



KAT\_A\_7\_\_\_\_\_

Image on the cover:

Thomas Ruff, 1992, Nacht 5 II, 190 x 190 cm (links) und 2021, tableaux chinois 15\_I, 240 x 185 cm (rechts).

Foto: © Lars Behrendt, KAT\_A, Andra Lauffs-Wegner

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# ONE EXHIBITION /// TWO COLLECTORS

ANDRA LAUFFS-WEGNER

Until now, the concept of the exhibitions at KAT\_A was based on the idea of showing two artists and presenting connections and developments through their juxtaposition.

The central aim was to question habitual perceptions and put them up for discussion. I was also inspired to do this by the exchange with visitors, who include art collectors and art lovers.

But this exhibition seems to deviate from that concept. It is dedicated to Thomas Ruff, one of the most important contemporary artists in my view. However, a dialogical context is also pursued in this exhibition by bringing together works from two private collections.

Together with the friend and collector Markus Kramer, we are showing selected works by Thomas Ruff. The different conceptual approach and subjective view of the two collectors is at the core of this dialogue.

The exhibition provides an overview of the aesthetic effects and structural developments in Thomas Ruff's work. Markus Kramer's academic study of art in the digital age and the structural developments in Thomas Ruff's work makes a particular contribution to this. It is also the basis of the chosen arrangement of the exhibition.

Thus, the exhibition THOMAS RUFF /// DISPERSION illustrates the overall context of Thomas Ruff's works, which were created over four decades.



# THOMAS RUFF /// DISPERSION

MARKUS KRAMER

We live in the epoch of the technological image.

With the emergence of photography about 200 years ago, the massive spread of the photographic image in the print media about 70 years ago, and the shift into digital communication about 20 years ago, technological images now determine our everyday life and communication almost all-encompassingly. The analog world surrounding us was expanded by a virtual level of experience that surrounds us on Smartphones, the computer, and in almost all other sites. It is already foreseeable that this development will continue to deepen and perhaps accelerate with continuing technological innovation.

No artist has as attentively observed and documented the resulting changes to our pictorial culture as has Thomas Ruff.

About 40 years ago, Thomas Ruff's oeuvre had its starting point in the traditional photographic image, created by the artist himself (*Interieurs, Porträts*). But very soon, he took his first recourse to existing pictorial material (*Zeitungsfotos, Sterne*) and the use of unusual imaging

“programs” that focus on a form of seeing in a previously unknown way (*Nächte, Andere Portraits*). Then came computer technology with the possibilities of digital image processing (*Häuser, Blaue Augen, I.m.v.d.r.*) and the flowing transition into a new life reality perfused by digitality (*nudes, Substrate, jpeg*). On the level of the digital pictorial material, the boundaries to the virtual technological image finally blur (*cycles, Fotogramme*).

In the result of the past 40 years, Thomas Ruff has worked out an atlas of the technological image in more than 25 series and, with aesthetic means, has mirrored the changing societal framework conditions and the transformation of our pictorial culture. “THOMAS RUFF /// DISPERSION” makes this the theme of an exhibition for the first time.

The title of the exhibition refers to the essay “Dispersion” by Seth Price (2002), a key work for understanding visual art at the beginning of the new millennium. An essential idea here is the increasing recourse that contemporary art takes to existing cultural goods and the accompanying displacement of entirely original images and objects by technologically transformed found input.





## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC APPARATUS

**In the 1980s, producing large-format colored prints in special photographic labs became possible.**

About 40 years ago as a young graduate of the Düsseldorf Academy, Ruff still worked with the traditional camera (*Interieurs* from 1979, *Porträts* from 1981).

As early as 1984, however, the powerful enlargement of his photographic Portraits dominated the viewer's visual experience: seen close up, the images tip over into an abstract level of perception and lose their "transparency". This means that the viewer's gaze no longer slips directly to the depiction level of the depicted object, i.e., he can no longer perceive the photographed person. The technological transformation process of massive enlargement suddenly enables a new perception of the original picture.

