
Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964-1977 contributes an innovative discussion on the role of photography in the evolution of conceptual art, primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, and accompanies the exhibition of the same title held at the Art Institute of Chicago from December 2011 to March 2012. While recent surveys on conceptual art such as Christoph Cherix’s 2009 landmark exhibition and accompanying catalog In and out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960-1976 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York have contributed to the relatively sparse retrospective literature on this essential movement, the Light Years exhibition offers the unique consideration of photography’s primacy as a visual medium in establishing the legacy of art as information.

This attractive oversized volume is 264 pages long and features essays by Mark Godfrey, Robin Kelsey, Anne Rorimer, Guiliano Sergio, Joshua Shannon, Matthew S. Witkovsky, and artist Allen Ruppersberg. The catalog is lushly illustrated with over 120 faithful color reproductions in addition to essay figures, operating as a catalogue raisonné of sorts for conceptual art works of the time period. The selected bibliography is divided into artist writings and interviews, writings on conceptual art and photography, and writings on individual artists, pointing to a comprehensive, wide array of key texts in the field.

Witkovsky’s essay “The Unfixed Photograph” provides the theoretical basis for the exhibition, referencing key historical texts by Rosalind Krauss and Roland Barthes. Concise chapters within the essay chart the evolution of photography’s use in modern and contemporary art, grappling with issues such as factual representation and the medium’s contentious relationship with the fine arts, citing milestones from Dada and Surrealism in the 1930s, to innovations by Ed Ruscha and Bruce Nauman in the 1960s.

In her essay “Reconfiguring Representation: Mechanical Reproduction and the Human Figure in Conceptual Art,” Anne Rorimer takes a different approach to exploring photography’s role in conceptual art by identifying five thematic or formal tendencies conceptual artists used in their practices with respect to the photograph: the camera and the canvas; the body as sculpture and surface; performed actions and narratives; multiple and double images; and the self and society.

Guiliano Sergio credits Arte Povera artists like Piero Manzoni with laying the groundwork for later conceptual artists’ engagement with the photograph in his essay, while Robin Kelsey gives an unexpected reading of the photographic work of California conceptualist John Baldessari in considering his inextricable relationship to the greater field of fine art photography.

This is an essential title for any library collecting contemporary art exhibition catalogs.

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