
A Matter of Method

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Propriété intellectuelle

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- 1 In his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Michael Fried offers an analysis of art photography since the late 1970s.¹ From the early light boxes of the Canadian Jeff Wall to the recent work of the French Luc Delahaye – and without omitting the iconic oeuvre of the German Andreas Gursky – Fried extends the modernist reading of art he began in the 1960s to include photography. Theatricality, absorption, the role of the beholder, and the *tableau form* are invoked as parameters not only for analysis of the output of artist-photographers, but also for fueling and legitimizing his theoretical discourse. In his collection of articles published in 1998, Fried took care to distinguish his critical from his historical work, but we now find him warning the reader that in this new book the two approaches merge. While his theoretical slant can prove interesting, his work as a historian is questionable. Taking a supposedly historical approach, he is happy to compare composition, lighting, subjects, or living environments in works that have neither their century, their specific medium, nor their intent in common, but do serve to illustrate his artificial genealogy. Fried's book in itself appears to be a historical object whose analysis of the visual evokes another time, neglecting the technical parameters, the economic and social givens of artistic output, and the institutional framework within which the works find their place and their definition.
- 2 It should be said in Fried's defense that we ourselves have published few historical analyses about the art of photography of the last forty years. However, some worth mentioning are the article by Nathalie Boulouch on the arrival of color photography in the modernist discourse of the Museum of Modern Art in the 1970s and Katia Schneller's look at postmodern uses of photography in the oeuvre of Robert Smithson. With regard to more recent practice, Marie Bottin has examined the enduring influence of Nan Goldin's 'trash' aesthetic on French criticism, and Gaëlle Morel has scrutinized Luc Delahaye's ways of photographing and his formal choices in light of the intent of his work.² It should also be pointed out, regarding the two latter studies, that the photographers concerned refused us permission to publish their images, either because

of disagreement with the papers' conclusions or because they feared critical discourse about their work that was beyond their control. In the visual field in general and that of art in particular, the history of the contemporary remains a delicate undertaking. That is unfortunate.

- 3 Olivier Lugon's article in the current issue provides a demonstration of this. The *tableau form* and large-format photography, addressed first by Jean-François Chevrier and later by Michael Fried, have a fascinating history, one in which people as diverse as architects, industrialists, and photographers have a role, adopting the latest technology and shifting the boundaries between mass media and artistic practice. Here we find a history of art that we understand, rather than merely accept. Drawing on the same dynamic, the articles by Dominique de Font-Réaulx and Pauline Martin cast useful light on the fight for institutional recognition of photography as art in the France of the 1950s, and on the notion of *flou* (soft-focus) as it was shared by painters and photographers in the nineteenth century. In this sort of contextualized history of art photography, much work remains to be done. This journal stands ready to publish the results.

NOTES

1. Michael FRIED, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008). Regarding this book, see the review by Katia SCHNELLER on our website, <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/index3000.html>; see also Robin KELSEY, 'Eye of the Beholder: Robin Kelsey on Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters ...*,' *Art Forum* 47, no. 5 (January 2009): 53–54 and 57–58.
2. Nathalie BOULOUCHE, 'Les passeurs de couleur. 1976 et ses suites,' *Études photographiques*, no. 21 (December 2007): 106–22; Katia SCHNELLER, 'Sous l'emprise de l'Instamatic. Photographie et contre-modernisme dans la pratique artistique de Robert Smithson,' *Études photographiques*, no. 19 (December 2006): 68–95; Marie BOTTIN, 'La critique en dépendance. La réception de l'œuvre de Nan Goldin en France, 1987–2003,' *Études photographiques*, no. 17 (November 2005): 67–85; Gaëlle MOREL, 'Esthétique de l'auteur. Signes subjectifs ou retrait documentaire?,' *Études photographiques*, no. 20 (June 2007): 134–47.