

A DIGITAL RETOUCHING TOOLS

1 THOMAS RUFF'S "HÄUSER" SERIES

The Gwerder Studio

Erasing an element in a photograph has become an extremely simple operation. Since 2010 Adobe Photoshop, the professional reference retouching software, has allowed users to simply delete picture elements by marking the approximate border of an undesired object in a reasonably contrasted era – for example a tree in front of a building façade –, in order to make it disappear, using a “content aware filter.” The program automatically computes a virtual pattern, based on the background, to replace the removed object.³ Until recently, even more so in the late 1980s, this kind of operation would have taken a lot of time and required a meticulous reconstruction of the missing information. The removal of a signpost and a tree, and the closing of a roof window, in one of the first digitally retouched photographs, Thomas Ruff's *Haus Nr. 11* (1987, Fig. 56 & Fig. 57),⁴ would thus necessitate a painstaking reconstruction of the building's façade, using tools only available in very few places. Software only had basic features; elaborate brushes such as the clone stamp tool⁵ only appeared years later. Changes therefore had to be realized almost pixel by pixel. Computers

3 The “content aware” filter has first been implemented in Photoshop CS5 (2010).

4 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 191.

5 A brush allowing to “paint with a sample of an image.” *Adobe Photoshop CS3 User Guide*, p. 29 and 195–198. Available at https://help.adobe.com/archive/en_US/photoshop/cs3/photoshop_cs3_help.pdf, accessed on June 27, 2018.

were extremely weak in terms of computing power and only corporate machines, already in use in advertising, were powerful enough to perform such complex tasks. To execute these manipulations, Thomas Ruff had to request the assistance of the photo-lithographers of a Swiss laboratory, the Gwerder Studio in Zurich, one of the few whose employees had sufficient skills and access to machines with adequate computing power to achieve the required task.⁶



Fig. 56: Thomas Ruff, *Haus Nr. 1*, 1987 (179 × 278 cm)

Before the work processes of this early retouching are analyzed as such, their place in Ruff's historiography ought to be evaluated, in order to understand their specific role in the reception of his work. Interestingly, even though the retouching of the *Häuser* series is mentioned repeatedly in Ruff's historiography, the actual name of the Studio Gwerder is hardly ever brought up. Considering that the Grieber Studio Düsseldorf, one of the main producers of large-format photography in the artistic context, is repeatedly mentioned – at least in recent years –, this is rather surprising. Only a few occurrences of the company Gwerder could be found in the literature on Ruff's work. The first mention can be found in Ruff's biography in Winzen's monograph *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*.⁷ The most important indication, based on Winzen, can be located in Stefan Gronert's texts for the main catalogue of the Düsseldorf School.⁸ The mention of the Swiss studio also appears twice on the Internet. One occurrence can be found in an

6 According to Gwerder Art Zurich, the archive material of this period has been lost due to a data migration.

7 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 254.

8 Stefan Gronert, "Photographische Emanzipation," in Stefan Gronert, (ed.), *Die Düsseldorfer Photoschule*, op. cit., p. 43.

interview with Helga Meister⁹ – author of the first book on Düsseldorf photography¹⁰ – for the magazine *K.West*, in 2008. In the interview, Ruff does not specifically reflect upon the studio. It further appears in Thomas Ruff's biography on the website of the Fiftyfifty Gallery, a non-professional association connected with a socially oriented street magazine, which doesn't mention its source, nor the publication year.¹¹ We can nevertheless date the mention to approximately 2001, considering that Ruff's biography on the website runs from his birth (1958) to that date. The year 1987 reads:

He starts the Häuser series, in which he uses digital retouching for the first time. In these years, there was no fotolab in Germany that could digitally retouch large-format negatives. After some time searching, he comes across the Studio Gwerder in Zurich, which agrees to do the desired retouching on a large image-file.¹²

Both occurrences are probably based on Winzen's monograph. On the web, information such as biographical elements are typically copied and used over and over. The indication of a "Swiss Lab" appears for example in an often-quoted article by Skyn Kynaston, but without citing the name Gwerder.¹³ Considering Ruff's considerable historiography, it might of course appear elsewhere. But it is nevertheless intriguing that the studio is hardly ever mentioned online and in the literature. Consequently, it could be argued that this results from a tendency to read Ruff's work in the lineage of German documentary photography, a paradigm in which the mention of retouching is either knowingly ignored or – and this is probably the case most of the time – unknowingly overseen. This hypothesis based on statistical criteria needs to be explored in more depth, but it already indicates a particular stance. The role of retouching itself has not been considered essential in the understanding in the study of the *Häuser* series. But is retouching indeed irrelevant, which would explain the disinterest, or does it on the other hand engage with important aspects of Ruff's strategy? Only the confrontation of the effective analysis of the mechanisms at play in this series and the comprehensive study of the reception of these images allows a valid assessment of the role of early retouching in his work. Clearly, the *Häuser* series cannot be used as a

9 "K.WEST: Die ersten digitalen Retuschen von Häusern entstanden 1987, für die Sie noch ins Labor Gwerder nach Zurich fahren mussten. Hat man die Veränderungen auf den Bildern überhaupt bemerkt? Und wie wurde darauf reagiert? War dieses Nachbessern nicht wider die Ehre der Sachfotografie? RUFF: [...] Man sprach darüber, dass an dem Haus ein paar Sachen weg waren. Bei der Eröffnung hieß es dann: 'Der retuschiert.' Manche meinten, das dürfe man nicht; andere fanden es ganz toll, wie immer." Helga Meister, "Das Bild ist schön. Thomas Ruff spricht – und schweigt – über seine fotografische Arbeit," *K-West*, No. 2, 2008, available at <https://www.kulturwest.de/de/kunst/detailseite/artikel/das-bild-ist-schoen/>, accessed on June 27, 2018.

