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# *Images and Photographs. Thomas Ruff*

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"Ruff's process emphasizes how easily the visual messages that enable us to relate to reality can be manipulated, and how fleeting their grasp of truth is."

"*Let it hasten to enrich the tourist's album and restore to his eye the precision which his memory may lack; let it adorn the naturalist's library, and enlarge microscopic animals; let it even provide information to corroborate the astronomer's hypotheses; in short, let it be the secretary and clerk of whoever needs an absolute factual exactitude in his profession—up to that point nothing could be better.*"[1]

Baudelaire concludes his famous 1859 attack on photography as an art form with this list of more "appropriate" recommended uses for a medium engaged in the mere reproduction of reality: uses that are utilitarian, "humble" even, such as those relating to the documentation and archiving of material. Interestingly, more than a century later, contemporary aesthetics have endowed this very type of photography with artistic qualities, giving value to its capacity to document or record data, or – as the French poet put it in his withering Salon critique – to be a passive scientific observer.

I am, of course, referring to the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Art Academy), where Thomas Ruff studied photography under Bernd Becher, along with a peer group that included Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer, Andreas Gursky, Axel Hütte and others. Through the work of these artists, photography's "ontological" agenda is forcefully set out, without having to strain or deviate towards a "creative" or "artistic" use of the medium in the banal sense: indeed, nowhere is the concept of "creativity" more vigorously rejected than by this group. Bernd and Hilla Becher, it has often been said[2], are widely recognized as having reduced the medium's expressivity to point zero, re-qualifying it artistically: their idea was to strip photography bare of its expressive/subjective characteristics in order to uncover its true artistic essence.

For many, the methodology of choice hinged on modularity, in the form of compositions made up of simple elements that together formed structures both complex and yet completely self-evident in the way they interrelated. Working in black and white, Bernd and Hilla Becher shot examples of what they referred to as "anonymous sculpture", industrial architecture of the past that had helped shape the economic landscape of early twentieth-century Europe and North America. Their hallmark was

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[1] C. Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art*, ed. and trans. by J. Mayne, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1955, p. 46 (originally published in French as "Salon de 1959", Paris, 1859).

[2] See B. and H. Becher, *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie Technischer Banten*, Düsseldorf, Art-Press Verlag in association with Wittenborn and Co., New York, 1970.

photographic ensembles of architecturally similar structures, organized in such a way as to create a visual grid or template that could potentially be repeated to infinity. Much has been written about the Bechers' "seminal" work of the 1970s, but one of the most crucial points is that it thematizes serial mass production (much like Minimalist sculpture), establishing a historical context through the classification of obsolete industrial constructions.

By proposing this classification system as art, the Bechers invited comparison with the productive procedures of art itself, a comparison that they formally resolved, according to Benjamin Buchloh, through the transfiguration of mass-produced objects into a series of photographs arranged as a grid. Another of Buchloh's observations is equally interesting: the Bechers' work classifies buildings whose external form reveals their internal form and function. Buchloh points out that it would be hard to find this level of transparency in contemporary industrial or service-orientated architecture (such as nuclear plants).[3]

In terms of language and methodology, the younger generation of photographers from the "Düsseldorf school" have also chosen to work with the series format, albeit articulated in a different way. The world represented by these artists is no longer shaped by the mass-production and accumulation of objects, but rather by the widespread, pervasive diffusion of the media and information technology; power is no longer wielded by manufacturers, but by those who control the channels of mass communication, just as our way of life is no longer governed by the real economy but by the "virtual" one. As a result, the younger generation of artist-photographers does not produce serial images, grids or modules, but pieces whose formal characteristics diverge substantially from Bernd and Hilla Becher's small-scale, modest black and white shots. Having gradually freed themselves from the direct influence of their teachers, each of the artists has followed a different path, but with one thing in common: the preference for producing large-scale color photographs. The series format is retained as a way of subdividing the work and grouping it thematically, but serial images no longer appear within the internal space of an individual piece. The stand-alone images have limited print runs and are enlarged to uncommon dimensions; the shots themselves are taken from a viewpoint above ground level, which broadens the visual field (this is especially true in the case of Struth and Gursky); and in their technical perfection and lack of "interpretative" elements, the photographs manage to present both an accurate and heightened reality. Photography thus becomes a means by which reality is aestheticized, and this, together with the simple, direct way in which the medium is used, has led to extraordinary results. Shunning the use of artificial techniques, Struth's museum galleries and tropical rainforests, Höfer's old libraries and Baroque theatres, Gursky's digital shots of Las Vegas hotels and Hütte's landscapes all tell us (to echo Walter Benjamin), that *it's a beautiful world*.[4]

