B
DIGITAL
STITCHING

1 ANDREAS GURSKY'S EXPANDED REALITIES

An oriented reception

"Although he has occasionally used a computer to help him make images, this is in order only to recreate an image that he has seen and not to create something unseeable. Computers can knit together an image too panoramic for a camera lens to capture." Fiona Bradley's statement in the introduction of the catalogue for the 1995 exhibition *Andreas Gursky, Images* at the Tate Gallery Liverpool in 1995[61] clearly shows a rather common historiographical tendency, which interprets Gursky's digital imaging techniques as mechanisms that allow him to show a certain pre-existing reality impossible to capture with a conventional photographic device, using a tool in order to transfer a mental into a physical image. Incidentally, this statement suggests that Gursky does not circumvent the conventional idea of photographic depiction, as the truth claim of the photographic is not impaired. "The [digital] montage doesn't falsify anything," Martin Henschel further claims,[62] in an important monograph on the artist, introducing the idea of falsification, unavoidably attached to the notion of photographic truth. Stefan Gronert, one of the specialists of Düsseldorf photography, concurrently argues in an exhibition catalogue on Thomas Demand, Edward Ruscha and Andreas Gursky, that the Düsseldorf photographer guides the viewer's gaze toward something that is pre-existent in

61 *Andreas Gursky. Images*, exhibition catalogue (Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1995), London, Tate Gallery Publications, 1995, p. 10.

62 Martin Henschel, "Das weltganze in seinen einzelnen Formen betrachtet. Andreas Gursky's Fotografien 1980 bis 2008," in Martin Henschel (ed.), *Andreas Gursky, Works 80 – 08*, p. 17.

the image, something Gursky actually sees but is unable to reproduce technically with one single image, rather than constructing something virtual.[63] He does not create or construct a new plausible reality but merely erases and highlights aspects in the image that he considers noteworthy, filtering visual data rather than creating it.

However, these positions reflect a common critical discourse connected to exhibition projects and catalogues. As Anne-Marie Bonnet notices, his work has predominantly been handled critically, endorsing the artist's own interpretation, rather than scientifically.[64] Consequently, there would be a commonly shared consensus about his oeuvre, which is hardly ever systematically analyzed or questioned. As an example, she summarizes Peter Galassi's almost epitomic analysis in the MoMA exhibition catalogue of 2001,[65] whose main articulation we are paraphrasing here: the child of photographers, a student of the Bechers, disentanglement from their inheritance, spontaneous then increasingly conceptual work, always distant from the photographed object, digital since 1992, interest not in the individual but in mankind in its social and political anchoring (e.g., globalization), states himself to be not particularly articulated or art historically educated, an aspect which arguably isn't important in his work. Starting from these premises, Bonnet interrogates in her article the commonly shared idea that referentiality to the depicted object, despite an obviously personal interpretation, has always played a central role in his work, which allegedly "questions the documentary" and is, as such, "linked to the tradition of the so-called Düsseldorf School."[66] Analyzing the writing of major scholars about his work, Bonnet stresses the fact that Gursky's relationship to the "real," despite his explicitly pictorial approach – Gursky as his commentators admit an important painterly element[67] –, has always been acknowledged. "It's about the experience of the world, whose foundation is the vision," Thomas Weski exemplarily argues.[68] Bonnet's essay reveals an interesting historiographical tendency that predominantly analyzed Gursky in terms of a balanced interaction between painting and photography. This interaction is addressed as a paragon – photography seeking legitimation through its relationship to painting – and as an intermedial system of representation, defined by

63 Stefan Gronert (ed.), "Reality is Not Totally Real," in *Grosse Illusionen. Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Edward Ruscha*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstmuseum Bonn, 1999/Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, 1999), Cologne, Wienand, 1999, p. 17. Gronert claims that Gursky, as opposed to Jeff Wall or Dieter Huber, doesn't construct a reality which is not pre-existent [ausserbildliche Realität], as if the use of indexical photographic fragments of the same object – for example the building in *Paris, Montparnasse* – were a token for an objective depiction. His apparently non-dogmatic interpretation of the concept of indexicality actually shows to which extent his analysis derives from a discursive and contextual preconception, which reads Düsseldorf photography as necessarily connected to the objectivist paradigm. A counter-example would be Matthias Winzen's concept of "credible invention of reality," in Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit.

64 Anne-Marie Bonnet, "'Pimp my world.' Zu Gursky's Bilderwelt zwischen Malerei und Photographie, Kunst und Welt," *Frame #2,* op. cit., p. 108.

65 Ibid., footnote 22, p. 109.

66 Ibid., p. 94.

67 Ibid., footnote 15 and 16, p. 92.

68 Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," in *Andreas Gursky*, exhibition catalogue (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2007), Cologne, Snoeck, 2007, p. 17. Quoted in ibid., p. 95, footnote 28.

the tension between depiction and construction. If in this reading both media are considered, it seems that the parameters usually associated with photography – the alleged privileged relationship to reality – are more important than those of painting, which supposedly serve the photographic medium. While Peter Galassi analyses Gursky's influences – for example, Jackson Pollock's *all over* or Gerhard Richter's grid patterns of the *Farbfelder* series, which seem to have been literally translated –, the photographic always plays a central role. One consequence of this dialectical interpretation is that painterly processes are often opposed to a certain extent to photography and sometimes even called anti-photographic.[69] The tension between image and depiction is emphasized, rather than exploring the inherent logic of the images, the mechanisms through which photographic fragments are embedded into a constructive visual approach or, for instance, the role of large formats or frontal constructions in relation to this alleged ability of documentation. A logical consequence of these approaches lies in a biased exploration of the role of the digital in his work. Often seen as a simple retouching tool or as a means to unveil what the eye can see but the camera can't capture, the digital as a process that structures his production in a yet to be delineated reconfiguration of the photographic remains underexplored. As stated in the introduction of this study, the work of Gursky and his fellow Becher students, whose practices involve digital post-production, are often interpreted from the perspective of the objectivist paradigm they are commonly linked to. It is obviously unproductive to reflect upon the relationship between indexicality and the definition of what an authentic or objective depiction might be. But the discourse produced by those associations reveals interesting historiographical and critical tendencies. For instance, it is intriguing to acknowledge how digital manipulation in their work has been perceived. Particularly in the 1990s, but also later, Düsseldorf photography seems to be necessarily connected, somehow, to the reality it represents, more than contemporary photographers such as Jeff Wall, for example. In the above-mentioned text, Stefan Gronert even uses the case of Wall as a counterexample, insisting on the fact that he builds credible images by combining several visual fragments, stitching together elements to produce an almost coherent, "authentic" image of reality that does not actually exist as such. Gursky on the other hand supposedly reveals hidden elements that are present in the image. He embodies an approach that surpasses the ability of conventional reproduction. That very position, combined with the distance from its subjects that his images often convey, has often led critics to compare him to a God-like figure.

69 For example Stefan Beyst, "Andreas Gursky. From a Spirit's Eye View," op. cit. In this case the terminology proves problematic, as "anti-photography" has been used by Nancy Foote to describe to work of the New Topographics photographers. See Nancy Foote, "The Anti-Photographers," *Artforum*, Vol. 15, No. 1, September 1976, reprinted in Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show. Artists Using Photography. 1960 – 1982*, op. cit.

Fig. 64: Andreas Gursky, *Gardasee*, 1986/1993 (39 × 120 cm)

Clearly, even if the never-ending debate about the depiction of the real in photography seems as such obsolete and unproductive, the fact that those two examples – Gursky and Wall – have known a very dissimilar reception, has to be emphasized and further explored.[70] Basically, Wall's images are supposedly disconnected from what they represent, interpreted as the enactment of a meta-discursive strategy, which addresses photography as an apparatus.[71] Gursky's work, on the other hand, seems to be almost systematically connected to the documentation of the globalized world, in which digital retouching is only a tool to represent more truthfully, expanding the limitations of the camera. Obviously, more nuanced views of documentary forms have recently emerged, which are not solely based on indexical depictions and do not reject the idea of construction. The exhibition *Click Doubleclick: The Documentary Factor* curated by Thomas Weski for the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2006[72] considers documentary in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, acknowledging new forms of documentation, based on perception or image circulation. The curatorial stance consists in a revaluation of documentary through its extrication from strict indexical representational forms. In that respect, Gursky or Wall's work is equally considered as an artistic interpretation of the contemporary world – both photographers are displayed in the exhibition. The recent exhibition at Le BAL in Paris curated by David Campany and Diane Dufour, *Anonymes. L'Amérique sans nom: Photographie et cinéma*, also shows Wall's images as a documentary form. The exhibition's stance is to present figures commonly associated with documentary practices – Walker Evans or Lewis Baltz – alongside photographers and filmmakers with more experimental approaches such as Jeff Wall or photographers using unusual source material such as Doug Rickard, who uses Google Streetview images. The exhibition highlights the idea that the ability

70 The use of digital retouching tools in Wall's work is often either discussed as a given fact (e.g., Paul O'Brien, "Jeff Wall, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, October-January 1994," *Circa Art Magazine*, No. 67, Spring 1994 or Michael Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday Life," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2007) or addressed through the "uncanniness" it produces (e.g., Laura Mulvey, "A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai). From After to Before the Photograph," *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2007).

