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Images to exercise ourselves: Morphology between August Sander's photographs and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*

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1. Introduction

In *Little History of Photography* (1931), while mentioning the photographic portraits of Germans published by August Sander in 1929 under the title of *The Face of the Time* [*Antlitz der Zeit*], Walter Benjamin alludes to Goethe by saying that the

> photographer did not approach this enormous undertaking as a scholar, or with the advice of ethnographers and sociologists, but, as the publisher says, "from direct observation". It was assuredly a very impartial, indeed bold sort of observation, but delicate too, very much in the spirit of Goethe's remark: "There is a delicate empiricism which so intimately involves itself with the object that it becomes true theory".[1]

[1] *Little History of Photography* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 520).

If one disregards the often peculiar way Benjamin incorporates quotations in his texts, not so much as a justification or support of an authority on the subject, but as a clue that allows a new path to be followed, one may perhaps overlook the fecundity of this quotation and of the entire section on Sander's photographs. The aim of this paper is precisely to follow this clue through a path that will take us from Sander's photographs – examined from the point of view of Goethe's morphology and the way it influenced Walter Benjamin – to Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*. At the same time, we will have in our mind an advice expressed by Benjamin that found its roots in Goethe and echoes in Richter's virulent and extreme gestures, when Benjamin describes Sander's work as, more than a picture book, "an atlas to exercise ourselves"[2].

2. August Sander and his achievements in photography

Regardless of the importance Walter Benjamin gave it, we know today that August Sander's work has a prominent place in the history of photography. This place was attained, among other things, due to the refreshed look it brought to photography, freed not only from the bourgeois attitudes towards portraiture which developed during the Nineteenth-Century, but also from the impositions of a pictorialism that was interested in affirming the artistic side of photography under the influence of painting. We can thus say that Sander shares interests with the movements that, in the beginning of the Twentieth-Century, increased the autonomy of photography

[2] Cf. *Ibid.* 520. I am not following the English translation (*training manual*) in what concerns this expression. The German word is *Übungsatlas*, literally a *training* or *exercise atlas*.

and consequently the possibility of creating a new visual language. In this strict sense, Sander's photographs go alongside with the experimental works of Rodchenko or Moholy-Nagy, but a closer look brings to the fore the fact that the first is less engaged in the pursuit of a utopian territory by means of the new images than in patiently observing German society.[3] And though he shares interests with the New Objectivity movement – with Albert Renger-Patzsch as its main figure – he nevertheless distances himself from it by proposing a much more serene approach:

> the sociological portraits taken by August Sander, while conforming to the aesthetic criteria of the New Photography, and related to the New Objectivity both in their social realism (derived from painting) and in their professionalism, are nevertheless very different from the machinist excitement of a Renger-Patzsch image.[4]

The "ideological framework" of Sander's photographs may also confuse us and even be a motive of perplexity, increased by the fact that these photographs appeared in an epoch of profound political and social mutations. We may say that Sander took part in a movement that wasn't interested in portraying the middle class that wanted to record his social position, but, on the contrary, in grasping the less famous and the anonymous which composed the different social groups. Nonetheless, instead of being hailed by the Third Reich, as what happened for instance with the photographs Erna Lendvai-Dircksen gathered in *Das Deutsche Volksgesicht* [*Faces of the German People*] (1932) and *Unsere Deutsche Kinder* [*Our German Children*] (1932), which revealed a belief in the mysticism of the forces of nature, Sander's photographs

[3] Besides portraits, Sander also photographed landscapes and architecture.
[4] "Figures of Style. New Vision, new Photography" (Haus & Frizot, 1998, p. 467).

were forbidden in 1934 and the photographic plates were destroyed.[5] But it would be wrong to regard them as having an explicit revolutionary content. In many different ways the social arrangement they display is traditional, not following a class ideology in the Marxist sense. And besides that, they (in a somehow inaccurate way) can be approached as a set of positivistic ambiguous interests nurtured throughout the Nineteenth-Century, related to social typification and physiognomic interests. All these questions are complex and have fed many different and at times contradictory interpretations of Sander's work. Its attentive look, the way it shows the diversity of social phenomena and its alluring powers are certainly among the characteristics that make its political relevance and also justify the prominent place it has in the history of photography, characteristics that, as I will try to show, bear a subtle and profound relation to the morphological method.

Sander's photographs in some way place us directly before the people he portrayed. This photographic strength of evidence is fed by the strategies Sander uses, strategies that are intensified by the technical and aesthetical possibilities of photography. Among others: the often used frontal pose and a kind of arrangement which puts the portrayed people in a straightforward position, their inclusion in their social and life context, the subsequent reduction of artificiality and dramatization.[6] Obviously – and though I am avoiding to dive into the question of the realism of photography, in which the alternative between photographic objectivity and photographic

[5] On these subtle but important differences concerning the way society was being portrayed, cf. "Portrait of Society" (Vaisse, 1998, pp. 495-514).

