

Word from Home
by Gerry Badger

Intertextuality. It's a horrible word, I know, one of those smart theoretical words that proclaims the pretentiousness of its user, but it's relevant to a current widespread tendency in the development of the photobook. I prefer to see the issue in terms of layering, although that implies one thing on top of another, thus creating an instant hierarchy, so perhaps interweaving is a better term, suggesting a melding, a coming together on equal terms.

I like the notion proposed by Robert Adams. A photograph might talk about location, about the photographer, and about metaphor. A picture might talk about only one of these 'verities', as Adams put it, and still be a great photograph, but if it talks about all three, it has a much better chance of being a great photograph. And if a single photograph can do that – although not as many can as one might think – how much more scope there is for this interweaving – adding history or psychology or whatever – in a photobook. Indeed, this should be the standard mission statement for any photobook.

In the photobook, however, there are other things to add into the mix. At least the word 'intertextuality' contains the word 'text', and that is one of the things at issue in Christian Patterson's *Bottom of the Lake*, and its predecessor, *Redheaded Peckerwood*. Patterson is at the forefront of an approach to photobook making that interweaves ideas and narratives, that not only includes texts and found objects, but importantly, does it **through** and **in** the photographs.

It begins with Walker Evans, as so much of contemporary photography does. To be sure, many young photographers of today might not be quite aware of that fact. although Christian Patterson certainly shows all the signs of being thoroughly familiar with Evans' legacy. Any budding photographer could do worse than to look to Eugène Atget in order to learn how to make a coherent photograph. They could do worse than to look to Evans in order to learn how to construct a coherent body of work – and decide for themselves what photography might accomplish. Now, as then, Evans provides the bulwark against the pictorialist tendency in photography – photography 'off its beaten track', as he put it. The endemic desire on the part of those who do not trust photography and need to trick it up to prove that it is art. Carefully heed Evans and it can be put back 'on track.'

Evans, whose background and artistic inclinations were literary, regarded photography as a kind of visual literature – about '*structure and coherence; paradox and play and oxymoron.*' This insistence upon photography as literature extended to the word, and to the photograph as a sign and symbol within a social landscape that itself had literary meaning, something to be 'read' by an artist or photographer who was acute to the landscape's 'text.'

So in his great book, *American Photographs* (1938), which was a manifesto for both a literary modernist photography and the photobook as a work of literature, Evans used the word as image, and the image as word. And if he was scathing and snobbish about 'art' photography, he embraced vernacular and utilitarian photography in all its aspects. Evans had been in surrealist Paris, and he was familiar with the publications that emerged around the important 1929 exhibition in Stuttgart, *Photo-Eye*. Here, in a display instigated by the European art avant-garde, vernacular photography was regarded as the surrealists regarded it – as a basic, populist visual language, in much the same way that modernist writers, such as James Joyce, looked to replicate the cadences and rhythms of vernacular speech in a literary manner.

Everywhere, the vernacular photograph, and indeed the vernacular landscape, – for Evans had no truck with ‘high’ architecture, except in an ironic sense – take their place in the modernist photo-constructions of *American Photographs*. The word too – almost prefiguring the word paintings of Ed Ruscha – punctuates the photo-narrative with little comments, ironic or otherwise. GAS. LOVE BEFORE BREAKFAST. CHATTERBOX. THE AMERICAN NITRATE OF SODA. Of course, such signs were out there in the American landscape, and still are, but Evans, perhaps even more than the painter Edward Hopper, made particular use of them.

American Photographs set a particular tone, and it was a tone that has resonated since in many American photobooks, most notably Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1959), and Lee Friedlander’s *Letters From the People* (1993) - and clearly in both *Redheaded Peckerwood* and *Bottom of the Lake*.

In *Redheaded Peckerwood*, the first text likely to be lodged in most readers’ minds is not even there – it is a ghost text. Patterson’s book is a retelling of a renowned example of an event that has become all too common in America, a serial killing. The book is a meditation, in photographs, documents, and objects, on the Starkweather-Fugate case, a robbery and murder spree across Nebraska in 1958 by two teenagers, Charles Starkweather and Caril Anne Fugate.

But for most readers, their knowledge of the event must come from the 1973 Terence Malick film, *Badlands*, a highly fictionalised account of the incident. Christian Patterson’s account is also fictional, but a great deal closer to the ‘real’ thing than Malick’s film, in that it reproduces texts and artefacts relating to the case – pictures, personal belongings, and pieces of evidence connected with Starkweather and Fugate’s homicidal journey across a snowbound Nebraska.

In the book, the textuality begins – as it surely does with any book – in the title. The word ‘peckerwood’, which baffles and intrigues foreign readers, and probably a few Americans too, has a complex etymology. It has racist as well as class and regional connotations, and in Patterson’s case, could be equated with ‘white trash’, a more recent term than the 19th century ‘peckerwood’ for the underprivileged small-town background of the fugitives.

