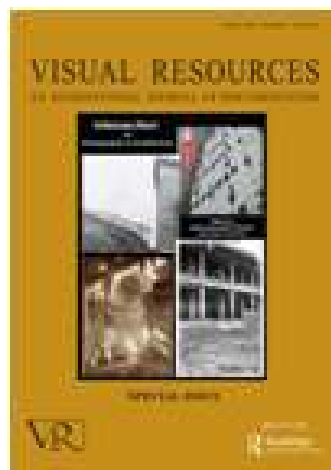


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Gio Ponti, “Discorso sull’arte fotografica”(1932)

Maria Antonella Pelizzari

In 1932, Gio Ponti (1891–1979) published in *Domus*—the architectural magazine he had founded in 1928—his “Discorso sull’arte fotografica” (Discussion on the Art of Photography), in which he stated the importance of photography as an independent art. He illustrated the essay with photographs by Guido Pellegrini (1886–1955), president of the newly created Circolo Fotografico Milanese (1930–1980), who had pursued an aesthetics of abstraction and objectivity, inspired by earlier Bauhaus and Constructivist schools. Ponti’s essay reflects an important moment of dialogue between photographic and architectural culture in Italy, when magazines like *Domus* and *Casabella* became important vehicles in showcasing international publications and portfolios and architects embraced photography as a modern vision. Ponti’s commitment to photography was also marked by the exhibition of international photography that he curated at the 1933 Milan Triennale, where nine countries—Italy among them—were represented. These statements on photography reflect also the complexity of Italian culture, where the excitement about modern photography and architecture coincided with the establishment of the Fascist regime. Ponti’s essay is proposed here for the first time in English translation by this author.

Keywords: *Ponti, Gio (1891–1979); Domus; Architectural Magazines; Rationalism; Circolo Fotografico Milanese; Pellegrini, Guido (1908–1976); Milan Triennale; Fascism*

Gio Ponti’s “Discorso sull’arte fotografica” (Discussion on the Art of Photography) is symptomatic of a particular moment in Italian culture when architecture, photography, and graphic arts formed a cohesive unit in shaping a modern visual vocabulary.¹ The main Italian architectural magazines in the 1930s—*Domus* and *Casabella*, both founded in 1928—became important vehicles of information about art photography, presenting reviews of new photo-books released in France and Germany, publishing international photographic portfolios, and fostering a critical discussion on what constituted this medium’s avant-garde. The architect and industrial designer Gio Ponti (1891–1979), editor of *Domus* between 1928 and 1941, and then again after 1947, was an important spokesperson for this generation; on the other hand, the editorial work of architect and designer Giuseppe Pagano (1896–1945) and art critic Edoardo Persico (1900–1936) for *Casabella* included photography within a larger discourse that championed European rationalism in architecture.²

Italian photographic circles had started to debate what constituted the essence of modern photography earlier on, in the twenties, as publications like the Turin-based *Il Corriere Fotografico*, with its annual portfolio *Luci e Ombre* (1923–1934), showcased the first experiments in abstraction and objectivity. However, it was particularly in the thirties, and with the contribution of architects like Gio Ponti, that the discussion on



GUIDO PELLEGRINI - MILANO
Stelle filanti.

GIO PONTI

DISCORSO SULL'ARTE FOTOGRAFICA

1° FOTOGRAFIA E PITTURA

Una delle funzioni della pittura, nel passato, era quella documentaria: attraverso effigi e composizioni documentare uomini e fatti, protagonisti e storia.

Questa funzione documentaria le è stata tolta dalla fotografia. Prima timidamente, attraverso il ritratto, poi in pieno, moltiplicata dalla stampa, ed oggi ad *abbandoniam*, poiché la fotografia ci dà degli uomini e dei fatti immagini plurime e simultanee; essa, come documento, ci dà quantitativamente più che non desse la pittura, che è sintesi.

Questo è il carattere della fotografia come mezzo documentario: essa delle cose ci mostra infiniti aspetti, e fra questi alcuni, estrappati da tempi e spazii eccezionali ad un istante critico, coglie un'espressione culminante, indimenticabile, dirompente: basti ricordare talune fotografie del Duce, quella di lui oratore col braccio levato al balcone, un'altra a cavallo. Così la fotografia giunge « per eccezione » ad un valore, ad un carattere documentario quasi assoluti, carattere al quale la pittura giungeva per sintesi.

Ma le due arti sono oggi fatalmente dissociate. L'una, l'arte di servirsi della fotografia, è l'arte di « vedere » le immagini; l'altra, la pittura, l'arte di « creare » le immagini. L'una è vista pura; l'altra è visione.