It should immediately be pointed out that Thomas Ruff's work does not have the same intention as the works mentioned above, whose aestheticism and typology is generated from the knowledge that the experience of reality in this world clashes with the way in which reality is sensationalized. Ruff is interested not so much in the effects of this sensationalism as in its mechanisms, and by showing us how it works he approaches a conceptual idea of photography, as many have commented. He experiments with the medium's linguistic possibilities, starting with the very "humble" qualities that

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[3] B. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity. Essays on American and European Art since 1945*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999 (First published in 1977).

[4] W. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *The New Left Review*, trans. by John Heckman, I/62, London, July.

Baudelaire assigned to it. Ruff has made two important, and complementary, points on this subject: that photography can only reproduce the surface of things, and that a photograph is also a statement whose accuracy must be verified through a series of tests, just as a scientist would test out a theory; a single photograph, like a single test, is not enough.[5]

To be more precise: Ruff works not so much with images and their potential for telling the truth, but with photographs – or one might even say with photography as a category – as a specific technical method of articulating visual language and its potential to construct meaning. In the analytical process that is at the basis of all of Ruff's work, truth is a pure eventuality. His photographic enlargements neither present us with visual redundancy nor overwhelm us by unfolding their full meaning, but invite us to ask ourselves about their meaning, which can have disturbing implications for the observer.

The artist's first cycle, *Interieurs* (*Interiors*), was produced between 1979 and 1983. The interiors were shot in his apartment and in those of his parents and friends in Düsseldorf, where he lived while a student at the Kunstakademie as well as in the Black Forest area. Following Bernd Becher's suggestion that he should photograph chairs, Ruff decided to expand the field of vision to include the space between two chairs. The photographs are shot in color using only natural light, but this assertion of truth is counterbalanced by the highly selective choice of subject matter. Ruff crops the space, focusing on details, and never takes in a complete area. The subjects are the headboard and pillows of a perfectly made bed, a framed photo portrait placed diagonally on a sideboard shelf, a small picture affixed to a wall decorated with gaudy wallpaper, a bathroom washbasin; the furnishings and decor all denote a particular social class (the lower-middle class) and period (the 1960s). The restricted size of the images and the way in which the shots home in on details to the exclusion of the wider context, perhaps help to highlight the intimate, personal and emotional dimension into which the artist has entered to create his work. They have sociological value as indicators of a certain type of community, one that remains anonymous but which nonetheless possesses and expresses a historical identity. Like the Bechers' grids, these are also "anonymous sculptures", but whereas the Bechers transcended everyday experience to concentrate on the very symbols of industrialized society, Ruff's images are firmly anchored in everyday life.

The concept of an anonymous community is directly examined in the series of portraits that Ruff started shooting in 1980. The first series is small format (24  18 cm) and presents a gallery of people of similar age, race and (apparently) social class: young, middle class (or lower-middle class) Germans whom Ruff met day to day while he was living and studying in Düsseldorf, and whom he photographed with the meticulousness of an archivist. The subjects are predominantly shot frontally from the waist up, and in a few cases in profile or three-quarter length. All of them are wearing their normal, everyday clothes, and their faces stand out against solid colored backgrounds chosen by the subjects themselves. Their expressions are as neutral as possible, and Ruff himself has declared that he modeled this series on the aesthetic criteria of the passport photo. In another interesting observation he refers to the influential work of the great August Sander (already active in 1920s Germany), which naturally invites comparisons with Ruff's portraits. In Sander's unfinished project *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (*People of the Twentieth Century*), the subjects' clothing is a clear indicator of profession or at least of social rank. But recognition on these terms alone is no longer a given in today's homogenized society, where what you wear does not necessarily advertize who you

[5] C. Hürzeler, "Interview with Thomas Ruff ", in *Thomas Ruff*, Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, 1996, p. 108.

are or what you do. Ruff photographs this dissolving of differences, which his mechanical eye captures in the corporeal experience of his subjects. More precisely the intention of these portraits is not to stress distinctive individual features, but conversely to bring out the anonymous, generic qualities that each one embodies. Ruff tests out the theory again in 1998 with another series of portraits. The methodology and choices are the same, but the "models" are very different from those shot fifteen or twenty years earlier, because the distinguishing signs used by communities to represent themselves have changed: clothing, hairstyles and body type.

