



**HAL**  
open science

# American Photography in France since World War II: Was France Liberated by the United States?

Jean Kempf

► **To cite this version:**

Jean Kempf. American Photography in France since World War II: Was France Liberated by the United States?. American Photographs in Europe, u University Press, Amsterdam, pp.205-222, 1994. halshs-00382235

**HAL Id: halshs-00382235**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00382235>**

Submitted on 7 May 2009

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## American photography in France since World War II Was France liberated by the United States? <sup>1</sup>

### I) Some questions on method and object

#### a) The object

There are difficulties in speaking about photography as a mass media. Photographs are (almost) never seen on their own and always as part of a complex “semiotic package”. The very term “photography” covers a wide variety of practices and functions which must be differentiated. Roughly three—obviously overlapping—domains can be isolated: “applied” photography (news, advertising, illustration), photography as artistic practice, photography as amateur/mass practice.

The study of the latter kind is best illustrated by the 1965 investigation conducted by Pierre Bourdieu and *alii*: *Un art moyen*.<sup>2</sup> Hardly anything has been done since in that field—apart from a few opinion polls—as a serious analysis of that question would require a full team of scholars and is beyond the reach of an isolated historian.

Photography in advertising, illustration and the news media raises different issues. An advertising photograph is obviously more advertising than photograph and when differences and influences can be isolated their significance for photography is relatively limited. Furthermore, in the case of the news media, although it is most interesting to analyze the way in which photographs participate in the creation of a particular discourse on society (a much traveled road these days) it is now safe to say that because of the way the market of press

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is part of a larger study of the mutual influence of American and French photography which I am conducting at the moment. I am grateful to Mick Gidley and David Nye for pointing out to me this little explored direction. Most of all, this essay would not have been possible without the generous cooperation and assistance of Christiane Degueudre (American cultural services in Paris), Michèle Chomette (Galerie Michèle Chomette), Jean-Claude Lemagny (Bibliothèque nationale), Gabriel Bauret (*Camera International*), Claude Nori (Contrejour), Gilles Mora (*Les Cahiers de la photographie*), Alain Desvergnès (Ecole nationale de la photographie), Virginia Zabriskie and Edith Carpenter (Galerie Zabriskie), and Marie-France Bouhours (Musée national d’art moderne). I want to thank them for their time, their interest in the project, and their assistance. Of course I am fully responsible for any error, omission, or biased interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (ed.). *Un Art moyen. Essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie*. Paris : Ed. de Minuit, 1965.

images is structured and because of the half-European, half-American origin of major agencies and illustrated media, one is confronted with an internationalization of tastes and choices in the field. This does not of course preclude specific national inflexions and developments, such as the Agence Vu in France and *Liberation*, a French daily which has made full use of photography in its various forms.

This leaves us with “creative photography” which will be the focus of this essay.

#### **b) Method and limits**

The difficulty in analyzing and pinpointing transnational aesthetic influences is obvious as the relationship between art and society is far from linear, unequivocal and continuous. I believe two levels must be identified: the social structure of photographic practice and the nature/content of photographic creation. These levels mutually influence each other: within the field of creative photography several types can be isolated but the nature and extent of each relation varies a great deal. As these have not yet been chartered I have chosen to work from three different sources: a classic aesthetic analysis of the photographic production, trends and “schools” in each country; oral history by meeting and interviewing in a non directive way actors and observers of this confrontation (photographers, curators, publishers, gallerists); and archival work on the dissemination of American photography in France (museums, American Cultural Center, journals and magazines) to identify how and when the French photographic milieu was confronted with American images. This research, which I would define as “social history of photography”, is not completed yet but sufficiently clear patterns and correlations have appeared to risk a few generalizations.

Lastly, if we all know that “the United States” is far from being a coherent block, America has often been exported as a definite although contradictory entity in photography, as in many other cultural fields. Conversely, we have good grounds for saying that France can be taken as a valid national entity as far as photography is concerned, at least until the mid-eighties when the emergence of new distributions due to the rise of a “cultural Europe” began to break up the concept. This is a very important point and one upon which I will come back later: I am not implying either that there is such a thing as the European Cultural Community yet or that French cultural specificity is disappearing as it gets diluted in some vague international style. I am speaking about the emergence of new networks and definitions, of new circulations and

spheres which consecrated new relationships and partnerships between nations, photographers and cultural agents. What is clear, however, is that the development of photography in France is due to a few limited personalities who, without denying their strong French roots, have all been greatly inspired (a better term than influenced) by American models.

