BOOK REVIEW

Vision Anew: The Lens and Screen Arts
Edited by Adam Bell and Charles H. Traub
University of California Press, 2015
292 pp./$34.95 (sb)

Vision Anew: The Lens and Screen Arts was published before the November 8, 2016, United States electoral victory of Donald Trump, itself a media event, but after a profusion of other phenomena—including "post-internet" art; the exponential growth of Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and Google+ (advent of both ever-cheaper digital photo technologies and augmented reality); the increased availability of 3-D printing; the revelation of unprecedented spying and surveillance technologies by the National Security Agency; the widespread use of drones for warfare, information, and entertainment; and major advances in robotics and Artificial Intelligence that also impact media and media platforms. This host of August changes has often paradoxically stimulated a return to the art object, witnessed in Vision Anew by some authors' probing of traditional values of photography (for instance, Gerry Badger's 2012 essay "Keep It Simple Stupid, Just Make a Good Picture: The Basics of Photography"). It has led others, such as Lev Manovich, to redefine the terms of the game, as when he writes: "There is no such thing as 'digital media.' There is only software—as applied to media data (or 'content')" (206).

The most obvious prompt for the essays in the book—which range from the historical (such as the opening mini-manifesto from 1961, "Photography Is," by Arthur Siegel!) to teasing out or proffering new generalizations, if not usually theorectizations, on this rapidly changing visual culture—is the omnipresence of digitally based images, and the nearly equal ubiquity of their use by all sorts of artistic practitioners, professional and nonprofessional alike. The overwhelming acceleration and accompanying "logic of barrage" highlighted through digital culture, at least in countries like the US, intimate issues far beyond this—that the environment has shifted onto a different register technologically, formally, politically, logistically, ontologically, and demographically, in which once sufficient responses, especially in any realm of aesthetics, will no longer do.

Art historian David Joselit had already pointed out years before the Trump debacle in his "Feedback Manifesto" (2010), "As art marches in circles, politicians manipulate images more effectively than the legions of MFA graduates from prestigious schools like Art Center, Cal Arts, Columbia, and Yale" (262). Commending the value of Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Against Interpretation" to avoid interpretation but rather settle on action or the contagion of gesture, Joselit recommended, among other things, "Don't produce art or art history by making a 'new' move in the game of aesthetics you learned in school. Assess the image ecology you live in and respond to it. Learn the system and counter it—make noise. Practice eco-formalism" (262).

Yet Vision Anew is decidedly unprogrammatic, aided in this by the broad range and roles of its forty-plus contributors, whether primarily artists, educators, critics, journalists, or historians—and their points of view, which include the presentation of configurations from the past (Rebecca Solnit on Eadweard Muybridge, excerpts from László Moholy-Nagy's 1947 Vision in Motion, a 1968 Hollis Frampton lecture), and ones more current (Aaron Schuman's 2012 interview with Trevor Paglen on "Machine-Seeing" in his work). The reconsideration of medium provides some of the richest content in Vision Anew, whether this is treatment of the "resurgence" of abstraction in photography (by co-editor Adam Bell), or reevaluation of the position of the photo book (Bell with Ofer Wohlberger and Jason Fulford) or of the changes wrought by HD (the co-editors Bell and Charles H. Traub with Bob Giraldi, Ethan David Kent, and Christopher Walters). As a reader in a rapidly shifting field, it seeks to avoid the more fixed or ideologized positions that have often characterized polarized debates around photography in particular. This is emphasized in Susie Linfield's contribution, where she decries the lack in photography criticism of "a fertile dialectic between ideas and emotions" (49). She scores a "fear of sentimentality" (53) as but one motivation at "the heart of photography criticism's peculiar hostility to its subject" (57). Linfield's sweeping objections are not only to an especially politicized "postmodernism" in photography and criticism that perhaps reached a peak in the 1980s, but include as well Sontag, John Berger, Roland Barthes, poststructuralism and postmodernism in general, the Frankfurt School, and Bertolt Brecht. Linfield's advocacy for "emotions" and the connectivity of photographs beg further development whatever the excesses of her adversaries (and her recommendation of critics who both respond and go beyond "postmodern" problematics, including Solnit, David Levi-Strauss, and Geoff Dyer).

Linfield's essay is in keeping with the tenor of Vision Anew: keeping an openness and attention to medium, slipping past "culture wars," retaining a supleness of perspective while largely deflecting any overt development of theoretical scaffolding. The strength of this approach by the editors is that the various artistic practices have more room to breathe. This is the case whether one reads Traub's interview with Alec Soth on the "interspace" of new technical possibilities with digital cameras that make possible the photographic moving image or moving photograph (215), or film critic Amy Taubin's conversation with Christian Marclay about the process that produced his video The Clock (2010). As this juxtaposition of artists—which includes Ai Weiwei, Pipilotti Rist, Doug Aitken, and film editor Walter Murch—would suggest, the central figure here is what Traub in his 1997 manifesto called the "creative interlocutor" (4, 265–68). Since "art is, in essence, process" (265), "by our intervention in the image, we are made aware of the plasticity of our universe" (266). It follows then for Traub that programmers, gatekeepers, curators, educators, editors, and conductors all have analogous artistic roles in structuring "imagery [that] is the ectoplasm of our existence" (266).

This image ecosystem is in constant motion, with, as Grahame Weinbren explores, the human senses actively seeking and structuring the visual information they encounter, an insight he finds already in Erwin Panofsky (116). As perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson wrote, "I will treat the eyes . . . not as a pair of cameras at the ends of a pair of nerves but as an apparatus for detecting the variables of contour, texture, spectral composition, and transformation in light" (qtd. 123). Just as fundamental to Gibson, Weinbren points out, is that perceptual systems are "sensitive primarily to change" (123). Vision Anew focuses upon the extraordinary mobility and change in the mediatic sensorium, one of the reasons...
the relations between mediums such as photography and cinema are rendered “perpetually uncertain” (73).

Although in his introduction Traub insists on the necessity of “human intervention for structure” (5), the far-reaching discussion often puts that into question, whether it is Paglen’s concern with how drone technology, spy surveillance, and such “machine-seeing apparatuses have political structures built into them, quite literally,” that “sculpt society” (197); Barry Salzmann’s exploration of how social media proliferation impacts photography; Charlie White’s “On <img>,” on the use of authored and authorless online images; or Lisa Kereszi’s searching questioning of authorship in work taken from Google Street View. Despite its breadth of investigation, Vision Anew, with few exceptions—one perhaps being philosopher Tom Huhn’s declaration that “photography is now the largest impediment to human advancement” (192)—resists long-term prognostication, in favor of the detailed or reframed snapshot. So James Agee’s words still resonate, that given the effort of consciousness “to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is . . . the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time” (qtd. 207). As Kereszi adds, “It will always record our world, one way or another, whether we are physically there or not” (211).


NOTES 1. As described by the Art Post-Internet exhibition, March 1–May 11, 2014, at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, China. 2. For example, the subject of a symposium at the Kennedy Center in Florence, Italy, June 21, 2014, was “Rematerialization of the Art Object: Art, Robotics, and Post-Convergent Labor,” featuring artists working in computer-assisted painting, CAD architectural design, sculpture, and 3D printing. Or more recently, the “Object of Art, Object of Capital” conference at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, December 2–3, 2016, probed, among other things, the finitude of the object versus the apparent infinity of capital. 3. As director and writer Mariana Luna put it in a brief but apt post: www.facebook.com/luna.mariana.luna/posts/10211529324972666. November 27, 2016.