C DISCOURSE ON DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN GERMANY

1 POST-PHOTOGRAPHY AND DÜSSELDORF

The understanding of the reception of digital technologies in Germany in the 1990s is impaired by the complexity of its situation – the multitude of strictly theoretical discourses and practices they are associated to – and cannot be approached in a similar manner to the documentary discourse. The latter stems both from the legitimacy of the representation of the real and a history it can be connected to, while digital technologies have from their beginnings been connected with manipulation and non-legitimate artistic forms. The obsolescence of certain post-photographic theories has clearly led many scholars to discard such discourse altogether, also repressing the indirect role they might have played in the constitution of other objects such as documentary photography. Although difficult to establish strictly, it could be argued that the triumph of the Düsseldorf School and more generally of documentary practices can be attributed – at least partially – to the rejection of these theories. It could be argued that the fear regarding the end of photography has triggered a downscaling of possible photographic practices, focusing on the supposed defining character of the medium, the imprint [Abbild]. In terms of methodology, such a hypothesis is difficult to pursue. It is rather delicate to evaluate the fact that throughout the 1990s digital manipulation in the images of Andreas Gursky or Thomas Ruff were not discussed. The non-reception of the digital in their work can only be approached indirectly.

Similar to the way that *In Deutschland* (1979) exemplifies the construction of a discourse on documentary, one particular exhibition crystalizes the heterogeneous discourse on the digital in Germany. The exhibition *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* (1995), curated by Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Florian Rötzer and Stefan Iglhaut and displayed in a multitude of locations, is probably the most cited project associated with the appearance of digital technologies in German photography literature and will, as such, serve as a comparative counterpoint to Honnef's famous show and more generally to the non-reception of the digital in the work of the Becher students. This particular case study aims at understanding the reception of the digital *when it was addressed explicitly*, which ought concurrently to draw attention to positions where the use of digital tools *was not discussed*. *In Deutschland* constitutes the outcome of a much wider, consciously deployed effort to legitimate specific German documentary forms. *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* rather operates as a point of convergence of dissimilar objects, where various theoretical considerations meet a visual outcome of a supposedly similar origin – the digital "revolution" – often associated with the term and concept of "post-photography."

However, that particular terminology is not restricted to a corpus of theoretical texts associated with Mitchell's original concept. It can historiographically be defined by the convergence of several phenomena: the theoretical effort addressing recent technological developments in photography, a body of artists mostly concerned with the representation of the human body and various curatorial and editorial projects combining the two. As mentioned earlier, "post-photography" is not a concept that has been consequently analyzed by art historians. The phenomenon has been treated in recent histories of the medium, for example by Martin Lister in Liz Wells' recent edition of *Photography. A Critical Introduction*.[235] Even though the terminology used is "digital photography," the addressed phenomena roughly coincide. But while recent histories have reflected the fragmented and heterogeneous nature of "post-photography," earlier efforts to grasp the reaction to new technologies in the photography-specific field have proven less nuanced, constructing an apparently coherent corpus and creating a theoretical and art historical entity that does not, in fact, exist as such. The technicist approach, in which the object-representation relationship was over-evaluated, seems anachronistic, even outpaced by the technological evolution it based itself upon. In fact, the whole idea of post-photography, and the visual production created during the 1990s independently from the theoretical discourse, suffers from a similar obsolescence. The definition of the whole concept of post-photography therefore rather derives negatively, emanating from a movement of rejection of obsolete theories and an imagery that, despite obvious interest, is given little credit because of its alleged fascination with technology. There has been a sustained interest for some individual artists and for the dominant theme of this imagery: the manipulated

235 Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography. A Critical Introduction*, New York and London, Routledge, 2004 (1996).

body.[236] But despite the fact that they clearly constitute important examples of artistic production and the visual outcome of the appearance of digital technologies in the 1990s, it seems that neither their past nor current work, outside of this timespan, has awakened much interest. Nancy Burson's work for example, one of the major protagonists of this phenomenon, has never been processed exhaustively by art historians – despite the fact that her work is almost systematically mentioned in histories addressing the 1990s[237] –, a treatment which constitutes a striking difference if compared to the Becher pupils.[238] The coalescence of theory and imagery or the epistemological relevance of technological and societal developments in the study of this phenomenon have hardly been examined retrospectively, as if the conclusion that post-photography was an erroneous and naive concept had definitively put its study on hold, as much its theoretical as its visual expression. While the history of artistic post-photographic practices has yet to be made, it seems productive to survey some of the major curatorial and editorial projects that addressed this imagery throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, a period of emergence and generalization of digital retouching in Düsseldorf. This partial unfolding of events and fragmentary analysis of historiographical evidence doesn't aspire to operate as definitive demonstration. The outline of a certain pictorial and discursive tendency, countervailing the deadpan aesthetics of the Becher students, ought nevertheless to help in understanding the contextual preconditions that might play a role in the definition of Düsseldorf photography.

