



FALL 2011

Between Staged and Documentary

Yasufumi Nakamori meets with Barbara Probst

Artist Barbara Probst and MFAH's Assistant Curator of Photography Yasufumi Nakamori met in the artist's studio in Chinatown, New York City on Monday, May 16, 2011. From her 11th floor studio of a pre-war building, facing north, one could see a complex and expansive skyline of Manhattan. Much of her thinking and shooting takes place in the studio. Nakamori, who worked on the Museum's acquisition of the artist's *Exposure #69: N.Y.C., 555 8th Avenue, 02.24.09, 6:16p.m.*, had previously met with her several times, and thus their meeting began with a friendly atmosphere.

Yasufumi Nakamori: When and how did you start photography? I thought you had once studied with Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf.

Barbara Probst: I actually studied sculpture and not photography. We were modeling with clay every day with a nude model posing for us. We would create a three dimensional image of our model as naturalistically as possible. At some point I took a photography class [with the Bechers at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf]. We learned about cameras and lenses; we learned to process film and above all we spent a lot of time in the darkroom. I remember I was totally struck by seeing for the first time photo paper laying in the developer, slowly, and like a ghost, beginning to show the traces of reality and finally ending up in a complete image with the finest nuances of grey, black, and white. I think the fact that I was working with clay every day and clay being such a blatantly neutral material without any reference sensitized me for my experience with photography as a medium which directly references the real.

YN: What are your thoughts on the relationship between sculpture and photography, and how does it relate to your practice? How did the former medium contribute to develop your sense and practice of the latter?

BP: Only in recent years do I realize how much my work with photography relates to my early years when I was very involved in sculpture. I noticed, for example, that my set-ups for the photographs are closely related to my practice as a sculptor. By arranging several cameras around the staged scene that is going to be photographed, the classroom situation with the nude model is mimicked. The nude model would stand on a turntable which we would turn every 10 minutes for about 30 or 40 degrees, so every student would be able to see every possible angle of the model.

It feels like I came full circle, but under very different circumstances and with different intentions. I am using photography now, and not clay. I am not interested in the naturalistic image of the model anymore, I am interested in the effect of the naturalistic image, the photographic image. When I make a series of images I am deliberately producing these effects myself as well as revealing them as effects at the same time. For example, one work consists of two images of a staged situation made at the same moment. One image is somehow mysterious, the other one is somehow bright and cheerful. Within this juxtaposition the two photographs declare themselves to be pure effects caused by two different strategies of image making. So my work is really about the conditions of photographic images as well as their impact on us, but it is not at all about what they represent.

YN: How do you conceive a picture? How do you conceptualize it? It seems to me your work may require quite a lot of thinking and preparation, including selecting a site and models, let alone setting up multiple cameras and lighting. Your work seems to focus on simultaneity and multiplicity of contemporary life, like Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

BP: Each series of images is the result of an interest or a question that results from the work I have done before. For example the very first exposure on the rooftop: *Exposure #1: N.Y.C., 545 8th Avenue, 01.07.00, 10:37 p.m.* resulted from a deep crisis about my experience with photography. After I bought a camera, I started to take pictures of the world like a straight photographer. Landscapes, streets, people, still life. I was deeply dissatisfied with my pictures,

which always reminded me of images I had seen before. This crisis led to an investigation of photography, philosophically as well as historically. In January 2000, I came up with the idea to photograph one and the same situation at one and the same moment from different standpoints and distances. The result of this experiment was groundbreaking for my work with photography and led to the next series in which I experimented in a more radical way with the idea of making simultaneous photographs. I tried to create images that were supposed to be more contradictory and discrepant. So each work leads to the next. I am still working with the principle of simultaneity and there seems to be a wide field of possibilities.

YN: What inspires you to make a picture?

BP: The conception of every series, especially the ones with many images, takes a long time. During this time I am doing research in all kinds of fields: film, philosophy, fashion, photography of all sorts, art. The inner structure of the work, which is the questions or issues the work will be based upon, usually develops simultaneously with the ideas of formal elements for the work.

YN: Using a radio-controlled release system, you simultaneously trigger the shutters of several cameras (a Canon T70, up to 14 of them so far) pointed at the same scene from various viewpoints. The sequence of images suspend time and stretch out the split second. Both illusion and device are always manifest - cameras, studio lights, tripods are often all visible, as if you are not interested in creating a seamless image of constructed reality, or a constructed moment. Could you comment on photography and reality? What about the difference between staging and documentary?

BP: The relationship between photography and reality was a starting point for *Exposures*. In the beginning I was very interested in testing every aspect of this problematic relationship. Now it still is by nature part of my work, but no longer the starting point. This issue has been discussed extensively in general and I don't feel the need to add to this discourse. At this point, I see my work as a kind of visual statement that goes beyond this problem. A photograph is always somewhere between reality and fiction, between staged and documentary. More or less closer to the one or the other. But it is never the one or the other.