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

11 Available at <http://www.fiftyfifty-galerie.de/kunst/592/thomas-ruff/biografie>, accessed on 24 May 2018

12 Ibid.

13 Skyn Kynaston, "Calculated Beauty," *Art Review*, No. 53, Summer 2001.

model for Ruff's digital work in general. But its particular position – the houses are Ruff's first digitally retouched images and they incidentally address documentary forms – marks a point of emergence of a new procedure. The evaluation of its reception might allow a better understanding of the fact that digital manipulations have been underexplored in his historiography.



Fig. 57: Thomas Ruff, *Haus Nr. 1*, 1987, details of altered elements (screenshots from Jan-Schmidt Garre, *Long Shots Close Up*, 2009)

Formats and visual strategy

Several criteria tend to assess the retouching in the *Häuser* series as being rather insignificant in Ruff's strategy. The first relies on statistics: of the twenty-nine architectural views of the series realized between 1987 and 1991, only two were retouched: *Haus Nr. 1* (1987) and *Haus Nr. 8* (1988, Fig. 58).¹⁴ Despite being one of the earliest examples of "artistic" photography in which elements were digitally erased or altered, the scarceness of the interventions seems to indicate that manipulation in itself did not play the predominant role it did in slightly posterior examples, such as the aforementioned post-photographic corpus or Andreas Gursky's composites, addressed subsequently. Merely used as a tool, digital retouching seems subordinated to a specific conception of photography addressing architecture. The series reproduces sober buildings built between the 1950s and the 1970s,¹⁵ similar to those that Thomas Ruff grew up in in Düsseldorf, and it is characterized by frontal or diagonal constructions, points of view at human height, uniform gray skies, chromatic homogeneity, limited tonal values and a neutral depiction. The pictures, as in Bernd and Hilla Becher's typologies, are mostly devoid of people, cars, traffic signs, vegetation or disturbing elements. As in his teachers' work, Ruff depicts three-dimensional volumes with specific formal characters, rather than merely documenting specific buildings. Some of the images of the series have been used as illustrations of German architecture or Germany in a more general sense, as Reinhold Happel observes: *Haus Nr. 7* (1988) for example was used on the cover of the supplement of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of November 30, illustrating the

14 Only the complete title with Arabic and Roman numerals *Haus Nr. 1* (1987) and *Haus Nr. 8* (1988), or the classification used in Matthias Winzen's catalogue raisonné: HÄU 01 and HÄU 08, allows to clearly identify these two retouched images, since there are several other photographs labeled *Haus Nr. 1* and *Haus Nr. 8* (with no manifest classification, chronological, thematic or formal). *Haus Nr. 1* (1989), *Haus Nr. 8* (1988), *Haus Nr. 8* (1989) have not been retouched, but the ambiguous labels have sometimes misled art historians and critics, who have amalgamated distinct images. See Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 191–192.

15 Ibid., p. 191.

upcoming vote for the reunification, titled “Du mein Heimatland: Deutschland vor der Wahl.”¹⁶ Happel engages with the represented buildings, describing them as “architecture for the masses,” defined by “rationality, anonymity, placelessness” and their social function. *Haus 4 II (Ricola, Laufen)*, 1991¹⁷ seems to corroborate that documentary inscription, as the digitally manipulated photograph, a two-part montage combining two images taken in Laufen (CH) by a local photographer, literally documents a building created by Herzog and de Meuron for the Swiss cough drop manufacturer Ricola. But Ruff’s images clearly differ from more conventional forms of architecture photography, such as examples from Thomas Struth or Axel Hütte of the same period. Except *Haus Nr. 7 II* (1988) and *Haus Nr. 4 I* (1989), all photographed structures are built upon strict parallelepipeds with clearly delimited angles, with mostly flat but sometimes gable or hip roofs, horizontally and vertically structured in grids through the aligned windows, balconies or structural elements. The frontal or diagonal inscription of the cubic structures into space further adds to the geometrically strict images, which thus acquire sculptural rather than architectural characteristics and visually lean toward the Bechers’ typologies.



Fig. 58: Thomas Ruff, *Haus Nr. 8 I*, 1988 (208 x 232 cm)

In terms of reception, the *Häuser* series seems to be situated in a gap between a documentary rhetoric and a formal position in which image construction strategies are predominant, which makes the evaluation of the role of digital technologies in Ruff’s work particularly interesting. On the one hand, the strict architectural series, shot frontally or

¹⁶ See Reinhold Happel, “Haus. Zu den Architekturfotografien von Thomas Ruff,” in *Thomas Ruff*, exhibition catalogue (Bonner Kunstverein/Kunstverein Arnsberg/Kunstverein Braunschweig/Kunst + Projekte Sindelfingen, 1991), Düsseldorf, 1991, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Haus 4 II (Ricola, Laufen)* is part of the Herzog and de Meuron series, despite the fact that approach and title might suggest that it is a part of the *Häuser* series. See Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979-heute*, op. cit., p. 191–192 and 223 and Sonja Claser, “Photographie parallel zur Architektur. *Interieurs* und *Häuser* im Werk von Thomas Ruff,” in Monika Steinhauser and Ludger Derenthal (ed.), *Ansicht, Aussicht, Einsicht. Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth: Architekturphotographie*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstgeschichtliches Institut der Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Museum Bochum, 2000), Düsseldorf, Richter Verlag, 2000, p. 104.

constructed diagonally, seems to be inscribed in the history of documentary depictions of architecture, which plays an important role in the history of photography, particularly in Germany. On the other hand, Ruff clearly constructs images, translating architectural forms into geometrical shapes with an emphasis on their formal values. Ruff's careful use of retouching ('as little as possible, but as much as necessary')¹⁸ shows that his formal constructions did not directly depend on digital post-production at that time. But in the 1980s, he seems to have been concerned by retouching and architectural shapes in photography, as the *Zeitungsfotos* series shows. During that period, he collected 2,500 newspaper images from German daily and weekly media, illustrating all sorts of themes, such as politics, history, art or everyday life. Between 1990 and 1991, he chose to print four hundred of them at twice their original size, without captions, dissociating them from their informational context, creating a systematic visual inquiry of media imagery.¹⁹ His interest for the *Zeitungsfotos* originated from the de-realizing effect of newspaper portraits: the halftone pattern resulting from the screen print technology produced an alteration differentiating the print from its photographic counterpart.²⁰ The series, which has not yet been systematically analyzed, was clearly used by Ruff as a formal model for the understanding of photography: frontal portraits²¹ and frontal and diagonal architecture images are omnipresent in this series, which emphasizes the fact that in the 1990s Ruff was merely translating or decontextualizing existing imageries in an artistic context, rather than producing new ones (see Fig. 59).