Però la fotografia non è solo documento, essa è oggi qualcosa di più. Se la fotografia ci ha dato prima quasi un timido surrogato della pittura, poi un documento, oggi essa ci dà addirittura una « vista » ulteriore; una vista astratta, mediata, composta, una vista che « mostra volta » vediamo; una vista indipendente, autonoma, che moltiplica, inola la cosa « il momento veduto, che li frammenta e nel tempo stesso li fissa.

2° NUOVA REALTÀ FOTOGRAFICA

La fotografia non è sempre fedele alle cose come noi le vediamo, appunto perché essa è una vista indipendente, astratta, dirompente. Della fotografia occorre servirsi con arte; quest'arte è già il saper « raggiungere » con essa ciò che noi già vediamo e intendiamo nelle cose: ma non è qui tutto, la indipendenza stessa della vista fotografica ci ha ancora rivelato a sua volta un inedito aspetto delle cose, ci ha portato una tutta nuova comprensione, un tutto nuovo senso di cose e dell'interpretarne le immagini.

Quali e quante cose oggi ci appaiono, quindi sono, soltanto attraverso l'immagine fotografica? *L'osservazione fotografica è*

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Figure 1 Domus 4, no. 5 (May 1932): 285. Page 1 of Gio Ponti's "Discorso sull'arte fotografica." Photograph by Guido Pellegrini. Image courtesy the Biblioteca del Progetto—La Triennale di Milano, Italy.

photography became part of a larger cultural context. Ponti, who was not a photographer, supported the increasing number of amateur groups, and chose to publish his "Discorso" first in a photographic magazine, *Fotografia*, representative of the Circolo Fotografico Milanese (1930–1980); the essay was reprinted soon after in *Domus*, where Ponti selected five images by Guido Pellegrini (1886–1955), the president of the new photographic group in Milan (Figures 1–2).

Ponti's engagement with photography, together with that of other architects and graphic artists during the thirties (like Pagano, Persico, Enrico Peressutti [1908–1976], Antonio Boggeri [1900–1989]) contributed to broaden the international horizon of this medium in Italy, as works and publications reached this country, spreading a knowledge of photomontage, abstraction, industrial photography, and still life, from East and West—Russia, Germany, France, Japan, and the United States. This architect's engagement with photography as a transnational art was marked by his curatorial project at



Figure 2 *Domus 4*, no. 5 (May 1932): 286–87. Pages 2 and 3 of Gio Ponti's "Discorso sull'arte fotografica." Photographs by Guido Pellegrini. Images courtesy the Biblioteca del Progetto—La Triennale di Milano, Italy.

the 1933 Milan Triennale, where he presented a selection of forty-three Italian authors within a larger group of photographers chosen from nine European countries (Figure 3). For the first time, internationally renowned Albert Renger-Patzsch (1897–1966), Herbert Bayer (1900–1985), Dora Maar (1907–1997), and Germaine Krull (1897–1985) were represented beside works by Italian authors like Vincenzo Balocchi (1892–1975), Achille Bologna (1888–1958), Italo Bertoglio (1871–1963), Ferruccio Leiss (1892–1963), and Bruno Stefani (1901–1978)—authors who had pursued a similar vocabulary of high objectivity and industrial aesthetics, choosing eschewed perspectives and camera manipulation as their formulas. This Triennale, historically significant because of its location in Giovanni Muzio's newly built Palazzo dell'Arte (1933), showcased, also, a spectacular structure designed by Gio Ponti: his Torre Littoria (1933), built with Dalmine steel technology, with an interior elevator and a small panoramic café-terrace on top, dominated the roofs of Milan like a new dynamic symbol of art and technology. Represented in two photographs published in the 1933 V Triennale catalog, Ponti's new construction (Figure 4) was seen through radical viewpoints from above and from below, which conveyed a dizzying displacement and resembled Moholy-Nagy's radical shots taken from the Berlin Radio Tower, in 1928.³

Similar to these photographic renderings, the ideas articulated in Ponti's "Discorso" resonated with earlier statements by Moholy-Nagy, whose Bauhaus publication *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (1925) was certainly known to him.⁴ The emphasis on photography as an independent expression, no longer subdued to documentary tasks, and no longer considered as "a timid surrogate of painting,"⁵ was tuned to Moholy's



Figure 3 Installation of *International Exhibition of Photography*, V Triennale di Milano, 1933. Photograph (uncredited). Image courtesy the Biblioteca del Progetto—La Triennale di Milano, Italy.

writing about this medium as autonomous “production” versus derivative “reproduction”—and it is significant, to this regard, that Ponti reflected on x-ray, telephotography, and micro-photography as new forms of visualization of the distant and invisible.

What is also worth mentioning here is that Ponti translated the lesson of revolutionary Russian photography and liberal Bauhaus theories into a specific historical moment that was ruled in Italy by Fascism. This aspect has not been discussed in any previous histories of photography, and it is significant, to this regard, that the only Italian reprint of this essay omitted Ponti’s political dimension—the lines in his “Discorso” where he described the photographic portraits of the Duce’s (Benito Mussolini, 1883–1945) heroic gestures as examples of successful photography, intent in grasping the moment of history in the making.⁶ Ponti’s preference for these photographic snapshots against more traditional “synthetic” portrait painting resonated, in 1932, with similar observations that Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1946) had made in 1928, when he had championed photography as a dynamic representation, recorded in time, of the gestures and speeches of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924).⁷ Whether or not Ponti was aware of Rodchenko’s observations, it is clear from these words that radically new media awareness had taken hold in Italy in the early thirties, as Fascism was in place. As Ponti confirmed, the theory of photography as copy of the real—as original copy—permeated other media like radio and cinema, and other journalists and intellectuals like Ugo Ojetto (1871–1946) were involved in explaining the impact of this new mediated life. Anticipating here what Walter Benjamin would articulate in much more extended form in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936),

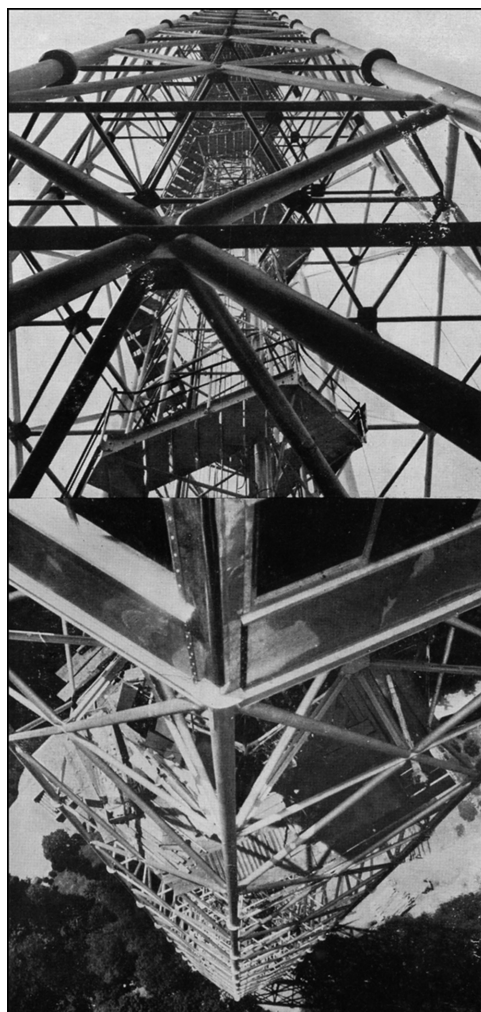


Figure 4 Gio Ponti, Torre Littoria (1933). Photographs (uncredited). Illustrations in *Triennale di Milano V 1933*, exh. cat. (Milan, Casa Editrice Ceschina, 1933), n.p. Image courtesy the Biblioteca del Progetto—La Triennale di Milano, Italy.

Ponti's "Discorso" proves the interdisciplinary involvement of Italian architects of this period who were conscious of the media-based quality of their work within a new regime that celebrated modernity and viewed photography as the art of the present.

Discussion on the Art of Photography⁸

1. Photography and Painting

In the past, one of the main functions of painting was documentary; creating images and compositions, painters documented people and facts, the important protagonists and their history.

Such a documentary function was taken away by photography; first with the photographic portrait, then with printing and photomechanical reproduction, and now, abundantly, as photography renders multiple and simultaneous images of people and events. As a document, it provides us with much more quantitative information than painting, which is about synthesis.

This is the character of photography as a documentary medium: it shows an infinite amount of details, and at times, if the photographer is able to capture an image in the critical instant, it can grasp a decisive expression, unforgettable, and we could say, *total*. One only has to think about photographs of the Duce, caught in the moment of giving a speech on a balcony, with his arm lifted, or riding a horse. Thus photography reaches an *exceptionally* high point, with an almost absolute documentary quality—a quality that, in the past, painting could only find through synthesis.

Today these two arts are fatally separated. On the one hand, the art of using photography is considered the art of "seeing" images; on the other hand, painting is deemed the art of "creating" images. One is pure sight; the other one is vision.