Thomas Ruff, 1989,  
Porträt (S. Kewer),  
210 x 165 cm



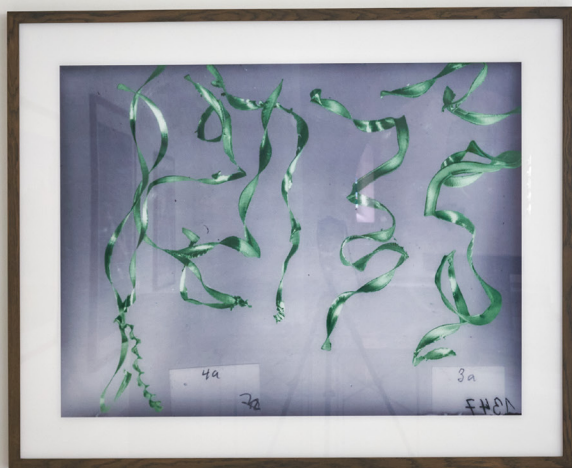
# THE ORIGINAL FROM THE DARKROOM

**At the turn of the millennium, digitalization is raising increasingly urgent questions of the relationship between analog photography and the possibilities in the digital realm. In particular, digital tools make it possible to transform existing photographs into autonomous new pictorial experiences.**

The series *Maschinen* (starting in 2003) is based on historical glass negatives that were originally produced for the advertising purposes of a machine-tool factory. On the computer, Ruff colorizes some of the scanned pictorial templates and uses digital retouching to develop the originally primarily illustrative historical pictorial documents into an abstracting visual experience.

Also using digital image-processing software, the series *Negative* (starting in 2014) derives inverted depictions from historical pictorial templates that conceptually correspond to the negative in analog photography. This simple procedure, anchored in the traditional photographic process, alters the pictures' visual effects surprisingly markedly: if several works from this series hang beside each other, the viewer experiences how strongly the transformation Ruff applies homogenizes the visual appearance.