## **II) A splendid isolation**

Until the 1970's the influence of American photography in France remained extremely limited. Or rather it was confined to specific occasions and to particular friendships. In the early part of the century, the French photographic and artistic intelligentsia knew American photographers and their work. The exhibition "New School of American Photography" (1900)—which brought the works of the American Pictorialists to the European public—came to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris thanks to Robert Demachy, after the Royal Photographic Society in London. It seems to have been generally well received. Already the reaction towards American photography was that although pictorialist there was something special to it, something different, more violent, more avant-garde, more extreme. Yet such exposure failed to provide the kind of real recognition that Stieglitz especially hoped for: they were not exactly taken seriously by the French photographic establishment. At the same time, French photographers were recognized and exhibited in the USA as if America was still absorbing all the lessons it could from a continent which remained until the 1930s a reference in the arts. World War II came as a breaking point in photography as elsewhere.

After the war a strange thing happened. As the United States (and the USSR) became for the rest of the world the power who defeated the Germans and liberated Europe from the Nazis, with all the ambiguities and oppositions such a vision of things entailed, a sort of general consensus developed in the photo world around what has been aptly termed "humanistic photography". This type of photography which privileges content over form, whose ideological message is essentially about the universal and enduring values of Man had been very powerful in France before the war with "Le Rectangle" (1936-1938), founded by Emmanuel Sougez and Pierre Jahan. After the war, the "Groupe des XV" (1946-1956) was its best representative. This rather loose group which was a continuation of "Le Rectangle" produced twelve exhibitions in its ten-year existence. It included many different photographers with varied styles (E. Sougez and P. Jahan of course, Yvonne Chevallier, Daniel Masclet, Marcel Bovis and

Willy Ronis among others) whose motto was first and foremost quality and professionalism. However, these photographers, who were also commercial artists, worked for the most part in the same ideological vein as *Life* magazine, and in turn found the best expression of their photographic practice in a major event, conceived in the United States but widely disseminated abroad: The Family of Man exhibition. Much has been said about such conception of photography, its message as well as the status of the image it entailed. What really counts in this analysis of intercultural contact is that when the exhibition traveled to France (to the Musée des Arts décoratifs) it was a great popular and critical success (the only dissenting voice being that of Roland Barthes<sup>3</sup>) and that its very ideology worked not as a revelation of what American photography was doing—or was about—but acted paradoxically as a confirmation of the rightness of France's position as well as a justification for reinforced parochialism.<sup>4</sup> Even Eugene Smith, who was perhaps the best representative of this approach, both in his work and in his life, was not recognized in France. The most important effect on French photographers came later, and, 15-20 years later, Jean-Claude Lemagny remembers, when young aspiring photographers came to see him, they often said that what decided them to become photographers was the Family of Man exhibition.

Mutual ignorance and self-satisfied complacency in front of a nation of good savages but savages nonetheless? Almost, if it were not for someone like Daniel Masclet, a founder and leader of the 30x40 club, who knew American photographers well and defended them: his friendship with Edward Weston (with whom he shared similar aesthetic conceptions) is well known as well as that with Paul Strand. He invited Strand to give lectures at the 30x40, and put up a Weston exhibit. But Masclet, himself a photographer, was isolated in his position, and, according to J.-Cl. Lemagny, stifled by some of his entourage who prevented him from having the beneficial effect he could have had. However, towards the late 1960's and early 1970's, Masclet's friend Roger Doloy with other photographers, Jean-Pierre Sudre, Denis Brihat and Jean-Claude Gautrand among others gathered, in the Groupe Libre Expression (1965), introduced directly and as inspiration of their own practice, American "masters", particularly Minor White.

---

<sup>3</sup> See his "La grande famille des hommes," *Mythologies*. (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 173-76 (originally published in *Les Lettres nouvelles*.)

<sup>4</sup> "The sentimental ideology of [the Family of Man] only confirmed the French ideology of the times" (J.-Cl. Lemagny, interview with the author, May 15, 1992.)

In short, and until the 1960's, there was little more than occasional contacts in the field of serious artistic photography, while at the same period the European model of photojournalism as well as that of picture agency and photo-journalistic ethics, best exemplified by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Magnum (whose founders were mostly Europeans), became a sort of international standard.

The 1960's, especially the mid and late 1960's, seemed to have been—as elsewhere—the time when the first revolution occurred: that of the true recognition of American photography and its wide dissemination in France. By all accounts, throughout the 1970's (ranging in French history roughly from 1968 to 1981) American photography dominated the French scene. It was only in the mid-1980's that the Europeanization of photography transformed the scene with the building of stronger European ties and the emergence of Southern Europe (i.e. non English speaking).

