

L'IMMAGINE RIFLESSA

una selezione di fotografia contemporanea
dalla Collezione LAC, Svizzera



MUSEO
PECCI
PRATO

Over the past two decades, Italian museums and institutions – universities and schools of fine art, as well as art publishers – have consistently (and conveniently) omitted to consider the proliferation and circulation of photography within contemporary arts. It is common knowledge that in the early seventies, especially in the United States, photography enjoyed an era of “rediscovery”, evident in the establishment of photography departments in art museums throughout the country, photography and history of photography art degrees were offered at Colleges and Universities, supported and/or piloted by a thriving photographic market. Such renewed and increasing attention to the world of photography was slow to reach Europe but eventually our museums began to build their own photographic collections as well as develop an institutional policy to promote photography.

In Italy only a few institutions attempted to document the flourishing photographic production but they largely failed to develop a coherent and consistent policy to foster a photographic culture.

By the early eighties art critics in the United States had posited a postmodern condition in the visual arts which focused on contemporary photography as a theoretical weapon able to dismantle modernist categories and to short-circuit the logic of modern museums, centred on media separateness. In Italy photography existed as a blind spot in museum activity and major museum collections, but circulated outside the institutions which were still confined to a pre-modernist condition.

The post-modernist notion, as it was postulated by art critic Douglas Crimp in the early eighties, articulated a theory which hinged precisely on photography. Reconsidering the two fundamental texts by Walter Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) and “A Brief History of Photography” (1931), Crimp focused on Benjamin’s discussion on the advent of photography among the visual arts and especially on its overthrowing of both art and art institutions.

In Benjamin’s words: “It is a fetishistic, fundamentally anti-technical notion of art with which theorist of photography have tussled for almost a century, without, of course, achieving the slightest result. For they sought nothing beyond acquiring credentials for the photographer from the judgement-seat which he had already overturned”¹.

As many of us have learned from these much invoked texts, it is the very appearance of the photographic print, the question of its reproducibility which so upsets and threatens the logic of museums and art institutions, including university art courses and art history courses, which control the discourse on art with their analyses and their research on stylistic conventions, and aim at the canonisation of artists.

It is the threat photography poses to art institutions which interests Crimp, for he, in a much quoted essay entitled “The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism”², published in 1980, posits a post-art phase which is brought forth and accelerated by contemporary photographic production.

To Crimp, the investigation on such a shift in the understanding of the work of art began to take shape in the late sixties and early seventies, especially in the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, when these two artist began to silk-screen photographic images onto their canvases. Thus the contamination of Painting through photographic reproductions, the occupation by mere copies of the very space of high art, the elimination of the mark of the artist which had been understood as the cipher of his genius, altogether signalled a rupture with modernist art and implied a radical cultural shift.

According to Crimp such a passage into a post-art phase in contemporary artistic production is accompanied by a crisis in the traditional activity of the (modern) museum. Since the seventies, the museum has progressively suspended its commitment towards contemporary art in order to re-propose exhibitions of masterpiece paintings

of the heroic years of high Modernism, or to celebrate photography-as-art exemplified in exhibitions of the masters of photography (Ansel Adams, Alfred Stieglitz or Edward Weston.)

It is in the light of Crimp's argument that we can also understand the inauguration of the big blockbuster exhibition era of the early eighties, with the exhilarating view of thousands of visitors lining up at museum ticket counters eager to consume the sight of hundreds of pictures hanging on the museum walls. Such an explosion of the museum-exhibition spectacle signalled by an increase in popular consent, indicates in fact a deep crisis in the traditional museum activity and its attempt to re-establish a consistently contested leading role in the promotion of artistic production.

Crimp understands this post-high art and post-museum era as that artistic phase marked by an explosion in photographic production.

Thus Postmodernist art hinges almost exclusively on photography and posits the representation of "déjà-vu" images which question the "aura" of the work of art and produce works which are never original but always copies, "always-already seen"⁵ images.

The early Film-Still photographs by Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine's copies of photographs by modernist photographers and Richard Prince's fashion-shot reproductions announced this new mode in photographic production. They suggest a sort of "invisibility" of subject-matter by submitting the viewer with already seen/already known images, and thus they declare the demise of the category of original subject-matter as well as the liquidation of the notion of the unique piece and the masterpiece print, to exclusively propose the aesthetics of reproductions.

