

**A Blinding Flash of Light: Photography Between Disciplines and Media** by David Tomas Les éditions Daziboa, Montreal, CA, 2004 367 pp., illus. Paper, \$27.00 ISBN: 2-922135-21-7.

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A survey of more than three decades of theoretical and artistic research in the field of photography, David Tomas' book is a major contribution to a broad range of subjects that are at the very centre of our current multimedia and multidisciplinary approach of art, technology, and culture. Both an artist and a scholar (although the word "both" may be slightly deceiving since it supposes certain boundaries that the author convincingly challenges), David Tomas proposes a refreshing theory of photography, which he manages to combine with a fascinating reading of the way knowledge is institutionally constructed (and, of course, also blocked or hindered) by academic, disciplinary, and political boundaries in modern and postmodern society. Photography is here no longer considered from the viewpoint of the *product*, i.e. of the image, but from that of the *process*, i.e. of the image-making (in this respect, there are some similarities with the basic stance hold by Patrick Maynard in *Thinking Through Photography* (1997) even though Tomas's approach is much broader). This major shift provides the basis for an anthropological interpretation of photography, which David Tomas elaborates with the help of several frameworks: anthropology (the main reference here is the work by the early 20-th century French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep), semiotics (which Tomas uses as a kind of interdisciplinary meta-language and which help him to link the dialectical relationships of light and darkness with the successive aspects of Van Gennep's theory of ritual processes, such as separation, margin, and aggregation). Corollarily, the move from product to process engenders also a completely different artistic use of the medium (given his refusal of the image's priority, Tomas has made many experiments with overexposed pictures of the sun, whose total "whiteness" makes room for experiencing and theorizing the stakes of all the other, process-linked aspects of photography). Here, the main reference is the heritage of conceptual art, with its double emphasis on the institutional aspects not just of "art" (as in the Duchampian revolution), but also of knowledge-construction itself (a crucial role is here devoted to the intervention of language, text, books, and the university as the new "biotope" for the postmodern artist-scholar). The book is divided in six chapters, each of them containing first an introduction situating with great clarity the problem or the point to be made, second one or more reprinted articles that are revised and reedited for the book, and third a postscript that provides a new contextualization. The global structure is chronological. Despite some repetitions that might have been reduced in one the sections (that on the semiotic reading of photography as socio-symbolic process), this structure gives a fascinating insight in the way the author has been thinking on photography since the early 70s: the reader sees how new ways of theorizing produce new ways of photographing, and vice versa (and he may also realize that it was possible from the very 70s to critically engage with Benjamin's ideas on the aura). The main thread that runs throughout the whole book is the question, "What is photography?" but this possibly essentialist approach is connected with great strength to a global theory of the way technology is used in order to produce knowledge, understanding, and interaction. For Tomas, photography is a key medium in technological culture for many reasons, not simply for historical reasons, as the first of "new media", but as a short-cut to the decisive features of intermediality and

interdisciplinarity. Bridging the gap between art and technology, or between nature and culture, photography is for Tomas the perfect device to foreground some sound ideas on knowledge-producing, such as the idea that good interdisciplinarity should be able to produce new objects (and not just different viewpoints on already known subjects) and that innovation in subject matter is therefore a necessity of media innovation. The examples of Tomas's own creative research, such as for instance the work on the encounter of the book and the Internet ("The Encoded Eye", first published in *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*) and which link, following the basic observation made by Henry Adams, the "medium" of transportation (the railway system) and the "medium" of photography (as a process of moving through time and space), are a clear and stimulating example of what the book stands for.

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