In Conversation with Barbara Probst

Frédéric Paul — One might think that the more documentation of an existing event one has, the closer one gets to the reality of this event. Does your work demonstrate the opposite?

Barbara Probst — A camera is like an eyewitness and a photograph is like a witness's account. Eyewitness accounts of the same event can be surprisingly discrepant. This was one of my initial realizations as I looked at the results of my very first simultaneous shoot: the twelve pictures, which later became Exposure #1 (page X). But what, actually, is the "reality of an event?" The answer seems a compelling work in progress, philosophically. I find photography the best tool to approach this issue, precisely because of its tie to this "reality."

F.P. — In Exposure #1 there are twelve cameras involved. It seems like a procedure that is both very elaborate and controlled. Do you remember what you were looking for as you prepared this first multiple shot?

B.P. — From the beginning of my involvement with photography I was drawn to use the medium to figure out what a photograph actually is and how it functions. Basically, I was able to think about it by using it. I looked at all the elements of the "system." From the process of the light falling on the film to the viewpoint of the photographer, from the grain on the film to the viewpoint of the viewer in front of the photograph, I was thinking my way through photography. In 2000, and as a conclusion of this preoccupation, I set up an experiment the result of which became Exposure #1. I wasn't really aiming for anything in particular and simply wanted to see what would happen if I shot one and the same thing at exactly the same moment from different points of views and distances. I used twelve cameras and myself as the protagonist. The twelve photographs deriving from this shoot left me feeling as if I had discovered a whole universe of possibilities with which to work. And I think I went deeper and deeper into this universe over the years and have still not gotten through it.

F.P. — Before the "exposures" one doesn't find the human figure in your work. You seemed more concerned with objects and architecture. Then, suddenly, in Exposure #1, you, yourself, are in the middle of the work, leaping on the roof. Soon after Exposure #1 you began to work with professional actors and models. Why did you introduce the human figure to your work?

B.P. — I was looking for a way to reveal the simultaneity of several photographs in the most obvious way. A person in motion seemed like an excellent tool. I did, at first, use myself, but I also didn't want my work to be understood as self-portraiture. So, pretty soon, I was looking for people who were experienced and natural in front of the camera.

F.P. — People are not always in motion in your work. The works, for example, that include two photographs, both showing the same two people each looking in a different camera. Can you talk about the shift that takes place between the two images?

B.P. — In the beginning, I wanted the simultaneity to be very evident. Later, I often reduced the movement of the models and the common moment became apparent through subtler means: the posture of a hand, a strand of hair, or wrinkles in the shirt. Especially in these "close ups," the models are somehow motionless, like in a tableau vivant. The two protagonists gaze, alert, into the cameras. One looks in the left camera, the other in the right camera. When the two images generated by this set up are installed side by side, the cameras' two viewpoints merge into one in the viewer's eyes. The models' intense gazes tie the viewer in, provoking him to gaze back. It is this "gaze back" that I am after. It puts the viewer in a somewhat impossible and unsettling situation, namely to abandon a—by nature—permanent viewpoint and oscillate instead between two points of view.

F.P. — There are types of works, often diptychs, in which the images seem to be disconnected: one image might show a close up, the other one a long shot. Like Exposure 11B (page X). The woman on her bike is the main subject in one image and then, in the other image, she's lost in a street view. Do you see them, somehow, as being like film stills? Have you ever been tempted to make a movie?

B.P. — There may be quite a few images in my work that could be film stills but I haven't yet been tempted to make a film myself. I am more interested in still images than in moving ones. The still shows an instant frozen from the continuum of life normally hidden from our eyes. In this sense, photography is antipodal to life. Film is closer to life since it has a chronological flow and it provides a narrative. A photographic image is not narrative by nature. It is, instead, more like the appearance of an event at a certain moment, without information about what happened before and after. Only the viewer's mind brings the narrative to a photograph, reading and imagining, more or less consciously, its before and its after. In my work, I engage in these narratives in the viewer's mind. I am trying to unhinge them, to challenge their solidity by provoking the viewer to negotiate his or her way through the dilemma of several diverging narratives. I am much more interested in the analysis of narrative in photography than in its fabrication in film.

F.P. — In 2004, you introduced found images as backdrops to your set ups. You used, for example, a still from Antonioni's Blow Up. What criteria stood behind your selections?

B.P. — I have a small archive of pictures for the backdrops: film stills, postcards, pictures from the internet. These are all pictures that are familiar to us, like the picture of the Alps, the film still from Blow Up, or the shot of Daniel Craig. They are quite evident and recognizable and are supposed to provide a context without carrying too much of a story. The first time I used these pictures, in Exposure #30 (page X), I covered three walls, as well as the floor of my studio, each with a large print out. A model posed in the middle of this scene, surrounded by four cameras each photographing her in front of a different backdrop. Each image shows the model at the same instant in a completely different context. The

backdrops helped me to increase the discrepancy between the images such that the images almost contradict one another.