In 1986, Ruff started to experiment with the genre by making his portraits much larger than the norm.
Pragmatic as ever, he chose the largest format print paper on the market, ending the series in 1991 when the paper went out of production. At over two meters in height, the photographs made the international art scene stop and stare, and gained Ruff wide recognition. The backgrounds are now a uniform white, and the shots always frontal. Paradoxically, the oversized format highlights the radical elimination of subjectivity on the part of both subject and photographer, to create what has ironically been termed "dermatological" realism in reference to the way in which every detail, down to the last pore and pimple, has been blown up to gigantic proportions.[6]

It has been said that these works recall the propagandist aesthetic of dictatorial regimes, whose enormous effigies towered over public spaces to be worshipped by the masses. It is perhaps a valid observation, and Ruff responded controversially by inserting artificially bright blue (Aryan!) eyes into twelve of the portraits he had previously realized, making them look even more disturbing than the rest. In a certain sense the enlargement process follows on from, and complements, the Bechers' research on "anonymous sculptures", in that the subjects, who typify a certain period and class, are almost transformed into "mass-humans", public heroes glorified by the artist. Braco Dimitrijevic and Krystof Wodiczko both had similar intentions with (respectively) their monumental black and white portraits and slide projections celebrating unknown passers-by, displayed on the exterior of public architecture and monuments.

Of course, Ruff's works were made to be exhibited indoors. The images are all surrounded by a white border, followed by the frame itself. They are photographs first and foremost, purposefully enlarged to avoid any expectation of realism that would still be possible in smaller format shots. Standing in front of one of these gigantic portraits, the viewer is fully aware that these are photographs and not images. To paraphrase Matisse: I do not make portraits of people, I paint pictures.[7]

Much of the appeal of these works is in the almost metaphysical quality of suspension that they project into the spaces in which they are exhibited; it is as if that excess of "dermatological" realism has somehow pushed them towards a dream state. Perhaps it is this element of surrealism that gives

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[6] *That remains to be seen. A Conversation between Stephan Dillemuth and Thomas Ruff*, in *ibidem*, p. 104.

[7] See H. Matisse, *Scritti e pensieri sull'arte,* Einaudi, Turin, 1979 (originally published in French as *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, Paris 1972).

the works their aura, in a sense that, curiously conflicts with Benjamin's view of the suggestive power of the photographic portrait, yet paradoxically agrees with Baudelaire's condemnation.[8]

The series *Häuser* (*Houses*) was shot between 1987 and 1991, and corresponds to the *Interieurs*: inhabited by the subject-types of Ruff's portraits, these apartments and dwelling spaces also constitute the living environment of the artist himself, who felt compelled to create a photographic record of his world. *Häuser* is a collection of anonymous urban buildings, photographed largely face-on, or from angles that barely imply an urban context (on which Ruff makes no comment). The buildings are wholly unremarkable, and are chosen purely on the basis of their proximity to the artist's studio (one hour's travel time or less). Ruff photographs them in the early morning so as to avoid contamination from the urban grind of daily life. At this hour, the skies are almost always a uniform gray color, but the artist still corrects the images in order to make them as clean (that is, as neutral) as possible. For the first time, Ruff uses digital technology to remove details such as a tree or road sign, or to "standardize" a facade featuring only closed windows. Modern techniques blend with obsolete ones, connecting the present to the past, a concept to which Ruff would repeatedly return in his future work. The format of the shots is modeled on picture postcards from the 1950s and 1960s depicting examples of vulgarization of Bauhaus architecture. This idea forms the principal theme of the series: functionalism become cliché, or the transformation of elite models into populist, mass-market counterparts. This descent from the high culture of modernist utopias to the low culture of suburban construction, and the resulting standardization of lifestyles, is perfectly evoked by Ruff's stark documentary style (and, to quote Benjamin once more, the "enormous barracks" are at long last photographed without being *transfigured*).[9]

Here again, the images' large dimensions and use of color (this time dominated by dull gray tones) helps to thematize the idea of a homogenous society whose way of life is as "identical" as the windows of these buildings. Nothing else is said: this series, more than any other, conveys the artist's conviction that photography can only reproduce the surface of things.

