

## Premise for Session 21

For Session 21, the tutorial committee has chosen a reader containing three classic essays on photography and the image, as a means of inspiring participants to work towards a single curatorial premise. The reader is not intended as an introduction to the history of photography, nor as a study of photographic exhibitions. The three essays relate both to art and the exhibition, on the one hand, and the politics of representation, on the other. They examine the use of images in exhibitions from different eras and ideologies.

### Content of the reader

“Road to Victory: A Procession of Photographs of the Nation at War”, from the MACBA catalogue, *Public photographic space propaganda exhibitions from pressa to the family of man 1928-1955*

Craig Owens, “Photography *en abyme*”, initially published in *October*, n°5.  
This issue of *October* is the first devoted to photography and sets the direction for the new postmodern position.

W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable”, in *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.  
This text marks the position from 1991 onwards: the transformations of warfare, the images of war, terror, cloning and onto “bio-pictures”.

### Markers

The photography-based exhibition raises many issues:

1. The heritage of exhibitions of photography in the twentieth century is tied to the development of curatorial narrative and exhibition making. The development of photography not only induced but also required different theories.

#### a) Seminal, modernist positions

Photography inspires a new understanding of subjectivity and objectivity: the “subjective” position of the artist or “creative eye” versus the “objective” position of the journalist or “technical eye”.

Photography joins the grand narratives in offering imagery for large-scale ideological exhibitions and inspiring new forms of display and design as a means of conveying its narratives in spatial form.

#### b) Seminal, postmodern positions

Grand narratives dissolve and photography as a form of modernist agency is reappraised in methods and a critique of representation: deploying strategies of appropriation and questioning the status of the author and the construction of the gaze.

A landmark postmodern exhibition, *Pictures*, is curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 at Artists Space, New York.

The appearance of gallery-scale solo exhibitions accords with the new independent curator organizing photographic exhibitions as an authorial work in its own right.

Photography exhibitions are now turned inside-out. This essentially takes the form of a curator's essay and a composition of images that look both at the photographic image's own construction and the ways it indexes the world.

In *Let Us Know Praise Famous Men*, published in 1941, James Agee, writes on the work of Walker Evans's photographs of sharecroppers: "Who are you who will study these photographs... and what will you do about it?" In the 1980s, the artist Sherrie Levine appropriates Walker Evans images, turning the status of the artist, technical mastery and the art commodity inside out.

### c) Positions after 1991 and the first Gulf War

War has always been a dominant subject in the discussion of photography's role within institutional curatorial projects. After the beginning of the Gulf War – and in particular the events surrounding Abu Ghraib – a new condition of photography arises. Although the photographic image remains dominant in discourses of technology and visual culture, it is henceforth as much a matter of "meaning" or "truth" being manufactured and its distribution controlled, i.e., the status of the photographic image in the leaking of illicit records and information regarding power, control and the mechanics of the system. Distinctions dissolve between the personal, political, war, home, landscape, battlefield, souvenir, trophy, documentation, but also at the level of the exhibition space itself, which is increasingly undifferentiated from spaces of public and private surveillance, on the one hand, and the immaterial image base of visual culture, on the other. The status of photography is redefined by what has recently been termed "bio-pictures": "a fusion of new techno-scientific images and the literalization of image-fears (especially religious) that have emerged in the epoch of the war on terror and the clone wars."

## 2. Modeling

Photography has an ambivalent status as it shifts between the intentions of the artist and the professional "photographer", between mechanical reproduction and unique signature work, between "reality" and "fiction", between scientific objectivity and "narrative" or "artistic license". This ambivalence offers interesting possibilities in an ongoing reflection on the curatorial/exhibition context.

During the twentieth century, ideological projects enlisted photography-based exhibitions in the form of "image bearing". At the same time, modernist discourse introduced the curatorial hand in collaboration with a well-known exhibition designer as a central component of exhibition display. The nature of this modeling draws on the curatorial text, the design of the exhibition, the handling of photographic image, and the various promotional materials.

## 3. Collection/Archive

For a number of reasons both intrinsic (the reproducibility of the medium) and extrinsic (the status of the photographic image in exhibitions and curatorial frameworks), photography encourages the collection of images as a specific form. The later variant of this is the photographic collection as a form of historical archive. The specific relation between questions of the collection and the archival nature of the photographic image and exhibitions of photography can be seen in the historical changes and the development of curatorial approaches throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

## 4. The Distribution of books, moving image, etc.

The image-based, mechanical reproductive character of the photographic image lends itself to developing exhibition and curatorial perspectives and their reiteration in book form – eventually beginning with or even being confined to book form alone. This begins with publications and journals, through to the new photography books that introduce an experimental “itinerant” narrative to the collections of individual photographs.

A seminal example of the modern photographic book is Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1957), which was initially refused by American publishers because of its unprecedented and innovative attitude and form, and was first published in France.

## Afterword

A consideration of the photography-based exhibition is introduced as a point of reflection. The reader serves as basis for participants to discover and synthesize a position from which to chart their own theme and curatorial premise.

The resulting proposal should allow a degree of experimentation, but at the same time remain clear and correctly scaled for realization.

The participants are encouraged to establish different categories of collections from which to draw their material; for example using the internet in order to access the Library of Congress archives and order prints; researching archives.org, ebay, or approaching a collector and negotiating the loan of works; establishing a dialogue with a living photographer; visiting photographic collections in Grenoble, and the surrounding region, etc.