Roger Kockaerts: the image revealed

The paradox of photography or the non-knowledge of photography – Prof. Dr. Johan Swinnen

PHOTOGRAPHIES
ARGENTIQUES ET PLATINOTYPIES DE

ROGER KOCKAERTS
UN CHOIX D'IMAGES CREATIVES DANS SON PARCOURS
PHOTOGRAPHIQUE D'UN DEMI-SIECLE

DU 12 FEVRIER AU 3 MARS 2007
VERNISSAGE LE 15 /02 /07 A 18H30, REHAUSSEE DE LA CONFERENCE :
'LE PARADOXE DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE OU LA NON –
CONNAISSANCE DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE' PAR LE
PROF. DR . JOHAN SWINNEN

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1931, the year zero of RK photography

Roger Kockaerts was born in 1931 in Wilsele, near Leuven. In 1945 an American soldier gave him a photography magazine. He dreamed of producing such images one day. But he abandoned his ambitious artistic projects and studied electromechanics. Roger Kockaerts became a technical advisor at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) from 1958 until 1988.

In 1956, at the age of 25, he bought the photographic equipment from a colleague and started to teach himself photography.
Suffering from his lack of artistic training, he joined the Photo Club of Boitsfort in 1957. A happy coincidence then intervened in his life. This group, which was at the forefront of the European avant-garde, had close links with Otto Steinert's subjective photography movement, which dominated the creative process in the 1950s.

It was here that some of the great names of modern Belgian photography were trained, such as Pierre Cordier and Julien Coulommier. In this context, Roger Kockaerts became familiar with the language and processes of photography that he would not have been able to grasp on his own. He experimented with special techniques such as Man RAY's solarisation, emulsion reticulation, negative printing, etc. In his own words, he developed a "photographic instinct". However, he got quickly tired of the taste for competition of the photoclubs as well as their amateurism, and decided to fly on his own.

In 1964, during his holidays in Brittany, he discovered a passion for rocks which he began to photograph systematically. This resulted in structured images banishing any human presence. He then concentrated on a meticulous research of rock erosion phenomena. He photographed their forms, their structures and their rhythm. Two important elements entered his creative universe: the principles of the series and of the randomness that presides over the destruction of mineral constellations. He

travelled extensively, alone, seeking to establish a photographic repertoire of eroded structures from the North Cape to the high plateaus of Anatolia.

In 1969 he returned from Lapland; that year was marked by radical changes both in his private life and in his artistic work. He composed detailed photographic montages in which the texture of the rocks became invisible, playing with the random association of negatives and positives.

He got married and his daughter Nathalie was born in 1971. This emotional and existential upheaval changed his perspective. He abandoned the natural phenomena of random construction and crystallization of chemical substances. He made photographic transfers on copper plates for printed circuits. He calls them "stratified engravings on copper".

From 1966 to 1971, he regularly exhibited his photographs in specialised galleries, alone or in group exhibitions, in Europe and America. At the same time, he made randomly arranged metal assemblages which he photographed. It was then that Roger remembered a conversation with a Turkish friend about

the graphic and artistic possibilities of the computer. At that time, the ULB laboratory where he was a researcher had a microcomputer equipped with a printer. He decided to undertake some experiments in his research on randomness, with the agreement of his director. This first realization goes back to 1973.

Roger Kockaerts continued to pursue these two careers at the same time: as a photographer and as an artist-engineer. He participated in numerous international exhibitions of computer art. In 1981, he compiled a work on the state of computer art at the time, which enabled him to understand the infinite possibilities of using the computer in the visual arts.

He has now given up his work as a computer scientist, preferring to devote himself once again to photographic research. He is particularly interested in the problems of preservation of archives and photographic documents. And it was for this expertise that I asked Roger in 1994 to be the head of the photographic department (conservation and restoration section) at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, of which I was director at the time.

Fortunately, he accepted! Now his former students work in important museums like the Army Museum in Brussels, the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels, the Chicago Art Institute and the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam.

An objective medium?

When studying the work of Roger Kockaerts, it seemed to us that we could apply the term "belgitude", which was coined in the early seventies to describe Belgian literature. Indeed, in his poetic-conceptual

montages, we discovered a regional, very Belgian perfume: a mixture of influences!

Serendipity, eroticism, humour, irony and humanism are the key words in the work. These notions remind us of the characteristics of a pictorial movement that developed particularly in Belgium: surrealism.

In his desire not to take himself seriously and to view our society with irony and poetry, Roger Kockaerts is related to Ensor, Storck, Spilliaert and Alechinsky.

We believe that Roger Kockaerts, by paying tribute to the heirs of Belgian surrealism, is expressing his regional identity. It is also a way of acknowledging that artists are influenced by the context in which they create.

We believe that Roger, in doing so, has produced work that could only have been produced in Belgium in the 1970s to the present day. This approach is particularly original and stands out from the international production as a whole. It is astonishing.

Roger Kockaerts' photographic experience is reflected in all his computer work, right up to the Orotype photos of today – Opium Fields.

From his first works on the square and randomness, Roger Kockaerts joined the artistic preoccupations of the avant-garde of the early seventies, which reacted against the passivity of the viewer while hoping for his active participation.

Interchangeability invites the viewer to take part in the creative process by combining the forms resulting from a programme as he sees fit. This game implies both a physical participation of the spectator who touches the different elements by juxtaposing them in the case of paintings, by superimposing them in the case of collages. But it also involves the psychological participation of the viewer, who thus explores the field of his or her perception and sensitivity to shapes and colours.

The poetic-conceptual montages are more hermetic. These mixed media works, which combine photographic images and info graphics, require a more intellectual participation from the viewer. In the best of cases, the viewer establishes semantic relationships between images and signs.

Random is a constant in Roger's work. It appeared in his artistic work long before the introduction of the computer and seems to play a catalytic role in his artistic process. We can conclude by saying that Roger's work is particularly demanding of the public.

Photographic fantasies

What are the characteristics of Roger Kockaerts' work? I would like to explain this with the help of the history and philosophy of the paradox of photography.
Philosophy and photography seem to be closely related. They share a rather similar ambiguity: both define something and thus represent a positive knowledge; on the other hand, they ask a question and are thus also a non-knowledge.

Philosophy is, in its coherent totality of justified proofs and informed negations, knowledge. But it also represents the questioning of this totality: a non-knowledge.

Photography exposes something: a small piece of reality, framed by the camera or in the darkroom, which, given the objectivity of the process, can certainly claim the label of knowledge.
Yet it still raises a question: what is the value of an image in relation to reality? How can something that is objective be "de-objectified" by the subjectivity of the author of the image and by that of the viewer, a phenomenon that is further amplified by the contextual influences exerted on both?

Every photo is a paradox? It is an image of reality, in other words, it is a way of seeing, a point of view. The emphasis on the word "way" should not, however, be interpreted as a simple relativization, and thus as the conviction that this is reality. The fact that it is an image means precisely that it is not reality, that it is rather a kind of expression; that we have learnt to look at this reality in this way in our pan-photographic culture; therefore we cannot assert anything about this reality expressed in this way until we have ascertained it beforehand through other sources of information, such as direct perception or verbal explanation.

Without these extra-photographic data, the photograph remains in extreme silence. Is this photograph a war record or a snapshot of a war film scene? This questioning non-knowledge opens up a path of interpretation that can only occur at the level of the photograph's identity, where the reality referred to becomes insignificant and is only perceived as "material" in the midst of other specific elements.
This sounds disrespectful when it comes to people, but for a photograph, it doesn't matter at all who this ordinary man is, or this poor man, or what part of the (third) world he comes from, or who this smug middle-class person is. After all, these are aspects of humanity itself. In the sense that one shows (one interprets by asking the question) without showing (one does not know reality), photography is close to philosophy as knowledge of non-knowledge.
So what?

Authority of the photograph

Here are a few aspects and clarifications of Roger Kockaerts' photography that we feel deserve our attention.

* <u>Photography as a collection of forms and materials. The problem of abstraction.</u>

In the ongoing dialogue between photography and painting, the phenomenon of abstraction, in the broadest sense, could not but play an important role. Reciprocal imitations? Spontaneous convergences? The discussion remains open. Despite immense differences, painters and photographers share the problems of the world of forms and are therefore naturally led, during a given period of circumstances (without excluding deliberate appropriations), to find similar answers. Photography is the trace left by the light reflected by objects.

* <u>The dream and the imaginary inner worlds. The problem of the surreal.</u>

Here we have the second great apparent paradox of creative photography. The first was that of abstraction: how to photograph the abstract? And we have seen that photography has its own means for this.

The second is: how to photograph the imaginary, the fantasies of our mind, what exists only on the screen of our imagination? To do this, photography uses three kinds of strategies that can be related to the work of Roger Kockaerts :

a. <u>subjective vision.</u> The photograph is simple and straightforward, but the object is chosen and seen in such a way, with such originality, intensity, or weirdness on the part of the photographer that the image takes us into a strange and fantastic world.

b. <u>manipulated reality</u>. The author succeeds in communicating his dream to us through technical artifacts: montage of cut-out photos, superimposition of several negatives and other lab manipulations. Here the photographer's freedom of choice is almost the same as that of a fantasy draughtsman.

c. <u>dream reconstitution</u>. It is then a matter of the photographer reconstituting in reality, staging the images that come from his mind, and then photographing them very objectively. And this is perhaps, in fact, the most productive way. This ability of photography to show us convincing images that give the illusion of reality makes it quite capable of making us believe in the incarnation of the dream, the fantastic, the pure invention. And this is all the more true because the images of our dreams, incoherent and illogical in their connection, often have, taken individually, this character of fixity, of fascinating clearness that photographic images also have.
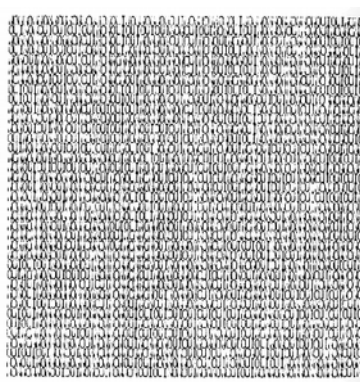
When Kockaerts' images are no longer sufficient to convey all the developments of an inner vision, the sequence introduces a discontinuous narrative that can serve as a reflection on the relativity of photographic reality as well as a poetic and metaphysical evocation.

This justifies the thesis, dear to Susan Sontag, of the deep affinity between photography and surrealism.

Even the simplest and most spontaneous photography would be surreal, because it is a doubling of reality, a surreality. The normal course of things in life is frozen, fixed in a fascinating image that is both precise and impossible. And the surrealist desire to erase the boundaries between art and life, the conscious and the unconscious, the professional and the amateur, the intentional and the unintentional, finds its realisation in the practice of photography. But then, every photograph becoming surreal, we would be referred to a general theory about the nature of photography.

For Kockaerts it is no longer a question of "what reality looks like", but of "what I feel about reality". Long live the radical (and poetically overwhelming) originality of Roger Kockaerts' photography!

Johan Swinnen, Paris, 1 mai 2007