### **III) The birth of a revolution**

What happened to ensure the dominant position of American photography on the French scene and make it the overwhelming model for the development of all photographic creation in France for almost two decades?<sup>5</sup>

The first explanation can be found in the attraction of the United States as a country on young French people in the 1960's. Paradoxically the nation which was waging the war in Vietnam and that French students and intellectuals described as the worst capitalist and imperialist country at a time when their models came from China and the Third World appeared as the Eden of creative minds and of youth. There, it was possible to try anything, to break up the yoke of academicism, to really “express oneself” (another concept of the age). While political, literary and linguistic theories were a French specialty, the visual arts lagged behind and had been since the interwar period: thus many aspiring artists and photographers (Arnaud Claass, Bernard Plossu and others) found a model in the journey to the United States as well as in American photography which combined a prestigious past (Weston, Evans,...) and a fully mature contemporary practice.<sup>6</sup> But such discovery was also intimately connected with that of American music (rock & roll, Jazz and the Blues), and the works of Jack Kerouac

---

<sup>5</sup> Michèle Chomette : “In France photography—that is to say exhibitions, books, museums, galleries, the aesthetic contact between artists...—was first and foremost American, 15 or 20 years ago.” Interview with the author, April 22, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Mora, “Matière, acte photographiques : Vingt ans de création continue,” *20 ans de photographie créative en France, 68/88, Les Cahiers de la photographie* 24, p. 52.

which played a part that has not been fully assessed on European liberation yet: critical of mainstream “Amerika” *as well as celebrating* its founding values and its universalist / revolutionary mission, Kerouac’s expression was the perfect link between continents.

Thus the discovery of America was double for that generation: discovery of a physical place, a continent in its variety, mystery, attraction (the full range of American mythology) and of photographic practices and status so different from what they had been accustomed to and so wonderful(ly developed) that they really thought they had found the Promised Land. Some even stayed such as Bernard Plossu who settled in the South West, in Taos. Others simply brought back images and exhibits: they could be found in photo magazines, at Arles festival, etc. Others again discovered photographic art and criticism there, such as critic Gilles Mora, who was to found the first serious journal of photographic criticism in France, *Les Cahiers de la Photographie* (1981), and whose stay in the USA between 1972 and 1975 was seminal in his thinking on photography: although his intellectual basis was and remained very French (Maurice Blanchot and the French semioticians), America and the Deep South in particular triggered his evolution. He now is one of the Europeans who knows and promotes (as writer, editor, and exhibition curator) American photography best, and his case is particularly exemplary of his generation.<sup>7</sup>

French photographers were not only fascinated by the country and its alternative (more often than mainstream) lifestyles as was most of a generation: they also discovered American photography and the place of the medium in the USA. The contrast with Europe was so great and the directions Americans were following in the field so close to their own aspirations that the impact on the relatively small and closed market of French photography was as strong as that of the baby boom on access to photographic practices.

This revelation/revolution (J.-Cl. Lemagny speaks of “uncorking”, a rather apt phrase) did not take place overnight but it can be dated fairly safely to the early 1970’s. It was essentially twofold: the realization that the photograph was an aesthetic object and a specific one; and—as a corollary—that there was such a thing as an artist-photographer. It had taken quite a while for such a proposition to be socially recognized; it would take another decade or so for it to

---

<sup>7</sup> He writes : “The journey to the US remains very important for me. Many of my projects with American partners (books, exhibits) are first and foremost pretexts to the American road and music.” (letter to the author.) It is significant to note how important American music, travel across the continent, and the “beat mentality” has been for some French photographers.

have practical consequences on the infrastructure.

### **New status and infrastructure**

The status of the photograph in America as an original piece of work, as an aesthetic object and not simply as a reproducible image or illustration, well established since the 1930's, came in the late 1950's and early 1960's, as a living proof of what a few French people thought without really being able to find a social discourse to "plug it into" as it were.<sup>8</sup> This realization acted as a detonator and constituted what I do not hesitate to term an epistemological revolution. In the US this emergence was made possible by the influence of a powerful art world (since the 1940's) and of a network of institutional relays—a real synergy—making American photography active and conquering, as well as a most desirable model for other countries. Starting with the principle that everything not only *can* but *must* be taught Americans quickly integrated photography in university curricula, and galleries and museums being used to working with art-in-the-making very quickly participated in the general promotion of photography as early as the 1930's.

Such combination led to the creation of a photographer who was typically a university graduate, often in fine arts or photography. He or she had not only a formal training in art and photography history but also in the technique and craftsmanship of fine printing. The tradition of fine printing, of the beautiful object, is something that goes back to the teaching of Weston and Adams and the f.64 and has become one of the basis for the recognition of photography as a fine art in the US. French photographers, often working for the press or for illustration, lacked this tradition: there was no equivalent of the character of the printer-photographer exemplified by Ansel Adams although there were a few French fine printers such as Sougez or Dieuzaide. But the absence of any real outlet in museums or galleries made such attention paid to printing unnecessary. It was not part of the photographic culture and young photographers paid much more attention to contents. It is not the case anymore mostly because the market has changed under the influence of the American tradition: the photograph has become an object.

