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Anonyme Skulpturen, anonyme Bilder

In 1991, Enno Kaufhold programmatically noted in a special issue of *Aperture* on "New German Photography" that "cinema and especially TV have taken over the task of recording reality from photography. In the coldly calculated pictures of Struth, Gursky, and Ruff, as well as in the staged pictures of Förg and Prinz, reality appears again, in an elevated, aesthetic form."[1] Although taken out of context, the quote stresses two points, central to our research, whose implications we shall summarize briefly. Firstly, it emphasizes the fact that documentation derives from a primarily aesthetic position, an allegedly new stance, if compared with the origins of the Becher protocol. Secondly, it insists on the calculated dimension of Düsseldorf photography, which in the work of Ruff, Gursky and Sasse can be taken in a literal sense: most of their images are computed digitally, and thus mathematically, which shows the proximity between an artistic position – Düsseldorf photography's tendency to construct every image meticulously, controlling every aspect of it – and the digital tools used.

The study of digital technologies in use at the Düsseldorf School has shown, primarily through the study of the specific discourse connected with the digital and through the evaluation of the overtness of its technical limitations (e.g., pixel structure), that these technologies operate as markers of a reconfiguration of photographic depiction, the outcome of which is addressed by numerous artists using photography in the 1960s. The main consequence of this new perspective toward the production of photographic images can be formulated in a very simple way: while photographic representation has primarily been preoccupied with the ability of the medium to depict – and could thus be interpreted as a formalization of the physical reality –, the two-dimensional photographs will increasingly be acknowledged and interrogated as autonomous images. That particular shift occurred in the typological work of Bernd and Hilla Bechers, whose protocoled depiction considerably influenced their students. The protocol has had an important impact on Düsseldorf photography on a strictly formal level but as such also plays a significant role as vector of discourse addressing documentary practices. More than the depictive capacities of the photographic apparatus, used in the context of strictly defined rules, it is the documentary position it embodies that ought to be predominately evaluated. The Bechers' original pursuit of an objective depiction of reality translates in the work of the young generation into the aestheticized "depiction" of images using a documentary protocol rather than the depiction of the physical world. The Bechers' depiction of "anonymous architecture," which had been increasingly interpreted as "anonymous sculptures" in the late 1960s, could be seen as "anonymous images" in the work of their students.

While the formulation might sound trite, it has to be stressed that Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Jörg Sasse – and it will have to be established to which extent other students of the Bechers can be linked to that claim – are primarily concerned with the depiction

1 Enno Kaufhold, "The Mask of Opticality," op. cit., p. 68.

and the reproduction of images. A multitude of definitions of what a documentary stance may be, of which technologies or positions allowed a "truthful" or "objective" representation, have over time been given and pursued, leading to an extremely controversial debate as to whether any documentary form would be more legitimate than another one. If the documentary style, the transparency its discourses advocated and "the belief in the readability of the images" *by themselves* has been questioned in the 1940s already,[2] its reappearance in the 1960s, concomitant with the institutionalization of photography *and* a radical reorganization of photographic depiction, seems – on several layers – paradoxical.

Through the legitimation process of German documentary forms in the 1970s, Düsseldorf photography emerged in a context in which its very existence as an art form was no longer questioned. But in that process, it lost its role to a certain degree, as many documentary models they were associated with only existed in the context of specific documentary or archival projects. The liberty of the young generation of Düsseldorf photography has consequently also caused instability: Does their strictly artistic endeavor allow their association with documentary forms *outside* the documentary style? Is the quest to "depict things as they are," which constitutes a discursive precondition of several historical models, still a necessity of their work? Very generally, it could be argued that the depiction of the *images* pretending to show the things as they are has become central in the work of Düsseldorf photography. The documentary claim, although not explicit, resides in the confrontation of images with the knowledge the viewer already has of them. The focus shifts from the objectivist paradigm, in which practices and discourse on the relationship between the physical object and its depiction remain central and in which the aspiration for transparency prevails, to new documentary forms, addressing the confrontation of the image itself with the spectator. As the analogy with Thomas Demand's photographed cardboard models, reflecting media imagery and its associated knowledge shows, reality is not "behind" the picture, but in front of it. What Nora Alter calls "visibility" (after Heidegger's concept *Umsicht*)[3] can be seen as an increasingly important precondition of the contemporary scopic regime, taking into account "the world round-about us"[4] and extending vision itself ("sight as a physical operation") and visuality ("sight as a social fact").

