

The
P H O T O
REVIEW

N E W S L E T T E R

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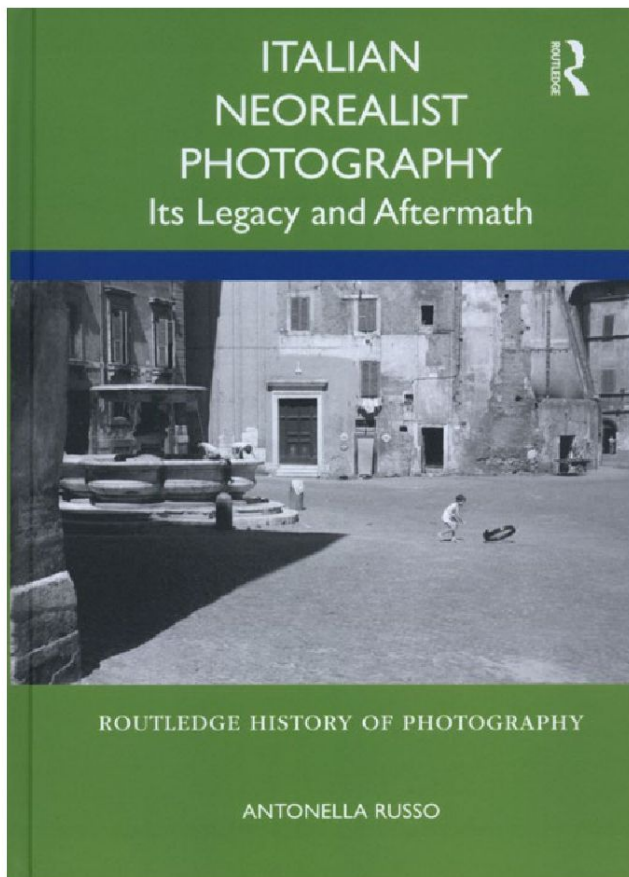
Self portrait
as
UNICORN

Duane Michals
Self-portrait as Unicorn
At DC Moore Gallery, New York City

BOOKS

Italian Neorealist Photography: Its Legacy and Aftermath by Antonella Russo. Routledge History of Photography series. London & New York, Routledge, 2022. ISBN 978-1-350-16225-9 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-003-10357-8 (ebk). \$115.00 hb.

As suggested by the second half of its title, this detailed book goes well beyond Italian Neorealist Photography, a style that reached its apogee in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Russo traces Neorealism's roots to the period between the world wars when Neorealism offered photographs of poverty as an alternative to Fascist propaganda that misrepresented the true state of the country. She relates that it was during World War II that a significant body of Neorealist still photography first emerged. A key example of postwar Italian Neorealist still photography, she explains, were the 1946 photo-plays by Luigi Crocenzì published in the magazine *Il Politecnico*, edited by Elio Vittorini. Neorealism became more widely disseminated through films such as *Ladri di biciclette* (1948, known in the United States as *Bicycle Thieves* or *The Bicycle Thief*), directed by Vittorio de Sica and adapted for the screen by Cesare Zavattini. As contrasted to most Hollywood movies of the time focusing on historical drama, love stories, and mysteries, Neorealism, in both films and still photography that was published primarily in leftist magazines, was more documentary in nature and frequent subjects were the lumpenproletariat in Southern Italy, including Sicily, where rural traditions and economic conditions stood in marked contrast to northern and central Italian cities.



Photographers of the Neorealist style were aware of, and influenced by, the documentary photography depicting rural poverty produced in the United States by the Farm Security Administration by photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, and books such as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). Italian Neorealist still photography was influenced by motion pictures in the sequencing of photos in publications and by the use of captions in the earlier American photo books. But as made clear by Russo, Neorealism's ethical component was its defining feature and she argues that later excellent photographs of Italian life by Italians and widely influential visitors such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, even if they depicted similar subject matter, was not true Neorealism.

Although there were some Neorealist photography books published in Italy in the 1940s, notably Vittorini's *Americana* (1942), Russo explores in depth *Un Paese* (1955, first published in English by Aperture in 1997 as *Un Paese: Portrait of an Italian Village*), with respectful portraits of villagers and landscape by Paul Strand taken in 1953 and text by screenwriter Zavattini, whose captions are presented in the first person like those in *You Have Seen Their Faces*. In *Un Paese*, Strand, the legendary American photographer who had relocated to France in 1950 in response to McCarthyism, depicted Zavattini's home village Luzzara in northern Italy south of Verona. Strand had already begun his series of books on different locales, including *Time in New England* (1950) and *Le France de Profil* (1952). Russo uses Italian primary sources to shed light on how this volume came about and impacted Italian photography. Despite its commercial failure in Italy, *Un Paese* set a standard for Italian books combining text and images and as a consequence of its ethical component, Russo concludes, it remains "the only true example of [a] photo-book published in Italy." Writes Russo, "Strand's photo-book proposed a new paradigm for Italian photography, a genre of ethical portraiture through which faces were historicized by merging with the landscape." Note that Russo distinguishes "photo-books" in which captions are an integral part of the creative product, with "photography books," essentially picture books without captions other than identifications.

To make it clear that Neorealist was not the only photography being made in Italy during this era, Russo examines Italian fine art photography, for example, the La Bussola group led by Giuseppe Cavalli, which was influenced by Benedetto Croce's dictum, "the subject has no importance in art" and the German Otto Steinert's two *Subjektive Fotografie* exhibitions (1951 and 1954–1955), in which Italian photographers such as Fulvio Roiter participated. In one of her more thorough examinations of Post-Neorealist Photography, she focuses on Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* exhibition, which traveled to Italy in 1959 as *La Famiglia Dell'Uomo*, and for which an Italian edition of the catalog was published. Here Russo concentrates on the reception and critique of the exhibition in Italy that to some extent parallels the response elsewhere, as recounted in such works as *The Family of Man 1955–2001. Humanism and Postmodernism: A Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen* (2004) and *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (1995), which are not cited by Russo.

This review only touches on some of the topics and significant figures covered by Russo, whose impressive research, documented in 429 footnotes, 87 illustrations, and lengthy bibliography, is published in this impressive book.

—Gary D. Saretzky