Thomas Ruff, 2003,  
Maschine 1347,  
113 x 143 cm





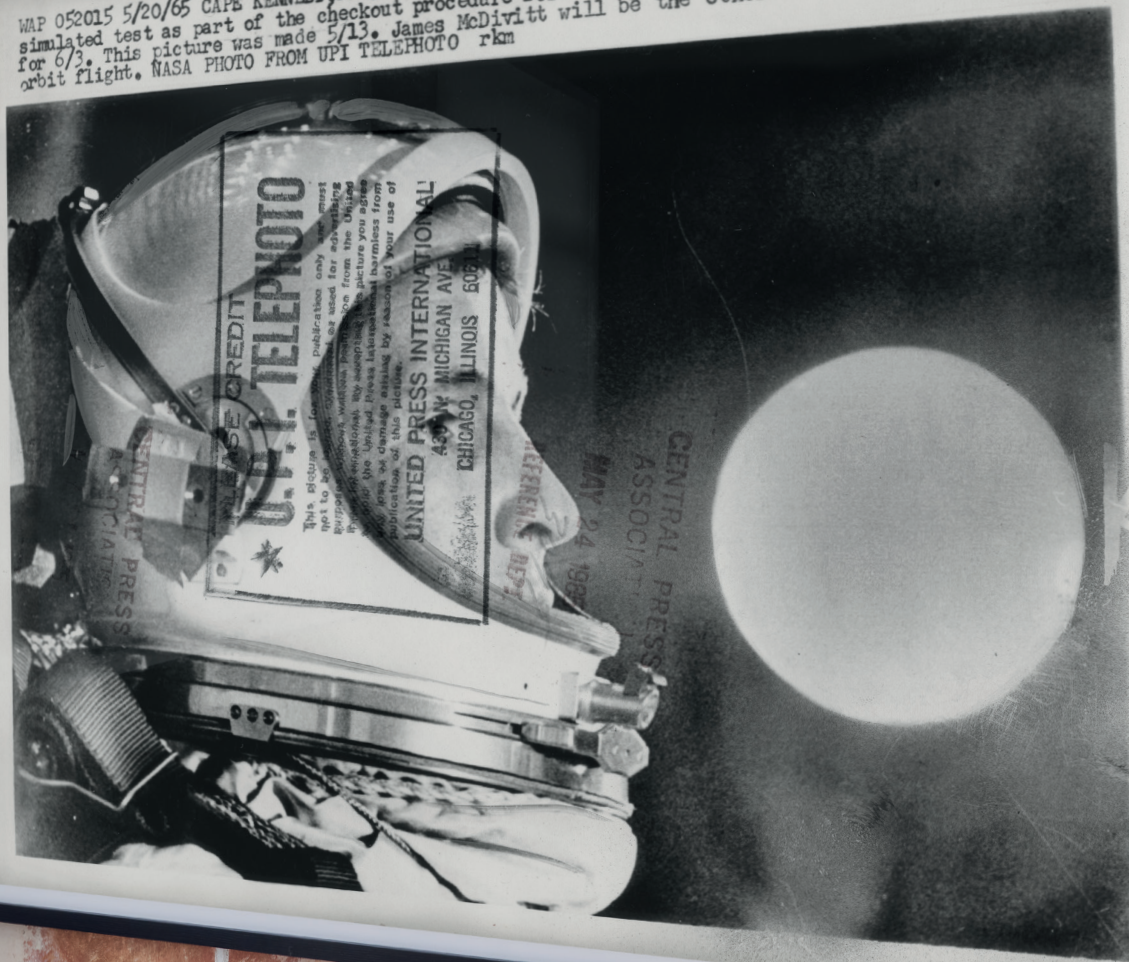








WAP 052015 5/20/65 CAPE KENNEDY, FLA.: Astronaut Edward H. White II goes through a wet mock simulated test as part of the checkout procedure for the 2-man, 4-day Gemini flight planned for 6/3. This picture was made 5/13. James McDivitt will be the other astronaut on the 62-orbit flight. NASA PHOTO FROM UPI TELEPHOTO rkm



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## IN THE AGE OF THE PRINT MEDIA

**In the second half of the 20th century, the massive entry of the photographic image into the print media fundamentally altered the informational and pictorial culture.**

The series *Zeitungsfotos* (starting in 1990) makes use of press images that Ruff photographically reproduces in a double column width. Robbed of their captions and thus reduced to their pictorial character, these works present what Roland Barthes called a “message without a code”: the images leave the viewer perplexed if he expects them to provide substantive information. Perceived is a rasterized image, a purely visual experience.

30 years later, Ruff takes recourse again to pictorial material used in the print media. In the 1950s and '60s, photographic originals were regularly sent to newspapers by post or by means of electronic transmission (photo telegraphy/wire photo); in the editorial office, the picture editor adapted them to fit the intended report and prepared them for reproduction. This regularly led to writing and stamped information on the back of the original photo. The photographs were sometimes also retouched by hand before being reproduced.

For the works in the series *press++* (starting in 2015), Ruff scans the front and back of such historical original photos and combines the two views in a new, large-format image. The visual content of the picture and the information added in the context of use thereby fuse in a new aesthetic experience.

Thomas Ruff, 2015,  
*press++* 01.16,  
185 x 231 cm



# THE IMAGE LIES

**Toward the end of the 1980s, the first specialized labs offered digital pictorial manipulation as a service. But “virtual” technological images already existed before that, for example the “wanted” photos of Red Army Faction terrorists that Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office produced with the “montage unit”.**

About 30 years ago, Ruff first made use of the possibilities of digital image processing to introduce aesthetic effects in pictorial templates – in a manner the viewer could recognize as such. Based on the pictorial templates from the series *Porträts*, Ruff digitally inserted *Blaue Augen* (1991) into the depicted persons.

Three years later, Ruff used an analog image-processing machine – used at that time by the police to produce “wanted” posters – to create virtual, nonexistent persons using various photos from the series *Porträts*. Ruff had the results silk-screened onto paper (*Anderes Porträts* in 1994/95).