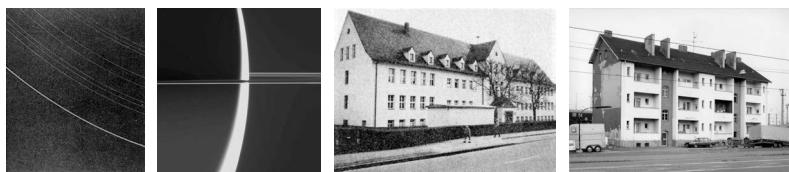


Fig. 59: Thomas Ruff, *Zeitungsfotos* as formal and thematic model (*Zeitungsfoto 354*, 1991, *Cassini 01*, 2008, *Zeitungsfoto 080*, 1990, *Haus Nr. 2 III*, 1989)

While examples such as *Zeitungsfoto 080* (Fig. 59) can be clearly identified as source material for Ruff's *Häuser*, it is yet another aspect of the *Zeitungsfotos* that proves productive for assessing the series. Some illustrations explicitly show Ruff's early confrontation with image manipulation and retouching and the history of such practices. In the printed set of images, two address one of the most famous examples of retouched images in the history of photography, repeatedly quoted in numerous publications: the photograph of Lenin holding a speech in

18 Interview of Thomas Ruff by Ute Eskildsen, in Ute Eskildsen, "Technik, Bild, Funktion. Recherche und Reflexion fotografischer Darstellungsmodelle im Werk von Thomas Ruff," in Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 166.

19 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 201.

20 Interview of Thomas Ruff by Patricia Drück, in Patricia Drück, *Das Bild des Menschen in der Fotografie. Die Porträts von Thomas Ruff*, op. cit., p. 116.

21 Ibid., p. 116.

front of a crowd in Moscow on May 5, 1920,²² in its original unedited version (*Zeitungsfoto 389*) and as a retouched version, in which Trotsky and Kamenev have been cut out (*Zeitungsfoto 388*).



Fig. 60: Thomas Ruff, *Zeitungsfotos* as formal and thematic model (*Zeitungsfoto 088*, 1990, *Porträt R. Huber*, 1988, *Zeitungsfoto 042*, 1990, jpeg r/02, 2007)

As André Gunthert notes, retouching practices have always existed but have often been perceived as the “negation of the recording of the visual”; hence, despite its existence, retouching has no history²³ and has long been perceived as a rather unsound and ethically problematic procedure. The fact that Ruff reflects upon this famous example suggests that these kinds of practices and more generally the construction of meaning in photography were concepts whose implications he was exploring at that time. These specific examples epitomize Ruff’s interests: while clearly addressing the formal characteristics of an image, he also interrogates its documentary attributes. As such, the *Häuser* could be interpreted both as documenting Düsseldorf architecture from the 1950s to the 1970s and as strictly formal experiments. In the two manipulated images of the series, the retouching seems to be subordinated to image construction strategies rather than to a semantic manipulation, as it guarantees a particular visual pattern. But while image composition in general in Ruff’s case is important, digital retouching is here rather used scarcely. Ruff has increasingly used digital technologies, and they have become an important tool and field of interest, as will be shown subsequently.

The *Bläue Augen* series (1991) is a reinterpretation of twelve *Porträts* in which the eyes have been digitally colored in response to several critics accusing the series of depicting traits associated with eugenic ideologies (Jean-François Chevrier and Klaus Ottman).²⁴ The *Plakate* (1996–1998) were made on a computer; the *I.m.v.d.r.* series (1999–2001) was partially digitally retouched. All images taken from Internet sources are obviously digital, from the early *nudes* experiments

22 The case is for instance documented in William J. Mitchell’s *The Reconfigured Eye. Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*, op. cit., p. 200–201.

23 André Gunthert, “*Sans retouche.* Histoire d’un mythe photographique,” *Etudes photographiques*, No. 22, September 2008.

24 In *Galeries Magazine*, No. 36, April/May 1990 and *Flash Art*, Vol. 23, No. 154, October 1990, respectively. A response to those claims from art historian (and Ruff’s gallerist) Jörg Johnen can be found in Jörg Johnen, “Street and Interior. On the Work of Thomas Ruff,” *Parkett*, No. 28, 1991.

(1999) to the recent *ma.r.s. pictures* (2010). The *Substrat* (2001–2005) and *Zycles* (2008) series have been computed from digital sources and extruded from mathematical formulas respectively, and the *Cassini* series (2008–2009) is based on edited images photographed by the eponymous unmanned NASA spacecraft.²⁵ The erasing of picture elements in the *Häuser* series, however, interestingly appears in a corpus where the digital and its deriving visual culture is not yet a central feature of Ruff's work (or vernacular visual culture for that matter). His 1980s images such as the *Interieurs* (1979–1983) and the early *Porträts* series seem at least connected with documentary aesthetics, despite an obvious yielding to compositional patterns. Their formal construction aspires to a certain extent to neutrality and stems from a capturing protocol apprehending similar subjects repeatedly. Formally and conceptually, the series recalls the Bechers' approach and their teaching. Both the *Porträts* and the *Häuser* series systematically adapt typological patterns, commonly associated with a particular kind of documentary photography or with scientific classification protocols. The subjects are framed analogously, and the viewpoints are either frontal or diagonal and are situated at similar levels. The *Häuser* were photographed in the early morning hours between January and March in order to guarantee a homogeneous light²⁶ and the portrayed individuals of the *Porträts* pose in front of a monochrome background, in color in the early small-scale images and white in the large formats. Clearly, there is a strong formal and conceptual relationship with the Bechers. However, while the progression from documentary endeavor to a predominantly visual strategy in the Bechers' work is complex,²⁷ Ruff's images are less indefinite: he *builds* images – avowedly with a visual reference, which does play an important role in their composition –, while addressing the potentialities and limitations of the medium used.