[6] On these issues and their relation with the conceptual questions Sander's work was trying to address, cf. *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century* (Keller, 1993).

conventionality seems way too narrow – it is not a pure objectivity what is at stake in here, nor is it an immediate access to reality. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Sander's photographs aim at an experience of direct observation that, though constructed, tries to intensify the way they were touched – seared, says Walter Benjamin – by the real. And the awareness of all this led, and still leads nowadays, to a profound reflection on the properties of documentary photography. Because of the questions it raises and the fertile way it answers these same questions, August Sander's work is crucial in any debate about the notions of archive or typology, and it influenced a whole range of photographers and artists, such as Bernd and Hilla Becher. It is certainly part of our most ingrained visual and artistic heritage.

3. August Sander in *Little History of Photography*

First of all, it is important to understand the context and the developments of *Little History of Photography* that allow Walter Benjamin to introduce *The Face of the Time* as an essential step towards the formation of a new way of seeing. Along with *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, *Little History of Photography* still remains as one of the most important and quoted texts on photography (even though this last one reveals a deeper understanding of photography). But its presence in the theory of photography is seldom followed by the double effort of, on the one hand, accepting the complexity of what Benjamin says about photography (rarely about photography as an isolated and pure phenomenon) and, on the other hand, trying to shed some light on his ideas with the help of other aspects of Benjamin's thought. The scope and tone of *Little History of Photography*

invite us to a whole diversity of readings. It shows us a succession of variable relations between different aspects: the magical, the real that sears the image, the relation with painting, the decline of the aura and the efforts to recover it, the optical unconscious, the human face, the political tasks – just to name a few.

In the alignment of Benjamin's text, the allusion to Sander's work comes after two important remarks, which, according to his analysis, correspond to two decisive moments in the history of photography. The first has to do with the analysis of the importance of Atget's photographs, based on the assumption that they grew away from a recent past that was contaminating photography.

> Atget's Paris photos are the forerunners of Surrealist photography – an advance party of the only really broad column Surrealism managed to set in motion. He was the first to disinfect the stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere – indeed, he dispels it altogether: he initiates the emancipation of object from aura, which is the most signal achievement of the latest school of photography. […] He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.[7]

The second moment deals with the resurgence of the human face in Russian cinema, resurgence which brings to the fore not only a certain impossibility of renouncing the human figure in the realm of photography (renouncement carried to an almost extreme point by Atget's Paris: "the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant"[8]) but also the changes in the representation of this

[7] *Little History of Photography* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 518).
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 519.

figure.[9] The photographic portrait was thus liberating itself from the bonds it had with the commercial and conventional practices, from the demands of a society fascinated by status and visibility, and even from the various technical and aesthetical ways of maintaining or artificially restoring the aura of photographs. Therefore, these changes in the depiction of the human figure contributed to the development of a refreshing photographic vision.

Although Benjamin doesn't say it explicitly, one may conclude that Atget and Sander share the same willingness to photograph from the perspective of an unconventional usage of photographic space – and of the contexts, the atmospheres or the faces which take part in it. Paris in the case of the first, German society in the second. This reconfiguration of space (also human space), or at least the ability to eliminate what is considered superfluous, opens the door that allows the unfolding of the details and regularities that weave the fabric of the world. Something closer to the notion of optical unconscious – referred by Benjamin in this same text – than to any theorization on the expressive landscape or the portrait which reflects the soul of the portrayed.

Moreover, it is important to stress the fact that Benjamin's approach to photography is often governed by political concerns. This means that, for instance, the questions related to aura decay or human face also have a social and political sense. Benjamin affirms that Sander's photographs do not qualify as portraits – in its traditional sense, related to the commercial, conventional portrait photography – because they aren't trying

[9] Mentioning the Russian films, Benjamin says: "to do without people is for photography the most impossible of renunciations. And anyone who did not know it was thought by the best Russian films that milieu and landscape, too, reveal themselves most readily to those photographers who succeed in capturing their anonymous physiognomy, as it were presenting them at face value." *Ibid.*, p. 519.

to fulfil people's desire of passing on to posterity, nor are they establishing the social status of the ones who were portrayed, as happened increasingly during the nineteenth century, when photography was put into the service of a rising bourgeoisie. On the contrary, they share a sense of anonymity, they show "people who had no use for their photographs", and therefore they open the path for a scientifically and politically engaged photography.[10]

Some of these profound relations between photography and its social aspects were later worked on by Gisèle Freund – who became friends with Benjamin in Paris during the 1930s. Freund's seminal study was published in 1936 as *La Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle*, a study that Benjamin came to read and comment in *Letter from Paris (2): Painting and Photography*.[11] In its subtlety – with its reference to configuration and to the dialectical intercourse between past and present of a work of art – the section in which the objection

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 519-520.