Ruff's attitude changes, however, in the images he creates of existing architecture designed by established "authors." In 1990, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron asked him to photograph one of their buildings, the Ricola Warehouse in Laufen, Switzerland, for the Venice Biennale. In this case Ruff immediately refused to approach the problem in terms of finding the "correct way" to represent and document the building in the context of an exhibition. He decided to accept the job, but not to photograph the warehouse directly. Instead, he asked another photographer in Basel to send him a series of shots. The building's hillside location meant that it could not be captured with just one photograph: several were needed in order to create a composite image. By digitally splicing the pictures he received together, Ruff managed to reconstruct a complete image of the warehouse, obtaining a result which is, and yet at the same time is not, an image of the original architecture. The artist thus assumes the role of interpreter, or commentator, on the genre of architectural

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[8] W. Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, NLB, London, 1979 (originally published in German as *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, 1931), pp. 242-243. The German philosopher writes: "In Hill's Newhaven fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in *art*."

[9] W. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," cit.

photography. This is better explained in his successive work, all commissioned, on buildings by Herzog & de Meuron and masters such as Mies van der Rohe and Luigi Cosenza.

The Mies van der Rohe project began in 1998, when Ruff was approached by the director of the Krefelder Kunstmuseen, a group of museums in Krefeld, Germany, which includes Haus Esters and Haus Lange, built by Mies between 1927 and 1930 and subsequently converted into the city's contemporary art galleries. Ruff photographed the two famous buildings for their re-opening following a renovation program, moving on to other Mies masterpieces, including the Barcelona Pavilion and Haus Tugendhat in Brno. The series is simply entitled *l.m.v.d.r.* in lower case, after the architect's initials. This time, the artist takes his own shots, although he is keen to stress that he does not want to compete with Mies' architecture, but instead with the image of it that exists in the collective and historical consciousness.[10] Therefore, he also uses archive photographs, which he digitally manipulates, for example by modifying the color of the brickwork of the Krefeld houses. Ruff explores the architect's work through a range of different photographic techniques with which he had already been experimenting in his other work: frontal perspectives, nocturnal photography, interior details, digitally manipulated images, and soft-focus effects.

In 2002 the gallery owner Lia Rumma commissioned him to photograph the Naples fish market, designed by Luigi Cosenza, which was being restored after having stood derelict for years. For the resulting work *m.d.p.n.*, in addition to photographing the building himself from different points of view and color-tinting existing archive photographs, Ruff also duplicated some of the interior images to highlight the sense of light and space in the old market. The result, as Giovanni Leoni has commented, is a collection of "architectural biographies" taken from a multitude of different viewpoints, which on the one hand revolve around the "bare fact" of the architecture itself, allowing it to emerge in its entirety, and on the other hand affirm, and interpret, its historicity. This multiplicity of shots – taken by the artist, by other photographers, and from archives – supplants the direct experience of the architecture, recreating a single vision but via a complex range of stimuli.[11]

This also applies to the work of the two architects in these pictures; as far as Ruff's own work is concerned, the use of multiple photographic techniques makes it impossible to identify a coherent unity of style, not even the impersonal, anonymous style that he had adopted up to this point. The photographs seem, in effect, to be the work of several different authors; the use of different languages dissolves subjectivity, and the idea of authorship that is raised in these encounters with past masters is resolved with the return of the concept of "death of the author".

The artist uses digital retouching (introduced, in a lowkey way, in *Häuser*) to examine how far images can be manipulated, and to test out the instability of their cognitive and information-giving potential. Ruff's entire body of work is informed both by a desire to experiment with different modes of expression and by an acute awareness of the realistic effects that the camera is able to produce. This is why he uses a combination of techniques ranging from advanced to obsolete (perhaps reconnecting himself to the Bechers in their search for traces of the recent past), and one could say that all of his work is founded on this method of examination.