71 See for example Thierry de Duve, "The Mainstream and the Crooked Path," in *Jeff Wall*, London, Phaidon, 1996.

72 Thomas Weski (ed.), *Click Doubleclick. The Documentary Factor*, exhibition catalogue (Haus der Kunst, Munich), Cologne, Walter König, 2006.

to document is not necessarily connected with the use of a non-altered image, but rather derives from a produced discourse – by artists or curators –, converging with the recent art historical position addressing the documentary through its discursive specificities. Much more than the actual technical interventions in their images, it is the produced discourse that defines the reception of the images, as seems to have been the case for Gursky and Wall's work until recently, one being labeled documentary, the other conceptual.[73]

Fig. 65: Andreas Gursky, *La Défense, Panorama*, triptych/digital composite, 1987/1993 (21.5 × 78.8 cm & 63 × 150 cm)

Despite an obvious classification of Gursky in a documentary context, his debt to painting and minimal art is also commonly stressed. Gerda Breuer, for instance, mentions his relationship to Caspar David Friederich, Dan Flavin, Barnett Newman and Donald Judd.[74] But even in those approaches, the idea that Gursky as documentarian prevails, independent of tools, technique or artistic strategies. Breuer mentions him, saying that he selects images from the "tide with which we are inundated" to produce "autonomous variants" of those "visual experiments,"[75] which suggests that he reflects upon the way the formalization of the world is perceived. According to the scholar, Gursky "manipulate(s) his pictures digitally, in order to focus on the elements of perception that interest him most."[76]

In order to understand the role of these practices, which, as we have seen, are interpreted not as manipulative interventions but as legitimate processes, it is necessary to evaluate their implication in Gursky's image composition strategies and to assess their relationship to photographic depiction and to painterly processes. One issue that seems central to the understanding of Gursky's reception, is the

73 A current categorization of Wall's work suggests to label the staged photographs "cinematographic," while the more recent photographs, which have not been staged or retouched, are called "documentary." See Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (ed.), *Jeff Wall. Catalogue Raisonné. 1978 – 2004*, Basel and Göttingen, Schaulager and Steidl, 2005. Jeff Wall himself further uses the concept "near documentary," appeared in the early 2000s and which focuses on experience. See Estelle Blaschke, "Jeff Wall. 'Near Documentary.' Proche de l'image documentaire," *Conserveries mémorielles*, No. 6, 2009.

74 Gerda Breuer, "Pictures of Paradox. The Photographs of Andreas Gursky," in Michael Mack (ed.), *Reconstructing Space. Architecture in Recent German Photography*, London, Architectural Association, 1999.

75 Interview with Andreas Gursky, in *Andreas Gursky. 1994 – 1998*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg/Fotomuseum Winterthur/Serpentine Gallery, London/Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh/Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'arte contemporanea, Centro Cultural, 1998), Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 1998, quoted in Gerda Breuer, op. cit., p. 25.

76 Ibid., p. 19.

relationship of digital retouching with either photographic or painterly aspects of his work – if they can be broken down schematically – in order to understand to which extent the reception is rather based on the reading of visual proprieties of his work (e.g., "documentary" style versus idealization) or, rather, on a discursive context, such as the documentary tradition of Düsseldorf photography he is associated with. As at the time Gursky's digital montages combine multiple images without using actual retouching as Ruff does, it has to be asked if this variant of digital post-production is considered more admissible than subtractive retouching[77] and if it rather ought to be connected with the photographic (as a way of improving representation) or as an outcome of a confrontation with painting (as a formal engagement with compositional issues and art historical sources).

Fig. 66: Andreas Gursky, *Paris, La Défense, Filmarbeiten,* 1987

Toward two-dimensional images

Gursky's modus operandi regarding digital manipulations in the early 1990s consists of rather simple manipulations. They will only become increasingly complex at the end of the decade. *La Défense, Panorama* (1993), one of his first composites, is a panoramic image resulting from the horizontal combination of three photographs. The original pictures were shot in 1987 in the western suburbs of Paris. Originally a triptych (three c-prints mounted on cardboard, see Fig. 65), the images were assembled in 1993, at a time when Gursky was experimenting with digital retouching tools,[78] which often leads to an unclear or erroneous determination of the production year, the format or even its assimilation with another photograph, *Paris, La Défense, Filmarbeiten* (1987, see Fig. 66).[79] The reception of the architectural study with

77 Even if, of course, Ruff's series is still considered "documentary."

78 Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," in Peter Galassi (ed.), *Andreas Gursky*, op. cit., 2001, p. 25.

79 The image of a film shooting has also been taken at *la Défense*, probably at the same time as *La Défense*. While bearing a clear discrete title, is it often wrongfully tagged *La Défense*, which further complicates the understanding of the genesis of the digital montage from 1993.

strong perspectival lines is quite particular. Despite being mentioned by Peter Galassi, *La Défense* is not in the catalogue of the MoMA exhibition (2001),[80] nor in most major catalogues, such as Munich (2007), Basel (2008) or Krefeld (2009). The moderate interest in that particular photograph is also reflected in the price of the various editions[81] and the numerous errors in identification or size. In 1993, Gursky constructs several images similarly, while formal differences are important. The *Gardasee* panorama, for example, was created the same year with shots taken in 1986. But it is especially the famous *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993) that provides insight into Gursky's formal interrogations of the time, especially if compared to *La Défense*. Gursky's largest print at the time, with a frame size of 180 by 350 centimenters,[82] *Paris, Montparnasse* possesses similar technical specifications to the two aforementioned images. The image results from the horizontal stitching of two photographs. But apart from that particular technical feature, *Paris, Montparnasse* also reflects another important transformation in Gursky's image construction strategies. *La Défense* and the *Lake Garda* photographs show an attempt to embrace a panoramic effect, producing an image not to be achieved with a single shot and using digital tools. Especially *La Défense* seems unrealistic, as such a wide panoramic view and its strictly geometrical distortion cannot be perceived as a whole by the beholder. And that very paradox – increasing the informational or documentary value, while "losing" the viewer within the image – is historically associated with the panorama:[83] "In conventional photography, the look extends into the very depth of what is framed, whereas in panoramic photography, it functions within a continuum, or an extension."[84] The shift from *La Défense* to *Paris, Montparnasse* thus reveals several aspects that will become a major preoccupation in Gursky's work. On the one side, there is an interest in human perception: Gursky aims to construct a transparent vision that collides with human sight. But at the same time and somehow paradoxically, Gursky adopts two-dimensional image constructions in which the depicted objects converge with the surface of the increasingly large image. Not only does he build progressively

80 Peter Galassi (ed.), *Andreas Gursky*, op. cit.

81 Christies London has sold 1 AP for 30,440 USD in 2007; Sotheby's New York has sold 1 AP for 25,000 USD in 2009, while several prints of the artists have recently reached seven-digit figures. See http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?IntObjectID=5021871, accessed on July 11 2018 and http://www.sothebys.com/fr/catalogues/ecatalogue. html/2009/contem...#/r=/fr/ecat.Fhtml.N08523.html+r.m=/fr/ecat.lot.N08523.html/190/, accessed on July 19, 2012 (page now offline).

82 Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit., p. 33. The height corresponds to the largest available papers at the time. See for example Michael Diers, "Bilder nach (Film-) Bildern oder Andreas Gursky und die Interferenzen von Fotografie und Film," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2003, footnote 20, p. 398.

