

Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964-1977,
Edited by Matthew S. Witkovsky Chicago: The Art Institute of
Chicago, 2011, 264 pp.

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Number 94, Spring–Summer 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/69367ac>

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Publisher(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1711-7682 (print)

1923-8932 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Tayler, F. (2013). Review of [*Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964-1977*, Edited by Matthew S. Witkovsky Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011, 264 pp.] *Ciel variable*, (94), 93–93.

Light Years Conceptual Art and the Photograph 1964-1977

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The title phrase of this catalogue, *Light Years*, is a pun on an oft-misused term. Although widely thought to refer to a measurement of time, it is actually an astronomic unit measuring the distance travelled by light over one year. What meanings can this term have when applied to a historical survey exhibition of photographic practices around 1970? Aside from the obvious reading (the period 1964–77 as a span of time captured by the camera’s mechanical register of light), one could propose an analogy between the space–time equation of the light-year unit and the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority proposed by Roland Barthes in his 1964 essay *Rhetoric of the Image*. As a cultural signifier, the photograph exists both as an object in the present and as a seemingly faithful representation of the past – the viewer’s interpretation is dependent upon the correspondences between the two.

Matthew S. Witkovsky (curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago) provides the main essay in the catalogue. “The Unfixed Photograph” makes two kinds of argument for the conceptual photograph as analogue. In the first, analog photography is a technology that has outlived its usefulness as a mass medium, only to realize its full potential in a separate sphere of fine art. This reading proposes conceptual photography as the catalyst for a present-day post-medium condition in artistic practices. The second line of argument explores the conceptual photograph as a mode of analogic comparison. This reading traces the rise of photographic theory employing semiotics – specifically, Barthes’s theory of the photograph as a “message without a code” – as a parallel development to artists’ interest in the camera as generator of generic images.

Witkovsky positions conceptual artists in the vanguard of sculpture and painting. For example, it is the material and mechanical basis of photography as a mass medium that allows Ed Ruscha to propose the

book form, such as his *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1965), as analogous to the mass and seriality of minimalist sculpture. Later photo canvases, such as Giulio Paolini’s *Anna-logia* (1966), offered photographs as scalar substitutes for painting. These approaches, Witkovsky explains, won market and museum recognition for photography as vanguard art over its documentary functions. Simultaneously, artists tested the factual properties of photographs. Works such as Jan Dibbets’s *Perspective Correction* (1967–69) questioned the camera’s mediating role in the recording of the world, its natural phenomena, and human artefacts.

Witkovsky’s premise sets up a two-pronged inquiry that continues through the essays in the catalogue. This framework is at times complementary and revealing as it appears to consider photography a mode of working in the age of mechanical reproduction, rather than a medium of expression limited by form. Witkovsky explains that conceptual artists used photography as an expandable medium, constituted by a “variability of forms” such as books, canvases, slides, and magazine pieces, prior to the exhibition of conventional prints. However, the focus on the static image over other camera-produced recordings such as video leaves one wondering whether the catalogue truly evades the curatorial approach of a traditional medium-specific historical survey. How does this approach influence our reading of a movement that at times questioned museological acts of classification and historicization?

For example, Witkovsky’s focus on the “material pressures put on photography,” such as scale and size, explicitly dismisses features of “dematerialization” articulated at the time by critics such as Lucy Lippard. Although Witkovsky’s approach opens up interesting avenues of exploration regarding the properties of static camera images, it closes the possibility of reading these works in terms of mobility – as a means to move

beyond the autonomous art object into other contemporaneous camera-made imaging such as video, or beyond the periphery of an art world centred in the United States and Western Europe. The exhibition catalogue for *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s* (Queens Museum of Art, 1999) offers a useful comparison, as it takes “dematerialization” as its starting point. The essays in this catalogue more easily demonstrate why the socio-political context of the Cold War, “Third World” decolonization, and the 1960s protest cycle rendered suspect the mediating effect of the camera and documentation in general.

Curators and art historians, most of them with academic credentials, have contributed essays to *Light Years*. Mark Godfrey discusses artists who travelled self-reflexively with their cameras, such as Eleanor Antin and Alighiero Boetti, through a material culture analysis of mass tourism and the postcard form. Both Godfrey and Joshua Shannon devote much ink to Douglas Heubler – specifically his *Variable, Duration, and Location* pieces – which use the camera as an instrument of recording to efface authorial intention. Robin Kelsey explores the theme of chance in the work of John Baldessari through the predictable influence of Marcel Duchamp and an unexpected comparison with the work of Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Weston. Giuliano Sergio considers practices of Arte Povera artists, such as Giulio Paolini, in light of photography’s relationship with Italian national patrimony. The final essay, Anne Rorimer’s consideration of the human figure, photography, and conceptual art, assembles most of the women artists mentioned in the catalogue, such as Martha Wilson, Laurie Anderson, and Adrian Piper. Rorimer presents a worthwhile overview of emerging feminist identity politics; however, the containment of these practices in one essay is analogous to Valie Export’s featured work, *Intersection (Verkreuzung)* (1972), in which the artist conforms her body to a cleft in the

ground. Between the essays are generous full-page colour reproductions of works in the exhibition, including details, complemented by extended captions.

Most curious is the catalogue’s inclusion of a previously unpublished 1973 “essay” by the Los Angeles-based artist Allen Ruppersberg. Titled “Rona Barrett’s Hollywood,” the essay is composed of twenty-one strips of photo-booth images of the artist as he peers over the top edge of double-page spreads from the iconic celebrity gossip magazine. Ruppersberg’s contribution is a playful foregrounding of the function of the catalogue in its inscription of the artist in art-historical discourse. You had “made it” in Hollywood if Rona Barrett wrote about you, just as artists gain legendary status through the inclusion of their work in historical survey exhibitions. Many of the works in the *Light Years* exhibition were rephotographed for their reproduction in the catalogue. Ruppersberg’s “essay” reminds us that in this act of documentation, the *Light Years* catalogue engages the reader in an experience of the spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority of the photographic image.

Felicity Tayler’s research, writing and artistic practice explores visual art as a means of information exchange and the function of artist-initiated publishing as a communications circuit. Recent projects include an exhibition for the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives and Artexte. www.attthetime.ca

