D
GENERIC PICTURE REALITIES

1 SINGLE IMAGE TYPOLOGY

The formal construction of most Düsseldorf photography primarily derives from the Becher protocol, which by definition constitutes a codification system formulated to depict reality. The first step of its application thus yields an image, which geometrically matches that reality, as most photographs are taken frontally. How does the autonomization of single images in the context of their typological confrontation affect that codification? The various strategies addressing photographic depiction and representation in the 1960s and 1970s suggests a shift, defined by an increasing awareness of the photographic apparatus and the technical (but also cultural) codification of mechanical representation systems. That awareness, highlighted by various strategies – the typological construction being one of them – increasingly acknowledges photographs [Abbilder] as autonomous images [Bilder], which become subject and object of the depiction. Without needing to inscribe this shift in a theoretical framework addressing broader implications (e.g., pictorial turn, iconic turn, etc.), the analysis of Düsseldorf photography in the context of these strategies and their explicit formal filiation with the Bechers and their ascendency from implicit models such as Richter or LeWitt, shows an important reconfiguration of photographic depiction: images become the main subject of photographic representation. Self-evident in Jan Dibbets' perspective drawings or Victor Burgin's *Photopath*, the understanding of that claim only appears overtly in Düsseldorf photography

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in specific series, when the material structure of the image appears, as in Thomas Ruff's *jpegs*. It is less evident if one considers Candida Höfer's libraries or Andreas Gursky's skyscrapers, which could still be comprehended as "transparent" depictions of reality.

Various tactics inscribe Thomas Ruff's, Andreas Gursky's and Jörg Sasse's work within an inquisitive approach to visual culture and the circulation of images. Most images physically exist as single entities, rather than as serial constructions or displays. As such, their relationality with the image of a collective memory could be defined by the concept of single image typology. This strategy is most obvious and most explicitly formulated in Thomas Ruff's work. His *nudes* and *jpeg* series, through the complex categorization system they are subjected to, confront every image with a pre-existing reference, to pornographic and media imagery respectively. The photographs are associated with a more or less explicit category by the viewer, as their generic character expresses a variety of images, rather than a specific moment in time or space. The decontextualization – similar to the Bechers' typologies, whose components appear as type-images rather than depictions – enhances the generic reading of the photograph, which the viewer associates with familiar imagery (e.g., photographs of the 9/11 attacks) or with well-known image categories (e.g., "historical images" or "orgy"). Similar to Jörg Sasse's *Speicher*, every photograph is defined by shared knowledge, an interpretative grid it is subjected to. The consequence of such comparative schemata, present as much in Andreas Gursky's photographs of the globalized world as in Jörg Sasse's investigation of vernacular photography, is the constitution of a single-image typology: although most Düsseldorf tableaus are conceived and displayed as autonomous units, they always interact with a more or less explicit visual equivalent, a multiple image system they are connected to.

The first decade of use of digital technologies in the photography of the Düsseldorf School has primarily focused on the autonomization process set forth through the Bechers' typologies. Its explorative underscore concentrates on various parameters of the single image – formats, image composition, verisimilitude or documentary discourse. Andreas Gursky's work of that period can be interpreted as a shift toward two-dimensional compositions, in a first step achieved through modified camera angles, and in a second step through digital manipulations. But although Jörg Sasse's early exploration of recycled imagery and a culturally defined grammar of the photographic image, his experiments revolve around the single image. But in the second half of the 1990s, the digital becomes much more than a compositional tool, participating in a wide-ranging interrogation of the single image in the context of a shared visual culture. The use of classification systems and the transformation of specific photographs into type images through compositional processes (Gursky de-specifies his photographs through reductive transformations – for example, by limiting color range) or more experimental and self-reflexive strategies (Jörg Sasse's *Speicher* implicitly builds a metaphorical image database) eventually inscribe the visual production in a system, shifting the focus

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from single image to single image typology. The typological classifications the single images are ascribed to are most evident in Thomas Ruff's *nudes* series. Every image corresponds to a defined category (or several, for instance), used by the whole pornographic industry and recognizable by the viewer. In his *jpegs*, the process is less explicit. Even if Ruff formulated a precise number of categories, a single photograph cannot necessarily or logically be identified. In the non-figurative *Zycles*, the categorization system is based on the formal parameters of the image itself: image shape (square or rectangular), background color (black or white) or line types (single lines or multiple lines). Mostly based on binary values, the series seems to explicitly address its categorial construction – and incidentally build a typological system within that particular series, while the *jpegs* address images available on the web. The strictly mathematical model of the *Zycles*, in which comparative mechanisms and generative processes using digital technologies converge, interestingly echoes anterior processual strategies, hardly ever evoked to apprehend Düsseldorf photography.