2 "FOTOGRAFIE NACH DER FOTOGRAFIE" (1995)

Fotografie nach der Fotografie was displayed in several locations in Germany and abroad in 1995 and 1996, most of which were not major internationally recognized institutions.[239] The important and widely distributed catalogue, available in a German and in an English[240] version, contains numerous essays by key theorists of transformations

236 Exhibited, for example, in *The Unreal Person. Portraiture in the Digital Age* at the Huntington Beach Art Center (1998), the *Je t'envisage* exhibition of the Musée de l'Elysée Lausanne (2004) or *Das zweite Gesicht. Metamorphosen des fotografischen* in the Deutsches Museum in Munich (2002).

237 William J. Mitchell for instance discusses Burson's *Warhead* series. See William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye. Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*., op. cit., p. 179 – 181.

238 Obviously, the fact that the Becher students have been promoted by the art market also plays a central role in the differentiated diffusion and reception of post-photography and Düsseldorf photography.

239 Aktionsforum Praterinsel, Munich (D), Städtische Galerie, Erlangen (D), Brandenburgische Sammlung, Cottbus (D), Kunsthalle Krems (AT), Museet for Fotokunst, Odense (DK), Fotomuseum Winterthur (CH), Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki (FIN), Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (USA), Adelaide Festival (AUS).

240 Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel (ed.), *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, Munich, Verlag der Kunst und Siemens Kulturprogramm, 1996 and Hulbertus von Anelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel and Nikolaus G. Schneider (ed.), *Photography after Photography. Memory and Representation in the Digital Age*, Basel, G&B Arts International, 1996.

connected to the appearance of digital technologies in the photographic field, such as Lev Manovich, Timothy Druckerey, Peter Lunenfeld, Wolfgang Coy, and Amelunxen and Rötzer themselves. The introduction written by the curatorial team explicitly states that the focus of the project lies in the transformation of the "photographic image" and the "principles of photography" through digital technologies[241] that, in an era of "fascination for the Internet, cyberspace and virtual reality"[242] would not have been sufficiently considered. Florian Rötzer's following essay[243] explains somehow differently that the project aims to explore the implications of the "digitization of photography" in a "new media system," addressing "the understanding of photography and its characteristics," rather than investigating its "artistic or aesthetic qualities."[244] The aim is not, however, to study the "spectrum of possible interventions into the photographic image" – a concept Rötzer illustrates with his first footnote pointing at William J. Mitchell's *The Reconfigured Eye*.[245]

Fig. 25: *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, catalogue cover of German edition, 1995
Fig. 26: *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, exhibition poster, Fotomuseum Winterthur, 1996

Clearly, it would be wrong to retrospectively formulate a coherent and consistent position with such manifold essays, arguing that the project, labeled photography after photography, produces a unanimous and concordant discourse, centered around the idea that digital photography constitutes a fundamentally new means of representation and that its digital nature – technically and ontologically – is the precondition for this change. For instance, Amelunxen notes that "after photography

241 Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel (ed.), *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, op. cit., p. 9. "Maschinerie" in the German text.
242 Ibid.
243 Florian Rötzer, "Re: Photography," in ibid., p. 13 – 25.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid.

comes photography, but it's altered by the after,"[246] stressing the fact that "the subject under discussion is neither the end of photography nor a post-photography"[247] but a redefinition or reconsideration of the medium in a new context. As such, the exhibition is primarily to be understood as a reaction to new technologies and a theoretical confrontation of its impact on photography, and not simply the display of artists using it:

> *The project attempts to investigate the extent to which a medium is currently undergoing changes, a medium which in our everyday lives has always been, and still is, understood as being documentary, reproductive and world-bound in character.*[248]

Right from the beginning the project is thus positioned (interrogatively) against the concept of reproduction or documentary, which brings along two weighty consequences. On the one hand, the project addresses the theoretical aspect of the raised issues; the catalogue contains important essays over 130 pages, summarizing or formulating interrogations on the impact of digital technologies on photography by Anglo-Saxon and European scholars. On the other hand, the project implicitly positions itself as an exhibition on the body in the digital age: although the preliminary remarks mention the examination of "photographic imaging strategies in the computer age, in particular in connection with the themes of body, space, identity, authenticity, and memory,"[249] the project predominantly revolves around the representation of the body. As the catalogue covers of the German (Fig. 25) and the English version, or the poster of the exhibition in Winterthur (Fig. 26) suggest, the body is central in the visual communication of the project. As such, it will be argued that the discourse on digital technologies in photography has been somehow absorbed by the discourse on the body in the digital age.