[11] Benjamin used and adapted some of his comments for a review on Freund's work, published in 1938, from which I point out a section about a methodological objection: "The book's method is based on the materialist dialectic, and discussion of the volume could further development of the latter. For this reason, I would touch on an objection which might help to define the position of Freund's research in scholarship. 'The greater the genius of an artist,' writes the author, 'the better his work reflects the tendencies in the society of his time – and precisely through what is original in the form of his work' (p. 4). What seems dubious about this statement is not the attempt to relate the artistic scope of a work to the social structure at the time of its production, but the assumption that this structure appears always with the same configuration. In reality, its configuration is likely to change with the different periods in which it is observed. Defining the significance of an artwork in relation to the social structure that prevailed at the time it was produced therefore amounts to determining a distinctive capability of the artwork – namely, its ability to make the period of its production accessible to the most remote and alien epochs – in terms of the history of its influence. Dante's poem, for example, manifested such a capability for the twelfth century, just as Shakespeare's work did for the Elizabethan period." "Review of Freund's *Photographie en France au dix-neuvième siècle*", (Benjamin, 1999, p. 121).

to Freund's book is developed show us the morphological and dynamical characteristics of Benjamin's thought, which play an important role in the specific way he adopts dialectical materialism and conceives history (for instance, in *The Arcades Project* and *On the Concept of History*).

This allusion allows us to clarify the social and political meaning of *Little History of Photography*. Above all, what is at stake in this text is the clear perception that the social structures must be addressed accordingly to a permanent change of aspect which takes into consideration the present. It is in the possibility of apprehending these configurations, of describing the different physiognomies of the world, of exercising our eyes and our attention, that Benjamin sees the most valuable features of photography. And this has nothing to do with a capitulation to the modern tendencies and the fashionable, a sin so often criticized by Benjamin. If today we still look with intensity at the works of a Sander or a Blossfeldt, it is because the configurations they show us are still alive, paradoxically distant and near.

4. From Sander's synthesis to Goethe's morphology

By relating Sander's work to the ones of Eisenstein or Pudovkin, Benjamin emphasizes the scientific framework in which it was produced, thus distinguishing it from a disinterested knowledge activity or a pure artistic attempt. *The Face of the Time* inscribes itself in the present, exploring the sociological configurations of its own time. If these configurations point to an archetype – a notion not used by Benjamin in this text – one should not understand it as an origin placed out of time, but as an appearance of the interweaved forms of a living organism: the German society.

The question of archetypes in Sander's work is anything but straightforward – and seriously complicated by a certain privilege he ascribes to the people who had ties to the earth, namely farmers. Though a few of Sander's notes insinuate a dimension of "generally human characteristics", in fact, and following the work published in 1929, nothing seems to suggest an archetypical quest – being archetype understood as a kind of platonic idea, unchangeable and independent of the phenomenal world.[12]

Thus, more than obeying to a left or right wing ideology, more than following a sociological school, what is at stake in Sander's work is a tenacious enterprise: recording, isolating and grouping the German society accordingly to the social types he perceived at the time (*The Face of the Time* included seven groups, which reflected this social perception). More than searching, as his avant-garde fellows were doing, the "proper" use and the unexploited "liberating powers" of photography, Sander aimed at the somehow humbler plan of showing a series of sequential combinations that would put

[12] This is a delicate question, vulnerable to pernicious interpretations. May we just remember that the Nazi's ideology was firmly rooted in a typically ideal man. If it wouldn't take us out of the scope of our text, we could add new elements to this discussion by analysing the way Goethe reflects on the archetype and the *Urphänomen*, but for the time being we will remain close to the interpretation of Ulrich Keller: "In *Face of the Time*, however, the plan for the large portrait atlas may be grasped *in nucleo*. Here it is impossible to detect any particular emphasis on "generally human" constants; the order and the titles of the pictures are subordinated to professional-social viewpoints. Also, the subscription leaflet incorporated only those of Sander's typewritten draft that was in keeping with these viewpoints. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that, under the influence of his publishers, Sander eliminated the archetypical component from his concept. This is also indicated by his radio lectures of 1931, in which references to "archetypes" and "generally human characteristics" are missing while the term "physiognomy" is clearly used in a historical and social rather than characterological sense." *August Sander: Citizens of the Twentieth Century* (Keller, 1993, p. 24).

documentary photography in a whole new level of visual and theoretical significance.
In a letter addressed to the painter Peter Abelen, Sander says the following:

> A successful photo is only a preliminary step toward the intelligent use of photography. […] I would very much like to show my work again, but I cannot show it in a single photo, nor in two or three; after all, they could as well be snapshots. Photography is like a mosaic that becomes a synthesis only when it is presented *en masse*. That is the way I used photography in my work *Face of the Time*.[13]

This section of Sander's letter points to the abovementioned importance of a series, of sequences which constitute the mosaic and allow it to become a synthesis, even though it does not discard the significant role each individual photograph has (one should be reminded that his photographs were usually planned, with a particular focus on composition and the inclusion of social space). But even if we admit that a singular photograph, planned or driven by chance, has an intrinsic value, what is important here – in order to follow the clues given by Benjamin – is to stress the subjects of mosaic and synthesis, integrating singularity in the morphological dimension of Sander's work.
The tension between singularity and totality, between isolated phenomena and the configurations they form, all this is central in Goethe's morphological thought.[14] Hence, the synthesis invoked by Sander can be said to have something in common with the notions and the processes which characterize

[13] August Sander, "Letter to Abelen", January 1951, *apud* (Keller, 1993, p. 36).
[14] In the final part of *Theory of Colours*, there is a paragraph that echoes Sander's words: "But without a comprehensive view of the whole of our theory, the ultimate object will not be attained." (Goethe, 2006, 1810, § 901, p. 189)

morphology as an intrinsically dynamic epistemological method, thus with theory in the Goethean sense. It is a contemplative activity that builds up on what is seen and develops itself by finding connections between phenomena. Returning to the quote of *Little History of Photography* which serves as a motto for this paper, one may also say that the principles governing Sander's work follow a direct observation, a patient and delicate exchange between observer and observed, between photographer and the photographed things and persons.

