

# an interview with christian patterson

## AUTHORS

Daniel Augschöll, Anya Jasbar, Christian Patterson.

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# interview with christian patterson, part one: bottom of the lake

A\_ One of the first things that impresses us about *Bottom of the Lake* is its juxtaposition of the telephone book's own text and graphics, your images and other visual content, and the marginalia and notes throughout the book. All of this material creates a space where the act of reading and seeing the book could be repeated indefinitely. Every time we look at the book we see something new. We see your personal connection to the material. We see you and your work speaking directly to the reader/viewer, keeping him aware of your process, reminding him of how photography and storytelling work.

CP When I first began exploring the idea of making work in Fond du Lac, a few fortunate experiences presented the work's primary conceptual layers and visual motifs to me. I was visiting my parents' house and decided to go digging through boxes in their basement and found my family's copy of the 1973 Fond du Lac Telephone Directory. It was the telephone book printed just after I was born. A wave of nostalgia washed over me, then as it rolled way I saw a depth in the book and all it contained.

A telephone book is a fairly exhaustive, factual record of a specific place and time, and most of the people and places it contains. It's very objective, and it has a lot of breadth – its information spreads out widely, across an entire city and its population. My memory and imagination of that place looking back and over time is a different kind of thing; it's highly subjective, but this lends its own, additional, more personal

depth to the experience of the place. What I've discovered is that I enjoy mixing these different ways of documenting, seeing and thinking. When they're mixed, something different and new is formed; an "other" little world within the work.

My version of the telephone directory, as *Bottom of the Lake*, has the visual layers you mention – the book's own text and graphics; my text, graphics, markings and marginalia; and all of the photographs, drawings, pieces of paper and ephemera (bumper stickers and matchbooks) inserted into the book. It has bigger, broader conceptual layers to consider, like place, time and memory. It has smaller, more specific themes like the local climate (winter, ice and snow) and culture (drinking and fishing) and iconography (the lake and the lighthouse), and the cultural and political context of the time (Nixon, Watergate, the gas crisis). And then there's the telephone too, (like the lighthouse, a long-distance communication device), taken apart and put back together in a different way.

I also think the experience of the book you describe is partly due to the telephone book itself; it's 256 pages long and densely packed with information. The "White Pages" feel intimate and personal; when I see all of the names, addresses and telephone numbers, I think about people, families and homes, and I'm amazed by the possibility of picking up the phone and calling someone – to "reach out and touch someone." Sadly, this is a phenomenon that we're slowly losing now with the widespread use of mobile phones, the disappearance of the telephone book and the lack of published names and numbers. The business listings, or "Yellow Pages" feel less personal to me, but the business names, slogans, graphic illustrations and cartoon characters that appear in that part of the book have their own appeal. I think the experience of the book is reflective of all this, and when combined with the visual layers I've added, there's quite a lot to take in.

A\_ The first few elements that for us are the real incipit of the book, and that in particular direct attention to the role of the narrator, are “What Lies Ahead?,” “Do Not Rely on Memory,” and the image of an inserted booklet page that reads, “The purpose of this booklet is to present an honest and clear picture of Fond du Lac and the delightfully prosperous section of Wisconsin in which it is located. It cannot contain all of the information everyone desires. Citizens, boys and girls, read it seriously.”

CP In addition to whatever subject matter I’m interested in at any particular time, I’m really interested in conceptual and visual layering, and playing with narrative and structure as they relate to the subject itself. I like working with all of these things together, simultaneously, to construct something, then deconstruct and ultimately fragment it. Both photography and books can each do this very, very well; and each in their own special way. When photography and the book form are brought together, a really powerful, special kind of story making can happen (not just story telling, but story making). And I’m not only interested in this process, I’ve become increasingly interested in showing it, and I’ve tried to bring that a bit closer to the surface with *Bottom of the Lake*, through both text and image.

“What Lies Ahead?” is a question with its own answer, depending on how it is punctuated, read or interpreted. As a question, it asks what is about to happen. But as an answer, it seems to accuse or declare that what is about to happen, or what we are about to see, is not entirely true. “What Lies Ahead?” and a few other text pieces in the book are cut-up anti-Nixon bumper stickers. Nixon was a big liar. And in a strange way, within the context of my own work, I’m directing accusations at myself and making declarations

about my methods and my way of putting my work together.

“Do Not Rely on Memory” is a text printed in the original telephone book itself. It’s an instruction given to the users of the book, reminding them to look up names and numbers and avoid misdialed or wrong numbers when trying to place a call or make a connection. But as the Telephone Directory becomes the Bottom of the Lake, the phrase is re-contextualized and relates to my work and its interests in photography, memory and time. There’s an inherent, shaky unreliability in these things, but to me there are advantages in that. So I circled the phrase in red ink – exactly like the disembodied hand circling numbers in red ink in the stock photograph on the back cover of the book. But I also drew a red string around the finger dialing the telephone – it’s a small thing one does to try to prevent the failure of memory. Photography tries to fight the failure of memory but often fails. Fortunately, that often leads to something altogether different yet interesting in its own right.