2 IMAGES AND GRIDS

An often-quoted aspect of the Bechers' teaching, as much by their students themselves as within the historiography of the Düsseldorf School,[193] mentions the insistence of Bernd Becher on defining one particular theme in a career as a photographer and pursuing it systematically. Candida Höfer depicts libraries or places connected with wisdom or power, Thomas Struth increasingly focuses on museum interiors and Petra Wunderlich on architecture. How can the work of Ruff, Gursky or Sasse be interpreted in that respect? An important aspect is that they designate their images *as* images, in a much more unequivocal manner than the artists who do not use digital technologies. In the 2000s, Ruff and Sasse created numerous projects and series in which the status of the image itself is addressed. Only their work makes explicitly visible the image surface through various strategies. If Ruff's *Porträts* have been interpreted as "surfaces," self-reflexive objects that possess no "depth,"[194] that particular aspect only becomes visible in the late 1990s through the display of pixels, blown up to considerable sizes in his large-format *jpegs*. Visible pixels also appear in Sasse's work in the mid-1990s, but numerous other visualization strategies of the image surface (digital filters, lens flare, visible chemical processes, etc.) and the materialization of photographs (as framed physical objects) and their symbolical dematerialization (as files in a digital databank) in his database projects pursue that self-reflexive strategy – photography in visual culture as a repeatedly interrogated object. Andreas Gursky retains a specific theme throughout the 2000s

193 See for example Matthias Winzen, "A Credible Invention of Reality," op. cit., p. 171.

194 See for example Cathérine Hug, "Surfaces, Depths," in *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, op. cit., p. 48 ff.

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and mostly depicts the manifestations of globalization, and his work is often read accordingly (e.g., globalized markets in Fig. 146). As such, his imagery seemingly pursues similar goals to Candida Höfer or Thomas Struth. Yet, his iconic picture world clearly derives from a *formal* confrontation with these subjects, rather than from an aestheticized documentary approach, addressing similar issues to his fellow Düsseldorf photographers.

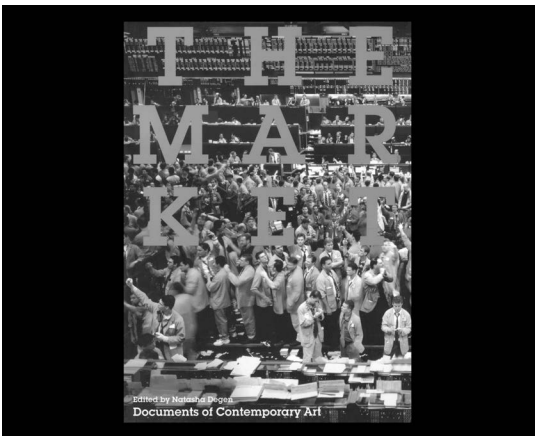

Fig. 146: Andreas Gursky, *Chicago Mercantile Exchange* (1997) used as cover of Natasha Degen, *The Market*, Documents of Contemporary Art, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2013

As the study of the period between 1989 and 1998 has shown, the emergence of digital tools in Düsseldorf photography approaches the photographed objects mathematically and orthogonally, arranging the depicted realities to correspond to a certain extent to the orthogonal model of the Bechers. Snapped to a structuring grid, the images acquire a certain autonomy, which results from the deconstruction of the relationship between a physical object and the photograph. In the period of the generalization of digital technologies, that "bond" is definitely discarded to focus on the economy of images in a new visual environment, in which distribution, classification and perception by a specific viewer becomes increasingly important. A clear symptom of the fact that these strategies address the visual architecture as a system rather than its particular outcome, resides in the various de-specifying strategies that Ruff, Sasse and Gursky apply. If all three produce generic images, they proceed very differently. Gursky primarily operates visually, applying compositional strategies, which de-specify the image, either by homogenizing a particular photograph or by reconstructing a visually pregnant composite, echoing the viewer's preconception of a particular topic. Ruff primarily interrogates the photographic apparatus itself. He addresses the methods of classification of photographs (on the web, in a scientific context, etc.) and their visual archaeology (reflecting upon the history of the photographic image and the photographic devices), and he explores their specific visual character and the relationship between a viewer and