Compared with their American counterparts, French infrastructures were utterly underdeveloped: whatever the potential talent of some photographers, it either remained unrevealed or hardly known for lack of clear distribution channels

---

<sup>8</sup> Michèle Chomette, interview with the author, April 22, 1992.

and of a market that could sustain creation. The only alternative for an aspiring photographer was to go into reportage and work either freelance or with an agency, in which case he was often crushed by day-to-day work, or to go into advertising (such as Bourdin, Sieff). More importantly for creative photography there was no support for the transmission of knowledge: publications, museums, libraries, universities. As an instance of the power of institutions in the “making of a photographer” we can take the most telling examples of Paul Strand, Robert Frank and William Klein. Paul Strand was born in the USA but spent a long time in France where he died in 1976. Although widely respected in the US, he was almost unknown of the French photographic establishment—with the notable exception of his long-time friend Henri Cartier-Bresson—despite his ties with the country. French photographers and critics discovered him through the United States. Similarly, William Klein’s photographic life has been almost entirely spent in Paris. Yet, his recognition (publication and exhibits) came from the United States. As for Robert Frank’s seminal influence on photography in the 1960’s it is well-known and documented. His book, *The Americans* was first published in France in 1958 by Robert Delpire, one year before the US. Yet, although the story of its publication later became the symbol of America’s rejection of a revolutionary vision and its acceptance in Europe, it should rather be seen as an instance of one man’s clear-sightedness vs. the timidity of the New York publishing establishment, undoubtedly a little cooled down by years of McCarthyism. The real audience, that of aspiring photographers reacted quite differently. It was American photographers who saw and understood Frank, while French photographers just did not see his pictures. Only in the late 1960’s did Frank reemerge as a figure, through his brilliant successors, Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander who were discovered by French photographers at the same time as him, thanks to the MOMA. As for Evans, until the late 1970’s he was utterly unknown of all but a few specialists. The Bibliothèque nationale and most particularly its curator of photographs, J.-Cl. Lemagny, was crucial in these discoveries for instance with the New American Photography exhibition which came to the BN in 1971. With great difficulty Lemagny managed to have this exhibit prepared by John Szarkowski and showing works by Friedlander, Arbus, Winogrand, etc., hung in Paris and despite the lack of media publicity, “it was seen by those who should see it”.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lemagny, interview with the author, May 15, 1992.

As in all social and aesthetic phenomena it most difficult to isolate one factor. The major obstacle to a full development of French photography seems however to have been the absence of structure for training and contact with the work of other photographers. Without a knowledge of history, French photographers had to reinvent the wheel. No French museum had any collection of contemporary photography except the Prints and Photographs department at the BN which organized exhibitions of contemporary photography as early as the 1950s (Man Ray in 1962 and Kertész in 1963). Nineteenth century photography, even at the BN, was treated topically, as illustration. There was hardly any monograph available in French and few were imported. Most publications were technical, or devoted to illustration and of course news pictures. Photographers' works were scattered across many different publications and contexts. And there was hardly any place where one could look at photographs, let alone seriously study photography. In France, universities are usually structured around classical curricula and subjects and have always taken a long time to integrate new fields, especially those involving technical equipment—thus great expenditures. This is partly due to traditions, the organization of higher education and the chronic lack of resources. The remarkable foresightedness and pedagogical activity of a few individuals—photographers and critics—cannot hide the total absence of photography in French higher education.<sup>10</sup> If one adds the poor state of French libraries, one understands that such situation did not encourage the development of an audience and of creators. As for the market (i.e. the support to creators) it was virtually non existent in the early 1970's.

The United States was the exact opposite: the photographer had both a philosophical and social sanction and existence. That revelation gave strength to aspiring photographers who saw that there could be a way outside the press. Thanks to Americans they also discovered that photographers could distribute their images themselves. This was a very formative lesson taught by people such as Les Krims or Ralph Gibson with *Lustrum* that Claude Nori, the most important publisher of the period, learnt: he would do the same for French photography.<sup>11</sup> *Contrejour*, first a magazine of creative French photography then a publishing house (1975), together with other cooperative endeavors was to help French photography find a place under the sun.

---

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the cinema penetrated the institution sooner : this is partly due to its narrative structure (professors of French literature were the first movie scholars) as well as its conspicuous and inescapable place in French society.

<sup>11</sup> Claude Nori, interview with the author, March 25, 1992.

## Beachheads

Things started to change in the early 1970's with intercontinental travel, Americanomania, and the strength of what must be called the American marketing machine. In that respect there seemed to be three identifiable "beachheads"—one was American, the other two French—: the American cultural centre (CCA) in Paris, *Photo* magazine, and the *Rencontres internationales de la photographie* in Arles (RIP).

The CCA was very active in the field of photography from 1965 to 1982. In 1957 it showed 50 photographs by Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind and sponsored The Family of Man exhibition in 1958 at the Musée d'art moderne. It then showed several American artists, often with literary connections, such as Man Ray. Then came a period of travel photography until 1972 when large traveling exhibits prepared by American institutions (MOMA, The Visual Workshop, The George Eastman House), mostly of rather established American photographers were regularly shown. This helped the French audience gain a certain sense of history and put them in touch with the best of American photography as well as with real prints, as the absence of photography in French museums made it extremely difficult for anyone to see anything but reproductions. In the 1970's, these exhibitions were also prepared in cooperation with the BN and gallerists such as Michèle Chomette.