Yet that position undergoes interesting variations depending upon the photographed object. While he can modulate clothes and expressions in the portraits, there is no possible intervention in the capture of a building.²⁸ Although Ruff gives a certain freedom to the photographed individuals – for example, allowing them to choose the background color of their portrait²⁹ –, he also crams them into a very strict pattern, recalling identity photograph protocols, creating an extremely homogeneous representation of individuals. Similar to the Bechers' series with almost identical buildings, such as the *Fachwerkhäuser*, the decontextualized and systematized depiction produces very homogeneous images, the individual character of which tends to fade. While this process is at work in the *Häuser* series as well, the remaining context surrounding the buildings, much more present than in black and white equivalents, rather positions the

25 See www.nasa.gov/cassini, accessed on July 20, 2018.

26 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 191.

27 See for example Martina Dobbe, "Typologie und Bookwork. Bildkonzepte des Seriellen bei Bechers und Ruscha," in *Frame #2. Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Photographie*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2008.

28 *Thomas Ruff. Oberflächen, Tiefen – Surfaces, Depths*, op. cit., p. 223.

29 Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 180.

series as a less conceptual documentary project. And although the *Porträts* are almost completely decontextualized – even if haircuts and clothes can still be associated with a particular period of time –, the architecture shots are situated in a real living space. Interpreted by Ruff as an attempt to carry his *Interieurs* to the outside, the *Häuser* seemingly retain or suggest a stronger, maybe more “traditional,” documentary factor. The considerable differentiation of the buildings, while expressing a logically similar shape based on a quadrilateral volume, does not allow the comparative decontextualizing effect occurring in most Becher series, and the considerable size of the prints does not allow a comparative effect spanning above two or three images. The buildings thus retain a certain degree of individuality. Although digital tools have been used in two images of the series in order to visually enhance the volumetric dimension of the buildings, these tools do not play an important role in the overall series.

The formats used by Ruff during that period provide another analytical axis allowing the evaluation of the *Häuser* series. While most *Porträts* have an original size of 24 by 18 centimeters, Ruff started to experiment with larger formats in the mid-1980s, producing fourteen 210 by 165 centimeter *Porträts* prints in 1986,³⁰ a format scale which became standard for the *Häuser*. Over time, many *Porträts* have been printed or reprinted at that size, with some variations.³¹ Sometimes they are even exhibited in various sizes at the same venue (e.g., Kunstverein Bonn in 1991). The “decreased reality”³² of the small photographs still approaches the original size of the models, while the blown-up images produce a de-realizing effect. The large photographs have become the standard exhibition format: as Michael Fried notes, “the enlarged portraits have completely displaced the earlier [small] ones in the public awareness of his work.”³³ Obviously, they engender a different relationship between the viewer and the portrayed individuals, whose enlarged traits are dissolved into the enhanced visual presence of the pictures. Confronted with singular features of the faces, to invisible details such as pores or hairs, the observer deconstructs the image into partial views. The size imposes a new physical relationship – except at a considerable distance, the image cannot be entirely grasped – and a new perception; the massive prints seem to invert the domination between beholder and image. The format changes are thus a constitutive parameter of the

30 He was given the financial support to have the five first large format portraits executed by a professional lab by gallery owner Philip Nelson (Nelson Gallery, Villeurbanne) earlier that year.

See Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 180 and 254.

31 From a minimum of 190 × 185 cm (Thomas Ruff's self-portrait) to a maximum of 235 × 185 cm.

32 Matthias Winzen, *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 183.

33 Michael Fried, *Why Photography as Art Matters as Never Before*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 143–144.

Porträts,³⁴ while its implications are minor in the *Häuser*. The *Häuser* series, realized between 1987 and 1991, has been printed in large formats only.³⁵ The shorter side of any print is at least 180 centimeters; the longer side is at least 230 centimeters. The relationship between depicted object and image isn't thus defined by a "bigger than nature" interconnection as in the large format *Porträts*, but still represents a "decreased reality," as in a more conventional small format. While the relationship to the spectator in the large *Porträts* clearly dissociates the image and the photographed object – in that case through the format variation – such obvious scission cannot be as evidently postulated. The *Häuser* remain photographed houses, much more than the *Porträts* are portrayed individuals. Frontality and size dissolve the *Porträts* into two-dimensional, bigger than nature images, which clearly is not the case in the *Häuser*. While format variations play a central role in Ruff's strategy and this particular parameter has in itself been acknowledged by the reception of his work (especially addressing the *Porträts*), few scholars have specifically engaged with that aspect in the *Häuser* series, as if large-format photography had become standard and needn't be analyzed. Large-format photography has been commonly interpreted as a way of proclaiming the medium's artistic value (e.g., Jean-François Chevrier³⁶), disregarding the actual role of the format variation in the work process of the artist. In Ruff's case, only the portraits have been consequently examined in that respect. This particular feature is commonly neglected in other series, which obviously plays an important role in the ability of a photograph to depict.