YN: Tell us about the presence of a body in your picture.

BP: I choose to stage models for my photographs because human beings, like animals, are constantly in motion, even when they sleep. A movement, seen from different angles and frozen by the camera in exactly the same moment, generates visual evidence that all of the images of a series were taken at the same moment. This can be, for example, a jump or a simple movement of a hand. This evidence ties all of the images together. That's why I stage models or "bodies. In other respects the body in my series is somehow important as a link between the images and the viewer. Very often my images are quite large (like *Exposure #69: N.Y.C., 555 8th Avenue, 02.24.09, 6:16 p.m.* which is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston collection) and the models in the images are almost life size. The viewer is invited into the pictures taking an imaginative tour around the three women.

YN: How would you characterize your work from your own perspective? What is it about ultimately?

BP: There are many aspects to my work, but ultimately it is based upon my interest in the phenomenon of subjectivity which again is based on perception. I regard photographic images to be a very useful tool to investigate this problem. A photograph is always derived from a point-of-view and a point-of-view is by nature subjective. There is no objective point-of-view.

YN: I'd like to discuss the issue of surveillance and photography. Your pictures often seem to comment on the culture of surveillance, giving an impression that a viewer or a model is being watched. Is this effect part of your intention?

BP: By looking back at the one who looks at you, thereby showing awareness that one is being looked at, one can defend oneself from one particular view. However, one can return only one view at a moment. All other views, be it of the eye or the camera, cannot be returned in that same moment. In *Exposures* you find often one image that shows the viewed subject returning the view, all other images show the subject being unaware.

I think in my work surveillance is only one of many possible views by people, animals, cameras, or even satellites. All these different imaginative views are taken by my cameras that generate very different pictures of the same thing at the same time. Each of these views have a different quality and as images provoke a different reading. One image in a series can be an intimate view of a person, a potential view of a friend. The other image of the same series can be an image that connotes surveillance.

YN: Do you bring in a sense of cinema in your picture making? The prismatic effect is heightened when backdrops, often enlarged stills from well-known movies are employed, or when you choose to shoot at an outside location in Manhattan.

BP: I think my work has a cinematic feel, because in film a scene is often represented from different angles. There is the technique of shot and reverse shot, for example, that tells the story from two different points-of-view. But film is by nature chronological. Each frame is followed by the next in time. In the Exposure series all the images are shot in the same moment and are visible for the viewer at the same time, when they are exhibited. The images are bound together by the common moment as they refer to one another. Each image tells the same story in a different way, yet at the same time it carries the same amount of "truth" as the others in the series. This contradiction blanks out the narrative of the images and turns them into a facade without a construction. These circumstances cannot be investigated in film, because the images in film are in chronological sequence and not simultaneous.

YN: Finally, would you talk about your most recent work?

BP: In my most recent works, the cameras have been placed at a distance much further away from the models than previously. From this distant point-of-view, the cameras are looking at the models as they are standing in the middle of a landscape or cityscape. The two different views make the landscape seem to move like a huge backdrop that is behind them. I feel that this idea of having the world pivoting around a figure like a backdrop has opened a new field of investigation for me. I am still in a thinking process as I am getting deeper into it, and can't really say too much about it yet.

Barbara Probst was born in 1964 in Munich, Germany, and studied at the Akademie der Bildende Künste, Munich and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. She has had numerous gallery exhibitions in Europe and the United States. Her work was shown in New Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2006. Solo exhibitions include the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, Illinois; the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wisconsin; Domaine de Kerguehennec, Bignan, France; Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, United Kingdom; and the Oldenburg Kunstverein. Probst currently lives and works in Munich and New York. Steidl and the MoCP have published an extensive monograph of her work. In the United States, Probst is represented by Murray Guy, New York. She is collected by numerous museums such as The Museum of Modern Art, New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in addition to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Yasufumi Nakamori is Assistant Curator of Photography, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and, as a specialist of post-1945 Japanese art and architecture, he teaches the subject at Rice University. His catalogue Picturing Modernism in Japanese Architecture, Photographs by Ishimoto Yasuhiro (MFAH/Yale University Press, 2010) received from the College Art Association the 2011 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Award for Smaller Collections and Exhibitions. His upcoming exhibitions at MFAH include Utopia/Dystopia: Constructed with Photography (spring 2012), and an exhibition dealing with the emergence of conceptual photography in Japan during the 1960s. Most recently, he has contributed an essay for the exhibition Metabolism, the City of the Future (fall 2011) at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo.