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# FRAMING THE DÜSSELDORF SCHOOL

The commonly used terminology “Düsseldorf School” or “Becher School” proves extremely resilient in the historiography of this subject. It is not our aim here to systematically examine its history. However, the importance of the reception of its proponents calls for a rapid survey of this phenomenon, as that label has considerably impacted the perception of digital works. Except for the mention of a geographical, historical or circumstantial link to the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf or the Bechers as inspirational or tutorial figures, there has been no relevant argument allowing a stringent definition of what has always been considered a “group,” at least nominally. Until very recently, the existence of this so-called school was commonly assumed, disregarding the fact that it had until very recently not been systematically studied. These historiographical circumstances are even more singular considering that even the lack of delineation has never been noticed, much less re-evaluated, until recent years. The “Düsseldorf School,” “Becher School” or “Düsseldorf School of Photography” has become such a persistent label that it seemed unnecessary to provide a rigorous definition of its formal specificities or its history. Only recently, several scholars have begun to question explicitly the very idea of Düsseldorf photography as a coherent entity. In an exhaustive overview of the Düsseldorf phenomenon, Stefan Gronert is one of the first to point out the fragility of the very idea of a “Becher School.” “Spontaneously identifiable” but also provoking “frowning,”<sup>23</sup> the notion is here primarily associated with a place of production and an educational

23 Stefan Gronert (ed.), *Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule*, Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2009, p. 13. The texts in German have been translated by the author, if not mentioned otherwise.

institution. It is thus mainly, but not exclusively, connected with the Becher class and brings together photographers who wouldn't necessarily have been associated if they hadn't studied together.<sup>24</sup>

This uncertainty as to what actually constitutes the "Düsseldorf School" has an immediate impact on the composition of its body of photographers, probably the most evident symptom of this indeterminacy. In the various publications and exhibitions addressing Düsseldorf photography, the body of photographers associated with the city or the school thus varies considerably. It commonly ranges from a small number of star photographers to a much wider group of photographers somehow connected to the city or the Kunstakademie. The scope sometimes even extends to commercial photography or artistic production only remotely connected to the artistic practices and aesthetic features commonly associated with Düsseldorf. The aim of this study is not to conduct an exhaustive analysis of the patterns that have led scholars and curators to establish those discussed compositions. Rather, we will concentrate on the variations of those selections and the reasons invoked to decide upon them. Ultimately, we aim to show that the notion of a school is far from being established and that those editorial projects reveal fundamental differences of definition, as much in the features brought forth supposedly defining the school as in the photographers involved therein.

According to Stefan Gronert, the term "Becher School" was introduced "officially" in the fall of 1988 at the Johnen + Schöttle Gallery in Cologne, at the exhibition *Klasse Bernd Becher*, displaying works by Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and Petra Wunderlich.<sup>25</sup> A review of the exhibition written by Isabel Graw for *Flash Art*<sup>26</sup> considerably contributed to the widespread acceptance, internationally, of the term. One of the earliest academic publications in which the idea of a school arises is Helga Meister's *Fotografie in Düsseldorf. Die Szene im Profil*<sup>27</sup> from 1991. This early project addresses Düsseldorf photography as a whole, the "Düsseldorf School of Objective Photographic Art,"<sup>28</sup> an early denomination for the "Düsseldorf School," only being here a subcategory among a very heterogeneous body of photographers with various connections to the city. Overall, the publication includes the images of fifty-two photographers. Surprisingly, this book is rarely mentioned in studies about Düsseldorf photography, showing that a consequent historiography still has to be established. Even more surprisingly, the author concentrates on the often neglected circumstances that led to the importance of Düsseldorf as a center for photography. And even though Meister emphasizes the fact that it is too early to conduct an exhaustive study of Düsseldorf photography, she suggests the key points required for a study of this subject – the role of the school and the teachers, the

24 Ibid.

25 See Stefan Gronert, op. cit., p. 14.

26 Isabel Graw, "Bernhard Becher's Students," op. cit., p. 123 ff.

27 Helga Meister, *Fotografie in Düsseldorf. Die Szene im Profil*, Düsseldorf, Schwann im Patmos Verlag, 1991.

28 "Düsseldorfer Schule der objektiven Fotokunst."

importance of the cultural environment, the proximity and importance of the advertising industry (photographers, technical aspects, companies) and the role of nearby institutions and galleries – sketching out what seems, in a cultural-historical effort to capture this phenomenon, a relevant introduction. Despite a methodologically stringent approach, mentioning the early date of such a study and the fact that many protagonists were, in fact, not in contact at all, Meister proposes a starting point for a comprehensive study of the phenomenon that only few scholars have reflected upon. The photographers she classifies as part of the “objective photographic art” – a definition directly derived from the Bechers’ doctrine – clearly share obvious aesthetic features. At that time, more than at any other, the students of Bernd Becher could be considered a coherent group. The aesthetic consistency and the recurrence of photographed subjects are indisputable. Apart from the Bechers themselves and the aforementioned superstars, Meister includes in this list Boris Becker, Andi Brenner, Ulrich Gambke, Axel Hütte, Manfred Jade, Simone Nieweg, Tata Ronkholz, Jörg Sasse and Petra Wunderlich. If many have over the years acquired a status almost as important as the four stars (Axel Hütte, Simone Nieweg, Jörg Sasse and Petra Wunderlich), some (Boris Becker, Ulrich Gambke, Andi Brenner) are barely mentioned in other studies or had only limited significance in the constitution of the “Düsseldorf School.” It is only lately that they reappeared in major publications on the subject: the recent *Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography* exhibition organized by the NRW Forum Düsseldorf in 2010, tends to suggest a re-evaluation of the whole concept, which is reflected in the choice of the photographers associated with Düsseldorf.<sup>29</sup>

Rupert Pfab, author of the first published dissertation on the subject, noticed in 2001, that it is surprising that there is no “comprehensive academic study” of the relationships of the students of Bernd Becher with one another and of the relationship between teachers and students, despite the numerous essays and exhibitions covering those photographers.<sup>30</sup> His doctoral thesis at the Freie Universität Berlin (1999) enlightens readers regarding many aspects of the “Düsseldorf School,” addressing various thematic aspects (portraits, street photography, “abstract” pictures, etc.) and series (e.g., Thomas Struth’s *Museums Photographs*) of the younger generation. He also analyzes the role and work of prominent teachers of the Kunstakademie (Bernd and Hilla Becher, Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, etc.). In the introductory chapter of his book,<sup>31</sup> he states that Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Struth (first class of Bernd Becher), Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff (later class of Bernd Becher) are the “object” of his study. Pfab legitimates his selection with their “consistent work series” with “art historically relevant themes,” their “international

29 Werner Lippert and Christoph Schaden (ed.), *Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography*, exhibition catalogue (NRW-Forum Düsseldorf, 2010), Düsseldorf, Schaden, 2010.

30 Rupert Pfab, *Studien zur Düsseldorfer Photographie. Die frühen Akademieschüler von Bernd Becher*, Weimar, VDG, 2001, p. 16.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 11, “Gegenstand, Zielsetzung und Methode” (object, objective and methods).

consideration” and their presence in leading exhibitions like the Kassel *documenta* or the Venice Biennial.<sup>32</sup> However, while he unquestionably chooses major figures, he fails to provide the reader with an explanation as to why those photographers were selected while others were discarded. Elger Esser, Laurenz Berges, Jörg Sasse or Petra Wunderlich, often seen as major figures among the group (if somehow less famous than the stars) are not included, and their work or role is hardly mentioned. The first study that supposedly addresses the “Düsseldorf School” as a phenomenon rather than as a sum of individuals thus fails to bring forth a relevant definition of one of its major feature: its very members.

Since 2001, several major publications have addressed the subject thoroughly. However, if we consider the proliferation of publications and exhibitions of individual photographers or group shows – Thomas Ruff’s images have been displayed in several hundred catalogues<sup>33</sup> –, it is noteworthy that there still is a surprisingly low number of surveys of the subject. Critical debate about the very idea of a school or group, the relationships among the Bechers and their students or among the students themselves remains scarce. And if we examine the constitution of the various compositions of the Düsseldorf School in those publications, we notice a surprising variety. The arguments – or the lack of arguments in some cases – invoked to establish those selections show the fragility of the whole concept of a school.

*Heute bis jetzt*,<sup>34</sup> a two-part exhibition held at the Museum Kunst Palast Düsseldorf in 2002, suggests no less than thirty-four photographers, most of whom had, at one point or another, visited Bernd Becher’s class at the Kunstakademie. The introductory text from the exhibition catalogue, also written by Rupert Pfab, uses the term “photography from Düsseldorf” or “Düsseldorf photography,”<sup>35</sup> rather than “School of Düsseldorf” or “Becher School.” The author seems to overtly avoid the imprecise concept of a school, considering a wide spectrum of photographers, engaging with a broad phenomenon rather than addressing a homogenous object. However, while the term school is now avoided, the definition of photographic practice in Düsseldorf is still connected to the features commonly associated with the concept of a school or group. Most photographers presented here seem to have a connection to the Kunstakademie, the Bechers or the city, with an emphasis, as Pfab argues, on the role of large-format photography, its format specific content and the importance of context in museum exhibitions.<sup>36</sup> Even though Pfab avoids the commonly used label and seems to open up the spectrum of photographers, the pervasive model, which presupposes a connection between them, implicitly prevails.

32 Ibid.

33 Ruff’s 2012 monograph already lists more than four hundred books and exhibition catalogues (group and solo shows). See *Thomas Ruff. Works 1979 – 2011*, exhibition catalogue (Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2012), Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2012, p. 259 – 266.

34 Rupert Pfab (ed.), *Heute bis jetzt. Zeitgenössische Fotografie aus Düsseldorf (Teil 1 and 2)*, exhibition catalogue (Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, 2002), Schirmer/Mosel, cop. 2002.

35 Ibid., p. 11 – 24. “Düsseldorfer Photographie” or “Photographie aus Düsseldorf” are used.

36 Ibid., p. 17.

*Objectivités*,<sup>37</sup> the exhibition held at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris from 2008 to 2009 displays, along with works of the stars and their teachers, works of Laurenz Berges, Elger Esser, Axel Hütte, Simon Nieweg, Jörg Sasse and Petra Wunderlich, who are commonly considered important figures of the movement. However, it also shows images of Lothar Baumgarten, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Klaus Mettig, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, Katharina Sieverding and Beat Streuli, whose association with the most famous students of the Bechers is less common. Gerhard Richter and Hans-Peter Feldmann, as teachers or inspirational figures of the same generation as the Bechers, are often invoked but are usually not assimilated to the "Düsseldorf School" itself. They clearly embody a similar role to the Bechers at the Kunstakademie and might have had as much impact on their students as their photography teachers. This aspect, also, has yet to be fully explored. The presence of Beat Streuli and, even more so, Sigmar Polke, is rather uncommon, considering their remote relationship to Düsseldorf photography.

In 2009 Stefan Gronert's *Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule*<sup>38</sup> directly approaches the problems of definition inherent in most academic studies. In his introductory essay, the author points out the fragility of the methodological approach of the concept of a school. He questions less the potentialities of such a phenomenon, which he compares to analogue situations like the "Helsinki School" or the "Vancouver School"<sup>39</sup> than the lack of a consistent study of its mechanisms. The presence of a probably "unique" density of museums and galleries of international importance and of the now well-known Grieger laboratory, besides the undoubtedly excellent quality of the education at the Kunstakademie, provides the city with excellent predispositions for the emergence of a group, school or movement.<sup>40</sup> Gronert's establishment of a body of photographers accordingly allows a certain vagueness. He doesn't pretend to provide a wide or exhaustive overview of all Becher students, or of those photographers who have studied at the Kunstakademie in the 1970s or 1980s (some internationally important figures like Thomas Demand or Katharina Sieverding are excluded from his selection), and he rejects short-time Becher students (e.g., Lois Renner) or "hybrid forms" of photographic imagery (Sigmar Polke or Gerhard Richter), concentrating solely on the Bechers, Laurenz Berges, Elger Esser, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Simone Nieweg, Thomas Ruff, Jörg Sasse, Thomas Struth and Petra Wunderlich. Interestingly, the book shows a fairly small number of early photographs, thus exemplifying a heterogeneous character of the body of images rather than the coherence Düsseldorf photography is commonly associated with.