In terms of width to length proportions, some of the *Häuser* tend to be much wider than conventional formats. The digitally retouched *Haus Nr. 1 I* (179 × 278 cm, 1987) and *Haus Nr. 4 II* (Ricola, Laufen, 153 × 295 cm, 1991), but also the unretouched *Haus Nr. 12 II* (183 × 287 cm, 1989) and *Haus Nr. 1 II* (183 × 302 cm, 1989), have an extremely stretched horizontal form factor. If that shape reflects the

34 The critical reception and curatorial projects tend to address the large formats only. The small *Porträts* are still exhibited, for example, at the exhibition of the Museum Folkwang Essen (2002), *Thomas Ruff. Interieurs – Porträts – Häuser*, where they have been shown along with the large versions. But many exhibitions, as a large part of his historiography, only address the large versions. For example, in a recent essay addressing Ruff's whole series, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev introduces the *Porträts* as "looming, gigantic portraits of happy people," only considering the large formats. This example is particularly meaningful considering that it has been published in an important monographic exhibition catalogue, which surveys and comments on major exhibitions of and publications about Thomas Ruff's work. Published in 2009, it covers an important segment of the artist's production, which the "official" monographic project published in 2001, *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute* doesn't, and thus surveys numerous projects in which both formats are present. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (ed.), *Thomas Ruff*, exhibition catalogue (Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Turin, 2009), Milan, Skira, 2009, p. 14.

35 Except for various medium format editions. See Matthias Winzen, *Thomas Ruff, Fotografien 1979–heute*, op. cit., p. 248–251.

36 See *infra* and Jean-François Chevrier, "The Adventures of the Picture Form in the History of Photography," in Douglas Fogle (ed.), *The Last Picture Show. Artists Using Photography. 1960–1982*, op. cit. Originally published in a slightly longer form in Jean-François Chevrier, "Les aventures de la forme tableau dans l'histoire de la photographie," in *Photo-kunst. Du XXe au XIXe siècle, aller et retour/Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren*, exhibition catalogue (Staatgalerie Stuttgart, 1989), Stuttgart, Verlag Cantz, 1989.

dimensions of the buildings the photograph is framed around, it also shows a certain liberty with the use of photographic formats, which commonly replicate the proportions of the sensor of the camera. The *Plattenkamera* used by most Düsseldorf photographers (18 × 13 cm or 24 × 18 cm) has proportions similar to a 4/3 television set, while these images are even more panoramic than 16/9 formats. In terms of proportionality, a significant number of wide images have indeed been digitally retouched. Clearly, *Haus Nr. 4 II (Ricola, Laufen)* constitutes the most extreme example; it has been composed with two separate photographs merged into one image.

Andreas Gursky's extremely wide formats from the early 1990s (e.g., *Paris, Montparnasse*, 1993), which also derive from the stitching of two photographs, bear a very similar pattern. However, the existence of unretouched examples shows that width is not necessarily connected with digital post-production. Consequently, if digital tools do not impair the legibility of the *Häuser* series as (potentially) documentary images, and the large and wide formats do not transform their perception (as in the *Porträts*), certain significant transformations in the conception of the photographic image do appear already. Revealing an emancipatory position toward "traditional" values of the photographic apparatus (i.e., standard formats) and discourse (i.e., the importance of the unretouched image as imprint), these transformations remain subtle, which explains their reception at the time. But despite their innocuous character, the formal developments connected to digital technologies and the relationship toward depiction deprived from its indexical constraint already establishes certain defining traits of some Düsseldorf photographers, such as the panoramic format.

Retouching and the documentary

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the common association, especially in the 1990s, of Thomas Ruff's *Häuser* with the German tradition of architecture photography, while at the same time interpreting his work as a formal-aesthetic approach. The series might indeed recall the often-invoked models such as Albert Renger-Patzsch or the Bechers, despite being in color and having specific formal features. Ruff has always rejected that tradition, repeatedly arguing that photography is inherently unable to represent reality, as it necessarily is a construct, and thereby attempting to emancipate himself from the discourse pretending to capture reality. The idea of strict documentation, as it has been advocated by an important tranche of the history of photography and its protagonists is thus for him of little significance, which partly explains his formal approach to the architectural object. His perception of image retouching also derives from these principles: "digital manipulation merely is a new tool in the history of retouching and manipulating photographic images,"³⁷ he argues. Addressing the difference

³⁷ Jörg Colberg, "A Conversation with Thomas Ruff," commissioned by *American Photo*, March 2008. Available at <https://www.popphoto.com/photos/2008/12/conversation-thomas-ruff>, accessed on June 27, 2018.

between himself and the Neue Sachlichkeit photographers, he emphasizes “that the difference between them and [him] is that they believed to have captured reality and [he] believe[s] to have created a picture.”³⁸ Accordingly, his oeuvre has been commonly read as the result of two-dimensional visual experiments, rather than as engaging with the ability of the medium as trace or archive:³⁹ “a credible invention of reality,” Matthias Winzen summarizes.⁴⁰ Of course, the staggering corpus of art historical and critical texts reflecting upon Ruff’s work – Winzen’s monograph published in 2001 already mentions between one hundred and fifty and two hundred catalogues of group shows and personal exhibitions – can neither be summarized nor classified easily. The complexity and extreme visual heterogeneity of his oeuvre – his motives span from portraits, architectural photography, photomontages, recycled popular images to scientific imagery and his photographs from seemingly documentary images to nonfigurative computer generated “pictures” – has logically driven his commentators to embrace its totality, in which depiction or documentation only play a partial role. Ruff has always claimed to make images rather than documents. Consequently, his use of numerous kinds of representational modes has led recent scholarship on his work to overlook the documentary reception of his early work, especially his early architectural photography.⁴¹

In an interview with Helga Meister (2008), Ruff recalls that after he exhibited his retouched house for the first time in the Haus Lange in Krefeld (1988), along with Elke Denda and Michael van Ofen, the retouching triggered dogmatic commentaries against digital image manipulation.⁴² The catalogue of the exhibition published in 1988, like several publications of the late 1980s and early 1990s, does not mention the digital intervention but rather emphasizes the “rigorous” documentary approach.⁴³ There is often no evidence as to why the retouching has not been mentioned – if the omission has been made out of ignorance or for other reasons – which makes an assessment of sources difficult. Rather than aiming at an exhaustive study of the phenomenon, we will thus focus on examples of repeatedly quoted texts from the late 1980s and early 1990s that hold a particular place in Ruff’s historiography, which either mention retouching or which do not.