Goethe's sentence on delicate empiricism [*zarte Empirie*], quoted by Benjamin, was first published as part of the novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*], and afterwards also gathered in *Maximen und Reflexionen* [*Maxims and Reflexions*]. The complete maxim runs as follows:

> There is a delicate form of empiricism which enters into the closest union with its object and is therefore transformed into an actual theory. But this heightening of spiritual capacity belongs to a highly civilized epoch.[15]

To understand what "entering into the closest union with the object" means, one has to consider the possibility of an intimate relationship between the subject and the object of vision, and this is one of the most remarkable axis of Goethe's theory of knowledge, one that enables a profound affinity between science and art. But the abovementioned maxim has also a second part, somewhat enigmatic, which seems to presume a utopian dimension. In fact, it is a humorous remark, perhaps ironic, because that "highly civilized epoch" will never come. It is, more accurately, the manifestation of a desire to answer the infinite solicitations of the world:

[15] *Maxims and Reflexions* (Goethe, 1999, 565 [509 in the HA Edition/ Goethe, 1982]).

The most committed and revealing promise that the spirit can make to himself is to convert into what he pays attention, and this conversion into the thing is, at the same time, spiritual metamorphosis, impulse of expressive self-fulfilment, intensification. To convert into the thing, that is the authentic theory. In this willingness, we may recognize theory in its ancient sense, although in Goethe it cannot be associated with the result of a discursive, argumentative process, but to the modest operations of concrete observation, of collection. Authentic theory is nevertheless an announced possibility, again and again announced, whose accomplishment belongs to a time that is still to come, which has its root in the inexhaustible life of each and every thing: 'on a daily basis, more relations between the things and ourselves are found, there is always something, coming from things, which awakes in us. I mean, things are infinite'.[16]

Anyhow, let us leave this double-faced maxim hanging in the air, and with it the problem of an intimacy which is always imbued with the conscience of its limits. Authentic theory is a demanding task, one that nevertheless must be pursued, exercised.

In light of its adequacy to Sander's photographs, in particular, and to images in general, the path followed also reveals the richness of another Goethean notion, the "aperçu". It describes a process that has less to do with the singleness of a unique blow, than with a lightning which forms itself and is prepared in a silent fertility, which "is part of a sequence and leads to a sequence. It is a link in a great chain mounting creatively"[17].

The maxim 561[246] confirms the ideas previously examined and adds also a few important details:

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[16] *O Pensamento Morfológico de Goethe* (Molder, 1995, pp. 289-290).

[17] *Maxims and Reflections* (Goethe, 1999, 416 [365]). On this question cf. also 562 [364]: Everything we call invention, discovery in a higher sense, is the significant practice, activation of an original instinct for truth, long developed in secret, which suddenly and at lightning speed turns into a fruitful perception. Developing from within, it is an outward manifestation which affords man a presentiment of his likeness to God. It is a synthesis of world and spirit conferring the most blissful assurance of the eternal harmony of existence.

In order to save myself [*Um mich zu retten*], I view all phenomena as independent units and try to isolate each from the other by sheer force; then I view them as correlatives and they combine to form vital structures. I apply this in the first instance to nature; but it can also be a way of looking at things which proves fruitful when applied to the latest turbulence of world history all around us.[18]

Goethe placed this maxim in a sequence which surveys and criticizes two innate and interrelated characteristics of humanity: a disregard for what we have before our eyes and a tendency to always connect the nearest and the most remote phenomena. Against this, he seems to sustain that a certain isolation of the phenomena is necessary and has to be complemented with delicate attention, and only afterwards can correlation be a fruitful operation. In other words, despite the fact that Goethe is describing a complex method which comprises more than epistemological qualities, but also aesthetic (and moral and historical) ones, we may say that what is at stake here is also a dynamic knowledge, capable of constantly reworking itself. This dynamic knowledge not only regards nature, but also history. This method is also capable of disrupting the principle of causality, so important in our modern science, thus enabling us to experience the world more intimately and in its variety. In *Theory of Colours*, for instance, Goethe uses the morphological method against the scientific view Newton brought to the study of colours.[19]

But in its delicacy, maxim 561 [246] creates another issue that is important to tackle. For Goethe, the morphological method is

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 561 [246]

[19] The following sentence from the "Introduction" to *Theory of Colours* addresses our previous readings: "During this process of observation, we remark at first only a vast variety which presses indiscriminately on our view; we are forced to separate, to distinguish, and again to combine; by which means at last a certain order arises which admits of being surveyed with more or less satisfaction". (Goethe, 2006/ 1810, p. XXV).

also a question of salvation ("In order to save myself…"), in the individual sense, undeniably, but also in the historical and epistemological: a salvation of living experience, or at least a resistance against the loss of diversity in our relations with the world.[20] This desire for salvation seems to reveal a nostalgia for something which is already lost, or perhaps it is nothing but a pessimistic warning against something which is endangered. By opposing this view to the pseudo-utopia of a "highly civilized epoch", we enter into the heart of Goethe's tensions and hesitations regarding his own time. Whatever the case may be, salvation is a "vital necessity", an expression of an anxiety that is going to reverberate, in a different way but in a similar tone, in *Little History of Photography*.

