

LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES – SEMIOTICS

PHILOSOPHY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY INSTIGATED BY PHOTOGRAPHY



Thierry Zeno: Thaïlande. 1977

When once the availability of one great primitive agent is thoroughly worked out, it is easy to foresee how extensively it will assist in unraveling other secrets in natural science.

Elizabeth Eastlake, *Photography*, 1857.

A philosophy of photography could be taken to mean the act of philosophizing on the subject of photography. That is to say, one can examine photography by using the concepts philosophers have accumulated over a period of two thousand five hundred years. One could inquire into its links with perception, imagination, nature, substance, essence, freedom and consciousness. The danger of such an approach is the projection onto photography of concepts created long before photography's emergence, concepts which might prove to be ill-suited. In effect, many respectable philosophers following this path concluded that photography was a form of painting or minor literature. This judgment was foreseeable since the concepts of western philosophy precisely subscribe to a pictorial, sculptural, architectural and literary outlook.

But the philosophy of the photograph can also designate the philosophy emanating from the photograph itself, the kind of philosophy the photo suggests and diffuses by virtue of its characteristics. All materials, tools and processes employ, through their texture and structure, a specific mode of constructing the space and time around them. They engage "to a greater or lesser degree" specific parts of our nervous system. They induce certain gestures or operations, while excluding others. As such, they endow those who use them with a certain lifestyle. There is no reason why film, devices or photographic paper should be deprived of such action. Undoubtedly, they suggest an unforeseen space and time, a distinct manner of capturing reality and the real, action and act, event and potentiality, object and process, presence and absence, in brief, a specific philosophy.

Evidently, the term philosophy is here taken in its most common meaning. A psychology, sociology or anthropology of the photograph would have been equally suitable. And why not an epistemology, semiotics or indicialogy of the photograph? It is vital to ask what the photograph itself imposes or distills, rather than what *we* demand from it.

This undertaking will therefore be anything but easy. Because not simply our philosophies, but more importantly our languages were originally forged to speak about painting, architecture and literature. On different occasions, God was a painter, a sculptor, an architect or a poet, only because man had been. We therefore do not have the words to describe a photograph adequately. But specialized terminology would be even more fallacious, as only common language has the power "through its *bricolage*" to re-encode itself so as to touch on new objects. That is why one should forget all jargon here, and particularly that of linguistics. When encountering terms such as signifier and signified, reality and the real, indices and indexes, perception and sensation or act and action, the reader is called upon to rediscover a naive English that will define and redefine itself according to circumstance.

Henri Van Lier