F.P. — Is this also the reason you chose to have black-and-white as well as color images in one and the same series?

B.P. — The coexistence of color and black-and-white photographs within a series can be amazingly disassociating. Sometimes there seem to be decades between two of a series' images simply because one is black and white and the other color.

F.P. — In a recent piece, you even used a negative image, a choice that seems to represent almost the limit of estrangement. How did you come up with this decision?

B.P. — Actually, the inverted black-and-white image in Exposure #101 (p. X) is not as far from actuality as you think. I shoot with analog cameras and film is always the first result of my shoots. So, the inverted image on the film roll is nothing but the original. This gave me the idea to leave one image in a diptych inverted.

F.P. — In some of the works you used strong colors: purple or violet in Exposure #37 (p. X), light blue in Exposure #47 (p. X), and a bright red in Exposure #83 (p. X). Is this a painter's reflex?

B.P. — Color is a great means to structure a series in a formal way. With color I can connect or disconnect certain images visually.

F.P. — Do you allow for a certain amount of improvisation and chance as you shoot?

B.P. — While I prepare the shoots very carefully and work hard to control everything, during the shoot itself I do always hope for improvisation and "mistakes." Very often, the most successful shoots are those in which chance is involved. When we shoot on the street I am happy about the passersby who get in the middle of our set and become part of all the images. In any case, the control in my shoots is limited, since there is always more than one camera involved. When we are shooting and I am struggling to control what we are doing, I am always very aware that I am only able to see from one point of view. It is amazing that in life we hardly sense this "restriction" of our field of vision to a small detail of the world.

F.P. — In your series you shoot both scenarios that sometimes seem straightforward and simple and others that seem quite complex. Can you talk a bit about these scenarios?

B.P. — There are scenes that include movement of the models, which I would call performances. The models perform a course of movement and either I or one of the models releases the cameras at a certain moment. Then there are scenes that are set up like tableaux vivants. The models hold a certain pose and keep their gazes alert for the duration of the shoot.

F.P. — Can you speak about the more recent cityscapes: the ice-skater diptych (p. X) or the color triptych of a woman with a green raincoat on a crossroad (p. X)? What's strange and interesting here is the fact that each image is strictly

equivalent to the others, even when the images show very different aspects of the depicted location. What led you to the idea of the cityscapes?

B.P. — A couple of years ago, I wanted to experiment with shoots based on a more rigorous set of rules. I decided to position all the cameras at exactly the same distance to the model, as well as position the model in all images in exactly the same spot. For these works, I chose locations that would look extremely distinct depending on the viewpoint. From this set up, I obtained images that center the model as a small figure. The backgrounds of these images are uncannily dissimilar. When looking at all images conjoined, the model that was shot in motion seems to become a static figure on a central axis around which the world pivots.

F.P. — Do you agree when I say that the images in these works are "equivalent"? I am sure a "straight" photographer wouldn't agree with this. However, picking one image and isolating it will reduce this image to its formal components. In this regard, your work seems critical of German photography after Becher. What would be lost if somebody prefers certain images of a series?

B.P. — In general, I think that the common moment renders the images of a series equivalent. Since they are all bound to the same moment, no image is more important or more true than any other. The substance of the series exists not in the individual image but rather in the interrelations between the images. So, instead of judging the individual images, the viewer is invited to travel through the space they mark out, to take on different points of view and to see him- or herself looking. The space between the images is the space of this journey. Sometimes I think that the space between the images is the most important part of my work.

Of course the individual image is not my field of interest and one can consider my work as a critique, but it would be a critique of the photograph in general. A critique of the photograph that is tied so neatly to reality and, at the same time, results from completely subjective decisions.

F.P. — Looking at all of the Exposures I noticed that you sometimes use a certain scene twice. For example the girl with the balloons on the street in #28 (page X) returns in #89 (page X). There are seven years between these two diptychs. What are you looking for when you reuse a scenario?

B.P. — Amongst the Exposures you find various groups of works. That is also the way we structured this book. There are, for example, the close ups, or the street scenes. There is the group that is mainly concerned with the making of images (when cameras or photographers are the subject). There is the group of works for which I used backdrops. I recently started a new group: the still lifes. And these groups are not chronological: there is no linear trace or progression through the last thirteen years of my work, since I go back and forth between these groups. Whenever I have finished a work, I feel, the last work provided me with an experience that helps to enrich the next work. So I often go back to an earlier work, pick up its original idea, and try to integrate a new experience. In the case of #89, I returned to a work completed seven years earlier.

