Abigail Solomon-Godeau: Photography after Photography. Gender, Genre, History

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by Wendy Vogel

In her introduction to critic and art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s book of essays Photography after Photography. Gender, Genre, History, Sarah Parsons champions Solomon-Godeau as a feminist holdout. Since the 1980s, Solomon-Godeau has plumbed notions of gender and sexual difference in photography, even after alternative methodological eclipses psychoanalysis in academic discourse. Yet Parsons adds a caveat: “As it seems to fade from academic favor, feminism is increasingly relevant, if by no means univocal as a form of broad cultural analysis.” To this point, Parsons brings up scrutinized public figures like pop star Beyoncé and media critic Anita Sarkeesian (subject to death and rape threats due to her critiques of sexist video tropes) as symptomatic. “Most public invocations of feminism have become highly visible because of the anxieties, even virtiol, that feminism still engenders”, Parsons writes.

Solomon-Godeau does not analyze pop culture, yet her criticism takes on this quandary: today, even in art history, feminism is often invoked only to be dismissed as partisan ideology. This meditation on feminist inquiry is the true subject of the book’s twelve collected essays. Despite its title, the volume does not narrow its focus to the formal questions of “post-photography”—in other words, the practices of digital image-making or Internet culture. Rather, these texts were written after Solomon-Godeau’s essay collection Photographs at the Dock, released in 1991 at the height of the fine-art photography market. During the period covered in this book (1995 to 2014), photography was transformed by digital technology, and photo criticism moved from medium specificity to universal discussions of image culture. But Solomon-Godeau’s writing, as always, integrates an analysis of technologies alongside considerations of how images work on us psychologically.

Photography after Photography is organized chronologically, without subsections. Nevertheless, three neat arcs emerge. The first four essays, penned mostly for museum catalogues, deal with issues of positionality—the insider/outsider binary in art photography, the desiring and colonizing gaze of photographers like Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden or Gernsheim. Postmodern stalwarts beset with the travelling 1955 blockbuster exhibition “The Family of Man”, and the infamous torture photographs taken by U.S. military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War. The second section addresses questions of photographic genre, containing two essays devoted to individual practices (Harry Callahan’s street photography and Susan Meiselas’s multimedia documentary project “Carnival Strippers” [1973–75]), and also two essays ruminating on the politicization of landscape photography and documentary. The final—and strongest—group of essays concerns how notions of “genius” are constructed around the oeuvres of Vivian Maier, Robert Mapplethorpe, Francesca Woodman, and Cindy Sherman.

Solomon-Godeau shines when applying deconstructive feminist analysis to broader questions of representation in visual culture, and the market forces that collude to elevate an artist’s reputation. As early as the 2013 essay “Inventing Vivian Maier”, she argues that the so-called street photographer’s reputation was essentially an entrepreneurial construction. Utilizing the tools of new media and an art market hungry to capitalize on artistic “outsiders”, the owners of her works expanded her oeuvre without regard to traditional scholarship. In the sharply titled “Robert Mapplethorpe: White-washed and Polished”, Solomon-Godeau tackles the elisions in Mapplethorpe’s Paris retrospective in 2014, at the Musée Rodin and the Grand Palais. In the effort to “burnish, sanitize and heroize” Mapplethorpe, the museums left out many of the explicit works that contributed to his art-historical importance, such as the sadomasochistic work and portraits of drag queens. Instead, they opted for his “blandest” pictures, showing his inert photographs of sculptures at the Grand Palais, and many of his most “tasteful” images of nudes—several of which depicted black men—at the Musée Rodin. Solomon-Godeau also argues that Mapplethorpe’s work shifted from analyses of racial fetichism (in the mid-1980s) to an appreciative revaluation of his depictions of sexuality, precisely because of the context in which it was produced: at the height of the AIDS crisis and culture wars. To deny viewers this historical framework does a disservice to the work and its audience.

Another essay is more melancholic. In “Caught Looking”, her article about Susan Meiselas’s “Carnival Strippers” series, she laments how seventeen-era debates about voyeurism have been replaced by “the infinite capacity of contemporary culture to neutralize or transform even the imagery of abduction into easily consumable spectacle”. The essay “Body Double”, which is devoted to the scholarly reception of Francesca Woodman’s work over thirty years, argues that feminist approaches to Woodman must not be jettisoned as she becomes part of the great canon. Not only does an analysis focus on sexual difference “rescue” Woodman’s work “from the trivialities of sentimentalism and mythology”, but it also situates it in the political discourse of the time of its production (1973–81). In “Coming of Age”, Solomon-Godeau likens Cindy Sherman’s work to a “neutering of feminism itself—a term, as she points out, that has a negative connotation when applied to women. She likens Sherman’s images in which she styles herself as an abject, aging societality to “victim blaming”, forging an analysis of the politics of celebrity with the “forgetting” of feminism in art history. Despite its title, the volume does not narrow its focus to the formal questions of “post-photography”—in other words, the practices of digital image-making or Internet culture. Rather, these texts were written after Solomon-Godeau’s essays, penned mostly for museum catalogues, dealt with issues of positionality—the insider/outsider binary in art photography, the desiring and colonizing gaze of photographers like Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden or Gernsheim. Postmodern stalwarts beset with the travelling 1955 blockbuster exhibition “The Family of Man”, and the infamous torture photographs taken by U.S. military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison during the Iraq War. The second section addresses questions of photographic genre, containing two essays devoted to individual practices (Harry Callahan’s street photography and Susan Meiselas’s multimedia documentary project “Carnival Strippers” [1973–75]), and also two essays ruminating on the politicization of landscape photography and documentary. The final—and strongest—group of essays concerns how notions of “genius” are constructed around the oeuvres of Vivian Maier, Robert Mapplethorpe, Francesca Woodman, and Cindy Sherman.

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