

ART, OCTOBER 9, 2014

FotoFocus Biennial: Q&A with Barbara Probst

By Natalie Rinn

Barbara Probst is a German photographer living and working in New York City. Selections from her series “Exposures” will appear in the second FotoFocus Biennial—a month-long exhibition of photography and lens-based art—opening this weekend in Cincinnati, OH. New York City-based curator and writer Kevin Moore and FotoFocus Executive Director Mary Ellen Goeke have planned six exhibitions for the this year’s biennial that examine photography as a medium: its relationship to its history, to other art forms (especially the moving image), and as a mediator between our own lives and the world.

Probst’s analog images embody this investigation: often capturing the same moment from several vantage points, they ask viewers to consider the limited confines—their own two eyes—through which they perceive small slices of a much bigger whole. *Whitewall* spoke with Probst about her work in FotoFocus’ “Stills” presentation, the foundation of her practice, and what questions she’ll explore next.

WHITEWALL: What first drew you to photography?

BARBARA PROBST: I always wanted to become a sculptor, but photography fascinated me—working in the dark room, seeing a ghostly image appear. I took a photo class and I was so fascinated that there was this trace of reality in it. The [sculptural] materials I was working with didn’t have that at all. They didn’t relate to anything. With clay and plaster you can make something, and it has a relationship to reality, but with photography, it was that trace of reality that really fascinated me.

WW: How did you decide what you would investigate with your work?

BP: After shooting a lot and finding that I always came up with clichés, I started to think: maybe I should start to think about what photography actually is in a very analytical way, what it does with reality, what it means, and think about the medium. That was the very beginning of “Exposures.” I think that my work is analytical, it’s not about the subjects, it’s about what the camera does, what the photographer does, and then what the viewer does—and everything that happens before you take a picture, and then after a picture is taken when you look at it. The picture itself is just a tool for this investigation.

WW: Can you describe your technical process?

BP: The cameras are analog cameras and they are connected to a radio wave receiver and with a button I can release them all exactly at the same moment. In an analog camera there are 36 frames. I always end up with five or six choices that are technically ok, and I choose one. Often out of 12 there are five images I would have shot in a different way. I often have what would be mistakes in the traditional sense of photography—like a reflection on a car. But it’s not about that. I accept that even when mistakes happen it’s quite interesting.

WW: What is one of your images that will appear in Cincinnati?

BP: One is of 12 photographs at the same time [*Exposure #106: N.Y.C., Broome & Crosby Streets, 04.17.13, 2:29 p., 2013*]. It’s a work that combines two incidents that have nothing to do with each other. It is no special event, it’s just a woman grabbing for an apple, and a taxi crossing the street. What’s happening in the images is not very meaningful. There are several different building blocks coming together—my apartment, and the street downstairs, and the model grabbing for an apple, and the striped shirt, and the blue sofa. They are formal things that are repeated in my work. It’s really about how you can look at it, or how we might look at it, and how differently we look at the world.

WW: By giving the viewer several perspectives, even of a meaningless moment, you reveal a reality that is more complex than the one we see.

BP: We think that we see everything from our perspective. We are kind of satisfied in that way, it's what keeps us going. But it's a very small detail of the whole world. It's interesting to recognize how little we see, I find, when we are in the world. We all see very different details of the whole thing. We have an agreement about things and so we can talk to each other and communicate. We don't know how other people perceive color, for example. We say this is green, but we cannot compare that experience. And so we are both, with our eyes, kind of alone. My work aims very much at the relationship of the viewer, who is actually needed for the work more than for other photographs. The viewer kind of completes the work. It's really about the points of views of the viewer. The viewer is really needed to bring it all together.

WHITEWALL: What are you working on now?

BP: I'm in the process of thinking and working on something that is more open, and not so obviously the same moment, but that still is the same moment. I was thinking about Godard in late 50s or early 60s. He introduced jump cuts into film. Within one scene he cuts off a second and the film jumps forward—the viewer fills in what happened, but every viewer can fill it in, in a different way. I was inspired by that to do that in my work, to break the viscosity of the common moment, and introduce images to the series even if they're not visibly connected. They are temporally connected. The viewer reads the work and brings these different elements together. I would like to bring my attention more to the viewer, open it up even more, and see if the viewer can carry it.