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[10] *"I treated not the buildings but the image of the buildings"*, in "Thomas Ruff with Vicki Goldberg," The Brooklyn Rail, New York, June 2005, pp. 16-17.

[11] G. Leoni, "Bio/grafie di architetture", in *Thomas Ruff m.d.p.n.*, ed. by F. Tramontano Charta, Milan, 2005, pp. 12-19.

Ruff first used archive photographs in the series *Sterne* (*Stars*), produced between 1989 and 1992. Having closely investigated everyday people and their living spaces, he decided to pursue one of his primary interests, astronomy, by turning his lens on the distant, infinite expanses of the universe. However, his attempts at taking direct pictures of the stars were hampered both by his unsuitable equipment and by the pollution (particularly from light sources) produced by European cities. He therefore contacted the ESO – European Southern Observatory, based in the Chilean Andes, and bought copies of their 1,212 negatives, from which he developed a series of gigantic prints. The resulting images are truly unusual, and at first sight look like abstract compositions rather than recognizable constellations: vast black plains more or less densely studded with white dots or patches, depending on whether the photographs are of galaxies or nebulae, the Milky Way or random stars. There is no romanticism, no emotional reaction to the immensity of the cosmos; nothing other than white elements that appear to be floating on a black background in a constantly changing relationship. The photographs lose none of their original scientific character and if anything, the artist maintains that, they provoke a philosophical reflection on time, or more precisely, on the presence of different temporalities in a single dimension, since starlight reaches us from different distances calculated in different numbers of light years.[12]

The *Maschinen* (*Machines*) of 2003 are also derived from archive images, taken from glass negatives shot in the 1930s for a Düsseldorf factory that produced machinery used for manufacturing mills, drills, and other tools. The original shots were taken for a sales brochure, which the artist subsequently tracked down: the published images show only the machines themselves, skilfully photographed against a light background, whereas the negatives pan out to reveal what surrounds the subjects. In his new images, Ruff set out to document the photographic process that led to those results, including the context, what can be seen "beyond" – for example the walls of the location, the machinery supports and the backgrounds against which they are set, and even the first test prints, arranged vertically for review. The artist retraces the process that led to the "posing" of these objects for commercial purposes, emphasizing these poses by digitally adding color, a technique of which Ruff was particularly fond at the time. The muted tones with which he tints the machinery – olive green, metallic blue, rust, yellow – are reminiscent of vintage prints, underscoring the fact that the images belong to the past. It is impossible to ignore the parallels between Ruff's large, expressionless portraits and these objects, which have been "reanimated" through digital color-tinting. Ruff has talked explicitly[13] about the influence of Francis Picabia's *portraits mécaniques* on his work, and the Surrealist painter's allusions to parts of the anatomy (carried through to the titles) are perhaps echoed in the chromatic "reanimation" of the machinery re-imaged by Ruff.

Between 1992 and 1996, before his color-tinted machinery and immediately after his black and white stars, Ruff produced the green-tinged *Nächte* (*Nights*). These photographs were made using special lenses and flash technology originally invented for the military and debuted in the first Gulf War, when night-vision shots of Baghdad under bombardment by the US army were beamed around the world. There was widespread concern at the time that the war was being sensationalized, and Ruff was keen to find out exactly how these effects were produced. He fitted his own camera with night-vision equipment, but the results could not be less spectacular or sensationalist. Produced in

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[12] T. Wulffen, "Thomas Ruff," in *Flash Art International*, no. 168, Milan, January-February, 1993, p. 65: "Then there is something semi-philosophical as well: with these photographs you're looking into various pasts."

[13] *Thomas Ruff. Maschinen/Machines*, Kestner Gesellschaft, ed. by C. Flosdorff Hannover, 2003, p. 9.

two formats, the most common measuring around 2 x 2 meters, the photographs do not present us with the glimmering lights of a city at night, but rather with a series of stark, deserted city streets, buildings with lit-up windows, and the odd tree or statue. The dominant tone is green, fading to black at the edges, and the images have a characteristic circular halo produced by the night-vision lens.