This research further highlights historiographical questions that the study of digital technologies – an angle never before extensively pursued – has opened up. The fact that digital technologies used in photography were considered with suspicion, as the post-photographic debate has shown, but that they were interpreted according

2 Olivier Lugon, *Le style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans, 1920 – 1945*, op. cit., p. 365.

3 Nora Alter, "The Political Im/Perceptible in the Essay Films: Farocki's 'Images of the World and Inscription of War,'" *New German Critique*, No. 68, Spring-Summer 1996, p. 166 – 168.

4 Magda King, *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 68 – 70.

to another prism in the Düsseldorf context, shows the strength and resilience of the documentary paradigm established in the 1970s. But it also reveals a certain position toward new technologies. As much in the early experiments in the 1960s and 1970s as in the 1990s, the digital is considered suspect or soulless. Sol LeWitt's open cubes and Manfred Mohr's equivalents are both processual forms, with an almost identical formal result. If the conceptual inscription of LeWitt's work obviously conflicts with Mohr's explicitly aesthetic and visual stance, it is ultimately the fact that the latter work was produced by a computer that discards these cultural forms. In the Düsseldorf context, the reception of digital technologies in the early phase of their use was either ignored or interpreted as a sheer tool that was subordinated to the artists' strategies. In Sasse's case, it was associated with formal experiments. And when digital visual culture became the subject of their work in the late 1990s, suspicions toward the new medium had vanished, and the digital parameter was not reflected upon either – except when it was visible and overt, as in Ruff's *jpegs*.

A third conclusion of this research lies in the uncovering of a rather sporadically mentioned component of the work of Sasse, Gursky and Ruff through its connection with conceptual art. The effect of a reorganization of photographic depiction in Düsseldorf photography, whose origins and implications we aimed to trace, was achieved through the evaluation of the Becher protocol, which allowed us to draw a formal and conceptual correspondence between the 1970s and Düsseldorf. The interrelations between the set of rules defining the Bechers' photographic body of work with the role played by digital technologies – as much on a formal as on a discursive level – has allowed an apprehension of the work of their students. The study of the early phase of the use of digital technologies has shown that all three photographers adopted an underlying grid structure and combinatory or serial mechanisms within single images. These "fundamental" mechanisms, inherited from conceptual art and mediated through the Bechers, innervated individual strategies and supplemented specific formal transformations. The panorama emerges in Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff's work before digital technologies were used, as implicit confrontation with grid structures and single image typologies: the generative and confrontational mechanisms in their images were extended through format variations, with an ensuing immersive character, consistently interpreted as an extension of documentary "value." The reception and interpretation of Andreas Gursky's panoramas of the 1990s thus legitimizes the concept of super-documentary, considering the numerous factors that enforce its depictive or informative claim. These formal transformations mark a shift toward generic forms with increasing image formats and a concomitant "reduction" of the specific information an image conveys. As such, these strategies can be interpreted as a new step in documentary forms. The documentary style has throughout the twentieth century claimed a documentary value by emulating the formal construction of a certain type of deadpan depiction. In the 1980s Düsseldorf photography starts to develop new positions that reflect the spectator's visual culture

(see Fig. 147). These transformations, present in the work of other Düsseldorf photographers, could in this research be established through analysis of the digital tools that enforce this formal reconfiguration.