When we open the volume, there are several pages of facsimile text, Starkweather’s handwritten confession, a chronicle of chilling self-justification, notable for its lack of remorse. ‘*Betty Jean was yelling so loud I shot her with the gun.*’ However, the most interesting part of the book is where Patterson creates texts in photographs and constructed images. Following Starkweather’s testimony, the first photograph, a typical small-town nocturnal landscape, features a tiny street sign – DEAD END. And similar texts crop up at frequent intervals, both carrying part of the narrative and adding a dark yet element. A sign exhorts us to ASK FOR ETHYL. (Or maybe go to the local whorehouse and Ask for Ethel). There is also YOU KNOW WHO and HELP. And then, at the end we have the whole apotheosis of the sad tale -YOU CAN’T RUN AWAY FROM ANYTHING.

All this is pure Evans, re-imagined in Patterson’s own inimitable way – the small town urban landscapes, the signs (Evans physically collected them, and so does Patterson), and the fascination with various tropes of vernacular photography (Patterson both recreates and reproduces forensic photographs, newspaper photographs, and advertising imagery). But there is another potentially interesting reference, the word imagery of Ed Ruscha, which are amongst my favourite paintings of the last fifty years. Ruscha combined word and image in a

nominally basic yet witty and insistently nagging way. HE ENJOYS THE CO. OF WOMEN is probably my favourite. Whole narratives lie behind these deadpan, mysterious aphorisms.

It is generally acknowledged that Ruscha's primary influence in the word paintings came from Jasper Johns' letters and word paintings. But in the case of his own photography, and books such as *26 Gasoline Stations*, he mentions the work of Walker Evans as a particular inspiration. So it is hardly beyond the bounds of possibility that the 'textual' Evans also fed into the range of things that fed Ruscha's creative imagination. LOVE BEFORE BREAKFAST would make an excellent Ruscha.

As would YOU KNOW WHO and ASK FOR ETHYL. Patterson is an admirer of Ruscha. Indeed, any artist playing with words - and I mean play in a serious sense - should know their Ruscha, just as any serious photographer should know their Evans.

Clearly, Christian Patterson is attuned to the word more than most photographers. *Bottom of the Lake* is another title with implications. It is a book about - in both a tight and a loose sense - Patterson's hometown, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Fond du Lac of course translates as 'Bottom of the Lake', but translation is an interesting phenomenon, and even an apparently literal translation usually contains nuances that don't quite 'translate' and might be missed by those unfamiliar with a language.

For example, Bottom of the Lake could be said to be harder in tone and implication than Fond du Lac. 'Bottom' also equates with 'ass', and occurs in phrases like 'rock bottom', while 'fond' has none of these meanings. And 'fond' has the same root as 'profond.' Anywhere in France outside a fifty mile radius of Paris is referred to as '*France Profond*' - deepest France. We might say that Christian Patterson is dealing - in both *Redheaded Peckerwood* and *Bottom of the Lake* - with *America Profond* - deepest America. And why not? The best subject for American photography has surely been America, and *America Profond* in the widest sense.

In an interview, Patterson remarked that he began the Peckerwood project by making lists. It's a thing many artists and photographers do to get themselves going, or to find inspiration. Eugène Atget made lists. Walker Evans made lists. Diane Arbus made lists.

In *Bottom of the Lake*, Patterson takes the listing process to its ultimate conclusion. The book does not just begin with a list, it **is** a list - specifically the telephone listings for Fond du Lac and *environs* (let's keep it French) for 1973. The book is a facsimile reproduction of the town telephone directory around the time of Patterson's birth, combined with his photographs, drawings, collages, doodles, and other 'interventions', many of which are visual, many of which are literary. The whole effect of the book is as if one found in old discarded telephone directory in an abandoned building, annotated in various ways, and with photographs of a high calibre stuck into some pages. In actual fact, Christian Patterson found it in a box in his parent's basement - bottom of the house - and it already contained markings. Then he, as their child, continued to make marks, and of course, added photographs.

After only four pages, we run into a 'Ruscha' aphorism. WHAT LIES AHEAD? It provides us with more than a hint of intrigue, promising narrative and wordplay delights to follow, perhaps also referring to what was lying ahead for Patterson in his own life. Also on this page is a typical example of what will occur at frequent intervals, the kind of idle doodling in which one might indulge if placed on hold by the telephone operator. 'Mississippi' is transformed into I PEE PEE.