83 According to Joachim Bonnemaison, who defines four types of panoramic images, Gursky's tableaus would be panoramas. Bonnemaison defines the types according to their technical capturing protocol: panorama views (one image taken with one fixed lens), panoramas (composite views with several images), panoramics (one image taken with one rotating lens, covering up to 140 degrees) and panoptics (one image taken with one rotating lens, covering 360 degrees or more). "La photographie panoramique dans la collection Bonnemaison. Entretien avec Joachim Bonnemaison par Régis Durand," in *Panoramas, Collection Bonnemaison. Photographies 1850 – 1950*, Arles, Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie/Acte Sud, 1989, p. 18.

84 Joachim Bonnemaison, ibid., p. 25.

plane images for compositional purposes, but he also "bends" reality in order to correspond to these formal patterns. That particularity is already present in Thomas Ruff's panoramic *Häuser*, which are systematically frontal. The ambivalent reception of Gursky's work of that period, and particularly the interpretation of specific formal characteristics (frontality, grid patterns and large format) and digital retouching, is thus directly linked to this ambivalence.

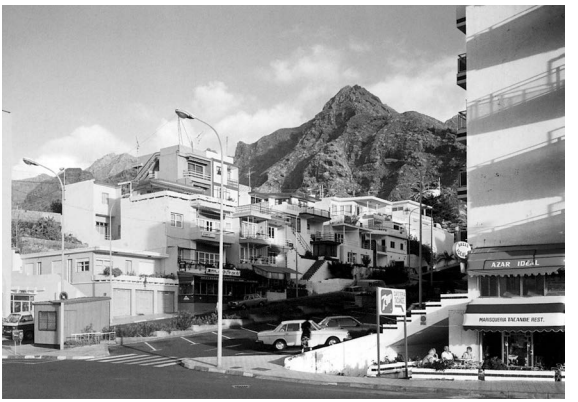

Fig. 67: Andreas Gursky, *Tenerifa, Bajamar*, 1987

The frontal construction characteristic of *Paris, Montparnasse* is central in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, in which it constituted one of the numerous parameters of their strict capturing protocol. Its existence was clear in Gursky's early work – the early *Pförtner* series (Fig. 68) relies on a strictly orthogonal composition –, but he somehow abandoned it during that decade. Images with architectural elements, such as *Düsseldorf, Terrace House* (1980), *Liège, Football Players* (1984), *Tenerifa, Bajamar* (1987, Fig. 67) or *Madrid* (1988), rather show a tendency to apply diagonal constructions. The frontal vantage point, which is commonly connected with Düsseldorf photography, is thus a pattern that doesn't prevail in Gursky's early work of the 1980s, although it is present in some examples. Interestingly, that particular construction, omnipresent in Gursky's recent work – e.g., the *Prada* series (1997), the *99 cent* series (1999 – 2002), the *F1 Pit Stop* series (2007), the *Dubai* series (2007), the *yang* series (2007) and the *Ocean* series (2010) –, appears gradually in the late 1980s and early 1990s, concurrent with digital retouching technologies and large formats. But how are these three aspects connected and how do they address documentary forms?

Several mechanisms play a central role in the shift toward frontal image constructions, which has been mentioned repeatedly in his historiography.[85] In the late 1980s, Gursky seems to seek inspiration in certain art historical models. Peter Galassi has argued that Gursky was chiefly inspired by the model of painting (Gerhard Richter and

85 See for example Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit.

Jackson Pollock in particular) with which photography seemed in concurrence since the medium had entered the art world in Europe throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This is often interpreted as being connected with large canvas sizes, which since the contact with the Grieger laboratory in Düsseldorf and the development of the Diasec[86] technology rapidly became prevalent among the Becher students. But while the use of increasing sizes of prints in Düsseldorf photography – Gursky's *Cocoon II* (2008) will reach a considerable size of 211 by 506 centimeters – has been interpreted as inherent to "artistic" photography and as the outcome of its dialogue with painting, the account of this history of the large format and its origin has to be nuanced. Jean-François Chevrier[87] – whose definition has been endorsed by various scholars and is commonly quoted in the art historical discourse[88] – connects the large format with painting and emphasizes the legitimization process of photography in the art field, creating the concept of *forme-tableau*. The French scholar stresses the objecthood of the large-format image, "designed and produced for the wall" and physically "confront[ing]" the viewer, creating a spectatorial relationship similar to painting, which "sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and 'consumed.'"[89] The image is clearly associated with "fine arts." Olivier Lugon, in a historical reconstruction of the genealogy of the uses of large-format photography throughout the twentieth century, undermines that very claim. He shows that it stood throughout the century for mass culture imagery, and he suggests that it wasn't technical innovations or the concurrence with painting that triggered the emergence of the large format in art photography.[90] In the case of Gursky, the image construction itself, in its increasing frontality and the apparent dissolution of the indexical picture elements into sheer plastic elements – a comparison to the graphical structure of Pollock's *all over* has often been made[91] – is central, and the image size seems to be consequential of those formal transformations, as Chevrier argues. But as will be shown subsequently, formats are also deeply connected with the idea of an enhanced documentary representation, a hypothesis for which Lugon provides a rigorous prehistory: photographic prints such as the NECO *Architectural Paintings* distributed in the US in the 1970s and used for the *Signs of Life* (1976) exhibition, a collaboration of architects Robert Venturi, Denise Scott

86 Invented in 1969 by Heinz Sovilla-Brulhart, the mounting technique permanently joining a print with an acrylic glass was used under exclusive licencing by the Grieger Lab, Düsseldorf from 1972 until the licence expired in 2009. See Sylvie Pénichon and Martin Jürgens, "Two Finishing Techniques for Contemporary Photography," *Topics in Photographic Preservation*, Vol. 9, 2001. Available at https://worldwide.espacenet.com/publicationDetails/biblio?CC=WO&NR=2012034709A2&KC=A2&FT=D, accessed on April 10, 2019.

87 See especially Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography," op. cit.

88 For example in Michael Fried, *Why Photography as Art Matters as Never Before*, op. cit.

89 Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography," op. cit., p. 116.

90 Olivier Lugon, "Avant la 'forme tableau,'" *Etudes photographique*, No. 25, May 2010. The author also surveys various inflections of Chevrier's concept from the late 1980s until today.

91 For example in Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit.

Brown and Steven Izenour with photographer Stephen Shore, not only allowed the printing of very large formats but also guaranteed "great graduation, stability, an incomparable piqué" and overall quality, even increasing with size.[92] In this context, large formats are directly connected with the idea of media and advertising,[93] while technically possessing an improved "documentary" ability, which disputes Chevrier's argument. While both approaches are not incompatible, they are symptomatic of diverging art historical positions that are essential to the assessment of Gursky's work.

Fig. 68: Andreas Gursky, *Pförtner, Passkontrolle*, 1982

In order to understand the dialectical relation between these two poles (photography vs. painting), we shall evaluate the formal dialogue between three and two dimensions. Understanding this might in a further step allow us to make explicit the correlation between the formal transformations and the two (schematically drawn) historiographical positions Gursky is apprehended by. Formally, the shift appears in four types of non-digitally manipulated images in his oeuvre, at that time rather untypical, which already suggest later bi-dimensional, frontal constructions: the "abstract" pictures, the bird's-eye views, the stripes pictures and, in a subsequent reflection upon the concept, the photographs depicting famous paintings. At first, Gursky's "abstract" pictures – for example, *Untitled I* (1993), which depicts a carpet,[94] the almost abstract sunset of *Untitled II* (1993) or the indefinite soil structure of *Untitled III* (1996, Fig. 69) – clearly show a dissociation from photography as a figurative medium and of the image as a three-dimensional construction (in that it renders an image

92 That sharpness increased with size was one of Stephen Shore and Steven Izenour's publicity arguments. Olivier Lugon, "Avant la 'forme tableau,'" op. cit.

93 Ibid.

94 The image of the carpet was taken in the Kunsthalle Düsselforf, which formally and as a reference suggests a connection to painting and the art world. See Marie Luise Syring, "Wo liegt 'ohne Titel?': Von Orten und Nicht-Orten in Gursky-Fotografie," in Marie Luise Syring (ed.), *Andreas Gursky, Fotografien. 1984 bis heute*, exhibition catalogue (Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, 1998), Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 1998, p. 5.

based on a central perspective). There isn't any clearly recognizable element, as they only show abstract patterns or colors. While not frontal, they clearly constitute an important step toward two-dimensional image construction strategies, in this case through framing and choice of subject, rather than through frontal constructions. Even though Gursky has completed very few of those images, all tagged "Untitled," they interestingly validate a tendency. Obviously, this doesn't serve as evidence in itself, but the conjunction of several analytical criteria corroborates this shift.