The notion of truth claim, while often present in theory, is mostly evacuated from the images shown in that context, as they *overtly* deconstruct that claim. Except for a few series such as Candida Höfer's *Türken in Deutschland* or Thomas Ruff's *Porträts*, it is important to remember that the body is persistently absent in Düsseldorf photography. The Bechers or Axel Hütte systematically and invariably exclude humans from their photographs, and if some traces of human presence sometimes remain in Candida Höfer's images, they are mostly limited to their motion blur. That absence raises the question of the spectator's relationship to certain types of images, which affects their reception: architecture photography is rather unlikely to be perceived as manipulated, which dissociates documentary forms from the very

246 Hulbertus von Amelunxen, "Photography after Photography. The Terror of the Body in Digital Space," 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. 123.

247 Ibid.

248 "Preliminary remarks on the project '*Photography after Photography*,'" ibid., p. 9.

249 Ibid.

idea of retouching. A manipulated body on the other hand, more immediately conveys a feeling of unease, which probably reflects a basic human response toward his fellows. The response to the retouched body thus derives on a visual level, influenced by a more or less verisimilar image, and on an "anthropological" level. Isabelle Graw empathically and almost passionately responds to Thomas Ruff's large *Porträts*, declaring that "the large-format print is [...] the antithesis of documentary photography. It bears no relation to the real dimensions of a person, and is therefore not an authentic, but an artificial representation."[250]

Images

The body – and the concept of post-humanity appeared in the early 1990s – clearly constitutes the central *topos* of the exhibition, which is correlated with digital technologies. Many images address the idea of the post-human, whose theorization reflects a general societal interrogation of the body and its representation. In the 1990s, the idea of shaping the body increasingly constitutes a paramount interrogation and fear as the emergence of genetic engineering, plastic surgery, bodybuilding and the increasingly important role of fashion models in mainstream media produced a series of new formulations of beauty, coincidently rejected by sub-cultural practices like branding, piercing and tattooing. *Post Human*, Jeffrey Deitch's exhibition for the FAE (Foundation Asher Edelman) museum for contemporary arts in Pully (1992)[251] and subsequently shown at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg,[252] constitutes one of the first to address the concept of the post-human in art. Deitch borrows the term post-human from biologist Leroy Hood, who in 1992 addresses the potential changes the decodification of the human genome might engender, entitled "Speculations on Future Humans."[253] Although the role of "computer science" is mentioned by Deitch, he aims primarily to address its implications in medicine and biomedical engineering, and not photography: "Computer science is perhaps a decade or more away from producing computers that will have more intellectual capacity and maybe even more creative intelligence than any human."[254] As such, the digital world is laid out as a utopian or dystopian possibility of change of human bodies, and the question of media is (not yet) being brought into discussion, although it is hinted at. While a small number of artists featured in the show actually use digital technologies, the prospect of potential societal changes induced by the digital is

250 Isabelle Graw, "Interview with Thomas Ruff," *Artis*, No. 41, October 1989, p. 55 – 58.

251 See Jeffrey Deitch (ed.), *Post Human*, exhibition catalogue, FAE Musée d'art contemporain, Pully, cop. 1992.

252 The exhibition was also shown at the Castello di Rivoli in Torino and the Destens Foundation for Contemporary Art Athens.

253 In an interview Deitch mentions the work of "neurologist" Leroy Hood and his article "Notes on Future Humans" (sic), given to him by artist Paul McCarthy, featured in the show. See Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova, "Jeffrey Deitch's Brave New World (interview)," *Flash Art*, No. 167, 1992 and Leroy Hodd, "Speculations on Future Humans," *Engineering and Science*, No. 55, Vol. 3, Spring 1992, p. 50 – 52.

254 Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova, "Jeffrey Deitch's Brave New World (Interview)," op. cit.

primarily discussed and illustrated in the catalogue (Fig. 27) the 3D rendered T-1000 of *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991), virtual reality goggles allowing virtual sex, images of computerized growth simulations or mobile phones exemplify the potential changes technology *might* induce in the future, as they are either science fiction or restricted to limited use. The caption of the illustration of the catalogue addressing virtual sex (p. 62 – 63), argues for instance that "programs featuring every simulated sound and sensation are not only likely to be better in many ways than the real thing, for futures generations they may *become* the real thing," expressing the common fantasies associated with new technologies and the merging of physical and virtual realities.