The communication effort of the American government was very efficient at the time as money was available, and it was a boon for French institutions which thus got good exhibitions for a minimal fee.<sup>12</sup> In addition these exhibitions travelled rather extensively through France to museums and regional American centers. At a time when there was only "Paris and the French desert", such channels must have had a profound influence. Also reaching the provinces was *Photo* magazine.

*Photo* magazine (created in 1967) was a curious mixture of genres but certainly the most important channel of dissemination of photography and particularly of American photography in France. Indeed for a long time it was

---

<sup>12</sup> Claude Nori suggests that the investment by the CCA in photography rather than painting was motivated by the relatively low cost of the medium. One must, in this respect, also mention an interesting program launched in fiscal year 1973 by the State Department called "Art from American Universities". The program aimed at proposing to foreign posts to acquire at a very low price art from young artists, mostly connected with Fine Arts departments of American universities, in order to form a permanent collection of American art. The program was not very successful mostly because it entailed technical difficulties yet is significant of the aggressive communication behaviour of American institutions at the time.

almost the only place where photo enthusiasts could acquire a certain form of visual culture and see what contemporary creation was like, as the other major European magazine, *Camera* (Lucerne), was difficult to get, and public libraries rather underdeveloped, at least in the photography section. Alongside its glamour photographs the magazine showed a lot of American reportage (Marks, Haas, Davidson, Erwitte, Freed), but most surprisingly also presented portfolios of all of the most important creators of the time, especially emphasizing staged photography and the expression of phantasms (Duane Michals, Arthur Tress, Leslie Krim being the most often represented). There was hardly any issue without an American portfolio, and many French photographers saw the work of Frank, Harbutt, Gibson, etc., in *Photo* for the first time. Yet, the magazine lacked historical perspective although it did show some major historical figures. By the early 1980's when other serious publications came out, *Photo* readership dwindled and it turned into a soft version of *Playboy*. It had served its purpose and its disseminating function would be transferred to other periodicals such as *Camera International* (founded in 1984) publishing only portfolios.

The panorama of the opening of the French photo world to the United States would not be complete without the *Rencontres internationales de la photographie* in Arles (RIP). Created in 1970 by Jean-Maurice Rouquette (a museum curator), Michel Tournier (a writer) and Lucien Clergue (a photographer) as an extension of an old festival, the RIP began as a small and rather informal operation. In 1973 the first major workshop was organized alongside exhibitions and evening discussions. Despite chronic financial difficulties and thanks to a few tenacious individuals the Rencontres have managed to blossom into a big operation which has become famous for its workshops. We are not interested here in the details of the history of the RIP. Let us just note that it was the other major place where American photography was seen and talked about and also where the most famous American photographers taught, ate, drank (and slept as Alain Desvergnes likes to say) with French aspiring *amateur* and professional photographers, curators, etc. It was not only the images that travelled, it was the makers themselves. American photography was present at Arles from the beginning and in great proportion. As Maryse Cordesse wrote: “[The United States are very well represented, only France has more photographers present at the RIP]...we think this is a normal situation as Lucien Clergue has always wanted since the beginning of the Rencontres that the United States which occupies a dominant position in the world of photography, is always present with France as

a guest country.”<sup>13</sup>. Significantly it must be noted that the proportion of Americans at the RIP tended to decrease after 1985 while that of French and European workshop masters and exhibitors increased sharply. The USA which used to be the core of the RIP for a great many years (“the years of awakening” I was speaking about) is now a nation like any other, another sign of a new era opening in the wake of the American “uncorking”: the evolution of the presence of Americans—qualitatively and quantitatively—seems to me a good indication of the evolution of the influence of American photography on French photography.<sup>14</sup>

What Americans also brought, alongside their images, was a sense of history of the medium. And what still strikes any European making a trip (a pilgrimage?) to the MOMA or the Met, is the fact that they show photographs in a historical context.<sup>15</sup> Few French photographers had any formal training in the visual arts, and most had come rather spontaneously to photography. There was only one history of photography—that of Raymond Lécuyer—available in France until the translation by André Jammes and publication in 1967 of Beaumont Newhall’s major work in a revised version designed to give a greater part to French photography. The effect of that book cannot be underestimated. It was the first instrument available to approach photography with a historical perspective. As such it modeled French thinking about photography: it established a canon, a periodization, definitions (documentary being one of them) as Latin grammar shaped for centuries grammatical thinking about languages which had little to do with it—thus tying the maturing of a certain photographic consciousness to the discovery of American photography.

### **The Bibliothèque nationale**

We must now turn to the fundamental impact of the Cabinet des Estampes of the Bibliothèque nationale, and of its curator since 1968, Jean-Claude Lemagny. French photography would probably not have been the same without him, his wonderful sense of human relations which helped him to get in touch with young photographers, advise and encourage them as their career developed,

---

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Maryse Cordesse to the American Cultural Services, February 17, 1979 [original in French].