Interestingly, Douglas Crimp's theoretical position on Postmodernity, based on the crucial role assumed by photography in contemporary visual arts, also seemed to indicate a strategy to infiltrate the (modern) museum. For although in an earlier essay entitled "Pictures" (1979) he stated that postmodern art and photography was to be researched exclusively in alternative spaces, in his later texts Crimp seemed to revise his position to posit a strategy of intervention on art institutions by admitting postmodern photography into the very space of the museum. To Crimp: "The photographic activity of postmodernism operates, as we might expect, in complicity with these modes of photography-as-art, but it does so only in order to subvert and exceed them"⁴.

What seems to be implicit in this argument is that postmodern photography makes reference and intervenes precisely on modernist modes of production to subvert its categories. Thus rather than being confined to alternative spaces, postmodern photography had to function within an art institutional framework.

By the mid eighties Cindy Sherman's early photographs had been admitted into the museum space; they had been widely exhibited in museums throughout Europe and finally were canonised by being included in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent Photography Collection and were even exhibited at the "Edward Steichen Photography Centre" on the Museum's second floor. A few years later Barbara Kruger's images were also included in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of painting and sculpture.

Such museum acquisitions seemed to score a partial victory for postmodern art (even though an argument can be made that since the eighties, more women artists than ever before in the history of art had been admitted to museums). This museum accessioning of works by what can be defined as the first generation of postmodernist artists can also be discussed in terms of a new strategy to transform the institutionalised control of contemporary arts. For as Crimp seemed to imply, postmodernist photography could also be best understood as a project to contrast the institutional control on contemporary arts. Such a project involves the institutional framework, but does not actually suggest an infiltration, as if the postmodern artists had introduced a Trojan horse to stir up a destructive battle within the museum - such a position would result in the negation of their works and the devastation of the battle ground itself.

Rather than infiltrating their work into the museum, postmodern artists seem to work according to what can be described as a “homeopathic” artistic practice. Frederic Jameson first raised such homeopathic strategy to transform what he defined “the logic of the image-world of late capitalism.” To Jameson: “...at least for the moment, the strategy which imposes itself can best be characterised as “homeopathic”: ever greater doses of poison – to choose and affirm the logic of the simulacrum to the point at which the very nature of that logic is itself dialectically transformed. Such a strategy – even conceived provisionally – has little of the vigorous self-confidence and affirmation of older political and even proto-political aesthetics which aimed at opening and developing some more radically new and distinct revolutionary cultural space within the fallen space of capitalism. Yet, as modest and as frustrating as it may sometimes seem, a homeopathic cultural politic seems to be all we can currently think or imagine”⁵.

Only a few echoes of the vociferous debate over postmodern photography and on post-art artistic production which had engaged art critics all over United States and Europe, actually reached Italy.

Fully immersed in the celebration of the birth of Italian neo-expressionist painting or “transavanguardia” or busying themselves in the canonisation of Italian art of the sixties and seventies, Italian art critics seemed oblivious to the investigation of an art or a photography after post-high art.

Thus throughout the eighties Italian art critics ignored the challenge to the modes of institutionalised control over artistic production which postmodern photography posed. Thus during the eighties in Italy the investigation on photographic practices of postmodernism was scant.

Among the few events that deserve attention, two exhibitions devoted entirely to photography stand out and deserve analysis.

The first is the exhibition entitled “Presi & Incantamento. La nuova fotografia internazionale (Taken by Enchantment. New International Photography)”, held at the Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, Milan in 1988, co-curated by Gregorio Magnani, Daniela Salvioni and Giorgio Verzotti.

The exhibition included photographic works by artists such as Gerhard Richter, Giulio Paolini, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Joseph Kosuth, Gilbert & George, Andy Warhol together with photographs by what was referred to as the “first generation of post-modern artists” such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Louise Lawler. It also presented works by younger artists such as Jeff Wall, Clegg and Guttmann, Karen Knorr, Olivier Richon, Ken Lum, Marie-Jo Fontain and Alfredo Jaar, among others. Photographs by Bertrand Lavier, John Baldessari, Imi Knoebel as well as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Thomas Struth and Günther Förg were also included.

The exhibition curators did not discuss such a comprehensive overview of contemporary photographic production as a breach or an epistemological suture with modernist logic, but rather they emphatically presented it and constructed it as the historical outgrowth of especially Italian and German Conceptual art of the late sixties and seventies. By the same token, the presentation of the photographic work by both established and lesser-known artists, rather than envisioning a post-high art phase in artistic production, appeared to simply affirm a political agenda which included issues that ranged from sexual difference to ideological criticism. Thus the issue of postmodernist photography seemed to amount to a committed and praise-worthy political project undertaken and revived by artists of different generations who have chosen photography as a more contemporary expression.