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the generic images he produces. Sasse's work also interrogates the grammar of photographs, aiming at understanding their cultural connotation, but it extends that questioning to the architecture of the image in a digital context. Although dissimilar in many regards, all three artists have in common a self-reflexive interrogation of a generic, autonomous image freed from its bilateral relationship with a referent, focusing on the overall architecture of imaging systems, considering an image in its broad cultural context. If it ought to be established to which extent "conventional" analogic photographic practices such as Thomas Struth's also address visual economies rather than a physical reality, the evaluation of the work of Ruff, Gursky and Sasse clearly highlights the fact that in *their* strategies, digital technologies play a central role, both as tools to produce their bodies of work and as a theoretical framework to think and formulate the implications of the (mostly) mainstream imageries they are referring to. Although neutrino detectors, Prada shops and Mars images might not seem reminiscent of the preoccupations of the everyday image consumer, they nevertheless reflect the equivalence of all images in an increasingly globalized, standardized and commodified visual economy.

3 ASSOCIATION WITH POST-PHOTOGRAPHY

The overt association of the work of Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Jörg Sasse with digital technologies has also produced a re-evaluation of their art historical inscription and categorization. In some projects, the idea of post-photography prevails. Thomas Ruff's digital work with the human body, for example – primarily through the *nudes* series –, has led some curators and scholars to read his production in resonance with post-photography. While in the early 1990s post-photography and German documentary photography seemed to develop distinct historiographies, only crossing sporadically, the coalescence of the representations of the human body and the use of digital technologies provided a new interpretative model for Ruff's production. Some scholars have imagined a rebirth of photography, presupposing that the medium had "died."[195] Their projects thus derive conceptually from the post-photographic debate, mostly approaching the representation of the body but sometimes also addressing digital retouching. The predominant stance, though, neither claims the end of photography nor disregards the importance of the digital. Rather, it highlights the fact that – as Matthew Biro argues – "it is important not to overemphasize the division between analogue and digital photography. As suggested by the long history of photomontage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, analogue photographs have always had the power to manipulate and transform reality."[196] Bernd

195 Jonathan Lipkin, *Photography Reborn. Image Making in the Digital Era*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2005.

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

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Stiegler goes even further in that respect, arguing that the autonomization of the photograph, through the supposed loss of the indexical link with the referent, brings forth the acknowledgement that every connection [Bezug] with reality is a construction. As such, he interprets digital photography, "which makes explicit that it *is* a construct," as symptomatic of a new paradigm aiming at deconstructing the omnipresent "myth of the real."[197] Ironically, the "visual truth in the post-photographic era," whose loss W. J. Mitchell feared in 1991, seems at last to be based upon much more pragmatic parameters (e.g., the viewer, the context, etc.), and the image as signifier of the world, rather than imprint, definitively accepted.

The emergence of digital technologies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Düsseldorf photography, were primarily focused on single-image constructions, which incorporated comparative mechanisms inherited from the Bechers *within* individual images. They were at that point used as simple tools, either to retouch images or to create digital composites. In these positions, the "folklore of photographic truth" is discarded,[198] although in some cases (i.e., Andreas Gursky), a documentary ambition remains. Both Ruff and Gursky's series were inscribed in a documentary rhetoric at the time, the tools being either ignored, or praised for their ability to enhance the depicting of reality. In the phase of generalization of the digital in Düsseldorf, an increased inscription of images into digital imaging systems has replaced the simple tool. The mechanisms structuring the images of the early phase are re-deployed outside of them. Through various strategies, Ruff, Gursky and Sasse confront their images with external imageries. Andreas Gursky's increasingly generic depiction of the globalized world operates through the confrontation of various symptoms of globalization, which are identical all over the planet (e.g., Nike sneakers or Prada stores), and their existence through image circulation systems (e.g., global advertising). If his tableaus physically remain autonomous objects, their content triggers a permanent dialogue with shared cultural references. While the Bechers' typological system is auto-referential and enclosed in each series – the comparative mechanisms only articulate the nine, twelve or sixteen images of a discrete typology –, the use of such processes by their students virtually expands to the entire global visual culture. Post-photographic imagery could in that respect be interpreted as embodying an intermediary position in which the references span from historical representations of the body to the visual symptoms of the cultural construction of beauty in the 1990s. But, as such, it could also be understood as a response to the increasingly significant epistemological status of images altogether.

197 Bernd Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie* (Bild und Text), op. cit., p. 422.
198 Allan Sekula, "Documentary and Corporate Violence," op. cit., p. 360.

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