In 1995, Ruff represented Germany at the Venice Biennale with two new series of works, *andere Porträts* (*other Portraits*) and *Stereofotos* (*Stereophotos*), both of which were begun the previous year. For the first series Ruff departed from his usual color c-prints and made silkscreen prints from photographs produced through another rare photographic procedure, in this case developed not by the military, but by the German police in the 1970s: a machine called the Minolta Montage Unit, which generated identikit images of criminal suspects by means of a special mirror to superimpose head shots. Ruff borrowed one of these machines from the Berlin police archive and used it in conjunction with some of his own portraits, superimposing two faces at a time to obtain a new "being". The resulting portraits resemble human hybrids (even when one set of features overrides the other), or worse still, monstrous-looking mutants. The dominant gray tones and blurred outlines produced by superimposing different black and white photos, give the faces a ghostly quality, further accentuated by the silkscreen paper prints. The overall effect is of a set of worn-out, faded photographs. It is also significant that a machine developed to identify people (with sufficient accuracy to accuse them of having committed a crime), and to drag them out of anonymity, is used here to obtain the opposite results: physical features are merged, making the subjects unrecognizable, and giving the images a surreal aura.

The ongoing series *Stereofotos* employs another, relatively simple piece of equipment, which like the Minolta Montage Unit is now obsolete. "Stereo" photographs also appear in other series, the first being those dedicated to auteur architecture. The subjects of the *Stereofotos* series are the buildings and landscapes of tourist destinations such as Brasilia, Jerusalem, the Alps and the Ruhr Valley. The small, square photographs (measuring 16  16 cm) are presented in groups of two, one image for each eye. When looked at through a stereoscope (a wooden box fitted with mirrors), the two pictures merge to become a single, three-dimensional image, giving the viewer the impression that they are actually standing where the shot was taken. Ruff is interested in analyzing different modes of perception, and with the aid of another simple technique he demonstrates that visual data is organized primarily by our brains rather than our eyes, or by photographic equipment.

At one of the many exhibitions of the 1995 Venice Biennale, the artist came across a hand-retouched photographic portrait of Sophia Loren, which prompted him to create the short series *Retuschen* (*Retouched*), consisting today of 9 hand-tinted portraits – almost all of them of women – taken from an old medical reference book. This is the sole instance in which Ruff alters his images by hand only, without using digital manipulation. By contrast, the 1996 series *Plakate* (*Posters*) is entirely based on computer manipulation. Working again with appropriated images, he produced large-scale, garish photomontages that parody political propaganda posters, commenting ironically that "They look like bad posters for B movies, but politicians behave like actors in B movies".[14] Ruff's sources of inspiration are actually more highbrow, and he again references past modes of communication, from the bold formal solutions of John Heartfield to 1920s Russian poster art re-imagined with the color palette of 1970s Maoist propaganda. The French president Jacques Chirac

[14] "Thomas Ruff with Vicki Goldberg," cit., pp. 16-17.

is portrayed with his arm raised in triumph, the self-proclaimed "hero" of the controversial French nuclear testing programme around Mururoa Atoll in French Polynesia; the Chinese leader Li Peng is eulogized for allowing students to protest freely in Tiananmen Square; the German head of state Chancellor Helmut Kohl is rammed headfirst into a modernist pyramid construction; the UK prime minister Tony Blair is thrust into a composition that recalls a famous Richard Hamilton picture; Angela Merkel, who was at the time the German minister for the environment, is praised for her lack of commitment to the environment; and the US Senator Jesse Helms and his gang are pictured blasting Los Angeles' MOCA – Museum of Contemporary Art ("Let's clean out this pigsty"). The lettering accompanying the images is printed upside down or back to front, making it difficult to decipher, and the chaotic iconography features dramatic pictures of aerial bombardments, tanks and nuclear explosions. Ruff's rhetoric blends the austere dignity of past modern art with the photographic experimentalism of *agit-prop* to construct these huge, spectacular satires in the form of pseudo-posters. This spirit of denigration is not just an end in itself, however: the message hits home. There is a kind of parallelism between signifier and signified by which the period's international political figures are not just the apparent object of ridicule: they are attacked with a clarity of intent. In short, it must be proved that these are works only apparently "political" and "self-referential".[15]

Ruff's clear understanding of the signs he is manipulating enables him to make optimal use of the texts with which he works. Between 1990 and 1991 he produced the cycle *Zeitungsfotos* (*Newspaper Photograph*), all drawn from his personal archive of 2,500 newspaper images, which he had started collecting in the 1980s. He selected 400 of these to make the new works, all small-scale and in black and white. By eliminating the original picture captions, Ruff also eliminates the possibility of reconstructing the pictures' original context and meaning. The news stories illustrated by the images are no longer of any use; whether they were related to politics, crime, culture, entertainment, history or science is now irrelevant, and the pictures float indeterminately, except in a few cases where they are already laden with meaning, particularly in historical terms. The assorted images – Mao, Hitler, Nazi rallies, street riots, Magritte's paintings – are not meaningless, but for the most part they bear witness to anonymous lives and unknown events, and act as visual enigmas, or else become the object of personal projections. Ruff has declared[16] that aesthetics played a part in his choice of images. The photos would originally have been evaluated purely on the basis of how well they "served" the article they illustrated, rather than on their aesthetic merit, and many of them would have been cropped to fit the layout. Ruff liberates them from these constrictions and in so doing restores their independence and formal dignity. But such issues do not exhaust the value of this cycle. The *Zeitungsfotos* are more numerous but less showy than the nine "posters" of the *Plakate* series, and are born out of a desire to reduce to zero the media "noise" that surrounds us; they can be read as a linguistic analysis, a proof of the cognitive value of images that most closely pertain to the "reality" under investigation, images directly produced by the media.

Since 1999, when Ruff began his *nudes* series (which has attracted as much attention from the art world as his large-scale portraits), the artist has dedicated himself almost exclusively – with the exception of *Maschinen* – to researching and manipulating images pulled off the internet, taking advantage of the medium's accessibility and the ready availability of computer-based graphic

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[15] See V. Liebermann, "Photography as Proving Ground," in *Thomas Ruff*, The Essor Gallery, London, 2001.

[16] "I then treat the photographs as if they were artistic photography ... In a sense, by doing this, I wanted to rescue them" in T. Wulffen, "Thomas Ruff", cit., p. 67.

solutions. Ruff's investigations into the processes relating to visual perception have thus moved into another arena, the global network of relationships created by modern-day digital technology. The potential for accessing and exchanging information on the internet is almost limitless; users go largely unregulated, and form another type of anonymous, communicative community, of the kind that Ruff has always thematized in his work. Anonymity also offers protection, and it is not surprising that the internet should have become a sounding board for the sexual fantasies of millions of users of pornographic sites and chat rooms around the world.

Ruff has responded by downloading a host of amateur and professional pornographic images from the internet and manipulating them to create new works. The artist is keen to document every type of sexual choice and persuasion for sale on the internet – straight and gay sex, masturbation, group sex, sadomasochism, fetishes, etc. – in order to create the most comprehensive record possible of human sexual experience, and (most importantly) of how it is sensationalized and exploited by the pornography industry. The (mostly) color images are enlarged and blurred by the artist to the point where they become dynamic, and change depending on whether they are seen from up close or far away, and whether they are "real". The "desirability" of pornographic imagery establishes a kind of hierarchy of the human body, because it focuses on the genitals, the main erotic zones, and the parts of the body most commonly fetishized; many of the bodies selected by Ruff are pictured in clothes or with objects that act as substitutes for the sexual organs, and this phantasmagorical mix of the natural and the artificial is intensified by the show that pornography puts on. By blurring the images' outlines, Ruff subverts the hierarchy: he eroticizes the entire body, the whole scene, even the objects and furniture where visible. Manipulating images in this way also stimulates perception, as we have already pointed out: from close up, the blurring effect (which is amplified in the large-format images) makes the "content" difficult to be read, and the eye more readily discerns colors and components (the figures appear to be treated by hand, like drawings, or like early Gerhard Richter paintings); from further away, on the other hand, the eye easily makes out whole bodies, which even acquire a certain three-dimensionality, along with their relationship to the background or space in which they are enclosed. In other words, while pornography presupposes a gaze that is passive, purely receptive and in need of clear images and precise contours, the gaze stimulated by Ruff is active, dynamic, interpretative, and capable of imaginatively reconstructing the images themselves, which are no less erotically appealing and remain recognizable in their principal sense.