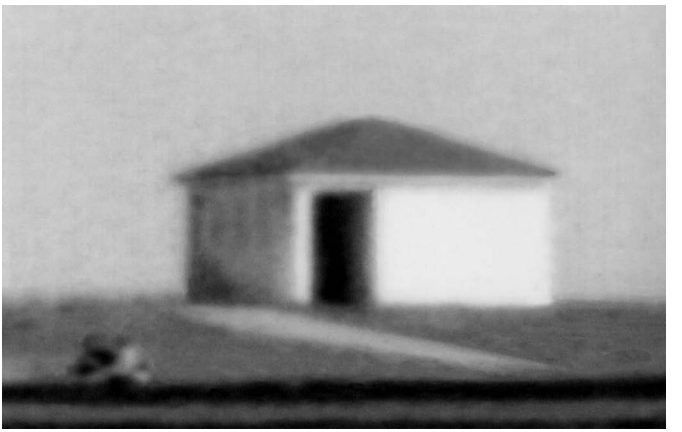

Fig. 147: Jörg Sasse, *3502*, 1995 (36 × 54 cm)

The period of generalization of the digital, set in the late 1990s, marks an increasing trend toward generic forms whose origin can clearly be traced back to the Bechers' typological work. If during the 1990s, Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky's images articulate through various strategies the plural image *within* the single image, the late 1990s implement the inscription of the photographs in image systems, which in Jörg Sasse's *Tableaus* is implicit even earlier. In Andreas Gursky's work, images of the Ruhr (i.e., *Rhein I*, 1996) or Paris (i.e., *Paris, Montparnasse*, 1993) are progressively replaced by a global imagery whose formal transfiguration is stripped down to generic type-images and whose content is generated based on grid systems. Thomas Ruff's categorial inquiry of stars (i.e., *Sterne*) is transposed to Internet imagery (i.e., *nudes*) or to strictly formal experiments (i.e., *Zycles*), bearing the same categorial architecture. Jörg Sasse explicitly interrogates the concept of the imaging system – in his case, allegorically addressing digital computing –, through his *Speicher*, which stores, articulates and displays photographs. The 1990s focus on generative and comparative processes within the structure of single images, re-inscribing (plural) serial constructions into individual photographs. The 2000s carry these strategies outside this limitation, although such single-image typologies often remain autonomous objects, individually displayed on a wall. But they stand for a globalized visual culture in which any image is necessarily submitted to an interpretative framework within a larger referential field, which again stresses the role of the beholder and the associated mechanisms of vision. Ultimately, the use of digital technologies in Düsseldorf photography has not significantly altered the strategies of its members. In an early stage, digital technologies only acted as one tool among others used to pursue a set strategy. Since the late 1990s, the digital has primarily

been addressed in the context of new image circulation economies. Thomas Ruff's *jpegs* clearly express and interrogate the technical contingencies of image formats and their implications but do not as such constitute technology-determined visual forms. The study of Düsseldorf photography through the prism of the digital has clearly opened its appraisal to new interpretative models. The correlation between its core mechanisms of digital imaging systems and serial imagery has allowed for an understanding of the photographic reconfiguration expressed by conceptual art. But could the general conclusions of this study be applicable to other Düsseldorf photographers not using such technologies? How could we articulate the work of those photographers using digital technologies (Ruff, Gursky and Sasse) and of those who don't (Struth, Höfer and Hütte)? Should Thomas Struth's 1986 picture *Shinju-ku (die Hochhäuser), Tokio 1986* – which illustrates the conclusive section of Kaufhold's "The Mask of Opticality"[5] – rather be ascribed to Walker Evans or to Jörg Sasse? The digital itself does not constitute a defining character of Düsseldorf photography. Its epistemological context of emergence, on the other hand, undoubtedly does.