Lastly, the “Read it Seriously” insert is a page from an old Chamber of Commerce brochure advertising Fond du Lac as a delightful place to live. The text is curious in its own self-contradiction and negation, stating the pamphlet’s purpose as presenting an “honest and clear picture” and then admitting its own shortcomings, saying it “cannot contain all of the information everyone desires.” And then, finally, it changes its mind and contradicts itself again, instructing readers to “read it seriously.” It’s as if the text professes its good intentions but confesses its own shortcomings. It admits an incomplete picture, an unavoidable void. It leaves you unsure of what to believe. Or, perhaps it suggests that a fiction can hold its own kind of truth.

There are also images that show process, or show my hand in their own way. The telephone book led me to research telephone advertising imagery, and there’s a section in the

book where telephone ads on torn magazine pages are used in successively different ways. The first one is simple, and entirely visual; it shows a red receiver and transistors on a red backdrop. The magazine page is slightly folded where it falls into the gutter of the book. It's followed by a photograph of snow on a windshield, resembling noise or static. The second ad shows two white-gloved hands placing a blue telephone into its box on a factory assembly line. This magazine page is folded back more than the previous one and reveals a second set of hands. It's followed by my own photograph of two white-gloved hands removing an identical blue telephone from an identical box, sitting on red paper, and the setting is clearly a studio. The placement and angle of the objects is identical, but the context and implication have changed. Here, the distance between images is short – just the turn of a single page. The third ad shows all the parts of a disassembled black rotary telephone laid out on paper. My own photograph of a deconstructed phone (this one is blue) is placed directly atop a torn magazine page showing the source image it recreates. The bottom of the ad peeks out from under my image and reads, "Put them together and dial anywhere." And, in making *Bottom of the Lake*, and especially the interactive telephone object, I've done just that.

A\_        How much do you think that a photobook relies on narrative methods that we know from other disciplines (i.e. storytelling in general, or more concrete literary techniques or devices)?

CP        I think a lot about the book form, and how the reader/viewer's expectations are conditioned, and how their experiences are grounded in the basic, physical experience of the book form. I think about the book as an object, held in one's hands, with pages touched and turned, usually in

sequence. Our experience of each and every book begins there, whether we like it or not.

I also think about narrative techniques and structural devices that can be utilized in books. Photography books have traditionally taken a very basic approach to sequence, whereas many contemporary books take a more complex approach. One approach is not better than another; each approach must complement, reinforce and strengthen the work to which it is applied. I still enjoy the simple beauty and strength of nothing but good photographs presented in a very simple way. But I'm personally more interested in something else; and that often includes more than just photographs.

I've been thinking a lot about narrative techniques – foreshadowing, flashbacks, various framing devices. The challenge, and the key, is not just leading the reader/viewer into something, but through it to some extent as well, with or without a marked end or exit on the other side. Photography can do this very well, but I think photography books are just beginning to scratch the surface of what's possible with different approaches to visual storytelling.

As time goes on, I dislike the term photobook more and more. It feels limited, or restrictive to me. I respect the intention of the term; it's necessary and important to recognize the special nature and visual language of photography books, especially everything that the more contemporary photography book language has become. But many so-called photobooks are artists' books that use photography as their primary means of expression, and they offer so much more.

A\_        Do you think that for creating a book open to different levels of interpretation, it is necessary to constitute a narrator that doesn't necessarily match the author?



CP Well, I think it helps. With *Bottom of the Lake*, there's the telephone book itself; its text, graphics and illustrations call to mind the voices of the people and places listed in the book, and the book as a whole is like a collective voice of the town. There's the marginalia; which is like one or more hands or voices (the different ink colors do fairly consistently signify different people). There are the various text pieces, the telephone ad copy, matchbook messages and of course photographs inserted into the book.

Then there's the old man who appears near the beginning of the book, holding a camera, pointing into the book, and pointing at the photograph of the bottom of the lake. I don't want to say too much about this man, who he is or what his role in the work is, but he does have a creative role; he shares some authorship in certain elements of the work.

But even more than all of this, the telephone component of the work contains a multitude of voices. It exists both as a self-contained interactive object installed in exhibitions and as an independent, widely accessible telephone number that can be dialed from almost anywhere at anytime. The voices include my imagined versions of a dentist, a dirty plumber, the local art society, a number of local taverns, the lake, the old man himself and many other people and places.