<sup>14</sup> Financial factors could also explain the 1979-1982 trend : money was so scarce that the RIP almost closed down and as Americans cost more to get it seemed logical that they be cut down. But although their number rose again after 1983, they were no longer a majority.

<sup>15</sup> Gabriel Bauret, interview with the author, March 25, 1992. One could also mention the predominance of the historical approach in American photographic scholarship as opposed to that of aesthetics (or “literary” readings) in French photocriticism.

and his flair which made him open the collections of the BN to contemporary creative photography. Here again the United States played a major role on his training as a photo curator: it was for him a revelation and a model of what should be done. Mr. Lemagny, the son of a famous engraver, came to the BN as assistant curator at the Department of Prints with a strong background in history (he is an *agrégé d'histoire*) and art history, but with little knowledge of photography, like most people of his generation in France. When he took his position in 1968, Jean Adhémar suggested that he made a stop over in New York on a return trip from Mexico City where he had been promoting a BN exhibit on French architects of the 18th century. His short visit to the MOMA and the Met were a shock to him, “a massive lesson” as he says: he saw how photography was respected, put in perspective, how a museum kept itself as close as possible to living creation, how creation and institution met. It showed him the direction to follow: open the collections to other countries as well as keep in close touch with the most contemporary creation in order to form the “continuous web of history”, upgrade them to an international level, and make permanent contact with American photographers and institutions. If I am telling this anecdote at length it is because it seems very significant to me of how seminal and at the same time how accidental the contact was and if I must insist so heavily on one man more than on a system, it is because the BN was the only place where such encounter between creators took place until the early 1980's. Under the enlightened guidance of Jean Adhémar, the Cabinet des Estampes took advantage of the 1943 law on the copyright of photographs to start (in the early 1950's) forming a fruitful relationship with living contemporary creative photographers (Souget, Masclet, Doisneau, Boubat, Sudre, etc.), and buying their prints. Yet, when J.-Cl. Lemagny came to head the Department of photographs of the Cabinet des estampes, the collection held no American photographer.

### **New Developments**

Thus in the late 1970's and early 1980's the basic elements for a serious development of photography slowly came to existence, strongly shaped by American models, but never with the efficiency, synergy and comprehensiveness of those of the New World. However, they allowed a development of creation in France and an improved dissemination of photography (American photography in particular came first by the sheer weight of its demography, production and means of communication). The American example thus played both as a reference and an incentive while it unleashed the creative forces in this country, and changed

the place of photography in French cultural life. The movement was part of a great cultural revolution which took place around 1981—a major political landmark in the French political landscape— and which was probably more accompanied than initiated by the Socialist government. It is difficult to see if there was any coherent policy in the art field, but there seemed to have been some causal relationship between the access of some people to positions of power and strong initiatives in favor of the arts: regional funds (FRAC), a specialized school (ENP), museum policy, new curricula in high schools. Photography being better known in the early 1980's it also became an instrument for the promotion of cities such as Paris where Jacques Chirac, advised by Jean-Louis Monterosso, created a structure (Paris Audio-Visuel<sup>16</sup>) and a festival (Le Mois de la photo), and other cities followed. In such active development and despite a strong component of anti-Americanism in French officials, the American models kept playing their part on people who prepared the decisions. The ENP is a case in point.

The ENP was created in 1982 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture as a follow up on the RIP. It was launched as one of the program of public works of François Mitterand's first term. The original blueprint had been submitted a few years earlier (1979) by Alain Desvergnès who was then in charge of the workshops at the RIP since 1978. His career is symbolic of the indirect but quite obvious influence of the New World on the Old. Alain Desvergnès was born in France but began his academic career at the University of Mississippi; then he went to the University of Ottawa where he set up a visual study workshop roughly at the same time as Danny Lyons created his in Rochester. About the coincidence Desvergnès says that his own workshop came first by a couple of years and that Lyons and he did not know each other. Yet what is most significant is not the chronology but the fact that such an idea which would be the basis for the RIP workshops and eventually for the ENP was allowed to mature in the North American university system and not in France. The ENP, now celebrating its 10th anniversary, has established its reputation and has been followed by a variety of institutions of higher education not all of which were inspired by the American model but all of which owe a lot to the unleashing of energies through the American model.

---

<sup>16</sup> Paris Audio Visuel is the co-publisher of *La Recherche photographique* and the originator of La Maison européenne de la photographie.

In the late 1970's photographers were published mostly thanks to Le Chêne and Contrejour publishing houses, and the time was ripe for a critical establishment to be born. Photographic criticism in the press had existed sporadically since the 1960's but newspapers or newsmagazines devoted very little space to photography or the arts in general (as a matter of fact until the advent of the new remodeled depoliticized version of *Libération* in 1982, cultural pages in newspapers were very limited). Around 1977, photo columns were established with specialized writers, the leading publications in the field being Le Figaro (which launched the first photo column in a daily with Michel Nuridsany in 1971, and *Le Monde*, first with Hervé Guibert (1977) then with Patrick Roegiers (1985).<sup>17</sup> Then Roland Barthes wrote his seminal *Camera Lucida* (1981) which soon became a major landmark. In the field of specialized photo criticism the Association de Critique Contemporaine en Photographie (ACCP) was formed and it began publishing a journal: *Les Cahiers de la photographie* (1981), soon followed by *Photographies* (1983) and by *La Recherche photographique* (1986).