Thomas Ruff, 1991,  
Blaue Augen C.F./B.E.,  
Blaue Augen M.B./B.E.,  
j40 x 30 cm each

Thomas Ruff, 1994/95,  
Anderes Porträt, Nr. 71/65,  
200 x 150 cm











Thomas Ruff, 2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.u.p. 01,  
130 x 165 cm

Thomas Ruff, 1999/2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.t.b. 01,  
185 x 235 cm

Thomas Ruff, 2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.l.k. 01,  
130 x 195 cm







## AT LEAST 50% RUFF

**Taking recourse to and digitally altering existing pictorial material raises the theme of the relationship between existing depiction and later transformation in the digital realm. With the rapid spread of digital image processing – initially on stationary computer systems at home, but then also on billions of Smartphones – issues initially hardly perceived become central topics in contemporary art.**

In 1998, Ruff began producing a pictorial documentation of the architectural oeuvre of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for exhibitions in the Lange und Esters Houses in Krefeld and in the MoMA in New York. To this end, Ruff created his own photographic depictions of the buildings, but also used existing archive pictures. A challenge this project posed and Ruff identified was that, because of their significance in cultural history, the depicted architectonic masterpieces always take on great weight in visual perception. This led Ruff to seek to use later digital transformation to make the pictorial templates to bring “at least 50%” of his own value creation into the works. To achieve this goal, Ruff uses selected analog, but especially digital transformation filters and processes. The series *l.m.v.d.r.* (starting in 1999) thereby became one of the earliest examples of thorough exploration of the potentials of digital image processing.

Thomas Ruff, 2000,  
*l.m.v.d.r. h.l.k. 01*,  
130 x 195 cm

# THE INTERNET BECOMES A SECOND REALITY

**Around the turn of the millennium, everyday life increasingly fused with the Internet. Expanded by new communication channels, especially the Smartphone, the technological image is becoming a ubiquitous and indispensable component of mass communication. Almost every picture suddenly already exists and is accessible for everyone via digital networks. In this environment, taking new “snapshots” is becoming an anachronism.**

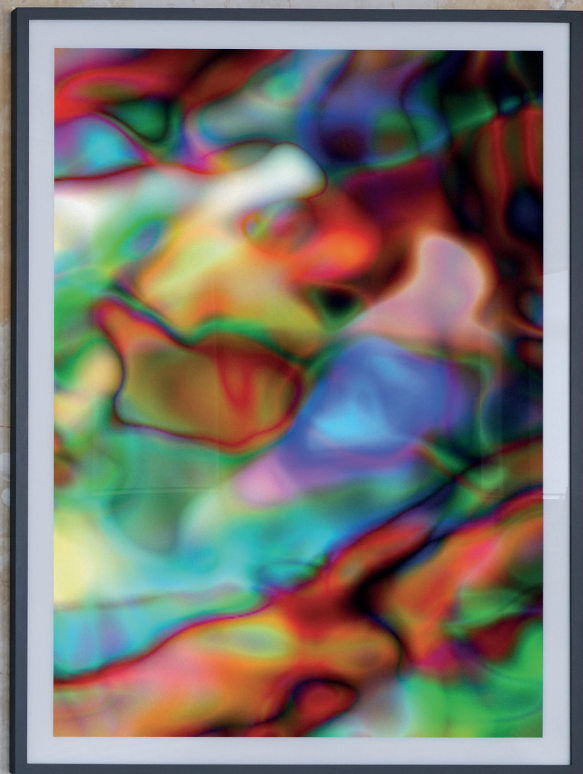
In 1999, Ruff first used Internet pictorial data to develop the series *nudes*. He thereby used thumbnail images from pornography sites in the Internet. Ruff greatly enlarged these low-resolution pictorial files and reworked the pixel structure inherent in the data material using a mathematical procedure of pixel shifting; this makes the depicted

object blurry. Along with making the internal structure of the presented data material visible, the aesthetic transformation chosen by Ruff leads to a change of purpose in the pictorial material used: the originally sexually stimulating effect of the pictorial templates is eliminated by the abstracting pixilation.

Two years later, starting in 2001 with the series *Substrate*, Ruff uses a pictorial filter to blur manga drawings found in the Internet; he then digitally overlays them (with a result resembling the multiple exposures used in traditional photography). The transformation process Ruff uses turns the originally illustrative inputs into captivatingly beautiful abstract clouds of color. The original Internet data are still preserved in these images, but distorted beyond recognition.