A\_ In *Bottom of the Lake* you disseminate messages that direct our attention to the act of reading and seeing. Sometimes they are the result of original marks and notes already existent in the phone book, sometimes they are generated by your interaction and manipulation of it. In some cases it feels like the book is reminding us to be aware of what we are looking at, or it's giving us friendly advice. For example, the message written inside the matchbook, "Seeing Changes Through Time" and

the text inside the back cover of the book, “This is your phone book – to help you find the numbers you want easily and quickly. Often, it’s helpful to circle or underline numbers to reduce the chances of misdialing and to find them faster next time.” How important is it for you to create an awareness or a sort of path that consistently underlines the fact that we are looking not at a “real” object but an artistic, partially fictional, piece?

CP        It’s funny that you mention the idea of directing attention and awareness. When I first started thinking about the name of Fond du Lac and how it is French for “Bottom of the Lake,” I also thought about its acronym BOTL as being like shorthand for the word *bottle*. This seemed fitting, given the drinking culture in Fond du Lac (the area has some of the most excessive drinking in America). And beyond that, I began to think about other phrases that fit the acronym and one of them was “Be on the Lookout,” which speaks to this idea of awareness.

The phrase “Seeing Changes Through Time” is something I discovered while learning more about the old man I mentioned earlier; it was something that he had said to me. And what I like about this phrase is that it can be read in more ways than one, like the phrase “What Lies Ahead.” We can either see CHANGES through time, or our SEEING can change through time. And each interpretation or meaning says something about my interests and the nature of this work.

I’m aware of the reader/viewer, and I mentally swap places with them all the time – after all, I’m one myself. I can step outside myself and peer over my own shoulder when I’m working on something, and I can easily imagine someone else being there too, and doing the same thing. There are times

in this book when I'm just turning my head, glancing over my shoulder and saying, "Hey, take a look at this. This is how this thing works." I don't think this dilutes the experience; I think it enlivens it. I'm just engaging with the viewer.

A\_        The book published by Koenig Books isn't the first published version of this work; you previously published a different, smaller book with TBW Books, and it's a version that is more traditionally "photographic" in the sense that your photographs prevail over other elements in the work. How and when did you decide to shift your attention to other materials? Was the more experimental form of the later book something you had in mind from the beginning? What is the most important process in your research when it comes to creating a book that is not solely comprised of your own photographs?

CP        My friend Paul Schiek, the publisher of TBW Books, invited me to make a book to contribute to his "Subscription Series" of artists' books. The books are smaller, and the idea of making a much smaller book in a much shorter period of time was intriguing to me, especially after spending years working on *Redheaded Peckerwood*, and before spending years working on the next big thing. At the time, I didn't know what kind of book I might make, and I didn't have a single picture or idea. But as luck would have it I was traveling "home" for the holidays and told Paul I'd take along a camera and see what happened.

The TBW book came together very quickly and most of the photographs were made in just two and a half days. This kind of photography that is made out in the world involves a certain amount of luck, and crucially, the ability to recognize good luck, run with it and keep running, to make your own luck.

In those first few days, I had a few fortunate coincidences and made a few good discoveries that quickly established some of the work's layers and overlaps. For example, the telephone book cover features an eerie image of the shore of Lake Winnebago (the literal bottom of the lake), and the color of the cover is a distinctive blue. I drove to the shore of the lake, and to the lighthouse, which is the symbol of the town. I hadn't seen the place in years, since I was a teenager. But when I entered the lighthouse, I was reminded that its primary structural components are large, wooden Xs that are painted the exact same blue color as the one on the telephone book cover.

Later, when I returned to the telephone book, I began thinking more about the BOTL/bottle connection, and the heavy drinking culture in the town. I drove around town over the course of a few very cold, snowy January nights and photographed some of the taverns in the town, mainly Mom-and-Pop bars found inside old houses. After I made a photograph, my fingers would be frozen so I would go into the bar. And that's how I began collecting matchbooks and thinking about other materials. And so I try to be on the lookout for good luck, and there were a lot of layers and overlaps from the very beginning, and one thing often led to another. I also love digging into something, doing research and finding connections to be made on the mental switchboard. That kind of thing excites me.

The TBW book was, in its own way, made on assignment and on a deadline. It also had a pre-defined trim size, paper, page count and cover design. I was happy with the result given the conditions, and happy to work with TBW. But I soon had a lot of other ideas swimming around in my head, including the use of the phone book. I knew that would require a lot more thought and time.