The exhibition catalogue of the Bonner Kunstverein,⁴⁴ for example, published 1991, explicitly addresses computer manipulation. In a short text titled “Zu der Architekturfotografie bei Thomas Ruff,” Reinholt Happel precisely mentions some of the interventions, which is rather untypical:

38 Interview Philipp Pocock and Thomas Ruff, *Journal for Contemporary Arts*, op. cit.

39 His later non-figurative or appropriative experiments have probably comforted this interpretation of his early series, such as the *Häuser* and the *Porträts*.

40 Matthias Winzen, “A Credible Invention of Reality,” in Matthias Winzen (ed.), *Thomas Ruff, Photography from 1979 to the Present*, op. cit., p. 131–161.

41 Which was not yet the case in the 1980s.

42 Helga Meister, “Das Bild ist schön,” *K-West*, op. cit.

43 *Bilder. Elke Denda. Michael von Ofen. Thomas Ruff*, exhibition catalogue (Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, 1988), Krefelder Kunstmuseum, 1988.

44 *Thomas Ruff*, exhibition catalogue (Bonner Kunstverein, Kunstverein Arnsberg, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Kunst + Projekte Sindelfingen, 1991), op. cit.

Even more so, it seems surprising that Ruff has intervened in some images, even though it can only be detected if they are compared with the original negatives. In "Haus No. 8 I" 1988, a signpost obstructing the view on the multi-story car park has disappeared, and an entire floor of a row of houses on the right side of the background has been trimmed off. These two manipulations lead to a much cleaner cutting out of the main motive [...] from the surroundings. The pursued objective, which wasn't to be achieved during the capture on location and whose realization proves problematic during the critical inspection in the lab, could eventually be realized through high-end computer technology.⁴⁵

While acknowledging the logical role of the retouching considering the "pursued objective,"⁴⁶ Happel still finds its use surprising, considering the "documentary" approach. His assertion obviously has to be pondered, given that photography retouching – digital or analogue – is usually considered suspicious. It is hardly ever simply considered on the same level as other types of parameters, such as the choice of the photographed subject or the frame. Happel's position epitomizes a common relationship to the retouched photographic image, rather than the digital nature of the post-production. One detail the quote also reveals, which again is very symptomatic of the discourse on retouching more generally, is the fact that the digital intervention is invisible and can only be traced back with the "original negative,"⁴⁷ which indicates that its appraisal is governed by its visibility or invisibility. There can be no general assumptions on the positions toward digital retouching in the early stages of these technologies. But his particular position reflects a common reaction toward the retouching of photographs, if they are visible or known (e.g., through a catalogue, interview, etc.). Post-photographic images mentioned in the first chapter embody another situation of that position, since the retouching is visible and overt. The conspicuousness of digital post-production technologies defines these images, even if they are not, in fact, digitally produced or edited.⁴⁸ The visual evidence – does an image appear to be digitally modified or not – thus plays a key role in the assessment of the reception of these imageries, and the fact that many critics have not discussed this very aspect of the *Häuser* series is probably imputable to the fact that it is not visible. One often quoted example of literature that does not address this aspect of his work can be found in *Parkett* 28 (1991), an issue which contains several contributions discussing Ruff's work. In an article titled "Lack of Faith," Marc Freidus describes Ruff's strategy in the *Häuser* series as being subtractive, in its way of decontextualizing the architectural objects: "Ruff strips the buildings of architectural context, inhabitants, vehicles, season foliage, indeed of almost all

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ As for example Nancy Burson's early composites, resulting from video superimpositions.

references to daily life or the flow of time."⁴⁹ Considering that Ruff did in fact digitally remove a car in one of those images,⁵⁰ it is interesting that the article does not bring up this deletion, which would ideally exemplify Freidus' interpretation of Ruff's visual strategy. It is hard to tell if Freidus ignored it or considered it irrelevant, but it seems likely that he wasn't aware of the retouching. Even nowadays, almost twenty years later, it is difficult to trace, as it hasn't been systematically explored. One might, on the contrary, argue that the article's proximity with the first exhibitions of the series could have provided Friedus with more precise information, as the retouching might have been discussed during the opening or mentioned in the newspapers.

Another interesting example of the "omission" of retouching is the repeatedly quoted interview for the *Journal of Contemporary Arts*⁵¹ in 1993, in which Philip Pocock interestingly addresses technology, but in terms of a hypothetical, future use. He asks Ruff if he might "one day" abandon photography "for electronic processes," but he omits any mention of digital retouching in the *Häuser* series, even though he asks about "the buildings [he] photographs."⁵² Here again, it is not possible to say if Pocock knew about the image manipulations or if he didn't, but the fact that he addresses the "electronic" as a hypothesis seems to suggest that it was perceived as a potentiality rather than a present-time fact. Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993) and Andreas Gursky's early composites such as *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993) were among the first institutionally acknowledged digital images that could be perceived as digitally retouched because of the (relative) conspicuousness of the post-production. The flying leaves in *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* obviously cannot be recorded in a single shot, and the form factor and formal construction of *Paris, Montparnasse* suggests a composite photograph; while these features are no proof of digital retouching, they lead to the belief that the image has somehow been tailored. This obviously is not the case in the *Häuser* series. And since Pocock explicitly opposes "electronic processes" and photography, it seems logical that he would not consider the combination of the two.