French critics were encouraged in their thinking by the work of American critics but also by the most powerful American photographers (Evans, Friedlander, etc.). Yet, they did not imitate the Americans and their approach neither followed the strict historical approach of American academia or that strongly influenced by avant-garde painting and indicial art (*October*). The example of French criticism and its originality gives us an interesting example of a liberating influence which did not lead to servility. It developed an original critical position reintegrating the discourse of structuralism and linguistics to work on the specificity of the photographic medium, using the bases of semiotics but also of literary criticism, and foremost the critic Maurice Blanchot, a fact which accounts for the literary approach of much French creative photography.

But the other type of support, the "market" did not follow as quickly. One can even say that it still is in limbo. Yet, if "the market still does not do justice to the quality of French creation"<sup>18</sup>, galleries were, before museums, a powerful source of education and the place where American photography of the best kind could be seen. The great spring of galleries was the second half of the 1970's. They were to pave the way for greater institutional involvement (institutions "climbed onto the bandwagon" to quote Michèle Chomette) in the

---

<sup>17</sup> Also in *Le Matin de Paris* (Henry Chapier, 1977, weekly), *Le Nouvel Observateur* (left wing weekly) in 1977-1978 which published several special issues on photography.

<sup>18</sup> Michèle Chomette, interview with the author, April 22, 1992.

early 1980's. In 1971 Pierre de Fenoyl opened the small "Rencontres" gallery, and the BN its own photo gallery, in 1974, in Toulouse, the photographer Jean Dieuzaide opened his "Galerie du Château d'Eau" (whose importance is due to both the quality of its exhibitions and its being "en province"), in 1977 Agathe Gaillard opened hers and also in 1977 probably the most important place after the CCA opened: the Galerie Zabriskie. Zabriskie is interesting in that it was opened by an American gallerist and that it showed almost exclusively American photography (with a few exceptions for French photography), and masters (Stieglitz, Evans, Weegee, Callahan, Strand, Frank) as well as contemporary creation (Papageorge, Klein, Friedlander, Nixon, Meyerowitz). Michèle Chomette, who started operating as an agent and curator in 1977 but only opened her exhibition space in 1985, was also a driving force in the recognition of American photography in Europe. In the 1980's the development of the market was greatly reinforced by public commissions. Cities, regions, great corporations became image-conscious and wanted to build or explore a visual heritage, Such as, for instance, the "Mission photographique de la Direction à l'aménagement du territoire," the "Mission photographique Transmanche". This created new sources of income for photographers and gave birth to exhibitions, and local collections which in turn formed the public's eye.

### **Aesthetics**

Lastly, but to a lesser extent, American photography influenced French photography aesthetically. One has to be most careful in this respect: everything can be connected to everything else and practices which are similar in appearance (the autobiography for instance) may very well be radically different in content and implications. This aesthetic effect is indeed most difficult to measure and is to some extent paradoxical. French photography developed somewhat differently from American photography but the strength of some American schools decidedly shaped the domestic scene, or rather it had a displacing influence more than it created an explicit following.

Aesthetically American photography was a facilitator which allowed French creative photography to build itself against the weight of the cultural heritage. It started with an imitation of American practices which evolved into a transformation and assimilation of these references (Bernard Descamps, Bernard Plossu, Arnaud Claass). The backlash of The Family of Man exhibition and the wake of marxo-structuralist criticism of its ideology came to reorganize the aesthetic scene. Yet, the effect was more philosophical than visual. Robert Frank

who could have crystallized these ideas and part of a budding rebellion against the father (Cartier-Bresson) in the late 1950's and early 1960's was not known well enough. Neither was William Klein, for reasons discussed above, who, with *New York* (1956) offered a powerful antidote to the Family of Man. After 1956, and simultaneously with The Family of Man exhibit, the professional groups (such as the Groupe des XV) and salons disappeared as photographers were now more and more isolated individuals: photography indeed was veering away from industry or crafts towards the other arts. The break came with the "American style" (i.e. Friedlander, Winogrand, Arbus) which allowed a reconciliation of avant-garde form (abstraction) and photographic realism in the acceptance of the banal (see Plossu's *Surbanalisme*) and of the anti-decisive moment: the founding tenet of French photography since the war, perfectly well embodied by HCB and summed up in the preface to *Images à la sauvette* (1952), the idea according to which photography was the recording of an *objective* outside reality crumbled to be replaced by the idea of a *photographic* reality (the *subject* matter being replaced by the photographic *object*).<sup>19</sup> Thus the Americans brought the French their conception of the photograph as an operation of the mind and recreated the ties between photography and the visual arts which had disappeared since the 1930's and the surrealists.

