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# PHOTOGRAPHIE CONTEMPORAINE ET ANTHROPOCÈNE

Photographie contemporaine et anthropocène

by Danièle Méaux

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## Reviewed by:

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Danièle Méaux, whose name is familiar to readers of *Leonardo Reviews*, is one of the leading French photography scholars, with an impressive list of works on mainly photography and space (she also edits the trend-setting open access journal *Focales* [1]). Her new book on the relationships between photography as a politically driven cultural practice and the Anthropocene as our new human and material environment is the logical continuation of her concern with space and place. In this work, the notion of place is opened to a broader environmental context, while the already strong focus on the political commitment of the photographer's creation is more directly addressing the no less political position of the spectator or reader in this new strand of photography.

*Photographie contemporaine et anthropocène* is not limited to a highly readable overview of the most important tendencies and highlights of environmental productions within contemporary photography ("contemporary" in the French context hints at the failure of the traditional formalist framework of historical Modernism; it should not be taken as a synonym of post-modernism, which French scholars often tend to reject as frivolous and depoliticized). The book also discusses a certain number of general questions. It thus asks, for instance, why photography occupies such a strategic position in the larger ecocritical debate. The answer given by Méaux does not only emphasize medium specific aspects of photography (such as its indexical properties), it also insists on its institutional and social embedding, which is characterized by what is called in French "artification," on the one hand, and intermediality, on the other hand.

"Artification", that is the integration of a non-artistic medium in the institutional

artistic realm, is a relatively recent phenomenon in France (it roughly goes back to the early 1980s), which explains the profound mutability of this medium: the position of photography is less rigid than that of other artforms and for this reason the medium is capable of permanently redefining itself in relation to changing contexts and conditions. This mutability involves a persistent reflection on what photography is, but also on what it can do. Medium specificity is far from being the final horizon of photography as art today, but since the status of the medium is still relatively open, it continues to be on the radar. This formal and technical concern helps avoid any form of blatant political instrumentalization even in the case of photographers with a direct political agenda. Intermediality, that is the possibility of combining photography with other media, either in one single productions, such as a book or in a sequence of linked performances (a set of photographs moving from a web site to a museum installation, for example), is a feature that reinforces the social and political impact of photography, which can progressively build new and different forms of interaction with various types of audiences. One easily understands that in an ecocritical perspective, artifice and intermediality are vital characteristics as well as crucial advantages of a medium that aims at exploring the permanently changing relationships between art and environment.

Yet what does the author mean by these relationships? Méaux explains from the first page that her book prioritizes a very particular type of photography, namely the type that aims at questioning our conventional ways of thinking of the Anthropocene. Photography, in this regard, is seen as an artistic medium with a strong cognitive as well as political dimension, for it forces the audience to rethink the mutual dependence of nature and culture (to put it very simply), to ask new questions on the forms and impact of the photographic medium itself, and eventually to make room for these issues in the larger social debate. The two major sources of inspiration of this critical take on photography and the Anthropocene are for Méaux, first John Dewey and his book *Art as Experience* (1932), a work that dismantles the dichotomy between life and art, and second Jacques Rancière, whose ideas on the distribution of the sensible have given a new political meaning to formal experimentalism as a way of making room for underprivileged or despised experiences by equally unacknowledged or misrepresented social groups and individuals. In Méaux's book, the photographic projects that depart from ecological concerns help reject false or fossilized ideas on the nature/culture divide, to start with the very idea of that divide itself of course, while at the same time feeding the social debate, which is an artistic as well as political debate. Structurally speaking, the divide between art and politics is quite parallel to that between nature and culture.

The author is too modest when repeatedly stressing the fact that her work does not cover the whole field of photography and the Anthropocene. It is true that not all important names are there and that the scope of the book has not to ambition to offer an encyclopedic survey. Yet the wealth of material is impressive. In spite of being explicitly selective, Méaux succeeds in bringing together a very wide range of authors and projects (there are roughly speaking more or less thirty of them that are being discussed, often with important references to historical models and examples, such as in the case of the documentary and reportage format). In addition, there is also the excellent organization of the whole work, which strikes the right balance between two types of analysis, first that of the various objects, practices, and contexts appearing in the pictures themselves (ecological catastrophes, animal life, the commons, planet earth, or "uncivilized" nature), and second that of the various protocols used by the artists (different types of cameras, shooting techniques, reflection on variations of scale, collaboration between text and image, exploration of new curation and

publication formats). Besides, and this is a powerful tool to unify the whole book, Méaux succeeds in blurring the boundaries between close reading and theoretical discussion, which gives this publication a unique flow.

Finally, *Photographie contemporaine et anthropocène* is a wonderfully and smartly illustrated publication, an aspect that, together with the affordable prize, powerfully increases the interest of this work for classroom use. It is also a pleasure to notice that so many artists authorized the illustrative reuse of their work free of charge –not a detail in current academic publication.

## Notes

[1] *Focales*. [openedition.org](https://openedition.org).

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