But photography is not only a document. Today, it is something more. If photography used to be a timid surrogate of painting, and then became a document, today it offers us an even further "vision". This is an abstract vision, mediated and assembled, a vision that we are able to "see again;" this is an independent vision, autonomous, which multiplies into many images; which isolates an object or a moment, and breaks them up, then fixes them forever.

2. The New Reality of Photography

Photography is not always faithful to the way we see the world because it consists of an independent vision, abstract and inhuman. One ought to use photography with skill: such a skill consists in the capacity to "grasp" what we already see and understand in the world. But this is not all. The independent photographic vision reveals to us an unusual aspect of things and gives us a whole new understanding of how to interpret images.

How many things today are presented to us, and therefore *are*, only through the photographic image! *Photographic aberration is in many ways our true reality*; in many ways, it is even our knowledge, and thus our *judgment*. Photography has a huge importance. It features a major part of our visual learning. *Nihil est in intellecta quod non fuerit in sensu*: with photography perception is mediated by what is filtered through the mind.

Ojetti has noted, in his discussion of cinema, gramophone, radio, that reality has been replaced by a mediated reality, which he has defined as an *escape from the real*, or concealment from the real. The consequences of the large diffusion of these new media are countless—and these are not, as they might appear, "transportation vehicles" of images and sounds. These media, that conceal the real, are the new reality; they are, by now, our "originals"; the artist who records a song or is photographed is the "producer" of the music, or of the image; and this music

or image are *authentic* for us. Today the original is the copy, not the creation; nor is it a novelty that our song imitates the tone of the machine, thus its copy (the record); similarly, our vision has assimilated, and mimicked the aesthetics of photographic snapshots in the art of drawing.

And there is even an other *reality* for us, the *photographic reality*. Today we are accustomed to it. It is the reality of photographic vision that travels across bodies (x-rays), that goes near things with monstrous enlargements, that is capable of reaching with telephotography those beings “that have never been observed.” Photography has made all these images *natural*; it multiplies them tirelessly, isolating, scrutinizing, and distorting; today it is an essential part of our knowledge, something that shapes knowledge; without photography we would return to a state of blindness about many aspects of things, and of the things themselves.

It is this demanding and relentless research towards “a vision” that animates the art of using photography, a medium that was first subordinate to painting, and now is completely independent.

Photography does not only have to pursue the truth thanks to its perfect sense of timing by capturing the zenith of physical movement, which already qualifies photography as art. As photography becomes free in its creative possibilities and playfulness, in its unflinching sharp vision, this art must pursue and represent its own truth, which we can only perceive through the lens, and which remains hidden from the direct perception of our senses.

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- 1 Gio Ponti, “Discorso sull’arte fotografica,” *Fotografia* 1 (1932): n.p.; *Domus* 4, no. 5 (1932): 285–87.
- 2 See Hélène Jannière, *Politiques éditoriales et architecture “moderne”: L’émergence de nouvelles revues en France et Italie (1923–1939)* (Paris: Arguments, 2002). The publication of Ponti’s “Discorso” follows a series of other communications in *Domus* throughout 1931 and 1932. See, in particular, Ponti’s essay on the volume “Photographie” edited by Charles Peignot for *Arts et métiers graphiques* in 1931 (and illustrated

as a selection in *Domus*, April 1932 and September 1932). Similarly, Persico contributed several essays to *Casabella* (titled *La Casa Bella* until 1933) in 1931, discussing new German publications by Franz Roh (1890–1965) and publishing photographs by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), Aenne Bierman (1898–1933), Umbo (Otto Umbehrr; 1902–1980), and Martin Munkacsi (1896–1963). See also Silvia Paoli, "L'Annuario di Domus del 1943," in Tiziana Serena, ed., *Per Paolo Costantini. Fotografia e raccolte fotografiche*, I (Pisa: Centro di Ricerche Informatiche per i Beni Culturali, Scuola Normale Superiore, 1998), 99–129.

- 3 *Triennale di Milano V 1933*, exh. cat. (Milan, Casa Editrice Ceschina, 1933).
- 4 *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, Bauhausbücher 8 (Munich, Albert Langen Verlag, 1925).
- 5 Ponti, "Discorso," *Domus*, 285.
- 6 Gio Ponti's "Discorso" published in Italo Zannier, *Leggere la fotografia. Le riviste specializzate in Italia (1863–1990)* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1993), 88–89.
- 7 Alexander Rodchenko, "Against the Synthetic Portrait, for the Snapshot," in Christopher Phillips, *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913–1940* (New York: Aperture, 1989), 238–42.
- 8 This is my translation, published for the first time in English. I wish to thank Salvatore Licitra, Gio Ponti Archives, for giving me permission to publish this translation.