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“Composite Faces: Histories and Continuities of Photographic Constructions of the Human Face between Arts and Science.” (Current working title)

The emergence of the composite technique as an exceptional form of photographic visualisation in late nineteenth-century marks a crucial point in the development of the new medium. On the one hand the superimposition of negatives refer to earlier techniques of artistic depiction, such as painting and drawing, e.g. in the collages of the photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander. On the other hand the technique stands for a new form of seemingly unmediated scientific visualisation and knowledge production, as in the facial superimpositions of the scientist Francis Galton. These composite portraits were oriented towards an ideal form or physiognomic type and drew conclusions from the outer appearance on inner characteristics, such as criminality, disease, race, heredity, and provided evidence for eugenic thought. As quasi-analytical devices, the collages include statistic considerations and go well beyond the neutral reproduction of the depicted object. New realities are constructed in the composite faces that strived visualise types and explore genetic genealogies. This quest for the representation of the invisible, explored in the new medium of photography, shows the technique’s relationship to visual arts, but also to twenty-first-century means of artificial visualisation.

The photographic material for Galton’s composite portraits was produced in what with Michel Foucault’s words could be described as disciplinary institutions¹ and the compositions rely on the systematisation in the depiction of the human face in identification and the judiciary system. The connections to the photographic practices in this field, however, become even more obvious when looking at the photographic practices of Alphonse Bertillon and his French Judiciary Service whose standardisation, the establishing of an archive system, as well as the translation of visual into numeric code laid the basis for today’s biometric identification. Even though the composite portrait, from a contemporary perspective, might seem anachronistic as a scientific tool, a diachronic reading reveals a number of connections between these early photographic visualisations and the construction of the human face in biometric recognition and computerised registers that are currently revolutionising the management of ‘identities’.

Central to my analysis are scientific and artistic photographic compositions, their production, utilisation and reception, as well as the discourse that unfolds around them. The historical examination focusses on the work of the protagonists of composite portraiture in nineteenth-century: Francis Galton, Arthur Batut, Cesare Lombroso and their American contemporaries. This perspective finds its counterpart in critical explorations of current utilisations of composite portraiture in artistic works and their positioning in relation to their historical predecessors and today’s technologies of visual typification and biometric identification. The methods and procedures used by nineteenth-century scientists to visualise the human face do not fundamentally differ from artistic approaches, and artistic images often serve as reference. In this case, the images of nineteenth-century science turn out to be as constructed as the artistic visualisations of the time.

¹ See: Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1975). New York: Vintage, 1995.

My examination of historical images of the human face will foreground the photographic and scientific practices, the methods, techniques and instruments that were used in the creation of the images. Through the seemingly undistorted depiction of reality, a second order of material evidence was constructed in the photographs. The images were treated as traces, as if possessing a direct, physical relation to the depicted object, and photography was embraced as an ideal medium for the production of scientific evidence. This understanding of photography as natural impression was already brought up by photographic protagonists such as Henry Fox Talbot² and prevails in later characterisations. Even though questioned in times of digital manipulation, the assumption of documentary evidence lives on in today's perception of photographic images and visualisations. The process-oriented approach, however, expands this understanding towards the whole "photographic act"³ including the predispositions, the circumstances of recording, as well as the contextualisation and reception. Furthermore this focus on the practices and instruments allows for an analysis of the power relations prevalent in the processes of recording the human face.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century the composite technique moves, or, as I would argue, returns, to the artistic realm. Nancy Burson, Gerhard Lang, Christian Mahler, Thomas Ruff, and other contemporary visual artists use the technique of the superimposition of faces. Some further develop the approach in relation to computerised visualisation, such as in the technique of morphing in which the merging of images of faces is achieved through algorithms and automated data processing. Many of the artists seem to be aware of the historical scientific and ethical background and adopt a critical position in relation to these predecessors, but also point at current developments in measurements of the human body and face such as in DNA analysis and biometric face recognition. This is why the examination of the artistic works and strategies in relation to historical and current ways of typifying and identifying the human face provides productive insights.

The project takes the "composite face" as a central reference point in the examination of these visual constructions of identification and typification. This opens up the visual realm to statistics and the archive, already included in the idea of the composite portrait⁴, but also allows for the discussion of the visualisation of the invisible and affective responses to the often uncanny superimpositions of faces.

² Talbot, William Henry Fox: *The Pencil of Nature*. London: Longman, 1844-46.

³ Dubois, Philippe: "Der fotografische Akt. Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv." In: Herta Wolf (ed.): *Geschichte und Theorie der Fotografie*. Amsterdam, Dresden: 1998.

⁴ See: Sekula, Allan: "The Body and the Archive." In: *October* 39, 1986, 3-64.