In a way American photography because of its institutional recognition, especially in universities, naturally opened the way for a generalization of mixed media and for the inclusion of photography in the domain of living contemporary art. This has been the main fight of at least two gallerists. Virginia Zabriskie explicitly wrote that: "after having tried to better understand my personal vision of this art I have become convinced that after the cinema photography is the richest artistic tool of the 20th century. So why cut it from painting and the other plastic arts?" Michèle Chomette for her part struggles "year after year for an inclusion of photography in a global policy of the visual arts,...a confrontation of artists, whatever their medium...as today the most interesting evolutions in contemporary art occur through photography."<sup>20</sup>

The ever-powerful school of landscape photography and its 1970-1980 developments seemed to have reinjected an interest in the landscape in French

---

<sup>19</sup> Mora, *ibid.*, p. 51; see J.-Cl. Lemagny, *20 ans de photographie créative en France, 68/88, Les Cahiers de la photographie* 24, p.145.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Zabriskie, "Une lettre ouverte de Virginia Zabriskie," *Zabriskie, Gazette d'informations photographiques*, vol. IV, n° 1 (hiver 1981) [original in French]; Michèle Chomette, interview with the author, April 22, 1992.

photography.<sup>21</sup> The definition by photography of a specific territory was indeed the great lesson of American photography and thus “America became the object of a mythology of the eye transferred onto the French landscape.”<sup>22</sup> This allowed new visions of the territory to develop especially through survey projects directly inherited from the American experience such as the landscape project of the DATAR (modeled after the FSA), and that of the Cross-Channel Photographic Project which, however, remained more European in its developments, as well as in the works of Bruno Réquillard, Bernard Descamps and Yves Guillot, all strongly influenced by the New World.

The third greatly successful field in French photography (where it developed much more than in the United States precisely because of its literary, philosophical quality) was that of staged photography, or, more generally, photography constructed to express an artist’s phantasies—sexual or otherwise. Arthur Tress, Duane Michals, Les Krims, were among the best known and most appreciated photographers. These photographers who subverted reality were represented at the RIP and very regularly shown in *Photo* magazine.

#### **IV) Towards a temporary evaluation**

Although it might be anathema to utter such words in our “liberated” age, I would say that the relationship between France and the US in the field of photography has been an instance of good colonialism. Indeed the close analysis of the case makes it necessary to describe it so. Twenty years ago the situation indeed closely resembled that of colonial exchange: one way and exclusive (France discovered American photography but was almost totally ignorant of photography in other European countries). There are limits, however, to the metaphor: the savages already had the bottle, they only needed a cork screw. French photography needed some outside help to find its true stature: aesthetic challenge to help it accept its own darings, institutional help to provide support for growth. America was ready aesthetically and economically to provide both. It

---

<sup>21</sup> Michèle Chomette, Lewis Baltz’s agent for Europe, notes, however, that it took ten years for Baltz to be recognized by the institutions: The Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris for instance hardly paid any attention to his work in the early 1980’s, and she did not sell any print during and after the first exhibition of his works she curated (and which was her first exhibition as gallerist). This, however, reflects more on buying habits and policies, the sociology of photography and collections, than on Baltz’s intellectual influence: he was very soon established as a master (early 1980’s). It must, however, be noted that the first photographs by Baltz entered the collection at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1973, another sign of its pioneering role.

<sup>22</sup> Mora, *ibid.*, p 52.

had the product and the channels, we had the need. The tide naturally flowed eastward.<sup>23</sup>

Many French photographers until the 1970's became reporter-photographers because they felt an urge to rush into the street; it was a way to experience the world. Now younger people become photographers because they see themselves as artists. For a whole generation photography meant American photography. Then the *American* model of development began to have some effects on French institutions. At the same time, for political reasons a European identity was emerging and around 1985-1987, by all accounts, the real hegemony of American photography dwindled and disappeared. The French now have their own circuits (exhibitions, books, collections, schools) and are developing in very interesting directions within the context of a European specificity. Simultaneously American photography has lately offered less stimulating work even though American photographers still manage to disseminate their images widely thanks to their weight, reputation and channels. The ambiguity between creation and decorative photography—most visible in the work of the colorists—and the relative repetitiveness of the work of younger artists, appears less interesting to young French photographers. Also in many respects the gap between the two countries has been partially bridged. “When we discovered Diane Arbus and Lee Friedlander we had everything to learn. But today.... At some point you have to realize that you cannot discover America twice,” remarks Lemagny.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> What now appears very clearly is that Americans have not reciprocated, quite the contrary. The assessment among some of the most active French supporters of American artists is rather harsh: while France and Europe still welcomes American photographers, the United States is almost impossible to penetrate either because of parochialism, protectionism or an inability to understand the issues raised in European photography.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the author, May 15, 1992.