37 Maria Müller, Armin Zweite and Fabrice Hergott (ed.), *Objectivités. La photographie à Düsseldorf*, exhibition catalogue (Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2008–2009), Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2008.

38 Stefan Gronert, op. cit. English edition: Stefan Gronert (ed.), *The Düsseldorf School of Photography*, New York, Aperture, 2010.

39 Stefan Gronert quotes Jean-François Chevrier on that particular matter. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

The catalogue of the exhibition of the Schirmer collection, held at the Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste in Munich between November 2009 and February 2010 declares, in its introductory essay,<sup>41</sup> that the “homogeneity of artistic positions that the label Düsseldorf School of photography suggests does *de facto* not exist.”<sup>42</sup> The main prerequisite to the existence of a “school,” which Ulrich Pohlmann underlines, is the teaching role of Bernd Becher, “supported” by his wife. Although he looks to the *Objectivités* and *Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule* catalogues for insight on historical developments of the movement, he also highlights one fundamental point whose importance is rarely pointed out: the role of Schirmer/Mosel editors in the establishment of Düsseldorf photography in the artistic context. The selection of exhibited photographers is the same as Stefan Gronert’s, except for the presence of Ulrich Gambke, a student of the Bechers (1990 – 1993) hardly ever mentioned in the literature on the subject, except in the early *Fotografie in Düsseldorf. Die Szene im Profil* (1991).<sup>43</sup>

*Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography*, an exhibition organized by the NRW Forum Düsseldorf in 2010, is claimed, in the introductory text of its catalogue, to be the first project to explicitly link the Bechers and their students to Stephen Shore’s *New Color Photography*, thereby suggesting a new angle to define Düsseldorf photography. The various essays constitutive of the catalogue address key questions concerning the existence and the definition of what the “Düsseldorf School” might be. Maren Polte specifically investigates the terminology issue mentioned earlier and the relationship between teachers and students and among students themselves.<sup>44</sup> She retrospectively highlights incoherencies in the establishment of a consistent body of photographers, labeled Becher students, but who often have not even studied together or been in contact. When Andreas Gursky began his studies at the Kunstakademie, for instance, Thomas Struth had almost finished his.<sup>45</sup> Of course, those described circumstances do not necessarily question the idea of a school. However, they do constitute historiographical evidence for the labeling phenomenon, which tends to establish a denomination without producing a proper analysis of its characteristics. A further element we ought to mention here, which doesn’t derive directly from the historiographical analysis because of its absence, is the omission of several photographers who seem to share common influences from American landscape photography and share aesthetics and interest for industrial architecture and its impact. Important figures such as Michael Schmidt, Joachim Brohm, Heinrich

41 Ulrich Pohlmann, “Arbeiten der Düsseldorfer Photoschule aus der Sammlung Lothar Schirmer,” in *Die Düsseldorfer Schule. Photographien aus der Sammlung Lothar Schirmer*, exhibition catalogue (Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste, Munich, 2009/2010), Munich, Schirmer/Mosel, 2009, p. 11 – 16.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

43 Helga Meister, *Fotografie in Düsseldorf. Die Szene im Profil*, op. cit.

44 Maren Polte, “‘Becher Disciples,’ ‘Becher School,’ ‘Düsseldorf Photography School.’ Approaching Terminological Definitions and Perspectives on a Phenomenon,” in Werner Lippert and Christoph Schaden (ed.), *Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography*, op. cit., p. 271 – 291.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

Riebesehl, Manfred Hamm or Wilhelm Schürmann are hardly ever associated with the photographers of the Düsseldorf School, despite obvious connections in the depicted objects, in the formal construction of their images and in a common socioeconomic and cultural context. When Klaus Honnef gathered several young German documentary photographers in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn in 1979, in an exhibition called *In Deutschland. Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie*,<sup>46</sup> he framed a wider documentary movement, one that exceeds the sole label “Düsseldorf School.” In an attempt to address the aesthetic features of German documentary photography,<sup>47</sup> consistent with his reflections on author photography (*Autorenphotographie*), Honnef exhibited images of some of the Becher students<sup>48</sup> – Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Tata Ronkholz and Thomas Struth – along with the work of photographers such as Michael Schmidt and Heinrich Riebesehl. In 1979, German documentary practice wasn’t necessarily – or exclusively – connected with Düsseldorf. However, historiographical developments later produced a coherent body of photographers, with a common educational, cultural and institutional context, which eventually became paragon for this type of photographic practice. More recent studies, however, begin to re-question the persistent categorization, which has brought forth the idea of a “Düsseldorf School” and has allowed the emergence of formerly disregarded photographers.

