Photography and Contemporary Art: the end of a (hi)story?

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Photography and Contemporary Art: the end of a (hi)story?

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REFERENCES

Cotton, Charlotte. *La Photographie dans l'art contemporain*, Paris : Thames & Hudson, 2005, (L'Univers de l'art)

La Photographie en dialogues = Dialoguizing Photography, Saint-Etienne : Musée d'art moderne ; Villeurbanne : Institut d'art contemporain, 2005

- 1 The intellectual fetishism, in which photojournalism is nowadays swathed, gives rise to an effect of distance and remoteness in our perception of photography as linked with contemporary art.
- 2 A brace of quite different publications strive first and foremost to produce a convergent effect. The first is by Charlotte Cotton, and devoted to photography "in contemporary art", while the second is the catalogue of the photographic collection of the FRAC Rhône-Alpes Institute of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Modern Art in Saint-Etienne. Both nevertheless prompt the similar feeling that the time has come for photography as contemporary art to appear in the fleeting lens of the past.
- 3 Cotton, for her part, submits this photography to a typology, and right away reveals the need to *fix* phenomena and, consequently, to infer that they are no longer part of a dynamic capable of radically altering our viewpoint. So after emphasizing the posterity of photo-conceptualism in contemporary photography (the only real historical datum in the book), Cotton suggests that we make a distinction between works based on differing "approaches" and "methods". Presentation (*mise en scène*) inherited from performance is followed by narrative incorporated within a single image (picture-photograph), neutrality, the subject and the issue of its prosaicness, intimacy and privacy, "moments of histories" (documentary and aesthetic), and, last but not least, the postmodernist attitude

of “re-appropriations”. By the mere listing of these “items”, the cross-checking which they themselves suggest renders somewhat arbitrary the main texts which follow each of the chapter introductions. Not only because works might quite legitimately belong to several categories, but also and above all because the serialization of examples, focused on just the aesthetic criterion, produces collusions prohibited by an historical approach. A single example: in the chapter on history and the documentary we find the names of Allan Sekula, Paul Graham, Martin Parr and Luc Delahaye, in particular. The presentation logic is not harmed but it compromises the fact that certain practices and attitudes produce, between them, certain thrilling contradictions. In this particular instance, how two photographers from the Magnum agency (Paar and Delahaye) are shifting their photojournalistic praxis towards the art market by introducing a muddle between documentary aesthetics (evidently at work in Sekula’s work, and Graham’s) and reporting. The issue of the aestheticization of photojournalism could well be raised here, but we remain caught in the inventory game. This lack of dialectic does not detract from the book’s practical, handbook-like aspect, by way of iconography and the pinpointing of major questions, but it does neutralize an object which actually seems to belong to bygone history.

- 4 *La Photographie en dialogues*, for its part, deals with an explicitly historical object, since what is involved is an (albeit invariably open-ended) collection, symptomatic of an enrichment devised in the mid-1980s. The collection thus appears to comply with a heterodox modernist approach that was championed at the time by the Musée d’Orsay in particular¹. This approach is at once inspired by the photographic department of New York’s MoMA (then run by John Szarkowski) and a political awareness of the user value of images. The interview with Jean-François Chevrier, who had been given *carte blanche* to put the collection together, comes across like an impassioned essay steeped in ego-history. Man plunges back into a day and age where he was seeking an alternative to aesthetic situations which he deemed to be frozen—which applies just as much to the formalism of American institutions (versus postmodernism) as to the French scene (pride of place going either to the auteur or to plastic/visual neo-pictorialism), or even the German one (subjective photography versus the documentary conceptualism of the Bechers). These are the choices: the theme of the body, the linkage between imagery from different periods, the wish to conceive of art history *with* photography. And as a result, the phoney debate about photographers’ photographs and artists’ photographs is ignored. The on-going overarching attitude helps to present choices with the apparent coherence at times offered by the narrativization of the past—choices, we are often reminded, which go beyond any understanding of acquisitions committees. The collection thus becomes the work of a person just as much as, if not more than, the symptom of a period—due to the very fact that, here, a social, technical and cultural history of images shifts readily to the background. By connecting these past concerns with these present questions and challenges, Chevrier underscores his own project: the updating of modern art within a context where art is now being “done away with” by design. In Chevrier’s view, photography—and he hammers home the fact that it lies somewhere between Fine Art and media—has played a decisive role in this updating of modern art, mainly through the two avenues he himself has taken: the form of the picture taken as a critical notion, then, in the ensuing years, the notion of document. But photography henceforth no longer plays this part in the revision of modernism, and thus announces that it belongs to a past episode in its history.

- 5 Lastly, if the sense that a certain history has come full circle seems justified, the “exit” of contemporary art represents, for photography, the final episode, caught up today in a future development that has not yet been predicted, and which we should nevertheless analyse as one of the enthralling moments of this history.
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NOTES

1. See on this subject: Bajac, Quentin, “Stratégies de légitimation”, *Etudes photographiques*, Société française de photographie, #16, May 2005, pp.222-23.