
H-France Review Vol. 23 (January 2023), No. 16

Sandrine Ferret, *La photographie document en action: Expériences et histoires*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2021. 214 pp. Introduction, website references, bibliography and index. €24.00 (pb). ISBN 9782753582743.

Review by Jennifer Stob, Texas State University.

The origins of photography are fragmentary by definition: this much has long been acknowledged in the various histories of photography as art, science, and ritual. The technologies that together enable photographic processes are piecemeal, paradoxical, and palimpsestuous. In recent years, many scholars have emphasized that the relationships formed in the cultural transmission of photography are piecemeal, paradoxical, and palimpsestuous, too. The experience of a photograph is always multiple, involving a negotiation between the maker's conceptual intent and a viewer's recognition. When and however exhibited, a photograph is marked once again by partial or overlapping meanings.

Sandrine Ferret's *La photographie document en action: expériences et histoires* examines documentary photography over three historical periods, highlighting the multiplicities at work within the creation and reception of photographs. She situates the beginning of documentary photography in 1930s America, where photographers like Lewis Hine presented the photograph as a social document in the hopes of spurring progressive reform. Soon thereafter in Europe, the Surrealists proved an eager audience for photography as social document. Ferret argues that their emphasis on the "marvelous" privileged the strategic symbolism of the real over its pictorial urgency.^[1] Surrealist appropriation may have been responsible for documentary photography's diminished social impact, but it also gave rise to a new photographic discourse in which documentary photography played a central role, based on the "decisive moment."^[2] This was the name that Henri Cartier-Bresson gave to the idea of an elusive, condensed authenticity within the real that a photographer could capture with a combination of compositional rigor and luck.

This "decisive moment" mode of making and perceiving documentary photography remained dominant for several decades. Ferret writes that it facilitated the art world's institutional embrace of photography as an artistic medium, even as the growing popularity of the "decisive moment" made documentary photography susceptible to accusations of kitsch. By the 1970s, artists like Raymond Depardon, Jean-Marc Bustamante, and the duo Bernd and Hilla Becher were troubling and displacing the "decisive moment" mode of documentary photography in their artistic practices.

Ed Ruscha and Lewis Baltz also questioned documentary photography's claims of aestheticism and objectivity with formalist strategies like seriality, frontality and the uniformity of subject matter. Ferret cites Allan Sekula, Alfredo Jaar, Bruno Serralongue and Sophie Ristelhueber as four examples of artists whose work destabilizes the supposed power of documentary photography. Their work exposes events that photographs hide or omit, exhausts photographic reproducibility, surrounds photographs with text and archival materials, or magnifies the subject's gaps, margins and aftermath instead of focusing on the subject alone.

In the third and final section of *La photographie document en action: expériences et histoires*, Ferret claims that many twenty-first century artists are reexamining and reworking documentary photography's historic tensions in compelling ways. They weave photographic narratives in image as well as language, creating space in an expanded mode of documentary photography for clearly determined moments as well as gradual, inexact passages of time. Of these numerous photographers who are engaged with the phenomena of collective memory and bearing witness, she focuses on Jean-Louis Schoellkopf, Gilles Saussier, Florence Lazar, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige and Laurence Leblanc.

Ferret makes the novel and bold choice to anchor her entire historical narrative of documentary photography in the concept of the "image act," proposed and elaborated by German art historian Horst Bredekamp in a series of lectures and publications.^[3] Bredekamp takes the stance that images must be credited with an inalienable power to "not simply illustrate, but actively *bring forth*, that which they show."^[4] His account seems to locate the ontology of all images in an ancient and even prehistoric cultural use value. He and a number of other scholars in the still somewhat marginal discipline of *Bildwissenschaft*, or "image science," believe that images from all eras and of all conceivable forms and media should be studied in dynamic juxtaposition to one another. Image scientists argue that this methodology frees representations from the linguistic framework of analysis in which they have been imprisoned and best respects an image's ability to act in and upon social life.

Ferret's book starts with Bredekamp's claim that an image activates itself in the process of looking. Each time an image is perceived, it passes from a latent state to an active one over and over again, powerfully influencing the spectator's sensations, thoughts and actions. Ferret then extends this claim: in the photographic context, she explains, an image is always acting doubly, once at its inception when the photographer frames and captures that which is in front of the camera lens, and once at the photograph's reception.

In documentary photography, this double image act is politically engaged, although Ferret believes the nature of this engagement is often misunderstood. We must judge documentary photography not on its power or lack thereof to inform us of a political truth, but rather on its power to make a political concept or situation available for spectatorial reflection. Accordingly, her book chapters are divided by positions that artist-photographers have assumed vis-à-vis this "image act" that Ferret believes are at work in documentary photography. They are entitled "*Faire l'acte d'image*," "*Défaire l'acte d'image*" and "*Refaire l'acte d'image*," or "Making the Image Act," "Unmaking the Image Act," and "Remaking the Image Act." This is an intellectually exciting move, especially for scholarship on the subject of the "decisive moment" in photographic history, which has not seen many creative re-framings such as this.

The attempt in *La photographie document en action: Expériences et histoires* to marry the unorthodoxy of *Bildwissenschaft* with the history of documentary photography raises many questions. Of these, perhaps the most pressing are: what has Bredekamp himself said on the subject of the image act within documentary photography? How might that affect Ferret's argument? Is what she is calling "the photographic act" (p. 23) identical to Bredekamp's image act? After such an intriguing theoretical gambit in the book's opening chapter, readers may find that they crave more context for Bredekamp's original thesis.

Without this context and a more detailed extension of it to specific artworks, it is hard to fully grasp how a photograph might "actively bring forth," as Bredekamp says, its subject matter in a given situation.[5] For example, readers are left to take the author at her word that the documentary photography discussed in the final chapter reliably enacts the affective operations each artist intends. Many readers may require additional convincing that such operations are truly independent from and equally significant to the operation of socioeconomic or psychological influences on a viewer engaging with a photographic artwork.

One way to appreciate this introduction of the concept of an image act to documentary photography would be to compare and contrast it with opposing theories. Several historians of photography have focused their research not on the image's power to act, but rather on the immutable ways that images interface with the empowerment or disempowerment of racialized or precarious communities. Although the scholarship of Ariella Azoulay and Tina Campt is not cited in *La photographie document en action: Expériences et histoires*, their work would enrich any consideration of artworks that try to dismantle or reconstitute the potency of documentary photography. Perhaps the inclusion of opposing photographic theory would in turn motivate a more inclusive purview of photographers—photographers who are Black, like Louis Draper or LaToya Ruby Frazier, and photographers whose cultural perspective is centered outside North America and Europe, like Edi Hirose or Hadi Uddin.

All in all, *La photographie document en action: Expériences et histoires* is an engaging and well-paced read, especially when Ferret is explicating and interpreting a photographic series. Her thoughtful analysis of conceptual strategy in the work of Raymond Depardon or Sophie Ristelhueber is concise and elegant. Photographers, art historians, and cultural historians alike will find in this book a welcome invitation to further ponder the agency of the indexical image.

NOTES

[1] Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 204.

[2] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952).

[3] Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, ed., trans., and adapted by Elizabeth Clegg (Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

[4] Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, xii.

[5] Bredekamp, *Image Acts*, xii.

Jennifer Stob
Texas State University
jstob@txstate.edu

Copyright © 2023 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172