The intent of this study does not lie in the examination of those historiographical developments or those overlooked photographers in detail. Our aim is merely to survey various elements that show the proximity of the work and practice of those photographers with the Becher students. Michael Schmidt, teacher at the Werkstatt für Fotografie of the Volkshochschule Kreuzberg, has multiple ties, contextual and aesthetic, with some of the Becher students. He sent Andreas Gursky, who incidentally mentions him as one of his major influences,<sup>49</sup> to the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. His early work bears striking resemblance and similar approaches to the characteristic style of early Düsseldorf photography (1975 – 1985). The urban views of his *Berlin-Wedding* (1976 – 1978) or the *Berlin Stadtbilder* series (1976 – 1980) share with Thomas Struth’s architectural series from the same period an interest in urban views, typography in urbanized spaces, repetitive pattern effects in the structure of popular housing; but they also share a formal approach with similar points of view, angles and construction, the use of low contrast and uniform gray skies

46 *In Deutschland. Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie*, op. cit.

47 Letter from Klaus Honnef to Tata Ronkholz, 1 March, 1979, Tata Ronkholz Estate, Cologne, unlisted, quoted in Christoph Schaden, “To Be Sure, That Is Also the Expression of a Particular Vital Consciousness. On the Reception of Stephen Shore’s Work in Germany 1972 – 1995,” in *Der Rote Bulli. Stephen Shore and the New Düsseldorf Photography*, op. cit., p. 49.

48 Bernd Becher, who was a friend of Klaus Honnef, called him to submit the work of his students for the exhibition. Klaus Honnef in conversation with Regina Wyrwoll, January 2009, in Wilhelm Schürmann and Klaus Honnef, *Energien/Synergien 9*, Cologne, 2009, p. 93 and 96. Quoted in Maren Polte, “Becher Disciples,’ Becher School,’ ‘Düsseldorf Photography School.’ Approaching Terminological Definitions And Perspectives on a Phenomenon,” op. cit., p. 278.

49 Interview in *Monopol*, No. 3, March 2009, p. 73.

and black and white depiction. Interior family portraits recall Thomas Ruff's, Candida Höfer's or Thomas Struth's own in their frontal static construction, the subject engaging the observer, although Schmidt's images are in black and white. Furthermore, it is the depiction of the industrial architecture of the Ruhr and its topographical and social consequences, epitome of the Bechers work, which also connects him with Düsseldorf. Interestingly, Thomas Ruff doesn't associate Schmidt with Düsseldorf, even though he thinks of him as an important German photographer.<sup>50</sup> For instance, his series from the 1980s, for example, *Waffenruhe* (1985 – 1987), clearly differ from the production of the Bechers' pupils. However, as stated earlier, it seems that Düsseldorf photographers only shared common subjects and aesthetics until the mid-1980s. Even if obviously Schmidt didn't study at the Kunstakademie and he belongs to another generation, he could have been associated with Düsseldorf, but unlike Beat Streuli or Sigmar Polke in the Parisian *Objectivités* exhibition, he wasn't.

Manfred Hamm also has potential ties with Düsseldorf photography – for example, through his interest in industrial architecture. His work, similar to the Bechers' until the late 1960s, is not associated with an explicitly artistic practice. Rather, it is published in architectural-specific literature where the fascination in the depicted object soon becomes apparent and shows an approach very different from the Bechers' students. The introductory essay of *Bahnhöfe*,<sup>51</sup> a study of railway stations worldwide, mentions “marvels of technology and architecture” or “cathedrals,” which leaves little room for interpretation about the real emphasis of the project. If some images clearly show an aesthetic approach antinomic to Düsseldorf photography in the same period – high contrast black and white pictures with theatrical effects, as for example the Frankfurt am Main station<sup>52</sup> –, many others show interesting points of correlation with Düsseldorf architecture photography (black and white and color): central and raised point of view, neutral lighting and similar formal constructions. From *Denkmäler einer Industrielandschaft* (Nicolai Verlag, 1978) to *Sterbende Zechen*<sup>53</sup> (Nicolai Verlag, 1983), Hamm produces a typological survey of industrial structures, in an attempt similar to the Bechers to create an archive of disappearing architecture.

Joachim Brohm's status in the history of photography seems to be linked with the publication by Steidl of his early 1980s Ruhr pictures<sup>54</sup> in 2007 and the outcome of his studies at the Department of Photography and Cinema at the Ohio State University with Professor Allan Sekula in 1984, *Ohio*.<sup>55</sup> As it seems, Brohm had been largely disregarded by historians and critics, despite having several group

50 Jörg M. Colbert, “A Conversation with Thomas Ruff,” commissioned by *American Photo*, March 2008. Available on [http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a\\_conversation\\_with\\_thomas\\_ruff](http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_thomas_ruff), accessed on January 10, 2018.

51 *Manfred Hamm. Bahnhöfe*, Berlin, Nicolai, 1984.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

53 *Dying coal mines of the Ruhr region*.

54 *Joachim Brohm. Ruhr*, op. cit.

55 *Joachim Brohm. Ohio*, op. cit.

exhibitions in important institutions.<sup>56</sup> However, his *Ruhr* series, photographed between 1979 and 1983 and eventually published twenty-five years later as an exhibition catalogue of the Albers Museum Quadrat in Bottrop, shares plenty of features with early Düsseldorf photography that have hardly ever been examined. While *Ohio* clearly shares formal qualities with a key figure in the constitution of contemporary German photography – Stephen Shore – *Ruhr* reveals another feature central to German photography: the documentation of the industrial legacy of a whole region, which not only adheres to traditions of German photography (from Albert Renger-Patzsch to the Bechers) but also connects with similar undertakings in the United States.

According to Heinz Liesbrock's extensive study<sup>57</sup> on the influence of New Color Photography<sup>58</sup> on their German counterparts, Joachim Brohm, Heinrich Riebesehl and Michael Schmidt are among the first European photographers to reflect upon American color photography, adapting a formal approach to their own sociocultural environment. Exhibitions like the paradigmatic *New Topographics. Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at the George Eastman House in Rochester in 1975, which has become the epitome of documentary photography, or the less known *The Second View: The Rephotographic Survey Project*,<sup>59</sup> an attempt to re-photograph famous American nineteenth-century landscape images from the same point of view, revealing as much the transformation of the landscape as the relationship of the photographer to the depicted object, played a central role in the constitution of German documentary photography. The discovery of American landscape photography, contemporary but also anterior, became central to German photographic practice. From the fascination for a seemingly untouched and boundless environment, the focus had shifted to a critical approach to the reckless use of resources,<sup>60</sup> a phenomenon that found a strong echo in Germany as well. However, while there is a critical component to American landscape photography and to its German counterpart, neither seems to be predominantly political or ideological, as some have stated.<sup>61</sup> Formal aspects – the discovery of color images, the vernacular snapshot aesthetics and a focus on trivial subjects – clearly played a central role in the development of those practices. This new approach, embodied by the opposition between man-made structures and the natural environment, has a seductive character; media theory would explain it through the shift from the industrial to the electronic age,<sup>62</sup> a phenomenon explicitly conceptualized by Bernd and Hilla Becher.

56 He participated in the *Reste des Authentischen* exhibition at the Folkwang Museum Essen in 1985.

57 Heinz Liesbrock, "Topografien des Anonymen. Joachim Brohm's Fotografien Ruhr," in *Joachim Brohm. Ruhr*, op. cit.

58 Sally Eaucilaire's study *The New Color Photography* (New York, 1981) constitutes one of the earliest occurrences of the now acknowledged label. See Heinz Liesbrock, "Topografien des Anonymen. Joachim Brohm's Fotografien Ruhr," op. cit., footnotes 28 and 30.

59 *The Second View. The Rephotographic Survey Project*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1984.