Thomas Ruff, 2001,  
*Substrat 2 I*,  
260 x 185 cm

Thomas Ruff, 1999,  
*nudes ez14*,  
102 x 144 cm















# TECHNICAL PROSTHESES FOR THE HUMAN EYE

**The reporting on the Kuwait War in the early 1990s with its widespread recourse to night vision images and the views of the planet Mars transmitted by space probes are examples of pictorial worlds that would not be accessible without technological tools. The “program” becomes a prosthesis for the human eye.**

In the series *Nächte* (starting in 1994), Ruff uses a residual light amplifier mounted on the lens of his camera to take night photos in Düsseldorf and its environs. The resulting images are presented in large format.

The context of this series was the reporting on the Kuwait War, ubiquitous in television at that time. The reporting was characterized by oddly greenish video footage on nocturnal bombing attacks that were presented to television viewers daily as evidence of progress in the war.

In the series *3D\_ma.r.s.* (starting in 2012) Ruff generates three-dimensional views of the surface of Mars using a computer program that connects a sequence of digital pictorial files taken by a NASA probe on the planet's surface that are available in the Internet for downloading. This enables the viewer to take a trip on the surface of Mars in virtual space.

Thomas Ruff, 2012,  
*3D\_ma.r.s. 02*,  
255 x 185 cm



# IMAGES IN THE DIGITAL STREAM

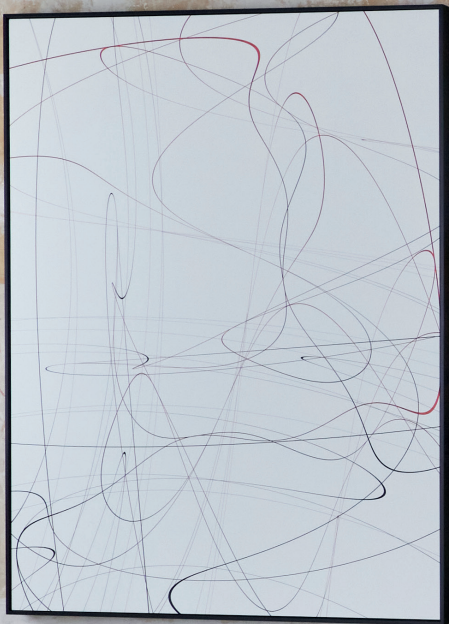
**The computer presents a common denominator for pictorial material of varying origins: the simulated virtual space is just as suitable as a source of data for new images as any other pictorial file can be.**

In 2004, Ruff started feeding pictorial digital files, mostly from the Internet but in part self-produced, through a jpeg filter. The jpeg data-compressing procedure accompanies our day-to-day life almost around the clock. It enables the compression of pictorial digital files, and if the presentation of the picture is small-format, our accustomed visual experience is preserved. But if the jpeg files are adequately enlarged, visual artifacts arise that Ruff takes as his theme in the series *jpeg* (starting in 2004).

Four years later, Ruff produces large-format virtual reality views. In a simple 3D computer model, he gives visual form to mathematical curves (cycloids) using physical formulas. In the calculated space, he also positions virtual colored light sources that colorize these curves. At his computer monitor, Ruff roams through the thus-constructed virtual realm and produces “snapshots” of suitable views. He then has these printed on large-format canvases. The results, in the series *cycles* (starting in 2008), are the first museum-held photos of virtual reality experiences.

Thomas Ruff, 2008,  
*cycles* 7044,  
306 x 236 cm

Thomas Ruff, 2007,  
*jpeg* la01,  
188 x 296 cm







# THE TECHNOLOGICAL HAND

**Existing pictorial material can be transformed by using digital filters. But conceivable are also compositional interventions in the image that turn the transformation into a painterly act in the technological realm.**

The majority of the works shown in the exhibition were created when Ruff applied a transformation technology to a previously selected input. Ruff then evaluates the composition of the resulting output and decides if it is good or bad. The artist's compositional decision thus stands at the end of the production process and is solely a quality filter.

This contrasts with painterly processes in which, already while carrying out a work, the artist continuously makes compositional decisions that then fuse in the finished output. Are such compositional (i.e., painterly) interventions also possible in the technological realm?

Ruff's work has investigated this question since the middle of the 1990s at the latest. In his series *Plakate* (1996/97), Ruff composes images with the aid of digital collages. Comparable to the traditional collages of the early 20th century, these works take as their theme the fusion of technological pictorial templates with the artist's compositional decisions – in the digital realm.