5. Benjamin and the *Übungsatlas*

In order to progress in some of the relations inferred and intuited up until now, let us return to Benjamin's commentary on Sander's photographs. Benjamin accurately selected a sentence from Alfred Döblin's introduction to *The Face of the Time*:

> Just as there is comparative anatomy, which helps us to understand the nature and history of organs, so this photographer is doing comparative photography, adopting a scientific standpoint superior to that of the photographer of detail.[21]

The terrain to where Benjamin takes us is thus one where science and art melt into each other, where photographic art is

[20] João Barrento, in the introduction to one of the Portuguese translations of *Maxims and Reflexions*, makes a pertinent remark on the double articulation between mimesis and utopia, between the sententious side and the projective side of Goethe's maxims. (Barrento, 2000, p. XIV).
[21] *Little History of Photography* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 520).

more of a bourgeois invention than a reality capable of dealing with the tasks of the present and the fertility of the photographic medium. It is not just a terrain influenced by Goethe (or Marx), but also influenced by the new possibilities brought by photography, an "art" inevitably polluted by science and objectivity. And, in this sense, Benjamin's recurrent interest on photography cannot be casual: photography is at once a result of history and something that makes history.[22]

Though we cannot fully develop the meaning of science in Benjamin's text, we must nevertheless have in mind the importance it has in the relation between the "comparative photography", morphology and historical situation. A few pages after the first references to Sander's work, Benjamin says that:

> When photography takes itself out of context, severing the connections illustrated by Sander, Blossfeldt, or Germaine Krull, when it frees itself from physiognomic, political, and scientific interest, it becomes *creative*. The lens now looks for interesting juxtapositions; photography turns into a sort of arty journalism. «The spirit, vanquishing mechanics, translates its exact results into parables of life.» The more far-reaching the crisis of the present social order, and the more rigidly its individual components are locked together in their death struggle, the more the creative – in its deepest essence a variant (contradiction its father, imitation its mother) – becomes a fetish, whose lineaments live only in the fitful illumination of changing fashion.[23]

This quotation is a good example of the way Benjamin, throughout his text, simultaneously absorbs the Goethean concept of science (and its morphological method) and transposes it into his own social and political concerns. It is also a good example of what we above called the variable relations between the different aspects of his historical study on

[22] The role photography plays in Benjamin's understanding of history is developed in a thought provoking book by Eduardo Cadava: *Words of Light. Theses on the Photography of History* (Cadava, 1997).
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 526.

photography. Consequently, the place Goethe has in Benjamin's text is peculiar, it almost seems as if the *direct observation* or the *theory as intimacy with the object* were there to prove that the problems raised by photography are deeper than the ones a superficial analyse could reach. Or perhaps Benjamin couldn't but write a history of photography that is also a display of the multiple roots of the photographic experience. We may say that Sander's work re-enacts, restages an experience of truth in the field of morphology, an experience that has a special place within a heterogeneous text.[24]

The ability to receive what comes from the past and, in a blow, put it at the service of the present and the future is perhaps one of the most important reasons for the success of Benjamin's thought in the philosophical and critical discourses of our culture. Besides showing this through his own way of writing and theorizing, Benjamin also crafted the concept of dialectical image, which has a central role in what concerns this question.

> It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images[25].

[24] Didi-Huberman refers to this heterogeneity of photographers and perspectives presented in *Little History of Photography* as a *sinoptic view* [*Übersicht*]. Benjamin was thus showing the ways how photography was taking part in the discovery of new forms of presentation and in the constitution of knowledge. *Atlas. Cómo llevar el mundo a cuestas?* (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 182).

[25] *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 463 [N3, 1]). This passage sheds some light on Benjamin's objection to Freund's text.

He distinguishes a pure temporal relation between the present and the past from a dialectical one, thus providing a historical concept that has profound similarities – as he himself remarks – with Goethe's morphology. This relation between the *what as been* and the *now* in Benjamin is acutely developed – also in its kinships with Goethe – in a text by Maria Filomena Molder. In what regards, for instance, an interpretation of the dialectical image: "The *what as been* is born out of a condescendence, out of a willingness of the present in relation to its inheritance, in relation to its 'being awaited', it is born out of an interest of a *now* [*die Jetztzeit*]"[26]. Here is what distinguishes Goethe from Benjamin:

> The line, a sharp and cutting blade, which separates Goethe and Benjamin, is grounded on the different domains in which the Urphänomen – the primal image or the origin – is applied; the step that goes from nature to history, underlined by Benjamin in *Das Passagen-Werk* [N2a, 4]. One should also add that this line separates not only the domain in which the concepts are used, but also the very own use of the concepts, once the vision that dyes each domain contaminates and regulates the conceptual use itself.[27]

Nevertheless, Molder shows that a set of affinities between Goethe and Benjamin transforms this separation into a living fabric, renewing itself before our eyes, interweaving the Goethean point of view on art, nature and antiquity with the Benjaminian point of view on criticism, art history and the relation between art and life. In this sense, and despite the complexity and importance of these distinctions and affinities, one has to understand that, although Goethe refers to the use of morphological method in what concerns history, and not only to natural phenomena, the concept of history developed by

[26] "O Eterno Motivo" (Molder, 1999, p. 156).
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

Benjamin is not the same. After all, they couldn't but live differently the *now* they were living in.