Fig. 69: Andreas Gursky, *Untitled III*, 1996 (186 × 222 cm)

The bird's-eye views, even though they are totally different visually and strategically, achieve a similar result. *Swimming Pool, Tenerifa* (1987, Fig. 70), for example, has almost been shot from a bird's-eye perspective, and the image surface thus roughly corresponds to the surface of the swimming pool it depicts. The uncommon viewpoint obviously recalls avant-garde experiments in which toppling the perspective creates a de-realizing effect, transforming the depicted object into sheer forms. For example, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's experiments aimed to deconstruct the bi-dimensional photograph into strict geometrical picture elements and thus produced almost abstract images. If Gursky's strategies bear similarities, the fact that he uses wider angles and that his color images retain a higher degree of representativeness – the connection to the depictured object remains – rather creates an oscillation between a colored *all over* image and a photograph of people in a swimming pool,[95] incidentally exemplifying Wittgenstein's concept of *Aspektwechsel*.[96]

95 Incidentally an effect that doesn't work with a black and white reproduction.

96 *Aspektwechsel* is the function exemplified by Wittgenstein with his famous rabbit-duck drawing, which aims to address the switch operated by the brain when looking at images, which potentially bear two possible interpretations. See for example Thorsten Jantschek, "Bemerkungen zum Begriff des Sehen-als," in Ralf Konersmann, *Kritik des Sehens*, Leipzig, Suhrkamp, 1997.

Fig. 70: Andreas Gursky, *Swimming Pool, Tenerifa*, 1987 (107.5 × 131 cm)

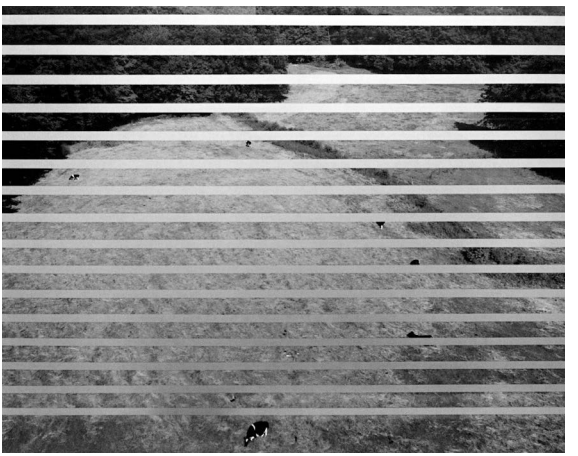

Fig. 71: Andreas Gursky, *Highway, Mettmann*, 1993 (186 × 226 cm)

Here again, while retaining the function of the photograph to represent, Gursky creates an almost abstract, painterly object, enacting the tension between the image as construction and the image as trace. A similar effect is achieved in the diptych *Cairo* (1992, Fig. 74), where an almost zenithal shot of traffic chaos in the Egyptian capital oscillates between abstract and figurative. The image is taken from a considerable distance, which produces picture elements small enough – cars and wandering people – that they could be perceived as abstract shapes and forms. But the fact that the image is not entirely orthogonal allows the viewer to see the side of the cars and buses and thus permits a certain level of recognition, increased by the considerable size of the prints (165 by 200 centimeters each). In the museum context, the movement of the viewers thus becomes an inherent characteristic of the dissolution or recognition of the depictured scene. The

back and forth movement triggered by Gursky, the tension he creates between both modes of representation, shows the importance of the phenomenon, and thus considers not only the image as autonomous representation, but also the image as a physical and contextual object, which seems to validate Chevrier's claim.

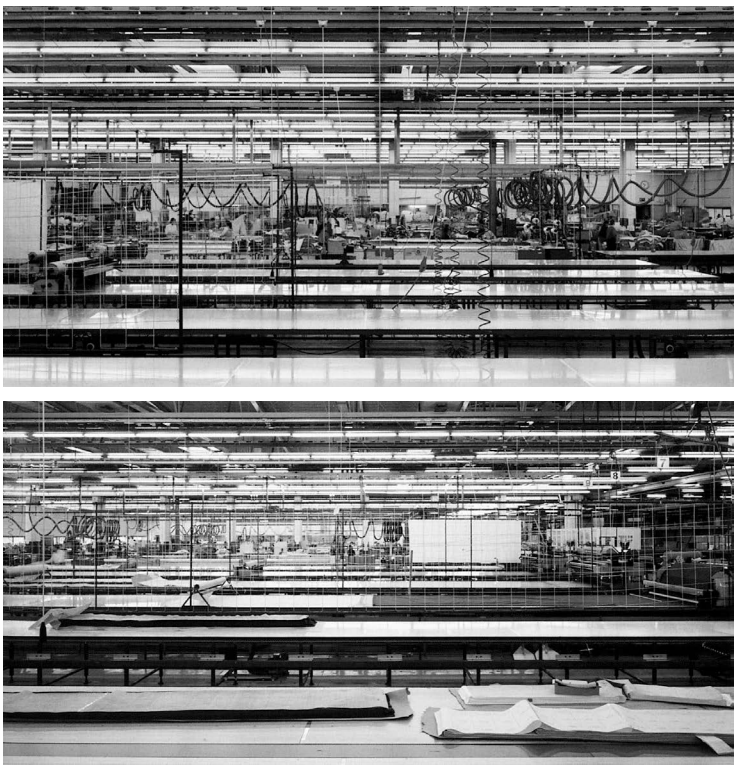

Fig. 72: Andreas Gursky, *Schiesser, Rodolfzell* (diptych), 1991 (165 × 276 cm each)

In that period, various other images emphasize Gursky's formal interest as regards this shift toward two-dimensional constructions. The rather unique *Highway, Mettmann* (1993, Fig. 71) undermines the depicting power of the image by superimposing a horizontal pattern on a landscape – in fact, a highway barrier through which the underlying field is photographed – which decomposes the image into indeterminate horizontal stripes. While cows and grassland are still visible and recognizable, the image seems to render not a picture of a field, but a picture of cutout stripes of a photograph, stressing the physical and figurative condition of the image *as* image. The diptych *Schiesser, Rodolfzell* (1991, Fig. 72), formed by two images of the interior of a fabric factory, instigates a similar frontal and horizontal construction. Eighty percent of the image is built upon white, gray and black stripes, which stratify the image horizontally. Tables and electric structures supporting the lamps cross the image horizontally, parallel to the (theoretical) horizon. While a single image already bears an abstract component,

the fact that the horizon in the diptych is set on different levels and that the perspective is more or less steep enforces the abstract effect, since the euclidian spaces of both images cannot be easily connected. While numerous factory shots still are non-frontal at the time, Gursky here clearly begins to develop a pattern, central in his later work. The formal construction that his images are built upon converges with the depicted reality, merging both into a two-dimensional image.

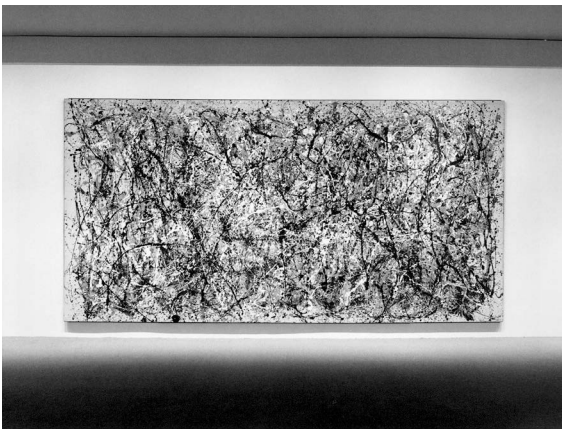

Fig. 73: Andreas Gursky, *Untitled VI*, 1997 (186 × 239 cm)

If more anecdotic, the 1997 reproduction of a Pollock all-over painting at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, *Untitled VI* (Fig. 73), almost ironically comments on or makes explicit his relationship to painting and the two-dimensional image. Gursky, rather than framing only the painting or showing parts of it,[97] locates the Pollock in the three-dimensional museum space and then compresses it again into his own photograph. The gradient of the floor gradually dissolves the wall into the floor, as the transversal patterns of the ceiling and the upper part of the wall merge both together. In the picture space, the canvas is rejected in the background, creating a distance from painting as a medium,[98] activating once again the never-ending quarrel for prevalence in the paragon of the arts. In an extreme and artificial convergence of the two-dimensional painting and the three-dimensional museum space, Gursky produces an *all over* structure that seems to overtly, and maybe naively, state his triumph over painting.[99]

97 As for example in *Untitled X* (1999) or *Untitled XI* (1999).

98 Anne-Marie Bonnet, "'Pimp my world.' Zu Gurskys Bilderwelt zwischen Malerei und Photographie, Kunst und Welt," op. cit., p. 90.