Fig. 27: Catalogue cover of *Post Human*, Pully, 1992

While laying out the fundaments of future preoccupation of media theories or the post-photographic debate, the exhibition focuses primarily on the body and the response of artists to these potential changes. The show interestingly features the work of Thomas Ruff, albeit not in relationship with retouching, as might be expected. His two portraits[255] allegedly express preoccupation with the body, as a typology or documentation of portraits in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in that particular technological context. His 1991 series of digitally retouched *Porträts*, one of which was featured as an edition in the *Texte zur Kunst* journal (No. 4, September 1991), might have ideally served the exhibition's prospect. But as will be more thoroughly discussed in section two, the digital interventions in Ruff's work are as often eluded. The journal's descriptive text of the modified portrait of Josef Strau (see Fig. 28) only mentions "the use of blue eyes," and the origin of the project: Ruff reacted to his *Porträts* being perceived as

255 *Porträt (E. Denda)*, 1989 and *Porträt (S. Weichrauch)*, 1988, only identified generically as "Portrait" in the catalogue. See Jeffrey Deitch (ed.), *Post Human*, op. cit, p. 130 – 131.

"a representation of German Arian youth." But the fact that they were digitally manipulated is not addressed.[256]

Interestingly, the very idea of post-photography was not formulated because of the actual link between those societal developments and the appearance of digital technologies. Rather, it emerges from the concurrent and contemporary presence of a new aesthetic and a new technology (digital photography), only associated through specific connections, which has produced an amalgamation. The idea of retouching – in real life as much as in imaging systems – obviously also provides an interconnection of both *topoi* and might have induced the use of the *post-* prefix in the post-human and in the photo-theoretical discourse.[257]

Fig. 28: Thomas Ruff, *Portrait 1991*, edition for *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 4, September 1991 (27 × 21 cm)

The new imagery represented by artists like Keith Cottingham or Nancy Burson derives from a new representation of the human body, which clearly constitutes the predominant subject. Most "post-photographic" artists share an interest in portrait photography, usually depicted frontally, with black or monochrome backgrounds,[258] suggesting a typological approach. The representation of the body relies on a critical interrogation of its functions, of its shape or role at the end of the twentieth century and of its history: the canonical body in art history has hardly been reinterpreted or questioned – representations correspond to the concomitant cultural evolution of corporeality throughout time –, and except for a few experiments of the historical avant-garde

256 "Descriptive text of edition," *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 4, September 1991. The information is for example explicitly stated in Winzen's monograph. See Matthias Winzen, op. cit, p. 222 and 248.

257 Obviously postmodernism provides another potential theoretical and terminological model, but similar issues (retouching of image *versus* retouching of bodies, etc.) and contemporaneity support the thesis of a connection between the post-human and post-photography.

258 This is for instance the case for Cottingham, Burson, Aziz and Cucher, Daniel Lee or the digital portraits of Orlan.

figures, it has mostly been depicted accordingly to the prevalent cultural model. Photographic representations, due to the archival functions of the medium, are more diverse, though. The outcome of their relationship to science has brought forth less standardized images which elude the canon constructed by painting, showing non-idealized depictions of death (e.g., Rodolphe A. Reiss or Timothy O'Sullivan), the "criminal" (e.g., Cesare Lombroso or Havelock Ellis) and hysteria (e.g., Albert Londe or Jean-Martin Charcot), even providing contemporary artists with a formal model. The obvious relationship between Nancy Burson's composite portraits, mentioned earlier, and Francis Galton has indeed been repeatedly noted.[259]

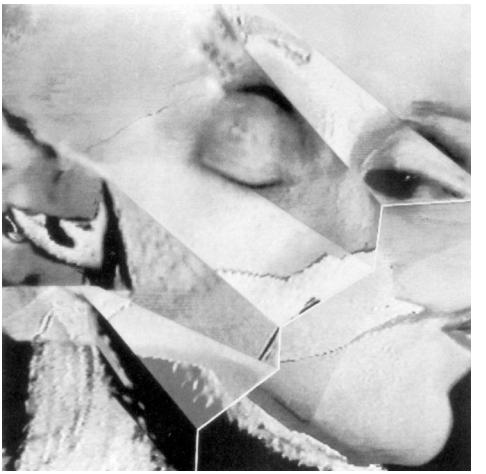

Fig. 29: Valie Export, *Untitled*, 1989 (b/w, 30 × 30 cm)

