

To the Bottom
by Thomas Weski

When I started organizing exhibitions in the mid-1980s, photographers used to send their prints by mail. Once I got the shipment through customs, I would measure the images, cut out mats, fix the prints to the latter and then frame them. At the museum where I worked there were aluminum and wooden frames in two standardized sizes. I sequenced the framed pictures, which would then be mounted by me and hung with wires to a picture rail mounted to the wall of the exhibition space. Since the modest exhibition budget didn't include any travel expenses, it was very rare for photographers to be present at the opening, or even before that, to help with the installation of their own exhibition. Most of them didn't provide any guidelines as to how they wanted their pictures to be hung, so the presentation was up to me. At that time, photographers had so much trust in their own pictures that they were sure the work would assert itself, not matter how bad the presentation was.

The fact that, at the time, very few photographers would think about the arrangement of their pictures seems rather surprising from a present-day perspective – but it also explains, from another point of view, the incipient success, during the early 1990s, of the so-called Düsseldorf School around its teacher Bernd Becher, whose students started to make conscious decisions related to the effect of their pictures, their size, form of presentation and framing and, therefore, their impact within a space.

Back then it wasn't common knowledge that the American photographer Walker Evans had done such pioneering work in 1938 with his installation of the solo exhibition *American Photographs* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Evans, who didn't respect the museum's curator of photography, installed his exhibition overnight with a friend. They found different ways to present his pictures on site, trimmed prints and glued them on cardboards, combined framed and unframed pictures into a presentation which diverted from the order of the pictures in the book published on occasion of the exhibition, constructing a different narrative. The next morning, the museum's curator found the exhibition already installed; only some leftover material gave a hint of the photographer's and his companion's work from the night before¹. For the first time in the history of photography – and right at the beginning of the increasing acceptance of photography as a form of artistic expression over the coming decades and its integration in the collections of art museums – in an act of self-empowerment, Walker Evans claimed control over the presentation of his own work and made it a part of his artistic responsibility as an author. Moreover, he made a clear distinction between the book and exhibition projects, finding a distinctive aesthetic solution for both.

Only about a decade earlier, in 1926, the Russian artist El Lissitzky conceived the *Abstract Cabinet* for the Hannover Provincial Museum, commissioned by its director Alexander Dorner. Not only did the cabinet turn the hierarchy of a museum on its head by combining art and design, it also engaged visitors in an innovative way. The walls of the cabinet were covered with metal slats so that, as the viewer moved through the room, the color of the wall and, consequently, the background of the artworks changed from white to grey to black. Visitors could rearrange the artworks by moving the frames that hung off picture rails or by rotating movable display cases. For his *Proun Room*, conceived in 1923, Lissitzky even included the floor and ceiling into the exhibition design in order to achieve a dynamic of

¹Cf. Mora, Gilles and John T. Hill. "American Photographs." *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1993. 160. Print.

perspective and establish visual axes for the spectator. Both examples count as milestones in the history of artists' spaces with regard to the development of forms of display opening possibilities of interaction and new perspectives for the viewer.

Christian Patterson's new project *Bottom of the Lake* has been published and exhibited in various forms in the last couple of years. In this work he makes use of a 1973 phonebook from Fond du Lac, his hometown in Wisconsin, as a starting point and platform for his artistic practice. Like many old telephone books, the book includes handwritten notes and marginalia. It's not clear whether Patterson's family added this layer of content, thus changing its character, or if the artist himself made these interventions. Patterson presents his book as a facsimile version of the telephone book and continues the subjectivization of the material by placing his own, new photographs into the old book. His photographs add their own temporal layer to the underlying time of 1973, and these time-based layers are connected by their common subject of place; a small, provincial town. The rational, alphabetical order of the phonebook and its subdivision into categories, together with its advertising, creates an ideal social type of the time in words and pictures. Patterson sets these elements against his own and appropriated pictures, which relate to the history, local infrastructure, daily culture and rough winter climate of his hometown, functioning as associative dialogue points. Following the reading direction of the book, a narrative construction arises which, rather than being a concrete representation of the place, seems to develop its own murky, personal conception of space and time.

In his exhibition of this work in Berlin, Christian Patterson arranged a wide variety of materials – large-scale color photographs, black-and-white pictures, archival material and objects – in a presentation specifically conceived for the location. The gallery consists of three exhibition rooms, situated on two different levels, each visible from the other and connected by a staircase. The entrance is located on the lower level, while the two rooms on the upper level are directly connected.

In the entry area Patterson shows four photographs that already cover the broad spectrum of his photographic production, from black-and-white to color, from appropriated and re-photographed material to his own shots. Among them there is also a large-scale reproduction of the phonebook's cover image, a color landscape shot of Lake Winnebago, on whose southern shore Fond du Lac is situated. Opposite the entrance, at hip height is one of the overall three door-sized openings in the wall that provide a view into the higher exhibition space. On one of the back walls, visible from the entrance, the artist has placed a wooden construction (*X Brace 1*), which he either dismantled from the Fond du Lac lighthouse where he photographed or newly created for the installation - this sculpture is so believably lifelike that one cannot tell the difference.