99 The difference with *Turner Collection* (1995), a similar picture representing three Turner paintings in a museum but with homogeneous light is striking.

Fig. 74: Andreas Gursky, *Cairo*, 1992 (129.5 × 154.5 cm)

These four types of images, through various strategies, articulate Gursky's tendency to search for two-dimensional tableaus, which constitute the predominant form of his recent work. After the mid-1990s, such constructions become omnipresent, and, as such, Gursky's work is much stabler and more homogeneous. The "abstract" pictures, the bird's-eye views, the stripes pictures and the photographs depicting paintings correspond to an exploratory period in which Gursky started to experiment with digital tools. Although many are not edited on computers, their formal transformations corroborate Gursky's experiments with the digitally composed panoramic forms. But here again the panorama predates the use of retouching programs, which indicates that Gursky at the time sought for certain compositions, merging the photographic depiction into a two-dimensional image whose formal qualities he aimed to control. Retouching tools clearly play a paramount role in the constitution of the stripped-down type-images such as *Rhein II*, but in the period of the emergence of digital tools in Düsseldorf, computer-assisted composition only constitutes one strategy among others, which will become prevalent only in the mid- to late 1990s. While in the 1990s many of Gursky's photographs maintain conventional form factors, frontal constructions with considerably wide formats will become almost systematic in later years. The very concept of panorama, its implications in terms of spectatorship or "documentary aptitude," and its relationship with mechanisms connected to typological permutations, consequently appear as paradigmatic forms. They encompass Gursky's key strategies and ought therefore to be further explored.

Raster grids and panoramas

A further compositional element of Gursky's reconfiguration of the depiction of the real, in which digital retouching technologies and painterly formal constructions play an increasing role, is the use of grid patterns as "structuring elements" of his compositions.[100] Gerhard Richter's *1024*

100 See Ralf Rugloff, "Photographers Anonymous," in Stefan Gronert (ed.), *Grosse Illusionen. Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Edward Ruscha*, op. cit., p. 95.

Colors (1973) painting has been repeatedly invoked as an inspirational model for Gursky's photography,[101] and it indeed appears to be a possible source of his visual strategy.[102] His images increasingly contain small square shapes or rectangles, which create a frontal structuring grid pattern decomposing the picture. *Paris, Montparnasse* can again be seen as an important step toward those new strategies. While it is always delicate to postulate a coherent evolution, this development is so striking that it ought to be mentioned. There is hardly any occurrence of frontal grid patterns in the 1980s in Gursky's images, except in some of his commercial work.[103] Those geometrical patterns are much more present in frontal architecture photography, such as in the early work of Thomas Ruff, Candida Höfer or in the typologies of the Bechers.[104] The construction of Thomas Ruff's *Häuser* for example clearly shares compositional similarities. The building is represented frontally, crosses the whole image as in *Paris, Montparnasse* and the picture is constructed with three horizontal stripes – the sky, the building and the lawn – none of which really allow a three-dimensional reading. But in the 1980s, grids in Gursky's work can only be found in his commercial work, and the only strictly frontal images are his very early *Pförtner* (1982).

On a technical level, *Haus Nr. 4 II (Ricola, Laufen)* from 1991 constitutes an interesting comparative example,[105] for it is a digital montage of two images, one of the few panoramic images of Ruff's oeuvre and the first he did not photograph himself. Very similar in their construction, the image of the Herzog and de Meuron building of the Ricola factory near Basel and *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993, Fig. 1) also share the double viewpoint, a logical consequence of the contiguous montage of two images. It is only theoretical in Ruff's photograph; since there are only horizontal stripes, the multiplication of the viewpoints cannot be actually seen. This double viewpoint allows, according to Gursky,[106] for a better visibility of the inside of the Parisian apartments and thus a "gain in documentary information."[107] Striking in that remark is once again the propensity of the photographer – and of his commentators – to read his images in the light of discourse related to the documentary. In this case the gain in informational value is equated with the rather hypothetical ability to peek inside the apartments. But even if both images correspond to a nonexistent viewpoint, the perception rather derives from the panoramic format; in Gursky's case, the effect is even increased through the fact that the building exceeds the frame of the picture. The continuum created by the panorama projects the viewer into a contemplative stance, created by the combination of two single images into one tableau. In that respect, the strategy of Gursky is very similar to one mechanism of the Bechers' typologies. If their

101 The first occurrence is Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit.
102 The recent digital version of *1024 colors* seems even more fitting. See www.gerhardrichter.com.
103 In the MoMA catalogue, Peter Galassi mentions his work for the Osram commercials, published in *Der Stern* (1981–1986). See Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit., p. 22.
104 The pattern is the most obvious in the *Fachwerkhäuser*.
105 Peter Galassi seems to be the first to draw the parallel between these images from Ruff and Gursky. See Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit., p. 33 and 38.
106 Andreas Gursky quoted by Peter Galassi. Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit., p. 38.
107 Ibid.

serial construction adds a comparative value to the images and singles out individual buildings (increased differentiation), the overall typological tableau rather merges every discreet element into a generic type (decreased differentiation). As such, Gursky's panorama re-enacts that very mechanism, the merging of individual images creating an indefinite continuum, structured by the grid pattern. If the overall documentary value could be interpreted as impaired by that phenomenon, the large high-resolution print and the double viewpoint paradoxically produces – at least on a theoretical and discursive level – the opposite.

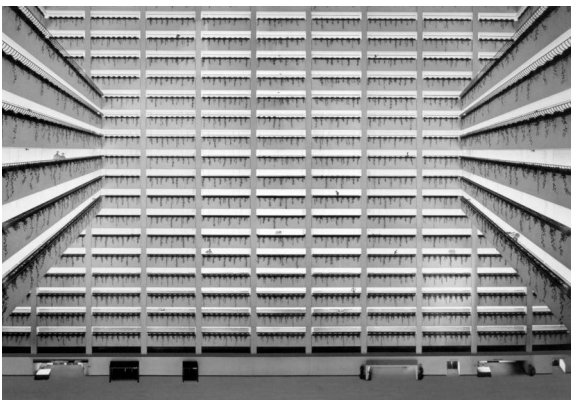

Fig. 75: Andreas Gursky, *Times Square*, 1997 (186 × 250.5 cm)

Appearing in the early 1990s in his work, those grid patterns tend to generalize throughout the decade. Clearly, they benefit from digital montage techniques, which allow the grid to be extended beyond conventional photographic formats. Furthermore, they allow for the building of visual spaces in which perspectival distortion can be controlled. Images such as *Atlanta* (1996) and *Times Square* (1997, Fig. 75) exemplify the frontal representation of an architectural element structured by orthogonal lines – they both show an inside façade with longitudinal rectangles –, which occupies most of the picture, only leaving a stripe on each side. Less extreme than the orthogonal construction of *Paris, Montparnasse*, where only the frontal façade of the building is shown, they nevertheless share the division of the image into numerous, tiny rectangles, parallel to the surface of the photograph. While there are many occurrences of square grid elements – *Avenue of the Americas* (2001), a building façade shot a night, where illuminated windows confronting a black background constitutes an almost programmatic example – Gursky increasingly diversifies the shape of those core elements. Using shoes (e.g., *Prada* series, 1996) or sneakers (*Untitled V,* 1997), individuals in his mass gatherings pictures (e.g., *May Day III*, 1998, or *Chicago Board of Trade*, 1999), cows (e.g., *Greeley*, 2002), shadows of stones (e.g., *Untitled III*, 1996), trash (e.g., *Untitled XIII*, 2002) or abstract shapes (e.g., *Paris, PCF*, 2002), Gursky decomposes the image into elementary particles. Creating a tension between painterly and photographic elements similar to that

in the zenithal pictures, Gursky plays with the line between depiction and graphical composition. *Avenue of the Americas*, for example, would hardly appear as a figurative depiction, if the left and right margins didn't contain buildings where the perspective lines are visible.