The *tableaux chinois* (starting in 2019) use scanned pictorial templates from Chinese propaganda magazines of the 1960s. Ruff overlays these raw data still visually shaped by offset printing rasters with two pixel levels (large and small pixels). In these pixel levels, Ruff “erases” individual passages, so that in some parts of the image large pixels, in other parts small pixels, and in yet other parts no pixels cover the analog rasterized picture. Analog and digital pictorial levels and the artist's compositional activity overlay each other to produce a painting in the digital realm.





# LIST OF WORKS

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC APPARATUS

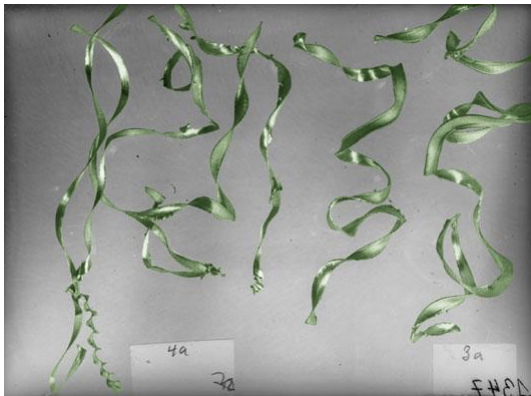
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Thomas Ruff, 1989,  
Porträt (S. Kewer),  
210 x 165 cm

## THE ORIGINAL FROM THE DARKROOM

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Thomas Ruff,  
2003,  
Maschine 1347,  
113 x 143 cm



Thomas Ruff,  
2014,  
negnus,  
jewels  
22 x 29 cm



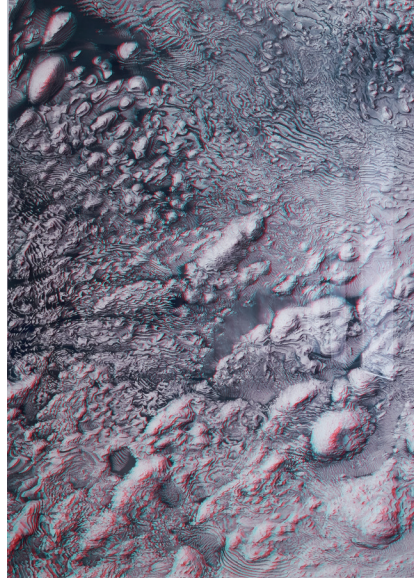


# TECHNICAL PROSTHESES FOR THE HUMAN EYE

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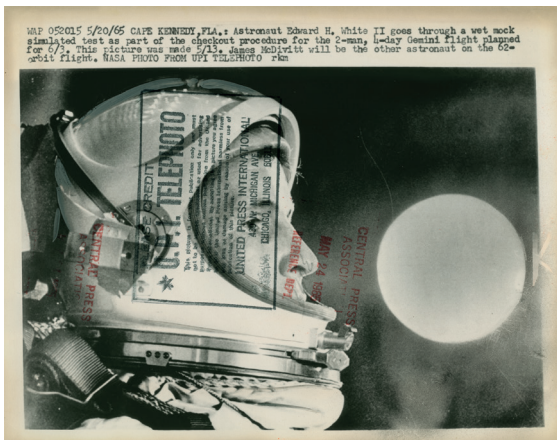
Thomas Ruff, 1992,  
Nacht 5 II,  
190 x 190 cm



Thomas Ruff, 2012,  
3D\_ma.r.s. 02,  
255 x 185 cm

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Thomas Ruff, 2015,  
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185 x 231 cm



# THE IMAGE LIES

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Anderes Porträt,  
Nr. 71/65,  
200 x 150 cm



Thomas Ruff, 1991,  
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# AT LEAST 50% RUFF

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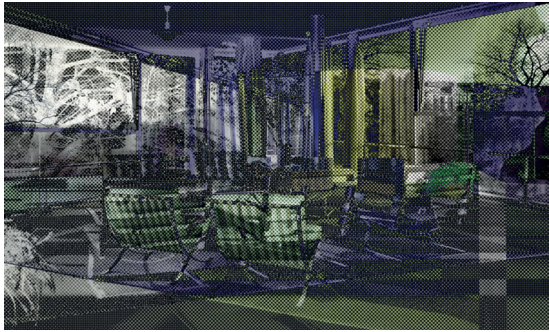
Thomas Ruff,  
1999/2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.t.b. 01,  
185 x 235 cm