His presentation, together with the color photograph of the very similar light blue construction (*X (1)*, 2013) in the entry area, constitutes a motivic duplication. The photograph and the construction in the background create a reference axis and at the same time the viewer realizes that every photograph is an interpretation of reality – that, in this case, is arranged in a comprehensible way.

If the visitor now enters the upper-level of the exhibition space, in the first room he will encounter, among others, a black-and-white photograph (*Grass X*, 2013) that incorporates the geometric shape of the wooden construction in a different subject. The picture is positioned in such a way that it creates an axis with the "source" material in the room beyond, connecting them formally. This second room hosts an array of different artworks. Two drawings of the same subject reference the cartoon-like additions to the phonebook (*Roll Out the Barrel (Beer Man)*, 2015 - *Roll Out the Barrel (Nixon/Exxon)*, 2015), raising

questions about the original, the model, and the reproduction. On another wall, located under a tableau of 27 framed book pages featuring some of the already introduced photographic motifs, we find two vitrines. These contain two arranged assemblages of different materials from 1973, clearly referring to the Watergate scandal under president Nixon with its bugging operations and impeachment proceedings – and seemingly, thereby referring to addressing the meaning and probative value that we attribute to documents.

In the last room we finally encounter the light-blue, x-shaped wooden construction that we were able to see from the entrance room, together with some photographs. And, underneath a large, overhead still life photograph of completely deconstructed telephone, there is a functioning and again light blue model of the same telephone set, which more or less represents the peak of technical progress in 1973. Following the written instructions provided in a likewise blue booklet, visitors may dial certain places and characters and listen to their messages and sounds over the phone. Strangely enough, this operation produces clearly imagined pictures and the strong feeling of being connected to a parallel universe that is deeply rooted in the past. In its retrogressive nature and presence at the same time, it draws an analogy with the photographic medium, whose visible outcomes embody a similar paradox of past and present.

In *Bottom of the Lake*, Patterson presents both color and black-and-white photographs. At the same time, he alters their common interpretation: the property that is perceptually and psychologically attributed to a black-and-white photograph, i.e. that of being the document of a past and concluded action, and the intrinsic characteristic of a color photograph of representing an ongoing and present process, are turned into their opposites by the artist. His pictures of the interior of the lighthouse situated on Lake Winnebago in Fond du Lac feel contemporary and extremely present solely as a result of their intensive coloration, but the meaning of the lighthouse, which lost its original function to new navigation technology, lies in the past. On the other hand, the documentary and temporally concluded character of the black-and-white pictures of taverns, photographed at night, in the dead of winter, devoid of people, is at odds with the many traces of their vibrant usage and lasting popularity as social meeting places.

The work is also a treatise on the color blue, that resurfaces on numerous occasions throughout the exhibition – from the landscape picture of Lake Winnebago on the cover of the phonebook to the wooden construction from the lighthouse, the telephone and the “Blue Book” that are part of the installation of the *Fond du Lac Telephone* and its interpretative possibilities. In *Bottom of the Lake* Patterson employs this color not only as a typical of-the-age phenomenon, but also to create an atmosphere of estrangement. This intense blue also constitutes a formal element running through the various sections of the exhibition as well as the artist’s book.

Taken as a whole, all the different layers of this work do not amount to a nostalgic journey through time to the photographer's hometown. On the contrary, Christian Patterson constructs a multifaceted narrative, that also tells us about his specific authorial access to reality. Making use of different documental strategies he creates a story that loads this place by the lake with mystery and awakes our collective memories.

Patterson has created a finely balanced installation that lends itself to a complex examination. The act of establishing visual axes, connecting the various exhibition areas through motivic repetitions, creating references through movement in space, combining different materials into a homogenous presentation, using different documentary methods, the psychological interpretations of black-and-white and color photography, the integration of

tone and sounds in the exhibition, investigating the relationship between images and text – all these elements result in a fiction based on facts, a great assertion, whose deciphering is part of the observation and which constitutes a counterpart to the linearly arranged artist's book.

In *Bottom of the Lake* Christian Patterson formulates a subjective – direct or already mediated – view of reality that is externally characterized by elements of research. He uses the familiar form of the document in which we are so happily willing to believe. But we should always keep in mind that Christian Patterson has created an audacious construction of authenticity, one that seems simple only at first sight and which he laid out with great pleasure as well as utmost sophistication. Upon further examination we stumble upon deeper and deeper levels and our certainties are increasingly shaken – until we arrive at the bottom of the lake and get lost.