" as title, the website of *Texte zur Kunst* uses "Porträt 1991." See www.textezurkunst.de/editionen/thomas-ruff1, accessed on July 6, 2018.

digital retouching is overt (the *Blaue Augen* and the *Plakate*), and those series explicitly addressing retouching such as the *Retuschen*, are only rarely exhibited and scarcely studied, which has even led Ruff to comment on mistakes written about these series. In 1998 for instance, he responded to an *Art: Das Kunstmagazin* article, which stated that his *Retuschen* had been digitally retouched. He wrote that he was "puzzled" by such a mistake[229] and sarcastically added that somebody from the editorial staff had probably mistaken them for large-format political posters. This anecdotic incident further shows to what extent the retouching in his work suffers from disfavor and lacks proper scientific evaluation.
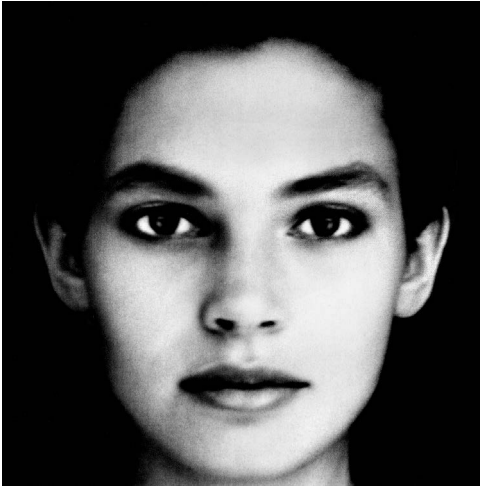

Fig. 93: Nancy Burson, *5 Vogue Models*, 1989 (b/w, silver gelatin print, 23.4 × 21.59 cm)

3   DIVERGING RECEPTION

The evaluation of Thomas Ruff's three alternative portrait series, two of which have hardly been studied or exhibited, the third playing an important role in the apprehension of his work, shows that while they comply with his inquisitive approach to photographic representation and with his confrontation with the history of photographic practices, their critical appraisal has differed considerably. The *Retuschen* and *Blaue Augen* hardly appear in exhibitions and in critical or scientific literature, which, for an artist who is chiefly renowned for his portraits, is rather surprising. The format has definitely played an important role in the reception of Ruff's work. The blown-up *Porträts* and *Andere Porträts* were acknowledged differently than the small-format *Retuschen* or the medium-format *Blaue Augen.* It is obviously difficult to explain why galleries, critics and institutions did not find in those two last

229 Thomas Ruff, "*Retuschen* in Handarbeit," *Art. Das Kunstmagazin*, No. 4, April 1998, p. 6.

series the interest they had found in the *Porträts*, the *Häuser* or the *Interieurs*. But stating the fact that these two series, in which retouching is both visible and a constitutive element of the artistic position, have been excluded from most monographic curatorial projects and have hardly been evaluated, exposes a resistance toward retouching in general, digital or manual, when overtly visible. The case of the *Andere Porträts*, which have often been interpreted in relationship to identification protocols, reflects a different position toward documentary forms. The images can be traced back to ID photographs and to archive material, which even if they are self-reflexive and resort to Ruff's own portraits, constitute an apparently legitimate documentary form or an interrogation thereof. Since the series reflects a historical practice, stemmed by its institutional use and its media circulation, it becomes an admissible photographic expression, reflecting the ever-recurring truth claim of the photographic.

The emphasis, in Ruff's own discourse and in the series' historiography, on the exploitation of a historical machine used by the police, whose result was seen every day in the news, shows how the relationship to the real – even in the work of an artist who stands for the photographic as constructed reality, a dimension fully acknowledged by critics – is extremely resilient. The use of digital technologies in the various portrait series is thus subordinated to a more widespread interrogation of photographic representation, hinging on both the historical exploration of retouching techniques and the processualization thereof in his images. As such, the confrontation of the regular and alternative portraits serves as a heuristic tool expounding Ruff's explorative work process. In the context of the comparison of digitally retouched images either associated with a documentary context or in a post-photographic reading, the reception of the portraits reveals interesting interstitial potentialities. Ruff's historiography has predominantly acknowledged his work in connection with Düsseldorf, either as an individual photographer necessarily concerned with the real, or through group projects addressing documentary forms. However, his portraits also possess a distinct historiography, connected to post-human imagery, which hardly appears in his "traditional" historiography. One of the few examples that combines Ruff and Burson – and one of the rare scientific studies of Ruff's work – is Patricia Drück's doctoral dissertation on the portraits.[230] The object "Thomas Ruff" is clearly constructed in the trail of a documentary discourse, which has as a matter of fact proven extremely contradictory and paradoxical. Visible retouching or post-human bodies seem irreconcilable with its underlying principles. The appraisal of this oriented discourse shows that Ruff has yet to be scientifically explored. His work has chiefly been considered by critics, curators and gallery owners, and its circulation is primarily connected to exhibitions and catalogues. An exhaustive institutional study of his work, through the evaluation of the role of the Johnen and Schöttle gallery, the Mai 36 Gallery, the Zwirner Gallery,

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230 Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., chapter "Hybride Gesichter," p. 57 – 63.

the influential collector and editor Lothar Schirmer and the numerous supporters of his work, would provide insight into the construction of the "Düsseldorf School" – in that case much more a commercial label than an art-historical category. "[The Düsseldorf School] is a functional book for the American market, because a label simplifies things, everyone is able to put you in a box and then follow you," Thomas Ruff recalls Lothar Schirmer saying about Stefan Gronert's book.[231] Yet, as mentioned earlier, Gronert himself deconstructs the very idea of such a school, while editing a book contributing to its perennation.[232]

The appraisal of Ruff's confrontation with portrait photography shows to what extent his strategy, which explicitly confronts the historicity of retouching and the implications of its use in contemporary photography, relies on a meta-reflexive discourse addressing image production and perception. While Ruff retains a personal attachment to the objects he represents – he, for example, repeatedly argues that his *Porträts* are just two-dimensional images but that the depictured individuals are also his friends, intermingling artistic position with personal appraisal – his portraits and alternative portraits series address an interrogation of the circulation and the inherent mechanisms of such images, questioning contemporary visual culture through one of the most familiar types of image, the portrait. The early reception of this body of work, which formally, conceptually and technically often echoes post-photographic images, shows the resilience of the documentary tag that his filiation has associated him with. Although formally very similar to various post-photographic images, which to a certain extent reproduce documentary protocols – and particularly those defining portrait photography –, both sets of images are associated with discrete contexts and histories. Ruff's retouched portraits are somehow dismissed, as if the overt manipulation deprived his photographs of their real identity.

231 See interview of Thomas Ruff by Gabriele Naia, "Thomas beyond the Surface," at www.italy.exhibart.com, op. cit.

232 Stefan Gronert, "Photographische Emanzipation," in *Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule*, op. cit., p. 13–15.