60 Heinz Liesbrock, "Topografien des Anonymen. Joachim Brohm's Fotografien Ruhr," op. cit., p. 19–21.

61 For the American context see for example Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing the New Topographics*, Chicago, The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago/University of Chicago Press, 2010.

62 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

The convergence between new technical means, aesthetic features and a critical reflection upon the urbanized space unquestionably stimulated the interest of German photographers in the 1970s. The works of Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld or William Eggleston offered a model that they adapted to their own environments, creating an extremely strong impetus that is constitutive of contemporary German documentary photography. The impact that the appearance of color photography and landscape photography had on the Becher students thus constitutes a crucial link between what became the Düsseldorf School and the German photographers who weren't associated with the city. However, the depiction of industrial architecture and its topographical impact in general – and the illustration of the Ruhr in particular – thus clearly connect Düsseldorf photographers and other German documentary photographers. In the recent exhibition *Ruhrblicke*, held at the Zeche Zollverein Essen in 2010,<sup>63</sup> Joachim Brohm was displayed along with the Bechers and most of their students. Evidently, there have been exhibitions where Becher students and the aforementioned photographers have been linked. However, it seems that there is a tendency today to picture them together and to reevaluate – sometimes indirectly, sometimes explicitly – the concept of Düsseldorf School.

Despite new attempts to label that phenomenon – simply generic (“Düsseldorf Photography”) or linked to an idea of school (Gronert’s “Düsseldorf School of Photography,” Liebert’s “New Düsseldorf Photography”) – a residual terminological indeterminacy remains. Is the “Düsseldorf School” a historiographically valid concept? If its validity can indeed be established, is it then a historical entity – we could indeed argue that there has been an aesthetic and methodological coherence in the works of the early students between the late 1970s and the early 1980s – or is the phenomenon still active nowadays, and it would thus require a wider definition than objectivist industrial photography and deadpan portrait photography? Some scholars, such as Michel Poivert<sup>64</sup> or Stefan Gronert, have suggested that the Düsseldorf School might indeed be a historically delimited period of time, because of the obvious issues of the definition of the concept as a whole. Bodies of photographers are uneven, and aesthetic and formal convergences have never been established systematically; additionally, there is no consensus yet about a name. The catalogue of the Schirmer collection uses “Düsseldorf School” in its title, but Pohlmann’s essay in the book supports the historiographically speaking more contemporary “Düsseldorf School of Photography.” Although Lippert’s “New Düsseldorf Photography School” tries to avoid the old idea of a coherent school, replacing “Becher School” or “Düsseldorf School” with “New Düsseldorf Photography School,” its position is weakened due to the lack of a definition of what would constitute the

63 Thomas Weski and Sigrid Schneider, *Ruhrblicke*, exhibition catalogue (SANAA Gebäude, Zeche Zollverein, Essen, 2010), Cologne, Walter König, 2010.

64 See Michel Poivert’s review of the *Objectivités* exhibition, “*Objectivités* à Düsseldorf. Des vestiges au prestige,” in *ViteVu*. Available at <https://sfp.asso.fr/vitevu/index.php?post/2008/10/07/268-dusseldorf-des-vestiges-au-prestige>, accessed on June 27, 2018.

“Old Düsseldorf Photography School” and what it positions itself in opposition to.

For the time being, four doctoral dissertations have been published on Düsseldorf photography. Patricia Drück, Eva Witzel, Rupert Pfab and Maren Polte have written their PhD theses on Thomas Ruff,<sup>65</sup> Andreas Gursky<sup>66</sup> and Düsseldorf photography<sup>67</sup> respectively, which indicates that extensive scientific studies have materialized recently. The only recent dissertation addressing photography at the Kunstakademie, the freshly translated book *A Class of their Own. The Düsseldorf School of Photography* by Maren Polte, approaches the matter historically. It produces an extensive survey of teaching and aesthetic developments, which embodies the conclusion of the recent critical re-evaluation toward the label. As a key reference for future studies on Düsseldorf, it uses the generic terminology “Düsseldorf School of Photography.”

65 Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, Berlin, Reimer, 2004.

66 Eva Witzel, *Die Konstitution der Dinge. Phänomene der Abstraktion bei Andreas Gursky*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2012.

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