The picture elements constitutive of those grids – windows, cars or people – obviously do not derive from Richter's *1024 colors* on the basis of a purely formal confrontation with painting. However, the origin of such a structural, geometrical decomposition of the image, concomitant to increasingly frontal constructions, wide formats and extremely large prints should be evaluated. Obvious preceding visual examples, derived from reproductive print mechanisms come to mind, as much in their use in mainstream media as for artistic strategies (e.g., pop art): offset prints, serigraphy, half-tone processes or rotogravure. The picture element – which entered the vocabulary in its short form "pixel" in the 1960s – constitutes the core element of these printing techniques, but also defines the digital representation of visual data. From the growing interest for mass reproduction techniques in the 1960s and for serial constructions in photography to the omnipresent pixel and computational mechanisms in contemporary imaging systems, there seems to be a deconstructive pattern in the approach toward the visual. Clearly, there seems to be in Gursky's work a proximity to digital mechanisms, but these were expressed visually before digital technologies had in fact become prevalent. His grid structures, in their attempt to segment images into pictures elements, seem inextricably linked with digitalization and represent a cogent approach to the understanding of his formal constructions, and seem to echo the discrete elements of typological constructions. This wider framework, whose resonance is present as much in Gursky's "models" as in his own work, indicates a specific development, addressed earlier, whose interplay with digital technologies, needs to be evaluated. How is the formalization of reality by the Bechers connected with the grid in Gursky's work? How is the single image in a typological construction translated in his tableaus? As the relationship between the Bechers and Gursky has primarily been discussed though the translation of their mechanism into his panoramic formats, the grid ought to be evaluated in that specific context.

Paris, Montparnasse, one of the major images of Gursky's oeuvre, and one of the first to be produced with digital technologies, occupies an important position in the artist's gradual shift toward those frontal image constructions, in which digital technologies play an important role, in particular in relation to formats. The formal development of a new panoramic image ratio directly benefits from these tools and increases the effect of frontality. *Paris, Montparnasse*, like many images and series from the early 1990s on – e.g., *Chicago Board of Trade II* (1999), *Tote Hosen* (2000), the *F1 Pit Stop* series (2007), *Untitled XV* and *Untitled XVI* (2008), the *Cocoon* series (2008) – are extremely wide in comparison to their height. *F1 Pit Stop IV* has a height of 223.4 centimeters to a width of 609 centimeters and a ratio of 2.72. *La Défense* has almost a form factor 4. In comparison, the more common image formats, physically derived from film

or plate sizes, are usually between 1.25 and 1.5. The common large format *Plattenkameras* that Düsseldorf photographers have used, respectively have a ratio of 1.38 (13 × 18 cm) and 1.33 (18 × 24 cm), a format which, as mentioned above, is comparable with a 4/3 TV screen. Gursky creates uncommonly wide pictures by combining several images. He doesn't use cropping – his technique is additive – and thus does not lose information. Considering the considerable size of those prints, a maximal resolution is required to retain the sharpness characteristic of most Düsseldorf photographers.

Until the mid-1990s, a period during which Gursky started to use increasingly panoramic shapes, the use of such formats is uncommon among the Bechers' students. As mentioned earlier, Ruff's panoramic *Häuser* have important width to height ratios. There are some other examples, such as some *Zeitungsfotos* (1990–1991), but their format reflects editorial choices and the images have often been cropped. But most of the time, Düsseldorf photography prints concur with conventional photography-specific formats, while some of Gursky's important series completely undermine the photographic depiction defined by the cameras, in format and size. Despite the technical possibility, most Düsseldorf photographers use established formats derived from form factors connected to their photographic apparatus. There are, of course, numerous examples of "untypical" formats in the history of photographic practices, which either reflect a particular camera format suited to specific needs (e.g., panoramic cameras or particular uses of photographic imagery connected to specific projects (e.g., photomurals). But their use by photographers now assimilated to an artistic context remains occasional until the early 1980s, when a growing number of them adopted these new formats. One of the first occurrences appears in Jeff Wall's work. Some extreme panoramic images[108] materialized at that time, hinting at a new tendency; a series of three images in 1980 (e.g., *The Bridge* or *Steve's Farm, Stevenson*, both roughly 60 × 230 cm), a few in 1987 (e.g., *The Old Prison*, 70 × 228.5 cm), the 1993 meta-panorama *Restoration* (119 × 489.5 cm) or the two 1997 narrative montages *A Partial Account (of events taking place between the hours of 9.35 a.m. and 3.22 p.m., Tuesday, 21 January 1997)*.

What makes these projects interesting is the fact that their image ratio, maybe even more than their considerable size, undermines yet another incredibly stable feature in photographic representation: the correlation between a form factor derived from a capturing device (silver plates, film, etc.) and the printed image. In Wall's case, the photograph results from the juxtaposition of several prints in a light box, a technique very common in his oeuvre. But some images have been stitched together with a computer retrospectively,[109] which suggests that an interest for such constructions predates their digital realization – a confrontation with panoramic models that Gursky might have

108 See Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (ed.), *Jeff Wall. Catalogue Raisonné. 1978 – 2004*, Basel/Göttingen, Schaulager/Steidl, 2005.

109 *An Eviction*, for example, was displayed as an analogical montage in 1988 and sewn together digitally in 2004. See Theodora Vischer and Heidi Naef (ed.), *Jeff Wall. Catalogue Raisonné. 1978 – 2004*, op. cit., p. 312.

been directly influenced by.[110] In evaluating his panoramic production of the late 1980s and early 1990s, an interesting shift to that format evolution can be established: while several early panoramas clearly bear a 2D structure (i.e., *Gardasee*), the appearance of a structuring grid in subsequent images enhances and makes explicit Gursky's intent: the *Wechselwirkung* in *Gardasee* alternates between a 2D photograph and what the viewer identifies as a 3D landscape. In *Paris, Montparnasse* it oscillates between a 2D photograph and what the beholder sees as a 2D environment. In forcing the representational spaces into a single surface – the surface plane of the image – Gursky controls the spectator's relationship to the image. That 2D surface – the matrix of that convergence – is geometrically a rectangle and has incidentally been theorized in the history of representation in various forms (as a mirror, as a window, etc.). But a rectangle can hardly appear in a photograph as a structuring element. Gursky thus replaces it with a grid, which makes the surface plane visible. Its subdivision into smaller elements, declinable in all directions, further serves the panoramic effect, as the picture can be stretched out as far as necessary. The interrelation of that grid, its structuring function, the panoramic effect, digital montage techniques and ultimately the documentary value, can best be analyzed through the appraisal of Gursky's most famous and most commented grid image, *Paris, Montparnasse*.

110 Gursky has always admitted a fascination for Wall's work, even emulating his style or compositional patterns. He made numerous images in the style of Jeff Wall, very few of which have been published. See Peter Galassi, "*Gursky's World*," op. cit., p. 19 – 20.

2 "PARIS, MONTPARNASSE:" CONSTRUCTION OF AN ENHANCED REALITY AND IMPROVED VIEWER EXPERIENCE

The relationship between digital image post-production and the truth claim of photography, its "documentary" value, has not only been interpreted in very different terms by the post-photographic discourse and the critical discourse addressing Düsseldorf photography. It seems that there are also considerable differences in the treatment of these issues when considering Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky, despite the canonical model, which defines them as necessarily or logically "documentary." In the use of digital tools in their respective work processes and in the discursive field acknowledging their images, sub-categorizations appear, whose origin and implication ought to be thoroughly explored. The documentary discourse, exploring various parameters such as the artist's own position, the particular role of digital post-productive operations, formal construction in relation to the depicted imagery, and the implications of work titles or serial compositions, has constructed diverging models in which the digital plays – this is a schematic outline – antithetical roles. It was established earlier that Ruff's *Häuser* series has been rather perceived as documentary because of its inscription in an alleged German photographic documentary paradigm. Its various digital manipulations have either been regarded as unimportant, considering Ruff's "rigorous" documentary approach,[111] or they are simply disregarded. While the reception of the *Häuser* series has fluctuated – the early reception in the late 1980s and early 1990s provides a more pronounced stance toward the documentary than later positions – the role of the digital retouching has never been articulated as an asset of its ability to document.[112] Gursky's digital post-production, on the other hand, has not only been tagged documentary *despite* digital retouching, but his images have often been interpreted as documentary partly *because* of it. "Gursky uses digital post-production in order to enhance such [documentary] statements, and not to resolve formal or aesthetics problems,"[113] Marie Luise Syring exemplarily argues in the important Schirmer/Mosel catalogue of the Düsseldorfer Kunstshalle exhibition (1998). A substantial part of Gursky's historiography, as established earlier, commonly relates his oeuvre to a documentary discourse of the globalized world in which digital retouching increases referentiality or allows for the circumvention of technical issues prohibiting the capture of

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

112 While digital retouching has never improved the "documentary" reading of Ruff, more recent examples of his use of digital technologies, such as his appropriative processes (e.g., the *jpeg* series), have reconciled his imagery with the objects of his documentation. op. cit. (2004), showing the 9/11 attacks, exemplary illustrates a new documentary approach less concerned by indexicality than with image consumption and circulation.