The question of Postmodernism was further invoked and questioned by Jean-François Cheurier and James Lingwood, co-curators of an exhibition entitled “Another Objectivity” held at the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea “Luigi Pecci”, Prato in 1989. This show exhibited works by mostly European artists such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, Günther Förg and Thomas Struth, Hannah Collins and Craigie Horsfield, Louis Garnell and Suzanne Lafont, Patrick Tosani as well as North American artists such as Robert Adams,

John Coplans and Jeff Wall.

In their text *Cheurier and Lingwood* traced a brief history of the use of photography in conceptual art of the sixties through works by artists such as the Bechers, Bruce Naumann, Douglas Huebler, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth among others. According to the curators, not only early works by artists such as Warhol and Rauschenberg played a key role in drawing attention to the photographic medium but also (and especially) works by European artists such as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Jochen Gerz, Jan Dibbets and Christian Boltanski, among others.

Thus the exhibition project involved re-claiming attention to a more European-oriented history of conceptual art and the construction of it as the foundation of contemporary photography.

To Cheurier and Lingwood, the notion of postmodernism as it was first elaborated by Douglas Crimp, had to do with the fabrication of yet another category which could account for an erosion of the traditional definition of photography as art.

To them : " ... The questioning of the nature of art itself within the contemporary period ... derived precisely from the intrusion of photography (of "industry", in Baudelaire's words) into the field of art."⁶

Thus in their view, postmodernism revives an old debate on the role that photography should occupy within contemporary art. It also points to the need to articulate a new critical attitude able to account for the exhaustion of old categories within photographic culture itself, namely photojournalism, fashion, advertising and architecture photography.

Thus rather than articulate a critical opposition with respect to fictitious categories which aim at maintaining separateness and closures within different visual arts media, Cheurier and Lingwood's project seems to reclaim the autonomy of (art) photography over other categories of photography itself, to restate and declare its prominence within contemporary arts.

As they put it: "The distinction current in the 1960s and 1970s between photographers, and artists who have chosen photography, is dissipating ... The work of demonstrating the possibilities of photography, and its limitations has essentially been done. They can inherit this 150 years of history".

Their notion of "Another Objectivity" which they elaborated, had to do with a revision and a re-evaluation of "Objective Photography" of the twenties, understood as the only correct representation of "experience and not perception" within contemporary photography.

Cheurier-Lingwood's "New Objectivity" also encompassed a revived interest in "straight photography" and thus rejects postmodernist photographic practice as "pastiche", the use of multiple images, collages, quotations and "déjà vu" photographs to exhibit works which are "entirely produced", each one "isolated in its frame." While omitting to investigate the possible strategies of intervention on institutionalised control of photographic works and practices, Cheurier and Lingwood seemed to reassert their own new aesthetics of photography over postmodernist strategy of intervention on museum politics. Thus they proposed their own concept of "objective" photography which had to do with a "dimension of experience ... to stand against the banalising and reductive effects produced by the cultural industry... these images give a new effectiveness (or violence) to the uncertainties of experience because they expose clearly its social, subconscious and technical constraints. They propose a model of actuality and produce a lucid beauty"⁸.

Each one of these two exhibitions reflected on the phenomenon of the increased photographic production in contemporary art and culture. While they certainly helped in drawing attention to the central role photography was playing in shaping the discourse of artistic production, especially "The New Objectivity" exhibition appeared problematic in its reclaiming a specificity to the tradition of photography within contemporary arts. For despite their invocation of new criteria to account for the massive use of photographs, Cheurier's and Lingwood's project seems exclusively interested in the

grounding of photography within the institutional space rather than positing it as a viable medium to image a post-art and post-museum era.

Fifteen years have gone by since Douglas Crimp's first elaboration of photography as postmodern art and the (modernist) logic of the museum is still very much at work; thus greater doses of homeopathic image therapy may be needed, more research work on contemporary photography and more photography exhibitions and photographic collections are necessary to contrast the institution's control and separation within contemporary arts.

Could it be that in Italy, a country where museums and institutions have miserably failed to take into account and document the challenge photography posed to the other visual arts, photography will be the medium which will finally lead us into a post-museum phase?

Notes:

1. Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, *Screen*, n.1, (Spring 1972), p. 15.
2. Douglas Crimp, *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism*, *October*, n.15, (Spring 1980), pp. 91-101.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.
5. Frederic Jameson, *Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism* in *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, Brian Wallis ed., (N.Y./Cambridge/London: The Museum of Contemporary Art, MIT Press, 1986), p. 45.
6. Jean Francois Cheurier and James Lingwood, eds., *Another Objectivity*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris and Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, 1989, p. 25.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
8. *Ibid.*, 37.