This series by Thomas Ruff interestingly highlights the changing reception of digital technologies. Since he started to diversify his formal approach, appraisals of his work have increasingly focused on the idea of photography as a construct. This impacted the reception of the *Häuser*, which had rather been interpreted as architecture photography in the late 1980s and early 1990s despite digital retouching. While there can be no definitive assumption as to the reasons why a critic or scholar did not mention digital retouching, the absence of its evocation nevertheless delineates an obvious tendency, governed by contextual preconditions. Neither critical reception nor scientific literature fully ignore digital technologies. Ruff even recalls discussions about the validity of its use, but those interventions clearly did not

49 Marc Freidus, "Lack of Faith," *Parkett*, No. 28, 1991, p. 68.

50 Helga Meister, "Das Bild ist schön," *K-West*, op. cit.

51 Interview Thomas Ruff and Philip Pocock, *Journal of Contemporary Arts*, op. cit.

52 Ibid.

trigger a reaction similar to the contemporary – avowedly predominantly theoretical – post-photographic discourse. The response toward images in which retouching is invisible therefore also reflects the opposition between a pragmatic reading of them and a dogmatic theoretical stance, detached from visual evidence, whose comparability can obviously be questioned.

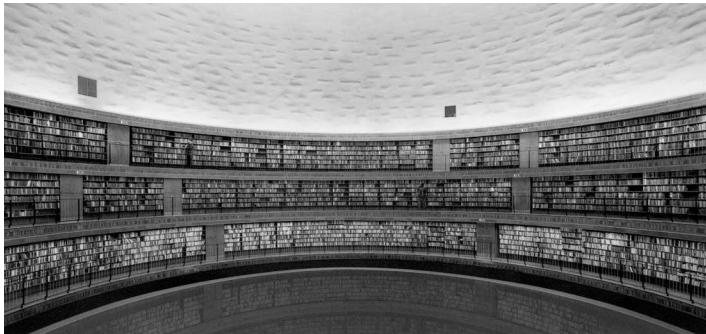


Fig. 61: Andreas Gursky, *Library*, 1999 (206 x 360 cm)

2 ADDITIVE AND SUBTRACTIVE RETOUCHING TECHNIQUES

The importance of these manipulations in Ruff's formal strategy can only serve as an early exemplary case and has not been used in itself as a definitive argument for the understanding of the discourse on the digital. But it nevertheless reveals a noteworthy tendency that shows to which extent this discourse is not so much related to technological preconditions, but rather depends upon the verisimilitude of an image: does the image *appear* authentic, or does it look manipulated? A major consequence emerges from the comparison of the discourse on post-photography and the discourse on the digital in Düsseldorf. It shows the reliance on visual parameters to approach digital photography critically: the opposition between verisimilitude and manipulated imageries occupies a key role in the constitution of the discourse discussing the digital. Interestingly, this antagonism not only opposes Düsseldorf and post-photography but is also present among some of the Bechers' students. It provides productive analytical criteria to understand the approach toward documentary forms. While Ruff's *Häuser* are perceived as documentary *despite* retouching, Gursky's images are considered as such *because* of its use: the confrontation of the subtractive retouching of both photographers reveals this schism, even though the comparison is somehow problematic, as Gursky only uses subtractive processes such as retouching, similar to those in the *Häuser*, in the mid-1990s. This makes comparability in terms of their reception and the technology used problematic, as both sets of images emerge in different contexts. But before the next

chapter's analysis of Gursky's early compositions, which embody a type of images with documentary "value" because of their digitalness, we shall address his late 1990s photographs with subtractive retouching in order to highlight similarities to and differences from Ruff's approach. *Rhein I* (1996, Fig. 5), *Rhein II* (1999) and *Library* (1999, Fig. 61) have undergone post-productive interventions similar to *Haus Nr. 1 I* and *Haus Nr. 8 I*. In *Rhein*, every trace of civilization has been removed.⁵³ *Rhein II* has been extruded⁵⁴ horizontally from *Rhein* (1996), resulting in a bi-chromatic, sober, painterly and anamorphic image, which serves Gursky's tendency to search for frontal, two-dimensional constructions, a central feature of his work, which will be developed later on.⁵⁵ While trying to assess to which extent retouching engages with the ability to represent reality would be irrelevant, it seems pertinent to evaluate the role those interventions play in the work process of these two artists. Discourse usually interprets Gursky's compositional strategies as a way to enhance or orient the perception of the depicted object, aiming for the generic instead of the particular. Transformations made with retouching tools clearly aim at converting a particular referent – in this case a river shore in the Ruhr – to a more generic view of a river, technically achieved through the erasing of contextualizing elements. Commenting on the genesis of *Rhein I*, Gursky claims that "[he] wasn't interested in an unusual, possibly picturesque view of the Rhine, but in the most contemporary possible view of it. Paradoxically, this view of the Rhine cannot be obtained in situ; a fictitious construction was required to provide an accurate image of a modern river."

Interestingly, such selection processes predate the actual use of digital technologies, as an example analyzed by Martin Henschel shows, using subtractive techniques even before digitally retouching images: the early *Müllheim an der Ruhr, Angler* shows a wild part of the Ruhr River, with only a bridge and some fishermen as sign of civilization. The picture, often associated with romanticism or historical painting, is in fact the photographic depiction of a very small section of the river shore, which remains natural. The landscape depicted in the image is surrounded by docks, a hydroelectric power station and housing estates. What matters to Gursky, according to Henschel, is less the reality of that particular landscape than the various memories and art historical sources it might refer to.⁵⁶

53 Stefan Beyst, "Andreas Gursky. From a Spirit's Eye View," op. cit.

54 In a program such as Adobe Photoshop an image can easily be stretched in one direction, creating an elongated version of the original image. An image depicting a square would simply produce an output with a rectangle in a stretched version.