A\_ During the time between the two trade book versions of *Bottom of the Lake*, you also realized an artist's book in edition of 10 copies, with different back covers featuring different text pieces. Do you feel that you have to treat words the same way you treat images? We tend to see most of your written materials in a very visual way, not only in the sense that they are evocative of what they say, but in particular because they draw our attention to certain details. Have you ever considered *Bottom of the Lake* not as a photobook, but as a *photo-text*? (To be more clear, in our opinion a *photo-text* is a work where images and words complete each other in a collaborative manner, without preference for a specific discipline.)

CP I'm not particularly fond anymore of having my work thought of solely as photography, or my books thought of only as photobooks. In the case of *Bottom of the Lake*, the term photo-text seems a bit more acceptable and fair, since I'm interested in the idea of image as word, and word as image, and the interplay between the two. Words and phrases are so highly evocative; they are a rich source of ideas, imagery and humor. But I also think it's fair to say that work that now also incorporates drawing, painting, objects, sound and text qualifies as something you could simply call art, or an artist's book. I'm just interested in the ways all of these things complement, activate and inform each other, to enliven a story and form a little world. But who knows, maybe I'll go back to walking down the street and making snapshots someday. Just don't mark my words.

A\_ *Bottom of the Lake*, even more than *Redheaded Peckerwood*, challenges our idea of a photobook.

When you worked on RHPW, you chose to work on a true crime story as your main subject, and then, with BOTL, you took the risk to create a story based on your own experience and imagination of a place – and a very personal one, your hometown. In Karen Irvine’s essay for RHPW, she wrote: “*Redheaded Peckerwood* is not an artifact of cultural memory. It is an interpretation of history that operates like memory and gives the past life in the present.” Did your personal attachment to Fond du Lac complicate the making of this work?

CP I like what Karen said about memory and the way that it works. A lot of my work up to this point has dealt in some way with the past, or at least an idea rooted in the past, but I’ve always strived to deal with the past in my own modern way.

There’s no conventional story contained within *Bottom of the Lake*; it’s really more of a layered, semiotic mood piece – it’s through the accumulation and layering of things that a sense of experience, place and meaning is nascently formed.

I don’t think that my personal connection to Fond du Lac was a hindrance; I think it was helpful in a very practical way, because I know the town – its history, its culture, its people and places. That background gave me a starting point, but I then let my mind wander and let my process take its own course. The place portrayed in the work isn’t truthful to anything but my imagination; it’s an entirely “other” Fond du Lac. I’m actually kind of surprised by the work myself, because it’s a very different vision/version of a place I know pretty well. But that’s where playing around with things will get you.

A\_ The date, time and year of the telephone book is stated on its cover as February 1973. You playfully use this fact to make cultural and political refer-

ences specific to that time period. What was your motivation for this?

CP I was interested in this particular telephone book because it was the first one printed after I was born in September 1972 – the book and I are more or less the same age, and we come from the same place. I set out to make and place photographs and other things in the book that could not only function in relation to that time, but also in relation to a more ambiguous sense of time stretching well beyond it. The only way I knew how to do this was to strive to make things that betray time more than they portray it, and then play with them in the book and exhibition in a way that feels modern in its conception and execution. But in thinking about 1973, I thought about what was happening in my family and Fond du Lac, and in America and the wider world in at that time. References to these many different things are scattered throughout the book as word pieces and marginalia, but they're treated in different ways.

The more personal, autobiographical things tend to be placed near related telephone book text. To cite a few examples, on page 49, my mother (in red ink) noted the screening times for *The Exorcist* at the local movie theater (and yes, I noticed the phonetic connection with the Xs). And on page 62, next to the listing for Gerald Turner, there's a scribble reading "RIP Lisa." There's a horrible Halloween murder story there, if anyone wants to search for it.

The cultural and political references provide a larger context to the book and are placed in a few different ways – the word pieces are treated as visual material within the visual sequence of the book, but the marginalia is placed in a very systematic way. I researched the year 1973 and its cultural and political events and became interested in a few of the bigger stories of the time – namely President Nixon, the Watergate scandal, his telephone calls, his lying and

impeachment. Nixon wired his own telephones and recorded every phone conversation he had with his co-conspirators. So to me, there's a connection.

Because the telephone book's own content doesn't refer to any of this, I had to figure out a way to apply it to the book. I decided to mathematically apply 1973's 365-day calendar year and its events to the 256 pages of the phone book; each page is roughly a day and a half, so in that way the book's pages begin in January and end in December 1973. On page 17 of the "Yellow Pages" portion of the book, there's the word "Watergate." And on page 71, we see the words "Nixon wired his phone." These things appear within the page order of the book in a way that corresponds to the chronology and news events of the year 1973.

There are references to other cultural and economic news scattered throughout the book – references to Picasso and Steichen (they both died that year), the worldwide oil shortage and U.S. gas crisis... Over the course of the book, a drawing of a happy man rolling out a barrel of beer transforms into a drawing of a scowling Nixon rolling a barrel of Exxon oil; one lubricating oil turns to another, and connects Fond du Lac's culture to the wider world in some weird way.

A\_        Your photographs in this work feel like cryptic signs and signals. Take for example the wooden X and the repeated appearance of the X shape throughout the book. Would you care to explain this sign and its significance?

CP        Sometimes signs and symbols say more. If I'm cryptic, the viewers can do more than view; they can read, or read into things.

Both Fond du Lac and its lighthouse are quite literally at the bottom of a lake – Lake Winnebago. The names and name



meanings of these places are highly evocative. You already know that the town's French name literally translates as "the bottom of the lake." The word "fond" means "bottom," but going deeper, its figurative meaning is also "that which is farthest" or "most remote." I've also been told that the phrase "Fond du Lac" could refer to being in a state of depression, which seems fitting. The Native American term "Winnebago" means "people of the filthy water."

The lighthouse was constructed during the Great Depression, and is now the official symbol of the town. Its image appears on billboards, postcards and T-shirts. You could say it's an icon, but it's also a cliché. But, I think it's interesting that the lighthouse emits light, sends out signals and is, like the telephone, a long-distance communication device, with Fond du Lac as a port of call or place to which it calls people home. It also marks the entry to a small harbor called "the Big Hole" (insert your own "L'Origine du monde" joke here.)

After I discovered the telephone directory, with its beautiful blue cover and cover image of the dark and sunny lakeshore, I couldn't resist my curiosity about the lighthouse, despite it being such a local cliché. And so I drove out to the lighthouse, and the bottom of the lake, in the dead of winter. I found an old anchor and a stone marker. I found pieces of wood that look like water, and stone that looks like wood. And when I entered the modest, weathered lighthouse, I found the wooden "X" braces that serve as the structural supports of the symbol of the town. They're painted the same blue color as the cover of the telephone directory. They're also heavily marked and weathered. People carve their names, lovers' names, and various slang and slander into the wood. They stick pieces of chewing gum to them. The local parks department periodically sands and repaints the wood. This process of mark making and taking produces a layered record of sorts over time, and reminds me a bit of the marginalia found in the

telephone book. And, an “X” can be an unknown variable or value. It’s an undefined thing, and I guess that’s part of the reason why I like it.

A\_ In your installations of *Bottom of the Lake* there are sections of the show that we think directly address your way of deconstructing and reconstructing history and, in this case, also a specific, personal story. The *Fond du Lac Telephone*, an interactive rotary telephone object, sits below a photograph of the same telephone but it is completely deconstructed. You also include vitrines displaying a mix of objects related to the project, as well as framed telephone book pages hung on the wall. Is this process of deconstructing objects, even your own, like the book itself, a way to manifest and expose the “objectuality,” the ultimate and physical nature, of every piece of your work?

CP There’s an old party game called Broken Telephone, or just Telephone. It’s known by other names in other places – Chinese Whispers, Don’t Drink the Milk, Grapevine and Secret Message, to name a few. In the game, one person whispers a message to another person, and this process continues around a circle or through a line of people. When the message reaches the last person in the game, that person speaks the message they have received aloud to the group. The game sounds simple but the fun of the game is that the message inevitably changes as it is passed from person to person, sometimes dramatically or humorously so. In most cases, the seemingly simple process of passing the message is complicated by human carelessness, error or the failings of even the shortest terms of memory. In other cases, the process is sabotaged by participants who deliberately alter the message

to create a more wildly different and humorous end result. The game is a simple but effective demonstration of the unreliability of memory, how change is often difficult to avoid and how these things can produce new and interesting results.

I enjoy putting things together and taking them apart. There are ways to work that out in the book, and other ways to work it out in an installation. They each have their strengths, and I enjoy doing both. I definitely don't think of the exhibition as being in service to the book or vice versa; they're each their own thing.

Books are affordable and portable, so a lot of the exposure and experience of my work comes through my books. I really love books, but they are flat and they include flat, small, printed representations of photographs, drawings and various objects that I've made. Everything shown in the book actually exists and has a physical presence and power all its own. Perhaps that's part of the reason why I've employed a trompe-l'oeil effect throughout *Bottom of the Lake*. There's a physicality I'm trying to convey, instead of simply portray. But it's in an installation where these things really live.

