



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

May 2012



### *jpeg de01*

2005

#### **Thomas Ruff**

Born: Zell am Harmersbach, Germany 1958

color coupler print, face-mounted on Plexiglas

109 3/4 x 72 3/4 in. (278.8 x 184.7 cm)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of Sarah and Gary Wolkowitz

2010.55

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*Researcher Liz investigated German photographer Thomas Ruff's image of the ruins of the World Trade Center following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. She drew upon her own remembrances of the attacks and a plethora of online resources in researching this image.*

- **What does the title *jpegde01* signify?**

Thomas Ruff, a German artist and photographer, created *jpegde01* as part of a series of works of art based on photographs of disasters or catastrophes. For each work in the *jpeg* series, Ruff began with an existing digital image in the Jpeg format, enlarging it to a point that the individual bits of data, or pixels, are visible. A colleague told me about a [2009 interview](#) in which Ruff explained how he intended these images to symbolize the concept of a disaster, rather than commemorating a specific event.

The term “jpeg” is an acronym for the [Joint Photographic Experts Group](#) (JPEG), an international committee which sets standards for digital image formats. It has also become the name of the type of digital image that can be posted on the Internet in a format that web browsers

can read and display. A digital JPEG image is composed of a grid of square pixels – bits of data. Digital cameras today are capable of taking photographs in very high resolution, but twelve years ago in 2001 (as I recall from my own experience designing websites) that early jpeg images were of a much lower resolution of 72 dpi (dots per inch). In a book that I found through a WorldCat search, David Friend's *Watching the World Change: the Stories Behind the Images of 9/11* (2006), I read that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks occurred at a pivotal moment when many photographers were using both traditional film and digital cameras. After the attacks, almost everyone switched to digital (Friend, 19).

- **What do *de* and *01* in the title represent?**

Originally I thought that the *de* might stand for “Deutschland” (Germany), since *de* is also the web extension for German websites and email addresses. However, when I searched for articles on Ruff through art bibliographic databases, I found an article by Bea Dotti in the Italian periodical, *Arte*, that changed my mind. Dotti mentioned that when the *jpeg* series was exhibited in Paris at the Galerie Nelson, Ruff arranged the works alphabetically by title, from *aa* (American architecture) to *bu* (bunkers), to *wi* (War in Iraq). Since Ruff stated that the *jpeg* series documents different kinds of disasters, my guess is that *de* stands for “destruction” and that *01* refers to 2001, the year in which the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks occurred.

- **Upon which photograph of the World Trade Center ruins did Thomas Ruff base his *jpegde01*?**

According to a note I found in the curatorial file for *jpegde01*, Ruff was actually in New York City on September 11, 2001 on Canal Street, not far from the World Trade Center, and saw the World Trade Center Towers collapse. He took pictures with his film camera, but due to X-ray damage or a spent camera battery, the film yielded no images upon development. In another interview that appeared in the 2009 catalogue of the retrospective exhibition in Milan, Italy, *Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream*, Ruff explains that his introduction to working with digital images coincided with the 9-11 attacks. “The first photographs that interested me were the horrifying images of the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” said Ruff, “and these are what inspired me to create my series [the *jpeg*s].” (Ruff interview, 79) Since his own photographs were destroyed, Ruff downloaded an image from the Internet, enlarged it so its pixels were visible, and made a C-print (color coupler) of the image.

One of the challenges in researching *jpegde01* was deciding which internet websites and archives to search for visual material. I wanted to find the original photograph that Ruff used in creating *jpegde01*. Since Ruff downloaded the photograph from the Internet, I thought that the best approach to locating this image would be to find out which images were posted online in the days following the attacks.

Internet Archive has a wonderful tool called the [Wayback Machine](#). The Wayback Machine is a digital archive of over 150 billion web pages captured at various points in time between 1996 and the present day. I searched the websites for the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* for September 11, 2001. The [New York Times](#)' site was archived eight separate times on September 11, 2001 and the [New York Post](#)'s website had pages for September 14, 2001 and subsequent days. The *Post* had slideshows of photographs of the attacks and of the destruction at Ground Zero, but I did not find the elusive photograph that Ruff used.

The [September 11th Digital Archive](#) has an entire page of links to [Sites Containing Images](#). One link brought me to a site called the [September 11 Digital Collection](#) which contains screenshots taken from the websites of news organizations worldwide on September 11, 2001. It was here that I was able to access the homepage of the [Washington Post](#).

The photograph on the *Washington Post* website and Ruff's image appear to be the same image, although the Post's version is cropped at the top and bottom and Ruff cropped the photo horizontally on each side. The photo credit cited Reuters News Agency.

I contacted [Reuters](#) asking about the photographer and received an email reply from David Pillinger. He identified the photographer as Peter Morgan and the information he sent confirmed that the image was taken on September 11, 2001. Peter Morgan no longer works for Reuters but is now with [AP](#) (Associated Press). I have contacted him and plan to ask him the following questions:

- **How soon after the collapse of the Towers did he photograph the ruins?**
- **Was the façade fragment in the photograph from Tower One or Tower Two, or was this impossible to determine?**

### **Selected Bibliography:**

Dotti, Bea. "Alla superficie della fotografia." [At the surface of photography]. *Arte* [Milan, Italy] 394 (June 2006): 114-120.

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Ruff, Thomas. "Interview with Thomas Ruff,"69-75, in Chiara Bertola, ed. *Thomas Ruff at the End of the Photographic Dream*. Milan, Italy: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2009.

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