One page later, a page entitled 'HELPFUL HINTS for better dialling', Patterson has circled the words 'Do not rely on memory' in red. And on a drawing of a finger dialling, he has drawn a red loop of string. The fingers pop up elsewhere in the book – fingers 'walking' through the 'Yellow Pages', as white gloved hands inserting into or removing telephones from boxes, as Richard Nixon's victory salute, and finally, as a monster hand emerging from the neck of a T-shirt Patterson is shown wearing as a child. The fingers also surely serve as two sly references to photography, which is an alternative 'memory', and is not as reliable as we might think. And when one is walking around taking pictures, the actual act, the snapping of the picture, is generally done with one's fingers.

One cannot rely on the memories provided by photographs, or anything else. Memory, whether collective or individual, is not only selective, but potentially highly fugitive. I am currently losing my wife, piece by piece with every day that passes, because she has dementia, so I am acutely aware, not only of how crucial memory is, but how fragile. For Christian Patterson, the Fond du Lac telephone directory functions like Proust's Madelaine, opening up a treasure chest of memories and sparking the playing around, but the play is deadly serious, and the tone of the book is not just determinedly indeterminate, but as dark as the harsh Wisconsin winters, which function as one of the book's leitmotifs.

Other commentators have written about the leitmotifs in Bottom of the Lake. As well as the winters, and the telephone, which is literally 'deconstructed' as we progress through the book – its interior elements laid out like an alternative alphabet – there is the town's main landmark, the lighthouse on the edge of the lake, and the community's numerous bars and taverns, an apparently inordinate number for a city of only 30-35,000 inhabitants. Both lighthouse and bars form the basis for many of the photographs, both 'documentary' and 'fabricated.'

For example, a lot of the black-and-white photographs depict bars at night, their exteriors piled high with snow, their interior lights a welcome refuge. Perhaps the book's equivalent of the *Redheaded Peckerwood* DEAD END photograph is a bar with a BUDWEISER sign in the window. Equating the two images, we may see Fond du Lac's taverns, escapes from the winter and drab normality, as both refuges and dead ends.

But despite the book's frequent darker implications, Patterson is never without humour. Sometimes it is quite juvenile – one page, for example, is annotated with PUBIST CUBIST, BEAVER PATROL, and MUFFIN STUFFIN. Not quite Ruscha here, but then Patterson redeems himself with a matchbook cover that contains the legend, FLAT BEER – ROTTEN FOOD – CRUMMY LIQUOR – LOUSY SERVICE. And he redeems himself to me personally by ticking off Badger in the directory, although of course before I get too excited, Wisconsin is the 'Badger State.'

The other symbol of refuge and safety, the lighthouse, is featured in a number of colour photographs of the timber interior, blue painted but with age wearing away the paint and revealing the timber beneath. More letters and words occur here. A vertical post has the barely legible word ART scratched into it. Can we detect the hand of Patterson here? And the structural cross bracing gives us the letter 'X.' That particular letter, which has numerous connotations, crops up again on grass, like a Richard Long conceptual sculpture, and there is also an 'O' on a tarmac road or path. Is the 'X' a kiss, a salute to a fond remembered childhood. Or perhaps not.

Bottom of the Lake is a worthy successor to *Redheaded Peckerwood*, a difficult act to follow, as it was a truly outstanding photobook. When I first saw Lake, I thought there weren't enough photographs for a 'photobook.' But that was my shortsightedness. What is a 'photobook' anyway? A book is a book is a book, and this is an artist's book which does not give up its secrets easily, which makes it a constant delight. So many photobooks today, even widely lauded photobooks, fall into the category of look at once then never again. Very often they are clever, but not very good.

Christian Patterson's fond, or perhaps not so fond, but profound paean to his hometown is clever, but not, I would contend, clever for the sake of it. It is a constantly surprising book, and, returning to Robert Adams' criteria for good photography, it gives us place, it gives us biography, it gives us metaphor, and it does add history and psychology.

And one of its delights is the very thing that first concerned me. The relative paucity of photographs amongst the pages of closely packed text results in them becoming 'lost.' That is, each time you open the book, looking for a particular picture, it can be difficult to find, but you come across others that had 'vanished' the previous time you looked at it. It is quite uncanny, and quite fascinating, and contributes not a little to the book's allure.

So, a brief coda - which takes us back to Evans and Ruscha, back to 1973 and possibly forward to 2017. I have mentioned the Evans image from *American Photographs* – GAS – the kind of image that few photographers had made previously in such a knowing and intelligent way. 1973 saw the first of the world oil crises, when the supply and price of petrol – ok, gas – became a worldwide issue. In terms of Ruscha aphorisms, Patterson plays what is undoubtedly his 'Trump Card' with SAVE YOUR GAS FOR NIXON. And on the back cover of *Bottom of the Lake* is another pithy text – IMPEACH CROOKS. There may be an intended connection between the two – I really couldn't say - but like much in the book, that's for Christian Patterson to know, and for us to find out.