Photography: Syntheses and Perspectives

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REFERENCES

L'Art de la photographie des origines à nos jours, (sous la dir. d'André Gunthert, Michel Poivert), Paris : Citadelles & Mazenod, 2007

Territoires partagés : peinture et photographie aujourd'hui, Milan : Skira, 2007

Collection photographies : une histoire de la photographie à travers les collections du Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou ; Göttingen : Steidl, 2007

Photographies modernes et contemporaines : la collection Neuflize Vie, Paris : Flammarion, 2007

- 1 The simultaneous publication of a history of photography by the publishers Citadelles & Mazenod, and the book devoted to the photographic collections at the Centre Pompidou marks a new historiographical stage, after an initial summary of historical and heritage-related knowledge produced in the mid-1990s with the publication of the *Nouvelle Histoire de la Photographie* edited by Michel Frizot (Adam Biro; Bordas, 1994) and the inventory of the Beaubourg's modern photography collections (Centre Pompidou, 1996).
- 2 The first noteworthy development has to do with the quality of the reproduction of the pictures, in books where the illustrative material has pride of place. The shift to four-colour printing for all the photographs permits an extremely subtle vision which focuses fairly and squarely on the image and, by comparison, gives books from the previous decade an inevitably dated look. *L'Art de la Photographie*, edited by André Gunthert and Michel Poivert enables us, furthermore, to take the measure of the breadth of research carried out in the history of photography over the past ten years¹ as well as changes in the way the discipline is broached: "The almost endless abundance of historical material

[...] prohibits any kind of exhaustiveness and forces anyone with too much to say to a history inevitably “smithereened”, which we immediately prefer to replace by a fondness for narrative”². And it must be admitted that the charm of narrative works, all through the ten chapters making up the book. The division of the book into major themes helps us in particular to link up photographic trends and tendencies, which were previously separate studies, for example in the very interesting chapter on *la volonté d’art* or “the will of art” written by Michel Poivert, which compiles and deals in an on-going way with Victorian photography in England and European and American pictorialism. This approach offers the non-specialist art lover not only great scientific precision but also many parallel episodes which stake out the history of the medium in the visual culture, littered with rumours, controversies, successes and disappointments, be they artistic or commercial. So the genesis of the invention, which is the opening chapter in which Paul-Louis Roubert takes as his point of departure the revelation of the daguerreotype by Arago at the *Académie des sciences* to propose an examination of the public reception of the procedure rather than draw up the erudite genealogy of the invention since light machines³. This switch of paradigm—“not a general history of the medium but a history retraced from the viewpoint of art and culture”⁴, where photography creates a new link with the image in every area of knowledge (science, information processing, artistic culture, and the like)—is perceptible in all the studies. To take just one example, a result of recent research, with regard to the overview of the series of new technologies aimed at simplifying then imposing as something obvious the use of photographs in the press, Thierry Gervais proposes a history of the illustrated press, where photography is part of the whole production chain “revealing the determination of professionals to produce an object, the illustrated paper, at once attractive and economically viable” (p. 304). The study of published imagery shows in particular that the pledge of authenticity accorded the photograph was only gradually preferred to the educational values of the print. Its adoption at the turn of the 20th century was accompanied by a conspicuous development of page layouts which little by little turned the illustrated paper into a magazine, whose significance throughout the century is analyzed by Gaëlle Morel, from myths of photojournalism to contemporary forms of information.

- 3 “Fondness for narrative” recurs in the catalogue of the Centre Pompidou’s photographic collections, in which the curators Quentin Bajac and Clément Chéroux have elected to bring photographs together in thematic sections, introduced by historical essays. The history thus created helps us both to note the wealth and coherence of the collection—the Futurist and modernist collections (the latter focusing on the Bauhaus) and the “humanist” collection—and identify the gaps—American photography for example, with which it seems complicated to be sparing in order to write a history of photography. On the other hand, it is worth observing the acquisition made in recent years of contemporary photographs, recently swollen by the major donation of the Caisse des Dépôts collection⁵. The period from 1960 on is also dealt with in a couple of chapters, around distinct themes: “Photography presented—fiction and narration” (Christian Caujolle) and “Documentary Forms” (Quentin Bajac). The themes are somewhat broad—Barbara Kruger categorized in documentary forms, for example—and at times interchangeable, the assumed encounter of contemporary art and photography is finally generously illustrated—and it is all the more regrettable that institutional recognition of the medium since the 1980s is not dealt with in *L’Art de la Photographie*.

- 4 The publication of the catalogue of the Banque Neuflyze Vie to celebrate its now ten-year-old collection attests to the position taken by private initiatives in the formation of collections devoted to photography⁶. Focusing on the themes of memory and portrait, it includes more than 700 works, with an important showing of famous portraits of 20th century artists and authors, and a series of contemporary works where, reading between the lines, we rediscover the theme, but from many different angles—the shift from face to reflection on the body, and the physical incorporation in the city. The classic construction of the catalogue (notices per artist) describes the forward-looking intent of the acquisitions committees—and, what is more, the relevance of their choices with regard to the subsequent itineraries of the artists included.
- 5 In another thematic approach, *Territoires partagés, peinture et photographie aujourd'hui*, the catalogue of the exhibition shown at the castle of Villeneuve/Emile Hugues Foundation at Vence, brings together both photographic and pictorial works. The pieces on view illustrate the vitality of both areas and their shared interests, but it is a pity that the book is organized on the basis of the classical distinctions made between pictorial genres. And that the comparison of the pictures in the book is not more direct and inventive. For example, why not have the shiny image of a model by Valérie Belin with a painting of Mao by Yan Pei Ming?

NOTES

1. And which is expressed in particular in the magazine *Etudes Photographiques* published by the Société française de photographie.
2. Gunthert, André, Poivert, Michel. « Histoire(s) de la photographie », p. 570
3. Roubert, Paul-Louis. « La Génération du daguerréotype : 1839-1851, la rencontre de la machine et de l'homme », p. 12-39. On this subject, Michel Frizot went for the opposite approach, writing about that event of 1839 that «everything actually happened outside that historic place and date», p. 23, *op.cit.*
4. Gunthert, André, Poivert, Michel. « Introduction », p. 7
5. This donation was the subject of an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, *Les Peintres de la vie moderne*, from 27 September 2006 to 12 March 2007, where the collection was presented in an almost exhaustive way.
6. At the Centre National de la Photographie, Régis Durand has highlighted these initiatives, by organising exhibitions around several collections from 1997 on : DG Bank, Lhoist and ABN AMRO/Neuflyze.