F.P. — In some of your recent works the human figure has disappeared. What led you to these still lifes?

F.P. — I think the still lifes came from my desire to work alone in my studio after all of these years shooting with a team of models and assistants. I started to look at the history of the still life and became really fascinated by it, especially by seventeenth-century still life painting. To my amazement, I found in many of these paintings an indication of time, like soap bubbles or butterflies. Soon, I started to experiment with still life using soap bubbles, a falling apple, and smoke. And I am currently still in the middle of it.

F.P. — How do you choose the objects in these still lifes?

B.P. — For the still lifes I choose objects that don't have much significance, things like a bottle or a mushroom. They don't have much to do with each other. As objects they are quite neutral.

F.P. — Do you really think a mushroom is neutral as an object? I am surprised. Think of John Cage, well known to be a specialist, or the Seven Dwarfs. A mushroom is more neutral in a forest or in a kitchen than in an artist's studio in New York, don't you think?

B.P. — I didn't intend any of these connotations. Maybe I should put it this way: in the still life the objects neutralize one another. There is a vase, a mushroom, a small model of a farmhouse, for example. These objects might point in different directions, as you suggest, but there is no coherence; they don't really make sense in combination with each other. In this way, I think the objects become neutral and John Cage and the Seven Dwarfs leave the mushroom.

F.P. — There is an aspect of your work that is completely Cubist: viewing things simultaneously from different points of view. In the still lives, this impression is particularly clear. Have you thought about this?

B.P. — The Cubists affirm illusion and I try to deconstruct illusion but, yes, both the Cubists and myself are somehow involved in a spatial thinking. After all, I am coming from sculpture and it may be I still am a sculptor trying to create a three-dimensional impression. I guess I was always a bit dissatisfied with the flatness of the photograph.

F.P. — How do you decide the size of your prints?

B.P. — There are rather large works that function as installations. They include twelve or thirteen images that take up a whole room. The images have a spatial relationship to each other, similar to the cameras that generated these images in the first place. And the viewer relates to this spatiality by moving within the space between the images while looking at them.

The fact that I always use at least two cameras inevitably brings the issue of space into my work. In some works, for example #69 (page X), I would even say the photographs create a sculpture in the mind of the viewer. Having said this, I always choose the size of the images in regard to their relationship to the viewer, so that he or she will need to move physically to view the whole work, be it only by turning the head or walking back and forth between the images.

F.P. — When it comes to displaying your work, do you work with the gallery space or do you have a definite layout for each work beforehand?

B.P. — The way the images within a series are grouped is really important. The order and formation of the images encourage a certain way of reading. The fact that we read from left to right comes into play. Sometimes I think of my series as being like sentences. The individual word, like the individual image, doesn't make much sense on its own. Only a certain combination and order of words makes a sentence that makes sense. So, the way the images are grouped is quite definite and is almost always identical.

F.P. — How do the streets of New York inspire your work?

B.P. — New York is like a three-dimensional postcard. I wonder if there is any another city that is reproduced so obsessively. Even a small detail of this city has a very high recognition value. And I am interested in pictures that are clichés. A cliché is easy to pigeonhole. When I shoot in the streets of New York or when I use backdrops with city views, I am hoping to generate photographs that are easy to pigeonhole. I am not trying to invent images; I am actually trying to make images that relate to all kinds of images we have seen before.

F.P. — What kinds of artists have influenced your work and possibly still do?

B.P. — Early on, I was drawn to the principles of conceptual art of the 1960s. Later, some of the more important influences were Dan Graham's incorporation of the viewer, Fred Sandback's notion of space, Godard's deconstruction of film, and Bertolt Brecht's epic theater.

F.P. — I would like to go back to Exposure #72 (p. X) where you used backdrops. It seems like a complicated shoot, as there are two models involved who are linked by one of the four images. How did you arrive at the idea for this work?

B.P. — In #72, I used backdrops, but I wanted one image to be defined by the foreground instead of the background. So I built this cave-like structure that I picked up from one of James Casebere's works and I positioned one camera in the cave looking out to the model. This camera generated an image that provides you very obviously with more information about the standpoint of the camera than about what the camera shoots. So this view comes from this dark, wet cave and could possibly simulate the view of an animal living there.

Since my work is really more about how we see and not so much about what we see, I am very interested in the idea that the photograph might show us more about the photographer than about what he or she shoots. To me, a photograph first and foremost represents a way of looking at something. To this extent, it is much more revealing and truthful in regard to who is behind the camera than in regard to what is in front of the camera.

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