Besides these modes of interrogation of the human body, another strategy prevails combining such examinations with a focus on the "materiality" of the image of these bodies. In the catalogue we can observe a discrete type of images, visually enacting their digital nature. Deconstructing and undermining the two-dimensional image, they disclose a supposedly digital mechanism or feature. Valie Export's *Untitled* portrait series from 1989 (Fig. 29) shows an image of the artist, whose progressive dissolution into gradually smaller polygonal picture elements generated by a computer, reveals the technical

259 Allan Sekula counts among the early thinkers reflecting upon Nancy Burson's work, very critically responding to her 1986 book *Composites. Computer Generated Portraits*: "In one particularly troubling instance, this returned body is specifically Galtonian in its configuration. I refer here to the computer composites of Nancy Burson, enveloped in a promotional discourse so appallingly stupid in its fetishistic belief in cybernetic truth and its desperate desire to remain grounded in the optical and organic that it would be dismissable were it not for its smug scientism. For an artist or critic to resurrect the methods of bio-social typology without once acknowledging the historical context and consequences of these procedures is naive at best and cynical at worst. Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, Vol. 39, Winter, 1986, p. 62. See also Nancy Burson, Richard Carling and David Kramlich, *Composites. Computer Generated Portraits*, New York, Beach Tree/William Morrow, 1986.

tool deployed to deconstruct the image. The two-dimensional images, showing a portrait, are confronted with their own deconstruction. In that particular case, it is only the two-dimensional image, not the body shown on the image, which is gradually dissolved.

This strategy clearly points to an interrogation of the medium in the context of the examination of the body itself, both aspects being interrelated.[260] It reflects recent technologies, addressing images increasingly present in mainstream media, where video feeds of characters were blended into computer animations. This example of deconstruction of the two-dimensional representation of the body has over time become a paragon for such practices, systematically connected with digital technologies. The exhibition *Ghost in the Shell* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1999/2000,[261] another milestone event whose contemporary section addresses digital technologies, exhibits, for example, Jim Shaw's very similar *Computer Degenerated Self Portraits*, suggesting similar interests and strategies in different cultural spheres. In *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, works like Michael Brodsky's *Transmission Interrupted* (1995, see Fig. 30) and Michael Ensdorf's *Memory Grid* (1995), highlight the image's pixelated structure. Brodsky downloaded pornographic images in GIF format (a jpeg ancestor) in 1991, altering the protocol handling the reception of the files on his computer and hiding explicit content.[262] He addresses the fact that the collective visual memory provides the viewer with enough knowledge to replace the hidden parts, and immediately recognize the origin of the images.[263] Ensdorf emphasizes the architecture of the digital photograph, editing anonymous portraits found in digital archives, advertisements or family images.[264] The project addresses the way the memory "places, categorizes, labels" images and confronts it with the "collective historical memory"[265] of the viewer, thus prefiguring some key issues emerging from the widespread use of the Internet in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s. The formulation of these two projects almost disturbingly prefigures Thomas Ruff's *nudes* and *jpegs* series and Jörg Sasse's *Tableaus*, as they address the exact same issues (image formats, circulation and

260 This strategy corresponds to the third step of the deconstruction [Vereinzelung] of the body that Peter Weibel has formulated in his concept of the "anagrammatic body." The first consists of close-up photographs of the body (e.g., close-up avant-garde photography), the second its recomposition (e.g., Hans Bellmer), the third the hybridization of the body with its representation or modelization, the fourth the digitally rendered virtual body (e.g., Aziz and Cucher). See Peter Weibel, *Der Anagrammatische Körper. Der Körper und seine Mediale Konstruktion*, exhibition catalogue (ZKM-Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, 2000), Cologne, Walther König, 2000.

261 Robert A. Sobieszek (ed.), *Ghost in the Shell. Photography and the Human Soul, 1850 – 2000: Essays on Camera Portraiture*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 2001.

262 Michael Brodsky, "Transmission Interrupted," in Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel and Nikolaus G. Schneider (ed.), *Photography after Photography*, op. cit., p. 140 – 142.

263 See entry "Michael Brodsky, *Transmission Interrupted*," on *medienkunstnetz.de*. Available on http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/transmission-interrupted, accessed on June 27, 2018.