> Work like Sander's could overnight assume unlooked-for topicality. Sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way. Sander's work is more than a picture book. It is a training atlas [*Übungsatlas*].[28]

According to this section, the physiognomic interest of Sander's work meets one of its most important tasks.[29] It is therefore more than a purely theoretical question detached from everyday life. It is also an exercise that allows us to have a greater awareness of the world we live in. The "matter of vital importance" mentioned by Benjamin is part of an encouragement for the continuity of Sander's project. Besides the questions considered throughout this paper regarding the importance of Sander's photographs – originality in the context of the history of photography, relation with *zarte Empirie*, morphological and scientific dimension, etc. – Benjamin makes an appeal that is somehow more concrete, thus pointing to their historical and political relevance. These last references seem to be tainted with a strange energy, at once untimely and premonitory. And they guide us into the necessity of an exercise. If the exercise is capable of keeping pace with the velocity of the world, that is another question (we know that,

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[28] *Little History of Photography* (Benjamin, 1999, p. 520).

[29] During his lifetime, Sander would also photograph landscapes, which we can interpret as another type of physiognomic study. Benjamin, on the other hand, in an already quoted passage regarding the way Russian films anticipate Sander's photographs, points to the fact that "milieu and landscape, too, reveal themselves most readily to those photographers who succeed in capturing their anonymous physiognomy, as it were presenting them at face value". In any case, landscape, as faces, history or plants is a stimulating object for morphology. Goethe himself shows this throughout his writings, drawings and paintings.

after *Little History of Photography* was written (1931), Germany and the world experienced very harsh years indeed). As well as premonitory, this segment – and the whole section on Sander's work – also seems to have a tragic face: it inspires the search for an experience with the world that, however, is not a promise of salvation.

6. Richter's *Atlas*

It is not by chance that Benjamin uses the term atlas to refer to Sander's work, nor is it also by chance that the atlas, as a visual-theoretical figure, can be understood and enriched with morphological categories. *Theory of Colours* and *The Arcades Project* can likewise be said to be an atlas though not formed by images (in the strict, purely visual meaning of the term). In each and every atlas we have before our eyes a tension between singularity and totality (whole), our competences of observation are required in what concerns the discovery of associations, synthesis, analogies, and affinities. It is, as Didi-Huberman explains, a visual form of knowledge that comprises two paradigms, the aesthetic of the visual form and epistemic of knowledge, a characterization that reverberates the path we followed in this paper. Moreover, the atlas has a destabilizing power that is deeply rooted in the procedure of montage:

> Against all the epistemic purity, the atlas introduces in knowledge the sensible dimension, the diverse, the lacunal character of each image. Against all the aesthetic purity, introduces the multiple, the diverse, the hybridity of all the montage.[30]

[30] *Altas* (Didi-Huberman, 2011, p. 14).

Though we cannot rigidly define it, the atlas is undoubtedly something that questions the practices and the theories in the fields of photography, art, history or philosophy. Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne* for instance deals with the functions and the forces of images, bringing the questions of montage and memory to a whole new level and with them destabilizing and expanding not only the history of art, but also any thought that seeks to understand the way images work in us. And the atlas, or at least some of the processes that constitute it, has also been a recurrent figure in artistic practices. So, after our morphological revisitation of August Sander's photographic work, we will now address Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, confronting it in order to see, among other things, how can the delicate empiricism be possible when challenged by its most intimate limits.

Surprisingly (or perhaps not that much) one can find subtle proximities, at different levels, between Richter and Goethe, expressed in a few of his writings and interviews. In one interview, Richter admits that he saw in Goethe – alongside Van Gogh, Picasso or Gérard-Philippe, figures who were dead or far away – a sort of father figure, a role model. In an interview with his daughter, he relates this fact to a certain general absence of father figures in post-War Germany.[31] A second aspect concerns the importance of the classical dimension in the way Richter tries to balance his life, taming chaos. Being asked about the differences between him and Polke, and why he is not that much interested in collages, Richter admits to be the more classical one:

> [Robert Storr:] *Of course, Polker is a maker of collages, and your sensibility is very close to Polke's in some respects, but on this issue you are very different.*

[31] "Interview with Babette Richter, 2002" (Richter, 2009, p. 443).

[Richter:] Yes, I am also the more classical one. Somebody once said that I am Goethe and Polke is Schiller, or I am Thomas Mann and he is Heinrich Mann.