Figures also crowd the surfaces of the cycle *Substrat* (*Substratun*) made between 2001 and 2004; virtual figures derived from Japanese *manga* cartoons, also found on the internet. Only their contours remain, however – the "insides" are saturated with bright, translucent colors. Ruff superimposes the silhouettes until the entire surface is covered, creating something that (at first sight) looks like an intensely colored abstract photograph. Here, too, the eye must learn to activate itself: from a distance, it is possible to discern the outlines, haloes, contours, and sometimes the anthropomorphic shapes of some of the figures, which resemble ghosts caught up in a colorful vortex; from up close the eye is hit by an almost psychedelic chromatic explosion, which touches the entire surface, by violent colors or, conversely, by the delicacy of the transparent outlines.

A similar effort is required to view the *jpeg* series, begun in 2004. Ruff enlarges digital images to a point where the pixels are clearly visible, thus complicating our perception of the subject. Once more, much depends on the distance from which the works are observed: from up close, we see a group of colored rectangles apparently jumbled together in no particular order, and it is of little help to know that there is a recognizable image hiding within this chaos, just as it would be of little help

to enlarge the print grid. From further away, we are able to rebuild the structure of what we are seeing, but the pixelated effect prevents us from rebuilding it back to its normal state. The pixel matrix is still visible and the image assumes an almost painterly quality, as if created by the unpredictable, irregular brush strokes of a human hand. Only the protective glass reminds us that we are standing before large prints. The choice of subject matter complicates our perception even more: many of the photographs are of natural landscapes, calling to mind Romantic paintings glorifying unspoilt nature. But Ruff brings this high-brow association to images of bombings and explosions, details of Ground Zero and half-destroyed buildings. The treatment is the same for both idyllic and dramatic subjects, and it is impossible not to draw parallels between this experience and the daily bombardment of visual stimuli to which we are subjected, without much discernment, as to the veracity of what we are seeing. In other words , Ruff's process emphasizes how easily the visual messages that enable us to relate to reality can be manipulated, and how fleeting their grasp of truth is.

The series *cassini* on the other hand (begun in 2006 and ongoing), consists of pin-sharp close-ups of elegant circular forms – discs intersected by wide circles – which have been enhanced with delicate colors in complementary tones. Although the colours have been digitally added by the artist and the cropping makes them ambiguous, the images, again downloaded from the internet, are dramatically real: they are in fact details of the planet Saturn and its satellites, photographed by the interplanetary probe Cassini (named after the Italian astronomer who discovered four of Saturn's satellites in 1675). The probe was launched in 1979 but only started sending back images of the planet in 2007.

The association with painting, albeit mediated by technology, is also felt in *zycles* (*cycles*), Ruff's most recent series, of which the first works were exhibited in June 2008 in Basel. Although the painting process – inkjet on canvas – is entirely mechanical, painting is evoked in its absence via the specific materials related to it. In this cycle of large works (up to four meters in length), Ruff returns to themes and techniques that typify his work, starting with his sources: in this case nineteenth-century books on electromagnetism containing mathematical formulae. When put into a special computer program, these formulae are elaborated into linear graphics, to which the artist applies a three-dimensional effect. The formulae are thus transformed into scrolling trajectories, long lines which seem to flow through space and its dimensions, finally leaving the computer screen to reach the virtual space of the large canvases which constitute the finished works.

Sinuous and elegant, the lines touch every point of the surface; those that travel diagonally across the space create the illusion of depth, criss-crossing each other to describe ever-changing matrices. The lines – of different widths, colors and curvatures – transform the space into a dynamic, flowing surface. In a certain sense, these lines eroticize the surface, just like the blurred contours of the *nudes*, which multiply the points on which the desiring gaze can linger. Ruff is fascinated, as always, by the techniques and scientific research of the past, using them in conjunction with sophisticated modern technology to give rise to formal solutions capable of renewing our visual language, starting with the language of photography.