The framed book pages are little assemblages – telephone book pages with handwritten annotations, small photographic prints, magazine pages, postcards, matchbooks and matchsticks attached to them. The vitrines contain a mix of objects related to various themes and threads in the work – other books and booklets, photographs of Fond du Lac, matchbooks, telephone parts, pithy political bumper stickers and buttons. Some of these things appear in the book, others are only seen in the vitrines, in an installation. I tend to accumulate a lot of material when I'm working on something, and it normally ends up in a box on a shelf in my studio – as I create work, I create an archive, not just in the work itself but in other things that lead to it. An exhibition is an opportunity to show some of these things, and to lead the

viewer a bit further down some of the various pathways in the work. So yeah, I enjoy taking things apart and putting them back together. I guess it's like I'm playing my own version of the game of Telephone. The end result is always something different than what I started with, and when it's something new to me, that's fun.

A\_ We would like to know more about your process of collecting and creating an archive related to your project. Is there any difference in the way you approach and use appropriated and archival material in your visual or sound related pieces?

CP The art historian Hal Foster wrote a great essay, "An Archival Impulse."<sup>1</sup> Compulsion might be an even better word to describe my feeling about working with archives.

Foster described the archivally-inclined art practice as "idiosyncratic probing." I like digging and I love research. It's a lot like photography really; at least the kind that's made out and about in the world, searching for something with a camera as an implement, or investigative tool. The camera is good for that, and photography makes for a compelling complement to the archive, given the notions that surround them.

Foster continued: "These sources are familiar, drawn from the archives of mass culture, to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or *detourné*; but they can also be obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory." With *Redheaded Peckerwood*, I was dealing with a familiar story; an American archetype, really. And I pieced my mostly visual version of the story together in a fragmentary way. *Detourné* is a kind of ballet move; a

1 Hal Foster. "An Archival Impulse." *October* Vol. 110 (2004): 3-22.

little turn that involves the changing of the position of the feet. And with my work, I'm always doing a bit of a dance around the subject. And now, with *Bottom of the Lake*, I'm dealing with a place where there is no mass cultural familiarity. I'm free to create my own alternative knowledge and establish some kind of new counter-memory.

Foster again: "Finally, the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well." As I tend to work on things for extended periods of time, and do a lot of digging and researching, I tend to accumulate work-related material and project-related ephemera over time. Some of this material might be used in an image, but a lot of it is not. But when I make installations, I often select materials from my personal archive, and arrange and display them in vitrines alongside the more rigidly defined and selected work.

I'm interested in the archive as a point of connection between myself and my work and the archive's own place, story or time. I like the idea of taking an archive and its associated story to a different place than it's been before; not necessarily to twist the truth, but to see it in my own way. And I think this is what can keep the "archive" contemporary.

A            We really appreciate the devotion to a certain project, and the possibility to rethink about the project in various forms. Do you think that experiencing the different versions of the book exposes something about the complexity of the creation of an artist's book? When do you know/feel that a project is concluded?

CP            It's true that the process of putting together an artist's book can be a complex one, and one that can take a

lot of time. I'm an analytical, obsessive person. I get lost in my work; I become subsumed in it, and it can take a long time to work through it and emerge with something that feels fairly complete. The two different versions of the book are reflective of this. The first book was the seed of an idea; the second book was its fruition and realization.

I've been asked the "How do you know when a project is finished?" question many times. I could say take your time. I could say you'll know when you know. But I still think about home, I still have my memory and imagination, and I still have ideas. I have a few smaller, related book and project ideas on the shelf. *The Bottom of the Lake* is always there, always changing. With a subject so close to home, I can't imagine letting it go anytime soon.

# interview with christian patterson, part two: fond du lac telephone

A\_ In the description of your interactive piece, the *Fond du Lac Telephone*, you state: "Sound, like image, is a visual art. The *Fond du Lac Telephone* is more than a sound object; it is a photographic object as well. It is made in the artist's image of his hometown, but in the eyes and ears of others, an 'other' Fond du Lac is created, through images of their own mental making." Can you expand on this? How can sound be a visual art?

CP I've always been interested in music and the relationship between sound and vision. Photography incorporates light and color, two things that share expressive qualities that are analogous to music and sound. Each of these things can be soft or loud, can pulse and reverberate, or can permeate a room or fade into its corners. They do similar things, rhythmically and compositionally. I explored the surface of this idea in my early, first series of photographs, *Sound Affects*.

I've always felt very aware of this relationship, and while I hesitate to say that I'm synesthetic, I'm definitely inter-sensorial. I've never felt a strong sense of classic chromesthesia (the association of certain sounds and colors) but I've always had a spatio-temporal, synesthetic way of visualizing long-term time (I visualize year-based time as an endless stack of overlapping circular shapes).

Thinking about the differences between sound and vision is equally important. Sound has a closer relationship with feeling while vision has more to do with understanding.

Disembodied sound has a more natural present/future

orientation while vision, at least of printed photographs, involves looking and thinking back, to some past. When you play a record on a turntable, you have a sense of the sound happening now. It's active, it "lives," vibrates and resonates in the air. It feels immersive; it moves in all directions, encircles and enters your body in a way that vision cannot. Alternatively, when you look at a photograph, you see and understand it as something that happened then.