264 Michael Ensdorf, "Memory grid," in Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel and Nikolaus G. Schneider (ed.), *Photography after Photography*, op. cit., p. 166 – 168.

265 Ibid.

categorization, collective memory, etc.). While all these examples display human bodies, their self-reflexive character diverges from what could be called the post-photographic iconography, more directly concerned with body, mostly used to advocate the project.

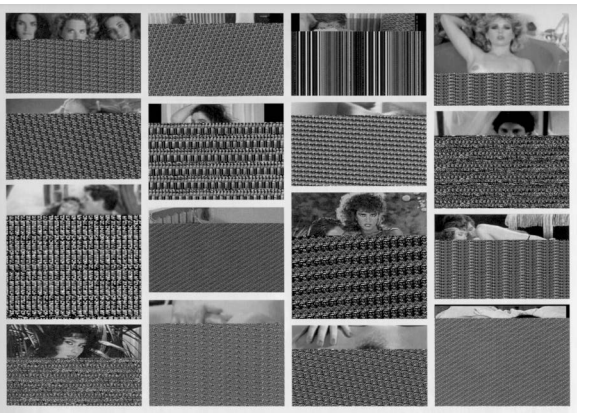

Fig. 30: Michael Brodsky, *Transmission Interrupted*, 1995 (16 photographs, variable sizes)

Aside from the photographs focusing on the human body and the overt exposure of the digital structure of the image, a further distinctive category characterizes some of those images: an overtly manipulated character. Most of the images associated with that *topos* can clearly be identified, at first sight, as having been subjected to some kind of visual manipulation or retouching. Not only do they differ quite explicitly from mainstream or usual representations of the human body – through the fact that they are often decontextualized socially, culturally and geographically through the use of monochrome backgrounds, the almost systematic absence of paraphernalia, clothes or architectural elements –, but the bodies themselves have been altered extensively or their depiction seems, somehow, odd. Some artists, such as the Venezuelan duo Aziz and Cucher, erase the human senses (nose, eyes, ears, etc.) from the bodies. The *Dystopia* series, with its unique dehumanized character's (e.g., *Maria*, 1994), has become paradigmatic of post-photographic imagery. Hardly any publication or exhibition addressing digital technologies fails to include them. Keith Cottingham's famous series *Fictitious Portraits series* (1992, Fig. 31), on the other hand, doesn't build on an anatomically non-coherent depiction of the human body, but operates by multiplying a manipulated self-portrait, inducing doubt about the realism of the depiction through its duplication. The *Untitled (Single)*, *Untitled (Double)*, *Untitled (Triple)* images function interdependently, the prints being therefore most of the time shown in resonance to one another. If retrospectively it has to be argued that despite an obvious common ground, these artistic practices differ considerably, it is still surprising to which extent the images resemble each other. Most works of Nancy Burson, Keith Cottingham, Aziz and Cucher, and some series of Jim

Shaw, Daniel Lee and Valie Export, comply with what could also be seen as the outcome of a manifesto – although there are no particular links between the artists. This uncommonly coherent body of images, the visual expression of post-photography or digital aesthetics, could be defined by two main features: the manipulation of the human body and the manipulation of the image. The mostly or at least partially naked bodies and portraits are frequently shown on monochromatic, mostly black backgrounds, completely decontextualized. The images address this visual enactment of the manipulation of the body, which here converges with the idea of the manipulation of the image. The composite photographs overtly give away the fact that they have been retouched. But more than the fact that they might have been digitally manipulated, they are interesting because they express, visually and technically, a (supposed) state of photography *after* photography. This new kind of imagery embodies the outcome of the radical rupture post-photographic theories have advocated. Aesthetically uncanny, those photographs are indeed dissimilar to any other kind of strictly photographic imagery. And while the color and light contrasts between bodies and background somehow recall baroque paintings, the imagery still differs considerably from what the observer is used to, and thus reinforces this idea of a new media or system of representation. These images were legitimated on one hand by the idea of post-photographic practices, embodying what Mitchell and his followers had circumscribed, and as a new imagery responding to issues related to new beauty ideals. Although there hasn't been an explicit art historical effort to evaluate what came to be considered a movement or at least a body of related photographers, several exhibitions and publications embodying this aesthetic trend have eventually advocated an idea based on questionable assumptions. In the introduction of the *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* catalogue, Rötzer explicitly associates Nancy Burson with "digital image processing," while her composite portraits are not always – technically – digital.[266] After retrospective analysis, one realizes that images showing human bodies are not digital at all.

