THE SERVANTS TURNING ON THE THRESHOLD

Jan Wenzel

Is printing some photographs in a book enough to merit it being called a photobook? Hardly, since it is rather a specific usage of the photographs that makes it one, namely a thoughtful presentation that works with the formal instruments of the book as such: with the page, the double page, the front and back pages; with the cover, the column titles, the captions; with halftone, the texture of the paper, the type of binding. These elements enable different modalities of presentation; they determine the way the reader is meant to perceive the photographs. The creators of a photobook adopt these elements of the book, assigning new functions to some of them or relieving them of all functionality.

Ed Ruscha is a case in point: he decided on the title of his first book before he had even taken a single one of the photographs that were to appear in it. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*—these three words and their typographical arrangement on the page were predetermined and it was from there that he developed everything else. The photographs he took were not meant to adhere to any special aesthetic expectations: Ruscha was unconvinced by the intentional artistry in photography and consequently culled the most striking gasoline stations from his selection of images. "I think photography is dead as a fine art" is a remark he made in an interview to elucidate his approach. He described his photographs thus: "They are technical data like industrial photography. To me, they are nothing more than snapshots." These two comments delineate the two extremes that defined the emergence of a new understanding of photography during the sixties: industrial photography and snapshot, conceptual reserve and blurred, unrehearsed spontaneity. In *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* the individual photographs maintained a casual insouciance—amateurishly shot pictures of stereotypical buildings and empty streets—invested with meaning by nothing more than the typographically well-thought-out words of the book's title.

With *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, a slim volume of 48 pages, Ed Ruscha discovered the design principle for a highly efficient contextualisation device that was able to transform a collection of individual photographs, however trivial they might be, into images of iconic power by repeating interconnected motifs. Browsing through the book's pages, we witness a photograph of a gasoline station evolving into an image that is representative of all gasoline stations. Other artists continued to develop this contextualisation device that reveals the trivial, ostensibly meaningless aspects of daily life through repetition, giving them significance in the process—from Hans-Peter Feldmann to Erik van der Weijde. While the American

Library of Congress initially refused to admit Ruscha's book into the library's collection—"because of its unorthodox form and lack of information" was their scathing explanation—today *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is regarded as one of the starting points for a history of the modern photobook and the publications that were inspired by it fill entire libraries.

New books build on pre-existing books. They enter into a dialogue with them. This dialogue does not even need to be intended by the author—the books organise themselves; without fail they find relatives and allies. With its mundane photo series Peter Tillessen's *Serienkiller* (Serial Killer), a sequence of 48 thin booklets that was created between 1997 and 2002, is reminiscent of Ed Ruscha's approach. A pattern emerges and it soon becomes evident just how much Peter Tillessen enjoys dodging and turning in order to coax that pattern away from the expected.

In contrast to Ruscha's typographically deliberate titles, the cover of each issue contains nothing but a number. It determines the issue's place within the sequence and thus embodies the law of the series in its smallest possible form. The title that gives each photo series a point follows on page three. The number of pages varies from issue to issue, in most cases the booklets contain 16–18 pages. *Serienkiller* was printed in a minimal edition of 5+2 copies.

In the year 2000 Peter Tillessen collated 21 photo series from *Serienkiller* in a book he published with Lars Müller Publishers under the title *Gold*. In its form it seems like an antithesis to Ed Ruscha's cheaply produced brochures. *Gold* is printed in the venerable duodecimo format that is somehow blunter than the common paperback format of today and thus exudes a certain gravitas. This impression is further reinforced by the hard cover and gold foil stamping. It's a "brick" of a book—the spine is four centimeters thick—and on the inside there are ordinary, quotidian situations: People in front of freezers, people with shopping bags, people at ATMs, building sites, shop window dummies, house fronts.

The American author Anatole Broyard once described the book as an "anxious object", a description that perfectly encapsulates what Peter Tillessen is attempting to achieve in *Gold*: he constructs an "anxious object" with all its elements juxtaposed to create utmost dynamism. The extreme contrast between the mundane photographs and the sophisticated object of the book is repeated in the tension between chapter headings and photographs. The chapter headings invigorate the photo series. It is only through them that Tillessen's snapshots are turned into dynamic images. You read "Performance artist" and see people in front of freezer units with special offers. You read "Gold Rush" and see builders with shovels and percussion drills. You read "Crème de la Crème" and see a gaudy house

front. It works as a joke because the viewers put their trust in the interpretational authority of the titles. They follow them, take them seriously, and let them determine their perception of the images. Thus a building site becomes a prospector's dig.

"All books that are not made, are, at least, just as important," it says in the final, 15th paragraph of Erik van der Weijde's "4478zine's publishing manifesto". Sometimes it takes a little longer until an idea takes the form of a book. This is another part of Ed Ruscha's legacy: The formula of 1 idea = 1 book. Of his book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* from the year 1967 he later said in an interview that he had not really been interested in the abstract forms of car park markings: "But those patterns and their abstract design quality mean nothing to me. I'll tell you what is more interesting: the oil droppings on the ground."

Peter Tillessen's *Oil*, published in 2010 by Kodoji Press, is a slim volume with photographs of such oil leaks. In its first print run of 300 copies produced on a Xerox printer, the 20-page brochure has the appearance a fotozine. The 18 colour photographs which are printed on one page each all show oil leaks on wet asphalt. They are abstract, ghostly stains shimmering in a profusion of colours. Esoteric colour clouds, without meaning, pure incident.

The rounded corners of the photographs take up the soft shapes of the oil leaks, while at the same time alluding to the shape of car windows—an association that is created exclusively by the framing but manages to evoke further impulses, concepts, and emotions in the viewer. The cover is on the back page of the brochure: three black-and-white circles of different size repeat the book's subject as a memorable graphic symbol.

"If two subjects communicate in the space, then space is an element of this communication. Space modifies this communication. Space imposes its own laws on this communication," Ulises Carrión wrote in 1975 in his manifesto *The New Art of Making Books*. For the past few years now and again one comes across photobooks that assert a dimension of depth on the flat page, created by the layering of individual elements. The lower level is usually the facsimile of an already existing publication: A secret service file in *Miklós Klaus Rózsa* (2014) by Christof Nüssli and Christoph Oeschger; a telephone directory in *Fond du Lac* (2015) by Christian Patterson; a bible in *Holy Bible* (2014) by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin; or a Soviet labour book in *Labour Book* (2015) by Kirill Golovchenko. An early example of this way of working with the page which combines aspects of collage and palimpsest—overwriting, overlapping, animated canvas—can be found in Ilya Kabakov's *V Nashem ZhEKe* from 1982. The Moscow-based conceptualist fabricated an anonymous collector who pasted postcards

into discarded magazines and textbooks. We can sense a playfulness in this method: beneath the postcards depicting heroes of the Soviet Union and socialist cityscapes, there are older layers of Soviet everyday culture, tautologically overlaid by the cards. Through this doubling the viewer's attention is focused on the context.

Peter Tillessen's *40 Jahre Kernspaltung* (40 Years of Nuclear Fission), published in 2012 by Kodoji Press, is a notable title in this category of books. Partly because it was created before this form of photobook became popular, and partly because it is the only example where the precept of the serial image, of motivic repetition, is combined with the form of the picture palimpsest. In this case the backdrop is supplied by the book *40 Jahre Kernspaltung: Eine Einführung in die Originalliteratur* (40 Years of Nuclear Fission: An Introduction to the Original Literature), edited by Horst Wohlfahrt and published in 1979 by the Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft in Darmstadt. Peter Tillessen selected 96 pages from the 379-page compendium. The text block itself has exposed stitching, which is covered by a red dust jacket. Two illustrations from the original book have been retained. One shows the laboratory bench on which Otto Hahn and Fritz Straßmann discovered nuclear fission in 1938, the other, a uranium mine in Oklo in Gabun. The remaining 40 illustrations show an amorphous matter that in the context of the book may be taken for a mineral or slag, the byproduct of a smelting process. The pictures seem like scientific photographs, they often have technical defects, they are blurred or strangely lit, and, in the sequence of the same object reproduced over and over again throughout the book, they also acquire an obsessive quality. You can read this book—detailed instructions are supplied in Tillessen's short text entitled *Atom Heart Father*—like a confluence of two professional obesssions, or as a kind of overwriting of the pictorial world of the father by the son who studied agricultural sciences before turning to photography, because in contrast to the pages on which they are placed the illustrations don't show radioactive material but the excrement of earthworms. "The worms are the depth psychologists of the soil which they evert as they evert themselves. They turn everything upside down. They are the anti-liquidators. They risk their lives to bring up from the depth what the liquidators have ploughed deep under, also risking their own lives," Peter Tillessen writes. Just as the fly served Moscow conceptualism as an emblematic animal—a symbol of socialist life—in a conceptually equally ambitious operation the earthworm is turned into a symbol of productive digestion, the heraldic beast of its own history.

Only a few people know that Ed Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* is a book that is strongly influenced by the author's relationship to his own

parents because all 26 gasoline stations shown are on the route connecting California and Oklahoma, where Ed Ruscha visited his parents four to five times a year. It should hardly be surprising that this is spotlighted here, since Tillessen ploughs and digests the history of the serial photobook with the efficiency of an earthworm. *Superficial Images* is the most recent result of this work. It is interesting to see how he arranges the interplay between individual photographs, the constellation of images on the page, captions, and different principles of repetition. In this play there is no centre anymore, there are no subservient elements, only constellations. The captions don't submit to the images: often they don't offer the viewers any kind of assistance; sometimes they spread confusion more than they explain.

And perhaps the acquired autonomy of the secondary elements that traditionally serve an ancillary function within a book—the cover, the caption, even the empty page—is the real explanation for the inner dynamics of those "anxious objects" to which the photobooks of Peter Tillessen doubtless belong. Maybe the humour in these books arises from this very ambivalence: as viewers we regard every image caption as a servant, but in *Superficial Images* for some reason the servants turn on the threshold and pursue their own, anarchic agendas; we can go along with them, or not.