

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2009

Barbara Probst

MURRAY GUY

A woman reaches for something on a coffee table. This is the core event of Barbara Probst's *Exposure #56: NYC, 428 Broome Street, 06.05.08, 1:42 PM* (all works 2008). Around it are layers of action that play out, as in Probst's other works, in multiple photographs taken from various points of view, all of them shot simultaneously by radio-controlled cameras that Probst sets up around and within her tableaux. She does not hide her apparatus, so that the cameras, as they record the limited bits of information afforded by their various angles, also record one another, creating an extra layer of narrative help—or hindrance.

This particular work is made up of ten panels, each providing a different fragment of the same story: A woman reaches for something; it appears to be a peach; it sits on a coffee table strewn with art books; a man watches, a cigarette caught between two fingers and a slightly hostile look on his face; someone behind the man is reading a newspaper; someone else is standing far enough away that he or she can frame the woman between thumb and forefinger, as if holding a picture of her instead of looking at the real thing. Throwing off this neat sense of progressive remove is another woman, apparently stationed behind a chair, looking away from the main action and wistfully touching the side of her face.

The vague and provisional nature of this summary seems to be exactly what Probst intends to elicit with her method: As a viewer, you find yourself inside the work, trying to piece together and lay out what is happening around you. *Exposure #56* is particularly effective in this regard, with its pronounced feeling of intrusion—as if the camera, and the viewer, has interrupted rather than caught the moment. Assembling the situation out of the pieces provided requires a cognitive effort that is colored by the particular pleasure of frustration, of having to guess and look again and think and look again, as in a memory game. Like memory, the work is unreliable: The woman sitting behind the chair is photographed from two slightly different perspectives, one straight on and the other just askew, creating a sort of stereoscopic composition in which a slight but distinct shift in her expression is witnessed, as if we are looking at the same object out of one eye and then the other.

The eye moves across the work from hand to hand to hand—from the woman reaching to the man holding the cigarette to the framing fingers—down to the covers of the books on the coffee table. The twelve-panel *Exposure #55: Munich, Waisenhausstrasse 65, 01.17.08, 1:55 PM*, although less complex than *Exposure #56*, is also anchored by a gesture, here a young woman drawing her hair from the back of her neck. She is alternately dreamy and attentive—in one panel we see that she is looking at her watch, an act that grounds the sequence in precision (she could be taking her pulse, or determining the length of the exposure)—and is photographed head-on, from behind, through keyholes and doorways and through (or perhaps reflected in) a window, the images seeming variously voyeuristic, staged, direct, intimate, off-hand. These changes in key constitute the large part of the work's flow, a broken story that seems to culminate in a single panel featuring a child looking directly at the camera, like a narrator whose presence both reassures and confounds. Probst, alert to photography's tendency to insist on its own truth, rarely inserts a clue that doesn't also point away from itself.

—Emily Hall



Barbara Probst,
*Exposure #55: Munich,
Waisenhausstrasse
65, 01.17.08, 1:55 PM*
(detail), 2008, twelve
color photographs,
each 29 x 44".