Thomas Ruff,  
2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.l.k. 01,  
130 x 195 cm

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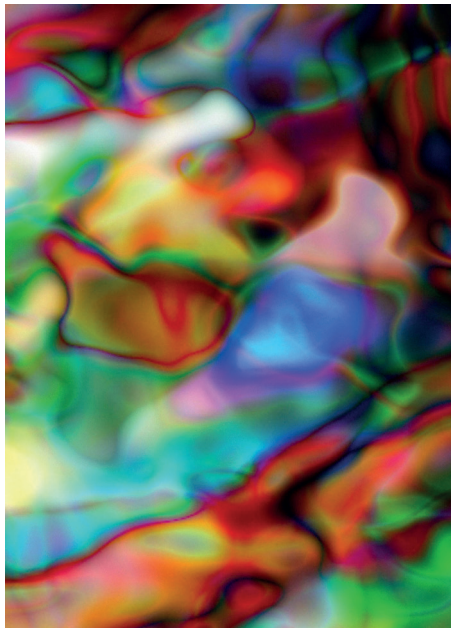
Thomas Ruff, 2000,  
l.m.v.d.r. h.t.b.10,  
130 x 195 cm



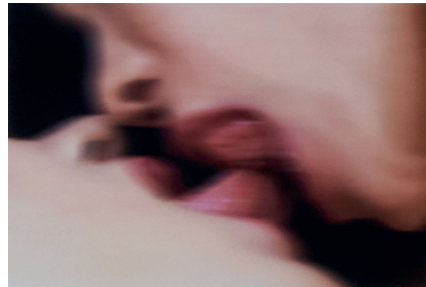
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Thomas Ruff, 2007,  
jpeg la01,  
188 x 296 cm

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL HAND

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Thomas Ruff, 2021,  
tableau chinois\_15 I,  
240 x 185 cm



Thomas Ruff,  
1996/97,  
Plakat I,  
256 x 191 cm

## RELATED LITERATURE

Vilém Flusser, "Towards a Philosophy of Photography", Reaktion Books, 2000, original in German, 1983.

Gilles Deleuze, "Leibniz and the Baroque", translated into English by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, original in French, 1988.

Seth Price, "Dispersion", <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion2007.comp.pdf>, 2002.

Markus Kramer, "Thomas Ruff – Modernism", Kehrer-Verlag Heidelberg, 2011.

Markus Kramer, "Photographic Objects", Kehrer-Verlag Heidelberg, 2012.

"Pandora's Box - Jan Dibbets on Another Photography", exhibition catalog, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2016.

Markus Kramer, "The Technological Hand", Kehrer-Verlag Heidelberg, 2018.



## KAT\_A – KUNST AM TURM

KAT\_A is a forum for contemporary art. With the ensemble of buildings around the historic tower in Bad Honnef-Rhöndorf, Andra Lauffs-Wegner has established an extraordinary exhibition venue where she shows selected works from her private art collection to the public. Theme exhibitions are arranged in a changing rhythm. Positions of both internationally established and young artists are placed in new contexts in order to illuminate art-historical aspects or to formulate current questions.

The spacious exhibition rooms show traces of days gone by with a charming patina. No typical white cube has been created here, but an individual exhibition space on the ground floor of the Gründerzeit villa Haus Hedwig and in the former chapel. The park with its rare trees also provides a special setting for installations and artistic interventions - idyllically situated between historic architecture, the Rhine and the Siebengebirge.

# IMPRESSUM

The catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition Thomas Ruff /// Dispersion - May 2022 to April 2023 at KAT\_A, Drachenfelsstraße 4-7, 53604 Bad Honnef-Rhöndorf

Credits:

Exhibitor views: © Lars Behrendt

Single works: © Thomas Ruff

Texts on the individual sections of the work: Markus Kramer

Translation: Mitch Cohen

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