But try this: close your eyes. Now, what happens when you hear a sound? Do you see an image in your head? Do you at least try to visualize who or what is making the sound? The telephone functions the same way. Sight and sound are our predominant senses, and they're not just related, they're interwoven. Sound is shadowed by sight and its experience and interpretation are informed by our own mental imagery.

A\_        How did you go about creating the sound pieces contained in the *Fond du Lac Telephone*? And do they follow any specific narrative?

CP        It all began with the telephone book. Listings for various people and places caught my eye, triggered a memory or sparked my imagination, and I began making stream-of-consciousness notes. There's no narrative; it's more of a collection of mood pieces.

The sounds of the telephone include odd sound montages, field audio recordings I made in Fond du Lac, archival audio I collected from various local public and private archives, and scripted readings and improvised performances by myself, other artists and friends and a small cast of comedians and voice actors. I wrote rough scripts, then coached people on the kind of emotion or voice they should try to portray. I then edited all of the audio. There are roughly 150 different sound pieces that last between 30 seconds and ten minutes each.



The phone does a few different things. If it's left untouched for 15 minutes, it will call you automatically and ring five times. If you answer the phone, you'll hear ordinary telephone sounds – beeps, clicks, dial tones, operator voices and other noise – but they're manipulated to do unexpected things. This is meant to signal that the telephone functions, but in its own special way.

The field audio recordings portray Fond du Lac itself, as a place. You can dial numbers for places like “Lakeside” or “the Big Hole” and be transported to the shore of Lake Winnebago, where you'll hear water and waves, or to a harbor where you'll hear wind blowing and ringing sailboat rigging bells.

Most of the pieces connect with a selection of people and places in Fond du Lac. A woman describes an odd late-night experience on the lake. A funny farmer challenges you with tongue twisters. You call him back and he shares a fable. You call him back again and something else happens. You might run into an introspective old man, and he says something about photography, history and photographing things over time. You can listen in on a pretentious conversation at the local art society. Or call a dentist, a plumber or a piano tuner. You can also call several local taverns – places like the Blue Room, the Hob Nob, the Loading Zone, the Never Inn, Somewhere and the Wishing Well. These are all actual places that once existed in Fond du Lac. A few of them still do.

There are a few different “the Artist at Work” calls that basically put you in my pocket as I'm making some of the *Bottom of the Lake* pictures. You can listen to me walking around in the lighthouse and making photographs, or trudging through snow at night and entering a bar.

There's a lot of music in the phone too, and some of it is manipulated in some way. Music changes speed or reverses

back on itself, or we hear people laughing, crying or talking around the music.

Nixon makes a few appearances too. He's usually either drunk or sorry, or both. Seems fitting.

A\_        The structure and experience of *Bottom of the Lake* and the *Fond du Lac Telephone* are very similar; we never know what to expect, we are encouraged to search for information and, by extension, to infer some meaning. Each experience functions like memory, retrieved by clues and cues disseminated in the work. To what degree are you interested in recreating the mechanism and the randomness of our remembering process?

CP        Memory, to me, often feels hazy, and difficult to grasp or hold onto. It's fluid and fleeting; always retreating. The process of remembering can feel like the process of trying to put something back together. Recollection is perhaps a more fitting term than memory. But yes, I'm very interested in all of this, in part because photography and storytelling both function like memory, and there are always elements of the uncontrollable or unexpected involved. But with my work, I'm able to control things as I recollect, create or recreate my own version of whatever it is that I'm doing. I enjoy this process, and I think the viewer enjoys reading work that functions in this way, because there's a certain kind of exploration involved.

A\_        We think that memory could be easily garbled and influenced by the acquisition of new information on the same subject, or the same memory. Do you think that your memory and perception of Fond du Lac changed after completing this work?

CP        When I first began exploring this idea, I was operating entirely on memory, which is a fuzzy thing. And when I then began physically exploring Fond du Lac, I found my memory at times confirmed, and at other times challenged or denied. Not everything was how I remembered it or expected it to be. But I created something that feels very true in spirit to my memory. My own memory and perception of the place haven't changed. What I can say is that in the course of exploring this idea and making this work, I became fixated on a small number of specific themes or threads, and this focused the work in a way that created the "other" Fond du Lac that emerges in the work.

A\_        Among the most powerful and hypnotic experiences contained within the *Fond du Lac Telephone* are the calls to "the Blue Room." The woman on the other end of the line has a soft, sensuous voice but she sounds introspective and halting. She repeats the word "Listen!" several times and goes on to talk about how things change in relation to distance and time. She delivers one of the keys to accessing and understanding your work. Why did you choose this specific character to interpret such an important role in your narrative?