55 Although *Rhein II* is often mentioned in articles in relationship with digital retouching, its strictly geometrical relationship with *Rhein I* has never been stated. Matthew Biro for example mentions the removing of elements without mentioning *Rhein I*, Alix Ohlin supposes that the image is a composite made with several river views. See Matthew Biro, "From Analogue to Digital Photography. Bernd and Hilla Becher and Andreas Gursky," op. cit., p. 358 and Alix Ohlin, "Andreas Gursky and the Contemporary Sublime," op. cit., p. 29.

56 See Martin Henschel, "The Totality of the World, Viewed in Its Component Forms. Andreas Gursky's Photographs 1980 to 2008," in *Andreas Gursky. Works 80–08*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstmuseum Krefeld, Moderna Museet Stockholm, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008–2009), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2009, p. 22–24.

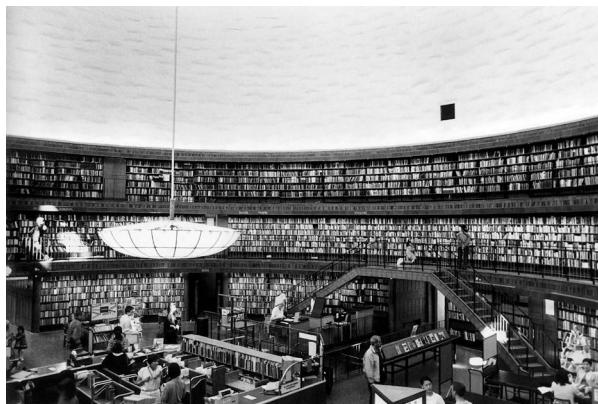


Fig. 62: Candida Höfer, *Stadsbiblioteket Stockholm*, 1993 (38 x 57 cm)

While the simplification process differs from the typological approach of the Bechers – there is no explicit comparative component in Gursky's work –, it nevertheless produces a similar des-individualization, producing nonspecific subjects. While formally the erasing of picture elements in *Rhein I* and *Rhein II* are subordinated to Gursky's generic formal constructions, they also fundamentally serve as vectors for a different kind of documentation addressing the generic.⁵⁷ In *Library* (1999, Fig. 61), in which the staircases or the counters of the Stadsbiblioteket Stockholm have been removed and the floor substituted with the reflection of the shelving,⁵⁸ a seductive visual impact is clearly produced, but the picture also constructs a new meaning, confronting a decontextualized generic photograph with a specific caption. The particular library is illustrated with a stripped-down building, which embodies a type-form, rather than an actual building. But while the Bechers induce a comparative mechanism juxtaposing similar objects, Gursky's approach rather constructs a generic overview of the subjects he is interested in, technically realized using retouching tools. In the work of the Bechers, the single-image autonomization, or its emphasis on type-images, is achieved through its inscription in a typological grid. In *Rhein I* and *Rhein II*, the same effect will be achieved by stripping down the image to a small amount of graphically strong elements, improving the visual impact and legibility of his tableaus, and by confronting it with a preconceived vision of that image. The potential of the digital tools thus compensates, so to speak, for the absence of comparative mechanisms across several images. Gursky's photographs, while gaining visual impact through their very large formats, retrieve the Bechers' strategies, not by arranging the depiction of an object by photographic means (i.e., frontal depiction of industrial buildings) but by intervening in the image itself.

57 Andreas Gursky quoted in Annelie Lütgens, "Shrines and Ornaments. A Look into the Display Cabinet," in *Andreas Gursky: Fotografien 1994 – 1998*, exhibition catalogue (Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 1998), Ostfildern, Cantz, 1998, p. 9.

58 Ibid.



Fig. 63: Andreas Bretz, illustration for Hans Onkelbach's article, "Gursky und sein Bild vom Rhein," in the *Rheinische Post Online*, Düsseldorf, 15.11.2011

In terms of referentiality, Gursky also marks a shift with the Bechers' original endeavor (i.e., documentation of buildings in specific places at a set moment in time), approaching their more conceptual effort (i.e., anonymous sculptures). He doesn't intend to document that particular library or that particular river shore. Gursky himself stated – and this stance is often endorsed by scholars⁵⁹ – that he aims to show prototypal environments, oscillating between the general and the particular, the macroscopic and the microscopic, "idealization and richness of detail," a tension Bernd Stiegler interprets as the ever-recurring theme of "photography which sees more or which sees less than the eye."⁶⁰ The tension between those two poles, symptomatic of the history of photography and of the reception of digital technologies in photography, leads Stiegler to the conclusion that the strength of Gursky's work lies in a non-partisan recycling of the recurring *topoi* of the history of photography, an avowedly new critical stance. If the *Häuser* and Gursky's images both express the articulation between generic and particular – a variable established in the Düsseldorf context by the Bechers' typological constructions –, the fundamental difference between them is that they are achieved by Gursky chiefly through digital manipulation. The generic only exists in his photographs through their retouching, while in Ruff's series it is primarily achieved through serial constructions. Clearly, the articulation of the particular and the generic occurs in the *Häuser* series *despite* the retouching, which is not necessary. In Gursky's case, the dialectic only exists *because* of the retouching. He does indeed erase picture elements, but only in order to build an image which would otherwise be impossible to realize. Ruff's retouching, on the other hand, entails minor interventions such as color correction or reframing the image, while Gursky's visual strategy is governed by the formal implications of such tools, which

59 A common interpretation of his work is the idea of a generic documentation of the globalized world.

60 Bernd Stiegler, "Digitale Photographie als epistemologischer Bruch und historische Wende," op. cit., p. 113.

thus acquire a much greater importance. But considering the fact that this comparison is somehow anachronistic, the earlier use of digital tools in Gursky's work ought to be examined, in both their formal and conceptual implications, and through their contemporary reception, in order to understand the genesis of such practice.