Could you explain to an American audience what this distinction means?

The classical is what holds me together. It is that which gives me form. It is the order that I do not have to attack. It is something that tames my chaos or holds it together so that I can continue to exist. That was never a question for me. That is essential for life.[32]

One third proximity can be found in the interview about the series on Titian's *Annunciation*: Richter refers the existence of a riddle which not only was at the basis of this particular series but also, and primarily, was at the basis of his dedication to painting:

[Nabakowski:] *What made you choose a fifteenth-century painting as a model and create a sequence based on* Titian's *Annunciation?*

[Richter:] Because there's something about this painting, or any painting, that grabs me if they're good – irrespective of the impact they had at the time, why they were made, the story behind them. I don't know what motivated the artist, which means that the paintings have an intrinsic quality. I think Goethe called it the "essential dimension", the thing that makes great works of art great.

I beg your pardon?

Something that is, or something that actively affects people, something in its essence. A dimension that, of course, lies beyond the mere choice of forms and colours, something that pertains to every detail… I don't know how to explain it right now. Perhaps I wanted to solve this riddle by painting, or by copying through painting.

And were you able to solve the riddle?

No.[33]

It is worth noting both the allusion to an essential dimension as something that affects people and also the existence of a riddle that, dealing with the aforementioned

[32] "Interview with Robert Storr, 2002" (Richter, 2009, p. 419).
[33] "Interview with Gislind Nabakowski, 1974" (Richter, 2009, p. 85).

dimension, works as an energetic element in Richter's proliferous artistic production. Curiously, the interviewer seems surprised, almost as if the reference to Goethe and the terms used could not be but a motive of stupefaction. Actually, we can say it to be a fertile anachronism, the more interesting the more we see in Richter one of the leading exponents of art since the 1960s.

At last, one can find a fourth proximity, which germinates from a quotation taken from Goethe's *Faust* ("In the beginning was the deed."). Richter wrote this line down in a note dated 25 February 1986:

> The idea as a point of departure for the picture: that's illustration. Conversely, acting and reacting in the absence of an idea leads to forms that can be named and explained, and thus generates the idea. («In the beginning was the deed.»)
>
> To put it another way, Marx teaching didn't cause historical change: new facts gave rise to interpretations, and thus to ideology. Action in pursuit of ideology creates lifeless stuff at best, and can easily become criminal.[34]

This note is a gateway to two different regions in Richter's creative world, regions that nevertheless are close to each other. The first one concerns a brief description of the creative act as Richter conceives it. It is just a hint, but the primacy of action and reaction discloses a strong positioning with regard to what art is and should be. Richter's work re-experiences and rethinks the possibilities of painting and the role of images in our life, a part of it shows a profound reflexion on certain themes and problems (man's fears, ghosts or failures), however this does not mean that, in his creative process, he is consciously and plainly following ideas. The analogy with ideology – the second region – serves as well as a warning

[34] "Notes, 1986" (Richter, 1999, p. 159).

against some political interpretations of Richter's work. Either in the field of politics, either in the one of aesthetics – and in between – we must be cautious about art as illustration.

Richter's *Atlas*, besides being a complex and still increasing assemblage of images, doesn't fit into the traditional categories of the history of art, nor in the categories of the history of photography, namely the private album and the documentary photography. In most of the cases the photographs and the photographic reproductions of other works are presented without context, imbued with a kind of objectivity that challenges the observer. They are somehow anonymous. Consequently, they have a particular energy which is not drained by any documentary concern. This energy allows the images to be internally repositioned by the intervention of the one who looks at them, who thus finds new constellations, associations and meanings. Richter's *Atlas* is also a "sketchbook" where we can find some of the images that were used in his other works, but also, at times, we find images that we can't relate to any other works. And a few, as we shall see, were placed there to paradoxically become visible and forgotten (or shall we say forgiven?). So it cannot be said to be a neutral repository, but a result of a selection (perhaps less strict in the most recent years), of a montage where memory, affections, creativity and chance play an important role. In its specific way, it gives Richter's work a morphological dimension, increasing the tensions between the singularity of each image and the constellations they form.

Richter's *Atlas*, as well as Sander's, distinguishes itself from the utopic ideals of photomontage and "new vision" developed in the beginning of the twentieth century, and is certainly less scientific than Sander's. It is not interested in social typologies nor in any other project of classification. Between the two poles of science and art, Richter's *Atlas* is closer to the second. Nonetheless, recalling the specificity of the *science* and the

knowledge explored by Goethe, Benjamin and Sander – each in his own morphological way – makes it easier to accept that the whole of Richter's work deals with a search for the most intimate relationship with phenomena. Or at least, in the case of the *Atlas*, we can talk about a willingness to show – through the assemblage, the montage, and the effort to tame chaos[35] – the riddles of the things that affect not only Gerhard Richter, but also ourselves.

