Claus Gunti

Looking at digital pictures: the image as part of an epistemological system

Thomas Ruff, *Jpeg bd01*, 2007 (C-Print with Diasec 266.1 x 185.1 cm)
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When in the beginning of the 1990's digital photography became growingly popular, a wide spectrum of scholars claimed that photography had undergone an irrevocable shift. Photography as such, historically defined by the bond between image and the depicted subject Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes had tirelessly tried to define, was now gone, undermined by the digital nature of the new capturing apparatus. The claim that the medium had undergone a radical change was dominantly based on an ontological approach, whose legitimacy relied primarily on a technical understanding of the medium: the fact that the digital image could be broken down into "precise and definite"[1] units and that there was no original – a claim which paradoxically[2] had already been used to question the legitimacy of photography as art in the early 20th century – was argument enough to argue that we had entered a "post-photographic era"[3], in which this indefinable bond was broken.[4]

During the same time-frame, roughly from the early to the late 1990's, a growing number of photographers made use of the newly available capturing and postproduction tools. According to the aforementioned theories, their images should thus be considered "post-photographic", because of the inherent differences they are supposed to bear. But interestingly, only a small amount of those images has been tagged as such. Early academic and institutional projects, but also more recent ones, have established a body of images[5], whose central feature is not their digital "nature" – many of them do not even involve digital tools – but the fact that they look digital. Mainly concerned with the representation of an altered and manipulated state of the human body, those images are reminiscent of an era where technological developments in science (such as plastic surgery, genetic manipulations and cloning, etc.) as well as graphic design (morphing, 3D models, and Photoshop, etc.) have changed our conception of corporality.

This brief reminder of the developments of digital photography shows two things; the history of photography has always, until very recently, tried to define *photography*, rather than photographic practice. Furthermore, it also shows that the relationship between the image and the subject it represents is often invoked to try to define the medium, disregarding the image itself, its formal features, the way it is perceived or the discourse it produces. Nowadays, if this rhetoric of radical rupture tends to fade, so does the interest for the digital as category. Even so, it seems legitimate to argue that computing did alter contemporary imagery and it seems therefore necessary to try to understand how it has done so. While technical differences between analogical and digital photography do not seem to be that important anymore – primarily because the spectator has grown familiar with the new aesthetics and uses of digital photography – a whole array of features directly linked to computer technologies, never systematically studied, seem to play an important role in photography. The first, maybe the most obvious, is the digital as subject. Image compression algorithms developed mainly for the needs of the Internet and consumer electronics, are probably the most apparent feature of the digital *in* photography. Widely used despite their relatively poor quality compared to lossless digital images, they do not seem to evolve much despite the exponential evolution of computing power and transfer bandwidths. As if they were accepted because they were recognizable, they seem to embody the paradigmatic digital aesthetics. Many artists have thus made use of this feature, directly addressing the digital *in* photography. The most famous example of this approach, Thomas Ruff's *.jpeg* series, embracing not only the aesthetics but also the name of the most commonly used compression algorithm, consists of a selection of images found on the Internet, edited and printed as large scale photographs, thus triggering a

dialogue between the virtual image and the object, between the low definition image and the artistic photograph or between the internet and the museum or gallery.

A second implication of the digital *in* photography, also present in Ruff's *.jpegs*, is the digital as apparatus, a system based on computing and exchange of information. While explicitly addressing formal issues in the *.jpegs* series, Ruff also engages the media itself, as a vector of exchange of data, recycling images that are very commonly consumed: using generic images (such as pornographic iconography) or documentary images everybody is familiar with (such as the burning World Trade Center), Ruff appeals to our relationship to images, addressing a new kind of spectatorship, focusing primarily on the image as part of a system, rather than reflecting on the image as archive.

Building on this discourse on the way digital technologies influence our relationship to pictures, one could draw a third level of the digital *in* photography. Taking into account the omnipresence of computers, the role the internet plays in daily communication and the impact it might have on vision and perception, we could argue that such development must – at this stage of our research this is a mere hypothesis – not only find an echo in artistic production, but that such a phenomenon necessarily implies a whole new system of producing knowledge, which unavoidably interacts with artistic production. If we examine the way Jonathan Crary has unearthed an epistemological break during the 19th century, which implies fundamental transformations in vision and perception mechanisms[6], it seems appropriate to suggest that digital technologies, and in particular the role of the photographic image as a vector of transmission of information, play a fundamental role in this hypothetical development. While investigating those transformations, we have to take into consideration that in recent days, the theoretical framework of numerous disciplines (and not only those primarily concerned with images), seems to undergo a shift towards epistemological considerations and, more generally, be responsive to issues addressing the mechanisms of knowledge production[7]. Our hypothesis thus derives, not only from the mere observation of a phenomenon, but also from the fact that many disciplines try to understand the way discourse is produced. Nevertheless, despite the methodological problems this coexistence presupposes – is epistemology a necessity to understand digital imagery or is it merely a trend ? – the question of whether contemporary technologies impacts on our habits of seeing is definitely worth considering.

1 Martin Lister, in Liz Wells (ed.), *Photography. A Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 334.
2 The very idea of the original in photography is extremely ambivalent.
3 William J. Mitchell's book, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-photographic Era*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 2001 (1992), is one of the first to assert such a shift.
4 Even though a critical historiography of those theoretical developments has yet to be established, some scholars have noted their inherent discrepancies and incoherencies. See for example Bernd Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie,* München, Wilhelm Fink, 2007 or Martin Lister, op.cit., chapter "Photography in the age of electronic imaging".
5 Nancy Burson, Keith Cottingham, Aziz & Cucher, Orlan or Inez van Lamsveerde are some of the commonly quoted artists of this "movement".
6 According to Crary, this shift is primarily based on the development of the status of sight in its relationship to knowledge. See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1992
7 Biopolitics probably being the most eminent.