Theories

The various essays in the catalogue address numerous questions and consider potential changes that turned out to be very relevant. Rötzer addresses the circulation of images through digital communication systems and questions the documentary value and the impact on author photography those technical changes might have, sketching out many of the central issues discussed nowadays. Despite a title apparently suggesting the replacement of photography by something new, an endorsement of Mitchell's apparent discourse of rupture, the project doesn't claim the end of the medium at all. Despite the titles,

266 Florian Rötzer, "Preliminary remarks on the project 'Photography after photography,'" in Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel (ed.), *Photography after Photography*, op. cit., p. 9.

which seem to suggest a radical change – "Digital (R)evolution" (Jacques Clayssen), "In Photographic Memory" (Wolfgang Coy), "Image Simulations, Computer Manipulations" (Martha Rosler) – the various essays are nuanced. Lev Manovich's "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography" builds on Mitchell's argumentation to show that "digital photography did not subvert 'normal' photography, since 'normal' photography never existed."[267] But while acknowledging differences in practice, aesthetics or circulation, the project uses the concept of rupture as a pitch. Contemporary to the images and the discourse it analyses, *Photography after Photography* is clearly intertwined with a phenomenon it seems to be, incidentally, a part of.

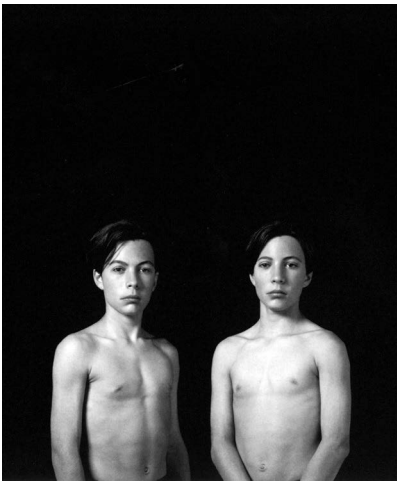

Fig. 31: Keith Cottingham, *Ficticious Portraits (Twins)*, 1992 (121.9 × 101.6 cm)

In terms of argumentation, photography is often conceived by the catalogue's texts as a medium, whose truth claim is endangered, a claim attested by various illustrations. Independently from the discourse itself, which often relativizes the impact of these technologies and contextualizes the concept of retouching, it appears that numerous examples of photo-manipulation published in the media focusing yet again on the human body are used as argumentative illustrations. While Mitchell concentrated on various types of historical images and their use in various contexts (e.g., Fig. 21), the editorial selection in *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* uses predominantly press images of human bodies. Victor Burgin and Jacques Clayssen's articles are illustrated by composite cover girls reflecting the ethnic diversity of the United States, both subtitled "the new face of America."[268] The now famous police ID photograph of O. J. Simpson on the covers of

267 Lev Manovich, "The Paradoxes of Digital Photography," ibid., p. 62.

268 The *Time* magazine cover (special issue, Fall 1993, Vol. 142, No. 21) was created by Nancy Burson and the Mirabella cover (Sept. 1994) by Japanese photographer Hiro (Yasuhiro Wakabayashi). See for example Greg Carter, *The United States of the United Races. A Utopian History of Racial Mixing*, New York, NYU Press, 2013.

Newsweek (in a light-skinned version) and *Time* magazine (in a dark-skinned version) is used,[269] as are numerous body related manipulations or computer-generated images (e.g., the 3D Marilyn Monroe, see Fig. 32), which again derive from a conception of the body generated with digital tools. Clearly, the key formal feature shared by those images is the obvious and patent fact that, in the context of the 1990s, they *look* digital. The consideration that most of the time they have not necessarily been produced using digital technologies (e.g., Nancy Burson) or that the use of digital technologies is not mentioned in the context of the manipulation (e.g., O. J. Simpson) is at this stage irrelevant. It is rather their perception, and their inscription in a broader discursive response, which seems to play a key role.

Fig. 32: Illustrations in the *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* catalogue: 3D rendering of Marilyn Monroe, p. 48

The evaluation of *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* clearly shows the proclivity of scholars to associate the discourse on the digital with considerations of the representation and hypothetical evolutions of the construction of the body. Numerous examples of such convergence can be found in the mid-1990s, as much in Germany as in other cultural contexts. The recurrent merging of the discourse on the digital and interrogations of the body, which were abundant at that time – corporality is also the main focus of the one hundredth Venice Biennial 1995 – can for example be found in the *Kunstforum* 132 (1995), edited by Florian Rötzer (Fig. 33). The publication, illustrated by a photograph from the *Dystopia* series of Aziz and Cucher, gathers similar artists as the *Fotografie nach der Fotografie*, such as the cited Colombian duo, as well as Lynn Hershman and Inez van der Lamsweerde.