In a note dated 28 Mars 1986, Richter considers art to be

> a special mode of our daily intercourse with phenomena, in which we apprehend ourselves and everything around us. Art is therefore the pleasure taken in the production of phenomena that are analogous to those of reality, because they bear a greater or lesser degree of resemblance to them. It follows that art is a way of thinking things out differently, and of apprehending the intrinsic inaccessibility of phenomenal reality; that art is an instrument, a method of getting at that which is closed and inaccessible to us (the banal future, just as much as the intrinsically unknowable); that art has a formative and therapeutic, consolatory and informative, investigative and speculative function; it is thus not only existential pleasure but Utopia.[36]

And thus we return to the question of Utopia. And also with Richter this is a tricky question. On the one hand, there is this brighter and hopeful side, capable of looking at art as that in which we apprehend ourselves and everything around us, but, on the other hand, there is also the cruel consciousness of the

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[35] "[Koldehoff:] *A few years ago you started exhibiting all the material you've used as a basis for your paintings, the so-called Atlas. In doing so, you're laying all of the ideas you ever had, or might have had, out on the table for everyone to see. That's an exhibitionist act.*
[Richter:] It could be, yes. But my motivation was more a matter of wanting to create order – to keep track of things. All those boxes full of photographs and sketches weigh you down, because they have something unfinished, incomplete, about them. So it's better to present the usable material in an orderly fashion and throw the other stuff away. That's how the *Atlas* came to be, and I exhibited it a few times." "Interview with Stefan Koldehoff" (Richter, 1999, p. 350).

[36] "Notes, 1986" (Richter, 1999, p. 161).

fact that every conceivable Utopia carries with it the failure of the world we live in. It is tempting to relate this ambivalence with the abovementioned maxims of Goethe, especially the ones related with *zarte Empirie* and the "highly civilized epoch" that will never come.

Though Richter considers that there aren't unpaintable themes, he nevertheless confesses that whenever he tried to work with images of concentration camps he was unable to do it, something that did not happen with the series dedicated to Baader-Meinhof.[37] He admits being incapable of painting something that is devoid of any hope. In fact, as one can discern during his conversation with Thorn-Prikker, in both cases, concentration camps and Baader-Meinhof, there is an attempt to confront the traumatic memories and the way they pervaded the individual and collective life. And the act of painting them, treating them as pictures, is also a complex and maybe awkward act of intimacy. In this case, it is an intimate experience with death and lack of hope. It is important to point out that the unpaintable photographs of concentration camps were inserted in the *Atlas* as a meaningful gesture that deals with memory and death.[38] But this gesture also says that the *Atlas* is a *Übungsatlas*, a place to exercise our intimacy with the world and with ourselves.

When questioned about the polemics that surrounded the Baader-Meinhof's series, Richter says the following:

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[37] "[Jan Thorn-Prikker:] *Were you confident from the very start that the terrorism theme was paintable?*
[Richter:] The wish was there that it might be – had to be – paintable. But there have been some themes that weren't. In my mid-twenties I saw some concentration camp photographs that disturbed me very much. I had to give up. That was when I put the photographs together in that weird and seemingly cynical way in the Atlas." "Conversation with Jan Thorn-Prikker concerning the 18 October 1977 cycle" (Richter, 1999, p. 226).

[38] Disturbingly, some of those images were blurred or coloured by Richter, a common procedure in his work. But *these* colours are something else; they are pushed to the limit.

there's something else that puts an additional fear into people, namely that they themselves are terrorists. And that is forbidden. So this terrorist inside all of us, that's what generates the rage and the fear, and that's what I don't want, any more than I want the policeman inside myself – there's never just one side to us. We're always both: the State and the terrorist.[39]

And in a note dated 17 Mars 1986:

Our horror, which we feel every time we succumb or are forced to succumb to the perception of atrocity (for the sake of our own survival, we protect ourselves with ignorance and by looking away), our horror feeds not only on the fear that it might affect ourselves but on the certainty that the same murderous cruelty operates and lies ready to act within every one of us.[40]

In a text entitled "Important stimulation by means of a single witty word", Goethe refers his studies on nature pointing out the fact that, with them, he not only follows the purpose of expressing how he perceives nature, but also how, at the same time, perceives himself, his interior, his personality. This reciprocity can be interpreted as an inevitable consequence of *zarte Empirie*. Being sceptical about the maxim "Know thyself", which seems to deviate man from the exterior world and force him into a false interior contemplation, he says:

Man knows himself only to the extent that he knows the world; he becomes aware of himself only within the world, and aware of the world only within himself. Every object, well contemplated, opens up a new organ of perception within us.[41]

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 227.
[40] "Notes, 1986" (Richter, 1999, p. 159).
[41] "Bedeutende Fördernis durch ein einziges geistreiches Wort", *Zur Morphologie* II, 1, 1823 (Goethe 1982; HA, vol. 13, pp. 37-41), *apud*, *A Metamorfose das Plantas* (Goethe, 1993/ 1790; Apêndice I, p. 67).

Throughout this text I tried to show that this knowledge-willingness is not necessarily comfortable, indeed it requires our participation and our creativity. Besides that, it also cannot promise contentment, a detail that compromises the Goethean equation between knowledge and pleasure. History and art, perhaps more than nature, give us objects that, on the contrary, reveal themselves considerably unsettling.
Atlas. After the images of concentration camps: in sheet 21 and throughout the next three sheets, images of pornography.

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