

## Photography: the Destinies of Modernism

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Translator: Simon Pleasance

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## REFERENCES

Baqué, Dominique. *Photographie plasticienne, l'extrême contemporain*, Paris : Ed. du Regard, 2004

*L'Ombre du temps*, Paris : Jeu de Paume, 2004

- 1 Between a 19th century partly marked by the appearance of photography and a 21st century which seems to be the new digital age, the 20th century appears to have exemplarily fulfilled a destiny of art which Benjamin announced as photographic. Put into perspective, and with hindsight, it can be historically defined, today, as the period of art during which the photographic model spread through theories and uses, shifting from an almost total absence at the start of the century to an ultra-presence from the 1980s on. This breakthrough, which goes beyond simple use and becomes part of actual practices, traces a history written in a multiple style, somewhere between-with-the history of photography, the history of art, and the history of culture. So when this involves not only envisaging this history, but also drawing consequences from it for contemporary art work, two questions come to the fore: over and above the generalization of its use, over and above its inclusion in art practices, what exactly was the role of photography in that specific history of 20th century art? And, in return, what was its effect on photography itself? In other words, this wholesale recourse to the use of photography in the 20th century has had a twofold effect on art and photography, which remains to be appraised.
- 2 In the introduction to his latest book *Photographie plasticienne. L'extrême contemporain*, Dominique Baqué recalls the terms of the debate at the centre of his work published in 1998<sup>1</sup>: photography, swallowing up contemporary art in the 1980s, has turned into a

powerful vehicle destroying modernist mythologies, and in particular the paramount one of art and culture, uncertain, hybrid and heterogeneous art, which has become a predominant medium since the 1980s, and was at the root of the upheaval which consisted in turning the repression of modernism into the basis of postmodernism by directly attacking the notions of auteur, work, and original. In this history, photography assumes a figure which it has been habitually cladding since the 19th century: that of the Trojan horse which, over and above the chemical and automatic image, conveys within it, and right to the hub of artistic praxis, the rules of heteronomy, crossing and transversality, which have become the lot of après-postmodern art, and of the “contemporary extreme”. By assuming his stance as a critic, Dominique Baqué undertakes a sweeping overview of contemporary photography from the never properly defined angle of “plastic photography”, where the division of a vision within the photographic field is essentially governed by the appearance and disappearance of “tropes”—the banal, the trashy, the intimate—, not to say the favourite subjects of those photographing the contemporary extreme. And photography here assumes both the role of the image’s ferryman and the reflection of the praxis of contemporary art.

- 3 But is this history of transgression and weakening of the modernist precepts by photography the sole link that is made between the photographic object and art praxis of the 20th century? Conversely, can there not be a convergence between modernist research and the use of photography by artists? Needless to say, hybridization and ambiguity are anti-modernist qualities of photography. But the critic’s stance taken up by Baqué is in the end of the day shortsighted; or let us say that it is not merely critical and as such is not aimed solely at establishing the state of a present situation by accusing photography—that Trojan horse—of being the medium of an impoverishment of contemporary artistic praxis. This is a reproach which, akin to the Trojan figure, has in the end been a classic since the 19th century. But this appreciation contains within it a challenge which focuses precisely on what, for Michel Poivert, broaching the issue as an art historian in the essay in the exhibition catalogue at the Jeu de Paume gallery, *L’Ombre du temps*, underpins a history common to art and photography: the issue of value. Where art history shows us that the history of—fertile—relations between art and photography in the 20th century is involved precisely just as soon as photography intervenes in practices which refuse to rule on its value as art or a simple document which, by working on this ambiguity, contribute, it just so happens, to the definition of the modern condition of photography. As soon as a second photographic modernity is involved at the very beginning of the century, a modernity which is no longer instrumental, as it was in the previous century, but a contemporary modernity of art by the re-use, hijacked by the avant-gardes of a utilitarian iconography to reveal its aesthetic qualities bearing the promise of a renewal of inspiration, photography has been instrumentalized in practices. So at every stage of this detailed three-part history by Poivert, documentary photography, experimental photography, and performed photography, since the acceptance of its own technical specificity to the place of the viewer, it is a bit of modernist utopia which contaminates photography itself in search of an essence, but it is also through this “forever rehashed definition” of the question of its value that photography ends up at the heart of the fundamental preoccupations of modern art. From Stieglitz to Jeff Wall, by way of Polke, Poivert demonstrates that there is indeed an affinity between photography and modernism over and above just direct or “pure” photography.

- 4 There is no clash between critic and art historian. The one tries to define a present and future place for photography. The other tries to appraise the fecundity of an a priori contradictory confrontation between art and photography in history. The one attempts the formulation of an autonomous narrative set up against modernism, the other the writing of a common history constructed around modernism as the very subject of contemporary art.
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## NOTES

1. Dominique Baqué, *La Photographie plasticienne. Un art paradoxal*, Paris : Ed. du Regard, 1998.