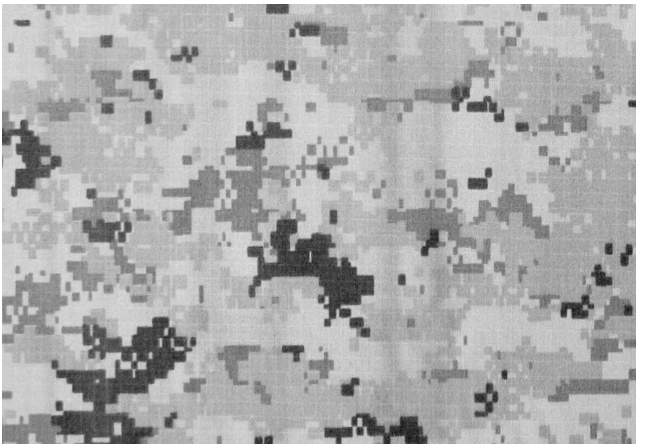

Fig. 148: MARPAT desert pattern, USMC (fabric)

From Düsseldorf photography to digital camouflage

In order to highlight this shift from documentary forms based on indexicality and interpreted as such to new models primarily addressing cognitive and mnemonic functions, two apparently unrelated examples shall be briefly discussed. The aim is to stress the fact that these imageries rely on an understanding of the contemporary world through its visual representation and to show that digital technologies and their associated visualization processes have altered our very

5 Enno Kaufhold, "The Mask of Opticality," op. cit., p. 68.

habits of spectatorship and have "reorganized"[6] vision itself. In 2001 the US Marine Corps patented a new camouflage pattern called MARPAT (Fig. 148),[7] which has since replaced most American military camouflage uniforms. The particularity of its pattern resides in the fact that it is based on small rectangular colored pixels, "provid[ing] camouflage in both the human visible light and the near infrared range."[8] The US patent technically defining the pattern mentions the fact that the fur of animals – the model that modern concealing technologies were often based upon – often varies from very dark on the back to very light colors on the belly,[9] "the gradation from dark to light break[ing] up the surface of an object as one thing."[10] MARPAT – colloquially called digital camouflage – "depends on [a] macro pattern resulting from a repeat of a micro pattern," which blends the segmented parts of the treated texture (fabric, etc.) into the background. Before elucidating the reason for this apparently odd analogy between camouflage technologies and digital photography, one particular aspect of MARPAT ought to be developed: the most effective way – stemmed by extensive scientific research – to mask a real object or person in real space resides in its concealment behind a modified incidence of its depiction. But that particular representation does not aim at copying or reproducing – unlike some old camouflage patterns that basically reproduced leaves in order to blend a subject into a vegetal background – but rather deconstructs the very mechanisms of vision. Paradoxically, the apparently best result of such a deconstructive method uses as a medium a pixelated pattern, which in the common understanding is simply a low-resolution image of reality. The scene perceived by the observer thus consists of a parasitic, composite cognitive view. The pixel-image stands in-between reality and its codified and formalized depiction, embodying a similar status to conceptual experiments of the 1960s (e.g., Jan Dibbets). Epistemologically, this procedure highlights the importance of representation above its physical reference – and concomitantly points to the fundamentally historical condition of human sight, whose implication in the digital era is only beginning to be evaluated, and in which mechanical vision supplants the human eye. Historically, camouflage had been developed during World War I as a counter strategy to circumvent aerial photographic reconnaissance, which started to be systematically used.[11] As such, that concealing strategy used in warfare directly derives from the use of mechanical recording devices that were, in that context, primarily mounted on airplanes. The generalized use of cameras in the early twenty-first century – often mounted as much on soldiers or rifles as on missiles or

6 See Jonathan Cray, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, op. cit., p. 2.

7 The acronym MARPAT stands for Marine pattern.

8 *Patent US 6805957 B1* for US Marine Corps utility uniform, November 7, 2001, p. 1. Available at https://patents.google.com/patent/US6805957B1/en, accessed on June 26, 2018.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 For a history of camouflage through its relationship with photography and vision, see especially Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek. Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance*, New York, Zone Books, 2012.

drones – influences the development of camouflage patterns, which more than ever respond to the use of optical recording devices, taking pictures as much from the air as from the ground. To a certain extent, the MARPAT's pixelated structure thus constitutes a logical answer to the digital devices it is supposed to seek concealment from.

