Chapter 6: Metaportraits: Thomas Ruff, *andere Portraits*

Background: The Composite Portrait in Contemporary Art

I have already discussed the composite portrait as an object of study within the fields of science and philosophy. Yet the composite portrait has also been an object of study within the field of art. Instead of using it to construct sociological or criminological taxonomies, artists have usually approached the composite portrait as a visual construct, problematizing the relationship between mechanical or digital reproduction and indexicality. One of the most well-known artists to work with composite portraits is Nancy Burson, who, in the 1980s, produced a series of works that featured the composite image and exploited its ability to produce ideals and types. Burson curated the categories of her composite portraits, constructing digitized averages of faces that portrayed sociological ideals of gender, power and race. These works expressed the critical role of identity politics in defining the sociological ideals. For example, Burson constructed a composite portrait, *Beauty* (1982), which consisted of the faces of famous Hollywood actresses, resulting in a depiction of a feminine and racialized ideal of beauty. Another work, *Warhead* (1982), is a composite of the faces of the global leaders who were, at the time, antagonists in a Cold War standoff, depicting an ideal of a political power defined by the white male. One reading of Burson's composites is that they invert the notion of the ideal that Galton had pursued through his composites, instead revealing the racialized and gendered parameters within which concepts such as beauty

and power are imagined in our society. In this way, Burson is able to use the symbolic aspect of the composite in a critique of society.

Burson's composite portraits are considered some of the earliest computer-generated artworks, and aesthetically they exhibit a digital seamlessness in which the visualized average can be observed in a singular yet pixelated face. Thomas Ruff produced a less well-known series of composite portraits in the mid-1990s, the *andere Portraits*, utilizing analogue photography and silk-screening processes to highlight the disparities between the composited faces. Rather than focusing on the composite's ability to produce and depict a monolithic aggregate, Ruff's composites call our attention to a constant movement between faces and thus make the zones of indistinction obvious.

Identification Portraiture

Ruff's *andere Portraits* grew out of his earlier series *Portrait*, an investigation of identification portraiture. In the late 1980s, Ruff began producing portraits of his colleagues at art school in the style of ID card and passport photos. These images grew into a study of identification portraiture, the kinds of photographs that function to identify individuals based on a clear, forward-facing pose and a neutral facial expression that accentuates the measurable features of their faces. These portraits explicitly exhibited photography's ability to show only the surface appearance of the subject; rather than revealing something about the person, as the viewer would expect from an artistic portrait, they left out the context, character and personality of the individual. These portraits exaggerated this capacity of the photograph to depict only what lies on the surface. They discouraged any internal reading of the photograph's subjects.

I argue that Ruff and Wittgenstein share a similar approach to the investigation of their respective mediums, photography and language, both of which are ways of operating with signs. As I mentioned previously, Wittgenstein said that in his investigation he was aiming to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use," that is, to understand language through a study of its

actual and everyday use. I argue that this approach is similar to how Ruff approaches photography and the photographic image. His investigations with photographic images attend very much to their everyday and bureaucratic uses, extracting the photographic image from a discourse on indexicality and instead approaching photographs through their use and as a kind of visual construction. Ruff states that photography "can only reproduce the surface of things."[1] Far from understanding this as a limitation of photography, Ruff uses his work to highlight this aspect of the medium. This, for me, also harks back to Wittgenstein's approach to language; he cautions against the view that, as he puts it, "the incomparable essence of language […] was hidden from us beneath the surface." Instead, Wittgenstein proposes to liberate us from this urge by getting us to recognize that everything "already lies open to view."[2]

Ruff's work with identification portraits conveys a sense of the chasm between an observer of the image *identifying* with the subject's face and *identification* as a practice of governance and institutional regulation. Ruff's photographic work is an investigation of the utilitarian uses of photography, or, you could say, of how photography is used in the everyday. His identification portraits concern types of photographs that, in some way, otherwise go unnoticed; they are both ubiquitous and unquestioned, utilized for specific and usually bureaucratic purposes. What is on display in Ruff's portraits is not only the subject's face but the conditions of its representation. In this, Ruff takes the visual language of the archive to represent the individual. Placed in a purely visual realm of art, Ruff's series of identification portraits problematizes the authority the archive has in relation to the subject of the portrait. As Dan Adler puts it:

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1 Richard Dorment, "Photography in Focus," *The Telegraph*, May 29, 2003, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3595514/PHOTOGRAPHY-IN-FOCUS-The-deadpan-images-created-by-Thomas-Ruff-of-nameless-individuals-and-equally-anonymous-places-are-masterpieces-of-austere-neutrality.-By-Richard-Dorment-Now-for-something-completely-indifferent.html and Hilde Van Gelder and Helen W. Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 43-44.