269 *Time* magazine was accused of racism as its cover attributed O. J. Simpson's alleged murder of his wife to his African-American origin, displaying a "diabolical" version of the original photograph, as Clayssen notes. See Jacques Clayssen, "Digital (R)evolution," in Hulbertus von Amelunxen, Stefan Iglhaut, Florian Rötzer, Alexis Kassel (ed.), *Photography after Photography*, op. cit., p. 74.

It also features articles by Lev Manovich and Rötzer, which, much like various texts in the *Fotografie nach der Fotografie* catalogue, enact the convergence of interrogations concerning corporality and reflections associated with the appearance of these new technologies. Here again, the discourse on the manipulation of the body has overrun the discourse on the digital, both being at the time closely connected.

Fig. 33: Cover of *Kunstforum International*, No. 132, Winter 1995

In the 1990s, digital retouching is thus primarily displayed through the representation of the body, a subject only incidentally present in Düsseldorf photography. The retouched nature of (some) Düsseldorf photography, whose early digital photographs do not exhibit their digital nature, will thus be – to a certain extent – ignored. As will be analyzed in part three and four of this study, there will be no reception of the digital components of their work in the 1990s, while in the 2000s it will be acknowledged as such and increasingly associated with scholars addressing the digital, such as Vilém Flusser and Paul Virilio.[270] Besides the fact that Düsseldorf photography doesn't display its retouched nature, it has to be emphasized that the photographic genre of the early retouched images – in Ruff and Gursky's case primarily architecture photography – clearly differs from the common outcome of post-photography, primarily concerned with "portraiture," "the body" and "the self".[271] The confrontation of Düsseldorf photography and post-photography thus highlights two discrete rejections of the body: its repression by Düsseldorf photography and the promulgation of an improved or altered post-human condition.

When Jonathan Lipkin's *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era* mentions Andreas Gursky's digital montages in his 2005 book, his overall project addressing digital photography is

270 For example in Régis Durand, *Disparités. Essais sur l'expérience photographique* 2, Paris, La différence, 2002, p. 23 – 24.

271 Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era*, op. cit.

clearly dominated by these categories. Even in a period when the digital is acknowledged and pragmatically addressed by numerous scholars in the Düsseldorf context – Kai-Uwe Hemken writes one of the first articles focusing on digital photography in the work of Ruff and Gursky in 2000[272] –, Lipkin addresses the body, which shows to which extent the discourse on the post-human has shaped the discourse on digital photography.[273] Overtly retouched images of the body, which acted as a counter-model for Düsseldorf photography, and architecture photography as a specific genre historically associated with the documentary and re-inscribed in that tradition in the 1960s and 1970s, thus sheltered early Düsseldorf photography from being perceived as digital, a situation only reversed a decade later. Digital retouching in Düsseldorf has thus not only been disregarded because of its invisibility and the association between the digital and the body. The association of the Bechers students with a documentary tradition and antecedent visual models prohibits an explicit differentiation with former images, and thus orients their reading.[274] Not only are their images retouched without it being apparent, but they can more generally be inscribed in a specific grammar or documentary style deriving from the newly built German documentary paradigm. Despite certain formal differences in their work (e.g., Gursky's panoramic formats or Ruff's color *Häuser*), Düsseldorf photographers blend into a tradition that plays a central role in their reception. Only the concurrence of three factors will eventually change that stance. Several artists will explicitly display the digital nature of their work (e.g., through Ruff's *nudes* series). The existence of digital retouching technologies will be generally acknowledged and will thus impair the reception of the images. Finally, it is the weakening of imagery connected to the body that will eventually lead to a response toward the use of digital tools and strategies in their work.

272 Kai-Uwe Hemken, "Von Sehmaschinen und Nominalismen. Anerkennungen zur digitalen Fotografie von Andreas Gursky und Thomas Ruff," in Monika Steinhauser and Ludger Derenthal (ed.), *Ansicht, Aussicht, Einsicht. Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth. Architekturphotographie*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Museum Bochum, 2000), Düsseldorf, Richter Verlag, 2000.

273 Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era*, op. cit.

274 Steven Skopik uses the concept of "primacy" to establish the impact of a visual differentiation between image types, defined by either their familiarity or their unknowingness. See Steven Skopik, "Digital Photography. Truth, Meaning, Aesthetics," op. cit., p. 264.