CP        Just as I had discovered the telephone book and its blue cover, and then the lighthouse and its blue interior, I also discovered a listing in the phone book for a tavern called "the Blue Room." I had never heard of the place before, but I imagined what it might look like and who might answer the phone there.

I also thought about the color blue and the word blue and all its different possible significances and meanings. If you're feeling blue, you're sad. If you're working blue, you're

actual “off-color” – indecent or profane, in a sexual way. And, as for the color...it has an actual, physical relationship with human perception of distance and time. It was all very interesting to me.

And so, I imagined a woman who sounds blue, perhaps in more ways than one. And I imagined her answering the phone and being unexpectedly introspective and forthcoming with her own deep thoughts, which also happen to say a lot about the nature of my work. For example, she says:

Listen! Listen! Listen! Hey... Did you know that the farther away an object is, the more blue it appears to the eye? Or that the more blue something is, the further away your mind perceives it to be? Now, there’s a funny thing. It changes the way you look at things.

A\_ Many of the telephone numbers in the *Fond du Lac Telephone* can be dialed multiple times, and each of those times the caller has a different experience. How does this multiplicity affect the listener? Is it possible to manipulate certain sounds, for example with overlays, to suggest a specific experience or opinion? (I’m thinking about Nixon’s apologies, but I’m sure there are several instances of this kind that affect the listener in the same way)

CP I wanted the telephone to feel real. And so, the telephone functions exactly as a telephone should, in nearly every way. It has a dial tone. It will beep at you if you leave the receiver off the hook. If you misdial a number or dial a wrong number, an operator will tell you. Each time you dial an assigned number, the telephone rings a different number of times. And yes, many of the telephone numbers – the people and places that can be called – have multiple

different experiences, because that is exactly what you would expect.

A telephone has an element of unexpectedness and unpredictability to it; even if you know whom you're calling, you don't know what they'll say.

And yes, much of the telephone audio is manipulated in one way or another. In some cases, it's to create atmosphere – if you're calling a dentist, you'll hear an electric drill, gurgling and spitting. If you're calling a plumber, you'll hear pipes clanking and water dripping.

A\_        In your experience, how do people react to the telephone in the exhibition space? What happens when we experience it in a private space?

CP        From what I've observed, people are surprised by the telephone. Up to this point, I've only shown it in photography-centric contexts – in *Bottom of the Lake* installations at photography festivals and at Robert Morat Galerie in Berlin. People visiting these places aren't expecting to encounter a telephone. Some people needed to be told that it's O.K. to touch the art and to use the telephone. But when they do, they seem to enjoy it.

Steven Connor's essay "Edison's Teeth"<sup>1</sup> describes the telephone as having an "umbilical continuity of the voice." Traditionally, a telephone literally transmitted sound over a series of cords and wires, leading all the way from one person's lips to another person's ears. And it all happened in real time. This created an "illusion of bodily presence." Connor goes further:

1 Steven Connor, "Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing" in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, Veit Erlmann (ed.), (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 153-72

The telephone uses the principle of electromagnetic induction to translate sound vibrations into fluctuations of electrical charge, which are then translated back into movement at the other end. It is the capacity of electrical impulses to be transmitted long distances without significant degradation by and into noise, which accounts for the illusion of bodily presence, the sense that the voice which arrived at the other end of the line had not been transported, so much as stretched out. It was, and is, this which makes for the surprisingly undisturbing disturbance it effects in our sense of the relations between proximity and distance, and the sense that, despite its reliance upon the new, clean, dry power of electricity the telephone remained a moist and dirty medium (hence its still-operative associations with sexuality and disease).

On a related note, if people feel more comfortable getting moist and dirty in the privacy of their own home (or mobile phone, anywhere), they can do so – an edited version of the *Fond du Lac Telephone* exists as a single telephone number that can be dialed from most of the Western world. In this version, the same number can be dialed over and over and a different experience is had nearly every time. A person would have to call the number over 100 times in rapid succession, without anyone else in the world dialing during that same time, to experience every phone call. The U.S. based number is 414-921-0393.

A\_        There is a number in the blue book called “The Artist at Work.” Do you think people are particularly attracted to call this number, maybe to find more revelatory information?

CP        The “Artist at Work” calls aren’t revelatory; they’re actually pretty literal, and simple – each one is a field audio recording of me working on *Bottom of the Lake* in a different location – in a car, in the lighthouse and in a bar.

I periodically route the public *Bottom of the Lake* telephone number directly to my mobile phone, but only for limited times. I’ve had a few fun and interesting conversations – people are always surprised to find me on the other end of the line.