2 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 126, §92.

> Everything and everyone that enters the archive is said to be subject to the same ritualized process of framing, a process that creates (and maintains) order, that suggests systematicity but refrains from signification. […] Ruff […] rigorously and repetitiously enacts photographic technologies, with each body of work implying context of regulatory ordering and categorization, an operation that must operate by both including and excluding subjects.[3]

One of the results of Ruff's reenactment of the archival ritual of identification photography is the conversion of his photographic subjects into objects, as Adler's reference to refraining from signification suggests. Ruff has stated that, once photographed, the person is "thingified."[4] The exclusion of a subjective stance in the image occurs through the observation of the image; the photographed subject lacks the character that is usually expected of a portrait in an artistic context. Instead, Ruff's portraits evoke the role of photography in science, as a way of documenting truth, and when applied to the human subject the result is a tension between a truth of the subject and the truth of the image.

Ruff's *Portrait* series visualizes what the surveillance scholar Lyon describes using his concept of a "data double," which is a person's identity within a database, an identity created from coded categories that produce a kind of "virtual fiction." These identities circulate amongst multiple institutions and interests and, all the while, are "vulnerable to alteration, additions, merging and loss as they travel."[5] The production of a "data double" results in a gap between a sense of self and a "data image."[6] Ruff has described his portraits as a kind of "fiction," and his portrait work has been criticized as producing an experience of alienation rather than identification in the viewer. Yet this experience is what we might expect of a subject confronting their own "data double" – an experience of dissonance

3 Dan Adler, "The Apparatus: On the Photography of Thomas Ruff," *Art Journal* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 68. [66-87]

4 Thomas Ruff, *Andere Porträts + 3D* (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1995), 16.

5 Lyon, "Surveillance as Social Sorting," 22.

6 Ibid., 27.

produced by the representation of themselves as information. Lyon describes the "data image" as a digital persona that is created on the basis of risk assessment and then circulated and as an example of how surveillance communication "is increasingly distanced from the person from whom the data is initially obtained."[7] Lyon explains: "The data-image may be abstract but it is not innocent." In the way that they bring to the surface the glaring bifurcation of the observer's sense of identity through the photographed subject, Ruff's *Portraits* may be understood as illuminating the aspects of data images described by Lyon. Ruff's study of identification portraits reveals that these forms of representation are not neutral in much the same way that, as Lyon explains, data images are not innocent.

andere Portraits

The composites in Ruff's *andere Portraits* (1994–1995) were constructed from his earlier portraiture series. These portraits extend the idea of a photographic "fiction" underlying the image. He has explained that, with these portraits, he intended to construct faces:

> The original idea was to reconstruct one of my portraits from several faces. But I gave up the idea quite soon, it was impossible. I developed the idea of "building" new faces, faces that do not exist. I mixed – man and man – man and woman – woman with woman and woman with men. They should be believable but at the same time the viewer should realize they are fictional.[8]

Ruff produced these composites by appropriating a security camera apparatus called the Minolta Montage Unit, used by the State Bureaus of Investigation in Berlin in the 1970s. This camera was originally used to produce pictures that combined individual facial features from four photographs, based on an eyewitness account of

7 Lyon, "Facing the Future," 173.

8 Thomas Ruff, email message to author, May 15, 2016.

a crime. The decision about which faces to include in the composite was made on the basis of the eyewitness account. Instead of having an artist sketch the face, the unit could composite different facial features to create a photographic "sketch" of a criminal's face. The resulting composites were often used as mugshots and displayed on "Wanted" posters in public spaces.

The Minolta Montage Unit used four passport-sized photos and, by way of an optical mirror system, merged them into a composite. There is a built-in polarizing filter to eliminate the hard edges where the lines of the facial features do not match up. The Minolta unit is a more sophisticated version of Galton's composite practice in the sense that the unit itself mechanizes the process of layering the faces. Instead of using four photos, Ruff combined two faces taken from his *Portraits* series. In producing these binary composites, Ruff played and experimented with the gender binary, combining faces of men and women. He then took a photograph of the resulting composite and used the photographic slide as the basis for a black-and-white silkscreen. He explains: "I wanted to go closer to the police technique, that's why I decided to print them as silk screens with the technical structure of a printed medium."[9] In contrast to the photographs from which they are constructed, which were originally exhibited by Ruff in vivid, saturated color, the resulting images are black and white. For the *andere Portraits*, Ruff consciously chose to avoid color photography, noting that a color photograph is much closer to a depiction of how reality looks to the unaided eye.

In his descriptions of this technique, Ruff often refers to the security and policing context in which the Minolta Montage Unit was originally used. His approach to investigating photography and photographic practices often plays with the notion of the photograph as a fact and/or fiction, questioning and problematizing its evidentiary quality. The use of the Minolta Montage Unit to produce mugshots from eyewitness accounts of crimes seems also to merge these notions, revealing the resulting composites to be fictional constructs that make use of the medium of photography. The "other"

9 Ibid.

referred to in the title of the series – *andere* meaning "other" in German – can refer to the original use of the apparatus by security bureaus: *Other*, with a capital "O," denoting those who stand outside of society, the criminals or the terrorists, those outside of the realm of the familiar and deemed dangerous. It can also refer to the face that is created when the two portraits are used to make the composite. As with Galton's composites, the fact that this face has no indexical referent and exists only in a pictorial reality is highlighted. Where the portraits combine the faces of men and women, the "other" can also refer to that crossing of a culturally constructed gender binary, a crossing that creates the face of an "other" gender that fluidly moves between the two traditional gender categories.

Metaportraits and the Binary Face

Referring to the reproduction technique used in Ruff's *Portraits* series, that is, the act of producing portraits of portraits, art historian Patricia Drück describes these pieces as "meta portraits."[10] This term can equally be applied to the *andere Portraits*, in that they are portraits of an already existing form of portraiture, the composite mugshot, and they appropriate the Minolta Montage Unit apparatus in their production. I think Drück's term is helpful in understanding these images and Ruff's motivations, because it captures the way in which Ruff is producing portraits of a portraiture practice in such a way as to reveal the *practice*'s character and essence. In doing this, Ruff presents the resulting composite portrait as an object of visual contemplation.

Ruff's decision to use only two identification portraits leads to a particular sort of binary composite. As Ruff states in the passage quoted above, he experiments with gender, combining the faces of both men and women. In this way, one might say that Ruff actually utilizes some notion of a "type," in gendered norms, and creates

10 Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie: Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff* (Dietrich Reimer, 2004), 170, quoted in Gelder and Wehtgeest, *Photography Theory*, 43.

composites of faces that disrupt these binary gender norms. In the piece titled *anderes Portrait, Nr. 71/65 (1994/95)* (figure 18), an incongruity between gendered norms is made especially visible. At the center of the image there is a single face. This face has delicate, feminine features, with rouged lips. Panning out from the center, two separate and incongruent hairlines begin to form. One face appears thinner, with a short, masculine hairstyle. The other face, behind it, creates a kind of halo effect, encircling the other. A wild mane of hair surrounds both faces. From the neck down, there is a single black turtleneck.

Figure 18: Thomas Ruff, anderes Portrait, Nr. 71/65 (1994/95). Image courtesy of the artist

Another piece, *anderes Portrait, Nr. 102/13 (1994/95)* (figure 19), produces an experience of constant double vision as one observes the appearance of the face. Although, like the previous image, there is a kind of alignment of faces at the center of the image, the features are less sharp, making the face appear to be in constant movement. The outlines of the two faces are closer to each other than in the previous image, and yet they do not align. The result of this lends the portrait a stereoscopic effect, giving the eye of the observer no outline to rest on as that of a singular face. The face at the center of the image appears feminine because of the obvious makeup, mainly eyeliner, eyeshadow and lipstick, as well as cosmetically shaped eyebrows. Yet the overall form and shape of the composite face produces an extremely masculine effect; it is stocky and muscular. The hairline is starkly defined by a dark hair color and parted to the side. As in all the *andere Portraits*, the facial appearances meld into a singular image below the face. In this portrait, the subject has a broad neck with a very visible Adam's apple, and shoulders clothed in a man's button-down shirt. This and the previous image are examples of how Ruff's composites highlight the incongruities between the two portraits that make up his composites. Although a single face appears at the center of the images, the misaligned outlines of the underlying faces immediately unsettles the perception of any singular face. A catalogue that was produced for an exhibition of the *andere Portraits* at the Venice Biennale in 1995 reveals that Ruff produced a few of these composites in stereo, using the same face to produce two different composites.[11] In the catalogue, two separate composites using one of the same faces sit side by side on opposing pages. This adds another level of stereoscopic vision for the observer; one can see the same face, but differently. The portrait I just mentioned, *anderes Portrait, Nr. 102/13 (1994/95)*, has a kind of doppelgänger in the piece titled *anderes Portrait, Nr. 102/125 (1994/95)* (figure 20), which uses one of the faces used in the former portrait but combines it with a different face. When placed side by side, one is able to observe the similarities between these two portraits, most significantly in the eyes. But the image gives way, once one turns

11 Thomas Ruff, *Andere Porträts* + 3D. (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1995), 34, 35.

to the rest of the face, to the merging and disparity produced by the imposition of the "other face." The shapes of the heads are different, and the clothing worn, which can be seen clearly from the neck down, differs as well. In looking at these portraits side by side, some of the characteristics of the shared face emerge through the comparison, while, at the same time, the binary structure of these portraits is accentuated.

Figure 19: Thomas Ruff, anderes Portrait, Nr. 102/13, 1994-95. Images courtesy of the artist

Ruff's *andere Portraits* consist of overtly and visibly manipulated images. Aside from the many layers that are produced by the reproduction practice used to create the *andere Portraits*, there are also many layers within the content of the images. Ruff's intervention

in producing these images is made visible through the use of analogue mediums, both the photographic apparatus of the Minolta Montage Unit and the process of silk-screening. This intervention is made more visible to the viewer in the choice of a binary image structure, because the viewer sees more clearly the outlines of each individual face. There is a seemingly constant movement between faces, a binary face that never stays put.

Figure 20: Thomas Ruff, anderes Portrait, Nr. 102/125, 1994-95. Images courtesy of the artist

Rather than applying a statistical technique that would merge the faces into a conglomerate, such that the multiplicity of outlines created a blur, Ruff chooses to use just two images and thus makes the misalignment all the more visible. The spaces in between the two

opposing or incongruent faces become spaces of uncertainty. In the central areas where the two faces align, a third face emerges. This face, a "fiction" as Ruff calls it, is apparent and seen in the photograph, and yet it exists only in the pictorial realm.[12] Historically, in Galton's use of the composite portrait, this "fiction" was endowed with a level of certainty and statistical salience. Yet, in Ruff's portraits, this "fictional" or "other" face refuses to stand still. In place of certainty, one sees double and then, again, multiple faces. The areas of commonality are unhinged, uncoupled from their surroundings, and produce instead an uncertainty. Once you see a face, it changes and you see another, and then it changes again. Ruff's portraits produce a constant mutability and expose a process of perceptual construction at work in the observer. In this way, the experience of the observer of the image is a part of what is on display in the image.

The technical attributes of the Minolta Montage Unit are described in a trade magazine: "Interestingly, the synthesizer is not hindered by racial or sex barriers. It can be adjusted for skin tone and texture, allowing any feature mix of male or female."[13] This is framed as a kind of technological advantage: that the apparatus is neutral and unhindered by social norms. Ruff utilizes this feature to produce portraits that mutate fixed, binary notions of gender. Ruff's constructions of what he calls "fictional faces" present faces that reveal not only the negotiations of a technically produced representation but also the relationship of the representations to the cultural contexts in which identity is negotiated. The *andere Portraits* display the malleability and ambivalence of identity. Dan Adler points out that the *andere Portraits* "demonstrate how the misuse of archival technologies may be read as gestures of a progressive political position, one that is open to the concept of exposing (or at least acknowledging) subjects that cannot be (or resist being) classified."[14] Ruff's *andere Portraits* reference the relationships between surveillance by security forces, archival documentation and

12 Thomas Ruff, email message to author, May 15, 2016.

13 Clemens Mitscher, "1987 – Opfer," Clemens Mitscher website, accessed May 25, 2017, http://mitscher.de/content/?page_id=265.

14 Adler, "The Apparatus," 7.

identity. The use of the binaries that visually structure Ruff's composites may also be understood as a reference to the binaries that problematize the visual operations of recognition, that is, the inner versus the outer, the objective versus the subjective and, as Ruff says, "A truth versus fiction." [15]

Scale

One of the aspects that characterizes Ruff's work with portraiture is the monumental scale on which he has exhibited some of his portraits. Combining the photographic portrait with the genre of large-scale, life-size painting, Ruff emphasizes the iconic status of the photograph and, as Enwezor argues, "emancipates the photograph from being read as a document, moving it instead towards being perceived optically and approached haptically as a picture."[16] The large-scale format for the exhibition of prints was also used by Ruff in his exhibition of the *andere Portraits* at the Venice Biennale in 1995. This again affected the way in which these images conveyed the meaning of a certain photographic genre of portraiture, in this case, the mugshot, by removing them from the contexts of identification and policing, and instead allowing observers to approach them as pictorial objects of study.

Although they were not exhibited on a monumental scale, the *andere Portraits* were printed life size so that a viewer, upon confronting them up close, could witness a breakdown in their technical structure through the enlargement of the silk-screened, photographic grain (figure 21). Distance is accentuated through scale. The size of the portraits makes it so that the viewer has to stand

15 Ruff, Andere Porträts + 3D, 16.

16 Okwui Enwezor, "The Conditions of Spectrality and Spectatorship in Thomas Ruff's Photographs," in *Thomas Ruff: Works 1979-2011* (München: Schirmer Mosel, 2012), 11. [9–19] The monumental scale on which his series of identification portraits was exhibited in Düsseldorf, Germany drew criticism at the time, as it conjured up a cultural memory of a Nazi aesthetic. Thanks to artist Johan Röing, who attended the Düsseldorf school with Thomas Ruff and pointed this out.

at a distance to properly perceive the entire image – to see it as a complete portrait. The closer one gets to the image, the more abstract the image becomes, further alienating the observer from any identification with the face. The further away one gets, the more the movement between the binary faces is made visible. Rather than depicting a clear image of the constructed face of a criminal, as in the original composited mugshots, it only showcases the construct. The malleability of identity and identification is made evident.

Figure 21: Thomas Ruff, Venice Biennale, 1995. Images courtesy of the artist

The scale of Ruff's *andere Portraits* also runs counter to Galton's beliefs about the ideal way of perceiving composite portraits. Galton's research mentions size as an important determinant of the readability of composite portraits, saying that, the smaller the image, the more likely it is that an observer will be able to see a single average face emerge from the composite. Against this prescription, Ruff's portraits instead actively make visible a constant movement, and seem to revel in the inability of the viewer confronting the portrait to nail down anything "identifiable." On this scale, the artificial nature of the photographic image of a human subject gets exaggerated, further emphasizing the limits of the photograph – that it

can only express the surface of things. Ruff's large-scale exhibition of the *andere Portraits* reveals everything on the surface, making visible the many layers and details of the images' photographic structures. And yet these images also evade any of the truth claims that are associated with the practice of mugshot portraiture from which he borrows. His work seems to state: just because something is seen, it does not mean it is true. In fact, his work goes further: the more you see, the less the *truth* can be revealed.

Concluding Remarks

Ruff's *andere Portraits* are a perceptual study of the photographic construction of the face. The zones of incongruity between the faces are made visible, provoking a perceptual movement. This both reveals an internal relation between faces and produces a new, "fictional" face. Ruff recontextualizes the use of the portrait as a document, bringing the composite portrait into an art practice as an object of study and positioning it as a site of pure visuality. Yet it is still a portrait, and so the observer cannot help but connect the representation of the face with an identity. In this way, both the face and identity are revealed to be constructs. The binary presentation of faces provokes a constant perceptual movement – the face refuses to stand still. The *andere Portraits* thus reveal a nuanced understanding of the transience of identity, gender and form. In this way, Ruff's artistic use of the composite is a distillation of the practice of representational resistance to reductive forms of recognition I discussed in the previous section.

Through its appropriation of a security apparatus used for facial recognition, Ruff's artistic practice serves as a precursor to the artworks that I will go on to discuss. The *andere Portraits* experiment with the truth claims of the photographic document and visualize a dissonance between the subjective and objective processes of identity construction through photographic representation. As an artwork, the portraits call our attention to the processes of perception both behind the image's production and in the experience of the observer. Taken out of an original context of documentation, mug-

shots and security apparatuses, the *andere Portraits* point us toward the perceptual processes that are revealed upon the observation of the image, rather than depicting an image for a proposed function or to achieve a fixed outcome. Ruff's portraits provide questions rather than answers. They question the dominance of the visual technologies used in the service of operations of recognition directed toward subjects. In particular, his composites constitute an artistic resistance to the visual act of classification. This theme of resistance to classification is taken up in the work of the following two artists, who in turn extend this line of questioning and critique towards the algorithmic forms of perception and recognition.