Review: How Photography Became Contemporary Art: Inside an Artistic Revolution from Pop to the Digital Age


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This book might also have been subtitled “Photography on Photography’s Terms.” The author – whose bona fides include author, critic, and academic – presents an intriguing story about the history of photography as fine art, interweaving art history with a deeply personal connection to the subject. As he indicates in the introduction, he writes both from an “eyewitness perspective” as well as from thirty years of research and writing about the intersections of art and photography. His thesis is that photography became central to contemporary art as artists moved beyond “the Modernist primacy given to painting and sculpture” and used photography both as documentation and an art of its own. Meanwhile, theorists (and academics) deliberated the multiple roles of photography in culture and modern life.

The chapters move both thematically and chronologically, all of them tied together with personal stories and recollections. Mr. Grundberg participated in this world as critic, colleague, scholar, teacher, and even photographer. He was integrally involved in the history, and as a result he presents the artists and their work from a friendly, human point of view; the book is far from gossipy but equally far from dry. Along the way, we are treated to views of the New York City downtown art scene in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as broader, social issues of the times (e.g., the Vietnam War, AIDS). Focusing on photography, he looks at movements such as performance art, land art and installations, and how photography’s documentation of that work ensured its survival. He does not, however, delve into photojournalism except in passing.
note how it, along with pornography, plays a role in “photography’s social functioning.” Finally, he concludes that “Every generation ... gets to discover photography’s importance anew, just as it gets to reinvent contemporary art itself.”

This book is a pleasure to read; while clearly well researched and written it tells stories about people, places, and times. Perhaps not revelatory, it nonetheless adds to a growing body of work that privileges photography as art without apology. Grundberg covers a wide array of artists, publications, exhibitions, and artworks, sprinkled liberally with personal memories throughout.

This book should appeal to a wide audience; undergraduates will appreciate the stories, and graduate students and beyond will note the deep scholarship that underlies them. The volume includes a helpful index and very readable endnotes. There is no separate bibliography, however these notes provide useful references. There are many images throughout, in color and black and white. And the book (at least in hardcover) is well made and sturdy. It is highly recommended that libraries add this volume to their collections.