Fig. 149: Thomas Demand, *Grotto*, 2006 (detail)

German photographer Thomas Demand, whose strategy addresses the relationship between several realities (referent, model, depiction), has interestingly used the very same process. The artist builds and subsequently photographs paperboard models that re-enact photographs of well-known media images. The purpose isn't illusionistic but rather aims at addressing collective visual memory, confronting the viewer with images that are already known. In his recent project *Grotto* (2006), built for the Serpentine Gallery in London in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and ARUP,[12] Demand reconstructed a cave situated in Mallorca and represented on numerous postcards[13] with approximately fifty tons of cardboard, using roughly 900,000 discrete pieces. The overall project won't be developed here, as only one particular aspect is of interest in this context. In order to create some unfocused areas in the photograph – Demand does not use digital retouching tools –, he physically created cardboard pixel layers[14] that would give the impression that some areas were blurry (see Fig. 149). The use of digital 3D production technologies was the outcome of the artist's interrogation of the digital and not only the resolution of a specific problem:

12 See for example *Thomas Demand*, exhibition catalogue (Serpentine Gallery, London, 2006), Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2006.

13 A set of postcards is reproduced in a booklet, contained in the box set produced with the Fondazione Prada, which allows comparing sections of Demand's *Grotto* and source material. *Thomas Demand. Processo Grottesco/Yellowcake*, Milano, Progetto Prada Arte, 2008.

14 Tamara Trodd, "Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall and Sherrie Levine," in Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, *Photography after Conceptual Art*, Chichester (West Sussex) and Malden (MA), Wiley-Blackwell and Association of Art Historians, 2010, p. 141.

> "*The other starting point for Grotto, 2006, was my deliberations on how the digital could be incorporated into my images [...]. I felt certain that [the use of digital cameras] wasn't the path for me. So I decided to take that representational apparatus, the digitalized world (which is only interesting to me in this context), and translate it into reality and then photograph it in order to regain it as a two-dimensional image.*"[15]

In this particular case the photographed object is "digitized" in real life, in order to produce a more "real" perception of it. Demand's strategy thus produces a fundamental questioning of the common relationship between a *continuous* depiction of reality – as W. J. Mitchell or Peter Lunefeld theorized it – and a *discrete* representation of it, and it also probes the indexical connection in photography.[16] Although not pixelated, Demand's leaf patterns used as wallpapers in the exhibition and displayed as insert in the Schirmer/Mosel exhibition catalogue echo camouflage strategies and more generally point to the ambiguous relationship between 2D representations and their 3D referent – "media as architecture" as Beatriz Colomina argues in a text of the catalogue.[17]

The natural procedure of breaking apart a surface, defining the camouflage structure of animals, or the production of analogue pixels in the real world in order to manipulate optical perception can consequently be interpreted as proto-digital, as breaking reality into formalized picture elements is the core mechanism at play in digital imaging systems. These strategies address a zone – between reality and perception – in which many artists today operate. And that particular area connects MARPAT and the *Grotto* project with Düsseldorf photography. Grid constructions in the work of Ruff, Sasse and Gursky invest an interstice between reality and depiction – when the photographic apparatus is considered as it has often been conceived. They further epitomize the convergence of two areas that Rosalind Krauss laid out as being necessarily opposed in her 1979 article "Grids": grid and mimesis. She states that the grid structure "declares the modernity of modern art" because it "states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. [...] In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree."[18] As such, the grid possesses an autonomy that has collided with reality as it did during the advent of conceptual photographic practices in the 1960s. The antimimetic structure collides, dialogues, addresses and enacts a rapprochement

15 Ibid., p. 51.

16 The project also leads to key disagreements between representationalist philosophical positions (or indirect realism) and naive realism (or direct realism). The first position states that the real world only exists through the way it is perceived; the second that reality as it is perceived equals the physical reality.