113 While the word "documentary" doesn't appear in that quote, Syring mentions his "social and political involvement [...], which transcends his documentary capture of places and scenes" in a preceding paragraph. Marie Luise Syring, "Wo liegt 'ohne Titel?': Von Orten und Nicht-Orten in Gursky-Fotografie," op. cit., p. 5 – 6.

certain images. Thomas Weski, in the exhibition catalogue of Gursky's major retrospective in the Haus der Kunst in Munich ten years later (2007), interestingly connects his formal preoccupations, defined by a "pure desire of seeing,"[114] with the ability of his work to document. Weski interrogates the "authenticity of digitally built photographs," whose genuineness cannot be "unequivocally read"[115] [abgelesen] in the image. Analogue photography would on the other hand possess that function. He thus suggests a credibility of the image, hence a documentary factor, based on its verisimilitude: "the new definition of the documentary concept in the field of digital compositions could be correlated with its plausibleness."[116] What Weski suggests is the transgression of a commonly shared *doxa* defining photography through its relationship to the real, which clearly is of relative importance for historians, but has played an important role in the structuralist theorization of the photographic image, and in the related post-photographic theorization of digital photography.

In the important 2008 monograph *Andreas Gursky: Works 80 – 08*,[117] Martin Henschel corroborates this stance, legitimating the necessity of construction in order to improve representation. That particular aspect is discussed in theory, relying on references to Barthes, Brecht and Benjamin, and in practice, commenting on the resulting image, which surpasses a conventional image. Mentioning a quote by Bertholt Brecht found in Walter Benjamin's "A Short History of Photography," Henschel legitimates the idea of construction as an admissible intervention, which in photo-theoretical discourses is rather suspicious. He admits that he gives a new inflexion to Brecht's words, though: "The situation becomes more complicated because the simple *reproduction of reality* now says less than ever about reality [...]. So we have to *construct something*, something artificial, and 'set up.'"[118] In a further step, he argues that in that particular case manipulation is a necessity, declaring that an image such as *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993) could not have been made traditionally, as "it would have been impossible to produce an absolutely flat-orthogonal façade from one single angle."[119] The convergence of such positions and Gursky's constructions indicates a new relationship to the documentary, defined less by the *desire*, stringently pursued, to try to document objectively (as in the Bechers' case) than by the *need* to produce a documentation only possible through new approaches and new technologies. Such improved or enhanced documentary forms seem to be a necessity to cope with an era in which images have become omnipresent and are

114 Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," in Thomas Weski (ed.), *Andreas Gursky*, exhibition catalogue (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2007), Cologne, Snoeck, 2007, p. 19.

115 Thomas Weski, "Der privilegierte Blick," op. cit., p. 19

116 Ibid.

117 Martin Henschel (ed.), *Andreas Gursky, Works 80 – 08*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstmuseen Krefeld, Moderna Museet Stockholm, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008 – 2009), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2009.

118 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography" (1931), in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London, 1985 (italics original, translation modified by Henschel), quoted in Martin Henschel (ed.), *Andreas Gursky, Works 80 – 08*, op. cit., p. 28.

119 Ibid.

produced at an exponential rate. Technically, the construction of *Paris, Montparnasse* hinges indeed on a particularity that has only few precedents in the history of photography in general, and even more so in the history of "artistic" photography: the double viewpoint. The three and a half meter wide photograph results from the juxtaposition of two images of a H.L.M.[120] building shot separately, horizontally sewn together, producing a particularly wide form factor, as mentioned earlier. The frontally constructed image, 70 percent filled by the grid structure of the architecture, possesses several formal, technical and conceptual particularities. A central single image-shot of such a wide structure, even at a distance with a zoom objective and the compulsory perspective correction, would imply a different result. The apartments at the borders, for instance, would be increasingly shown diagonally, rather than frontally, hiding their interior and undermining Gursky's all-seeing eye. Henschel's comment on that particular feature of the image reveals a position on its aptitude to document that differs considerably from more conventional views in which indexicality is central. He claims that not only "does [the montage] not "falsify" anything,"[121] but it allows the image to be enhanced, as "the view into the individual flats would have been steadily diminished toward the outer sides."[122] That part of the article is illustrated by a detail view of one of the apartments of *Paris, Montparnasse*, which is a very common editorial presentation.

Enlarged selections of the building have repeatedly been used as hermeneutical tools in various publications, aiming at a visual transcription of the idea of an enlarged document. In this case, the illustration somehow paradoxically shows a detail that, if considering the text, seems to suggest that this is one of these peripheral apartments and that we are granted visual access thanks to the digital montage. It is in fact in the middle of the image and would consequently be visible in a single-shot photograph. Numerous catalogues have printed various cropped sections of this particular image, zooming in or out of the photograph. Sometimes organized in sequence, they suggest various levels of reading, as if the print in a book was not sufficient to render the large-format photograph, or as if multiple information levels were contained in it and had to be pedagogically brought forth. The Haus der Kunst catalogue[123] for example shows various clippings from the apartment level to the whole image on five following pages, enacting the dialectical relationship between the particular and the general that Gursky's work is often interpreted through. But while the printing of an enlarged part of an image for pedagogical objectives is not uncommon in photography books, the sequential repetition of image parts appears much less frequently and is, for instance, rather

120 "Habitation à loyer modéré": French social housing. The "Mouchotte" building (1966) in Montparnasse was designed by architect Jean Dubuisson (1914 – 2011) and is the first project in Paris of such amplitude (752 apartments). Its grid design echoes Gursky's own interest for such patterns, which emerges at that time.

121 Martin Henschel (ed.), *Andreas Gursky, Works 80 – 08*, op. cit., p. 28.

122 Ibid.

123 Thomas Weski (ed.), *Andreas Gursky*, op. cit.

uncommon in Gursky's overall historiography. *Paris, Montparnasse* appears to be perceived as a particularly relevant image to illustrate Gursky's alleged ability to surpass the documentary aptitudes of a single image.

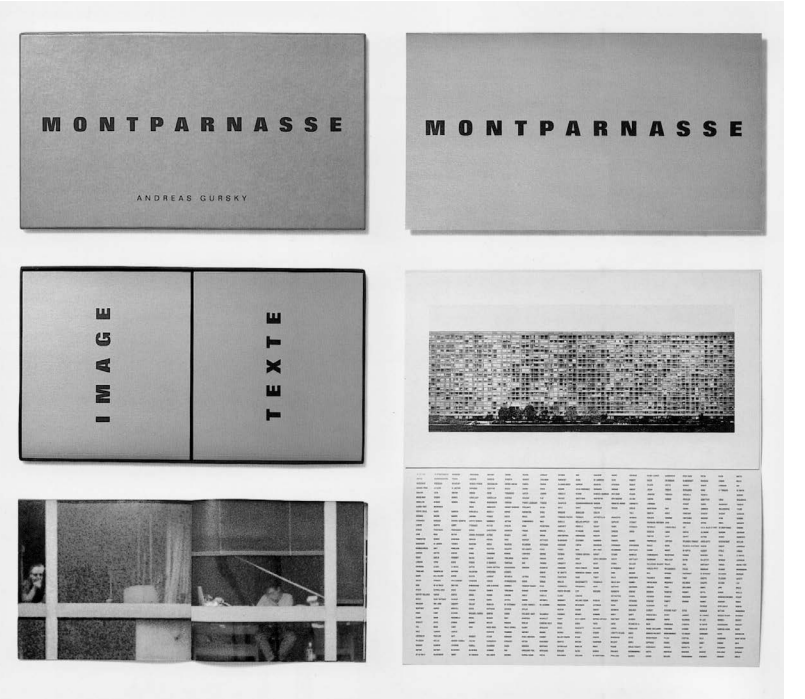

Fig. 76: *Paris, Montparnasse*, Portikus, 1995 (source: Martin Parr & Gerry Badger, *The History of Photobooks*, Vol. 2, 2006)

An alternative example of this approach can be found in a special edition book focusing on *Paris, Montparnasse*, edited for the Portikus Frankfurt exhibition in 1995,[124] in collaboration with the photographer (Fig. 76). Besides extreme enlargements allowing viewers to discern the facial expressions of individuals in the building,[125] the publication adds textual information to the project. The book contains, for instance, a list of the names of the roughly 750 families living in the building, extending the strictly visual information in its various formats and clippings to non-visual details, enhancing the general knowledge connected to the image. While the title of the photograph itself obviously enhances the connection between image and reference, the additional data provides the reader with an even more plausible reality he can relate to and as a collateral effect improves the inscription of the image in a documentary paradigm. Interestingly, twenty years later such

124 *Andreas Gursky. Montparnasse*, exhibition catalogue (Portikus, Frankfurt, 1995), Stuttgart, Oktagon Verlag, 1995.

125 The enlargements are for example reprinted in Martin Parr and Gerry Bager's *Le livre de photographies. Une histoire volume II*, Paris, Phaidon, 2007, p. 275.

metadata – non-visual information associated with an image – cannot be dissociated from the practice of photography altogether. Most digitally produced images in the 2010s harbor various values, such as geo-tags,[126] *within* a photograph, which thus contribute to its informational power. Despite the formal construction repeatedly connected to images with repetitive patterns such as Gerhard Richter's *1024 Colors* (1973), such a discursive pattern constructs *Paris, Montparnasse* as a documentary form, rather than as an image with a strictly formal value, and anticipates the economy of the forthcoming digital visual culture.

The analysis of *Paris, Montparnasse* and its reception shows the appearance of a new relationship to the real, expressed as much in the formal construction of the photograph, the double viewpoint, the large format, the panoramic form factor and the editorial handling of the project, as in its reception, which shows more than the eye could see and transcends "conventional" photographic representation. Every technical feature of this photograph enhances the supposed documentary abilities, which are commonly acknowledged by the critical discourse as being legitimate interventions, a position which paradoxically rejects a common photo-theoretical tradition in which strict indexicality prevails. Gursky's own position – "I compose freely, but I work with real and authentic material,"[127] he insists – shows to which extent the truth claim of photography and its concurrent discourse is stemmed by strict indexicality, a notion that seems, however, to be gradually replaced by verisimilitude, with the acceptation of digital tools. Clearly, some of the technical features deployed by Andreas Gursky are not new. Addressing the double viewpoint for instance necessarily leads to a comparison to stereo-photography, a feature that Thomas Ruff has explored with his various architectural stereoscopic views,[128] suggesting a confrontation during that period with improved photographic technologies. Obviously, stereo-photography differs from Gursky's case in that it produces two images, and only the brain reconstructs a discrete double viewpoint image. Every photomontage does, of course, combine several viewpoints. But the inscription of such technical features in the critical discourse suggests an evolving conception of the documentary in which digital tools are accepted at various levels, since both the *Häuser* and *Paris, Montparnasse* are somehow considered documentary. The concept of documentary that Gursky is associated with primarily derives from the model his work has been read into, through the re-actualization of its key proponents: the Neue Sachlichkeit. As the evaluation of the construction of the German documentary paradigm in the 1970s has shown, an alternative documentary model, in which the technology had precisely been erected as a tool able to improve human perception, is commonly discarded: Moholy-Nagy's *Neues Sehen*, its

126 GPS coordinates embedded into the digital code of a photograph.

127 Gursky here comments the creation of the picture *Hamm, Bergwerk, Ost* (2008). Andreas Gursky, in Jan Schmid- Garre, *Andreas Gursky. Long Shot Close Up*, documentary film, 60 min., Pars media, 2009.

128 The "*Stereofotos*" (from 1994) and the stereoscopic views of the "*I.m.v.d.r.*" series (2000 – 2001).

ascription to a mechanized vision and its emphasis on perception,[129] collides with the ideal of transparency that the documentary style has embodied, and which was re-instated as a *doxa* in the 1960s and 1970s. As the explicit dismissal by Klaus Honnef of the experimental forms of the new vision shows, the resilience of the documentary style in the discourse on documentary forms has persistently dissociated Düsseldorf photography from any experimental position as source – this was the case as much for Moholy-Nagy as for Gottfried Jäger's *Generative Fotografie* –, although their cross-reading might generate productive encounters.

3 FROM INDEXICALITY TO VERISIMILITUDE: THE SUPER-DOCUMENTARY

The shift in Gursky's image construction strategies of the early 1990s shows several important alignments addressing the documentary ability of photography. While indexicality, one of the most stable values of documentary photography in discourse and representation, is discarded by the shift from specific to generic pictures, the image is tweaked in order to ameliorate its documentary factor. Large formats and the convergence of reality and image through frontal constructions create an improved viewer experience, documenting recognizable type-images rather than actual places or buildings even if, through specific titles, the generic image is re-inscribed in a real context. Digital retouching tools play an important role in this process, as they allow the seamless construction of large-format photographs and concur with the deconstruction of photographs into two-dimensional images, a shift in which grid patterns play an important role. Gursky's imagery combines an image using indexical photographic fragments with a pre-existing mental image, addressing a common visual culture. As will be more thoroughly discussed subsequently, Gursky's visual world reflects familiar images, reminding viewers of their equivalents seen in the media or the web. The experience of Gursky's images is thus based on both immersive features (wide and large formats, etc.) and the construction of a documentary discourse emerging from the interaction of the knowledge of the viewer and the generic images he digitally creates, resulting in an expanded documentary experience. Creating visually seductive images stripped off from contextualizing markers, which he brings into resonance with contemporary visual culture and the relationship we commonly project onto indexical images, Gursky creates verisimilar images serving as projective surfaces. The reception of his early work, while acknowledging both photographic and pictorial elements, further stems that strategy by strengthening the documentary factor associated with his work. In that context, digital retouching tools are almost systematically considered legitimate as

129 See especially Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire: D'August Sander à Walker Evans*, 1920 – 1945, op. cit., p. 36 – 42.

they produce an improved viewer experience and are not perceived as manipulative. In *Paris, Montparnasse* they are logically read as necessary tools to create such an image, as they only circumvent the limitation of the photographic apparatus. The documentary factor thus also relies on these technologies, in diametrical opposition to digital tools as they were perceived by the post-photographic discourse.

The work of Andreas Gursky of the 1990s thus articulates a singular relationship between image and depiction, as the use of protocols to formalize objectification (e.g., the Bechers) has been reinterpreted. Clearly, Gursky has adopted numerous mechanisms established or developed between the 1950s and the 1970s (frontality, grid patterns, etc.), but he has adapted them in their relationship to the subject and in their relationship to the observer. While the subordination of the represented objects to the formal representation clearly exists in the Becher case already, there nevertheless remains a strong discursive element on documentation. In Gursky's case, the relationship to the depicted world is still crucial, as shown by his own or the critical positions. It is not so much based on indexicality but is constructed upon verisimilitude and a collective visual memory. Digital tools are thus not only in accordance with a strategy where strict indexicality and dogmatic positions are rejected, but they also embody an essential mechanism in the constitution of an expanded form of documentary. Combined with the discursive schemata of his reception, almost systematically addressing the increased documentary value of his work, despite its inscription in painterly processes, the work of Andreas Gursky, as a discursive entity, ought thus to be qualified accordingly, considering its superlative characteristics: we might call this new upgraded form "super-documentary." In this context, the use of digital tools in order to produce frontal wide format photographs, either by knitting multiple images together (e.g., *Paris, Montparnasse*) or by extruding an image (e.g., *Rhein II*, extruded from *Rhein I*), corresponds in terms of artistic endeavor to his use of subtractive retouching tools, erasing disturbing picture elements. Both technical manipulations serve the construction of a two-dimensional space, which acts as an interface between a clearly arranged reality and a beholder whose knowledge and visual culture is considered a constitutive parameter. The key formal and conceptual choices, which increasingly determine Gursky's image-making process – frontal constructions, grid patterns, horizontal stripe patterns and abstraction – serve his deconstructive approach to photography as a "window on the world," through a new codification of the medium in which strict indexicality is replaced by an expanded form of documentary. The first step in this process is analytical, as these four formal features further develop the typological intent that emerged with photo-conceptual practices, transferring the taxonomical protocol developed to represent reality into the image: rather than documenting the (specific) contemporary world, Gursky documents the (generic) representation of the contemporary world, systematizing its visual culture. The second step is thus generative. Gursky confronts the deconstructive pattern his photographs are structured by – in their relationship to the

fragments of reality they are built upon – with a generative outlook, addressing image production strategies. Gursky documents the world in that he produces images that represent the world, in a tautological movement that challenges the relationship of reality and depiction, and thus radically alters the status of the photographic.