17 As much because he reconstructs media image in 3D, than because he makes models of modern architecture, which Colomina considers as a mass media. See Beatriz Colomina, "Media as Modern Architecture," in *Thomas Demand*, exhibition catalogue (Serpentine Gallery, London, 2006), op. cit., p. 19.

18 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," op. cit., p. 50.

between several layers – the physical reality, the visual in-between and representation. The work of Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Jörg Sasse operates within that area. Their images are bi-dimensional and re-enact the grid structure through the orthogonal spaces they create. Their work further embodies a self-reflexive aspect, as the images themselves address the convergence of images of reality and the two-dimensional: like the Bechers before them, they choose to merge reality and depiction, producing a codified correspondence between the two. The mathematical formalization of reality results in the focus on visual forms that address their consumption methods rather than their original relationship to a physical reality. Indexicality as defining parameter is deconstructed, and the focus is shifted toward what gradually becomes the real: as some media theorists such as Paul Virilio[19] have claimed, the image increasingly precedes reality and accordingly replaces it.

The chief function of digital technologies lies in their function as markers of the reconfiguration that connects the different layers of the representational apparatus. As MARPAT patterns, which belong to several strata – while they exist physically in reality, they clearly operate as images in perceptive layers as well –, the tools and strategies employed by Ruff, Sasse and Gursky mark the nodal points of interference between several spaces, deconstructing transparency and related representational concepts. Apparent pixel structure (e.g., Ruff's *jpeg* series) and digital effects (e.g., Sasse's *Tableaus*) highlight the intermediate character, in between various visual strata. The physical world is not only increasingly perceived through its photographic depiction. But that depiction is progressively altered into a generic representation, which considerably shifts away from the concept of imprint or trace. The conception of the photographic image as construct, subordinated to economic, social or political powers and increasingly enacted by a limited number of proponents, seems more accurate than ever before. And its relationship with reality has undergone an important reconfiguration – the appearance of computational or augmented forms of photography merging with 3D renderings or scans constitute the recent symptoms of that shift[20] – as was noted by Jonathan Crary in the introduction of *Techniques of the Observer* already in 1991.

> *"The formalization and diffusion of computer-generated imagery heralds the ubiquitous implantation of fabricated visual 'spaces' radically different from the mimetic capabilities of film, photography and television. These latter three, at least until the mid-1970s, were generally forms of analog media that*

19 In the specific context of warfare, Virilio argues in *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception*, that the reality of the war landcsape becomes "cinematic," because of its increased visibility (which derives as much from lens flares than from cameras). See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception,* New York, Verso Books, 1989.

20 See for example Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, William Uricchio, "The Algorithmic Turn. Photosynth, Augmented Reality and the State of the Image" in *Visual Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2011 or Maxime Guyon, Milo Keller & Joël Vacheron (ed.), *Augmented Photography*, Lausanne, écal, 2017.

> *still corresponded to the optical wavelengths of the spectrum and to a point of view, static or mobile, located in real space. [...] Increasingly, [the] emergent technologies of image production are becoming the dominant models of visualization. [...] Most of the historically important function of the human eye are being supplanted by practices in which visual images no longer have any reference to the position of an observer in a 'real,' optically perceived world."* [21]

The main emphasis of this study targeted the understanding of the reconfiguration of *depictive* strategies. It aimed to examine how in the 1960s and 1970s the depiction of objects in the physical world was increasingly replaced by the depiction of images. It further addressed the modalities through which representational strategies in Düsseldorf photography were affected by this reorganization. But ultimately, if *depicting* constituted the core focus, *seeing* cannot be excluded from that interrogation. The representational shift assessed throughout this research ultimately raises the question of the impact of these reconfigurations on vision itself, and its increased mechanization.

21 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, op. cit., p. 1 – 2.