Objektiv

NORMAL PICTURES.

An interview with Carter Seddon by Lucas Blalock

Los Angeles-based photographer Carter Seddon's beguilingly simple pictures deliver a peculiarly photographic sense of having 'been there before'. This familiarity might be mostly in our previous experience of looking at photographs, but there is a recursiveness that echoes through the work on a number of levels. The legacies of photographic modernism, the Pictures Generation, and literature are all in play, but so are memory and touch, the specificities of place, technology and materiality; the photograph both as textual, conventional object, and as a method of sensory extension. There is a conflation of registers (the tactility of subjects, dust from the negative, a pictured picture, and scanner artifacts) that is reinforced by Seddon's seemingly myopic engagement with the world, explored through close encounter alone, without the grounding contexts of a broader view.

Lucas Blalock: I just read the press release for your show at *Interface* at Jenny's last year, which uses Don Delillo's *White Noise* as a starting point. The titles of the works have this very plain quality that feels oddly suspicious. Can you talk about how you think between pictures and text, especially in a world where the former often stand in for the latter?

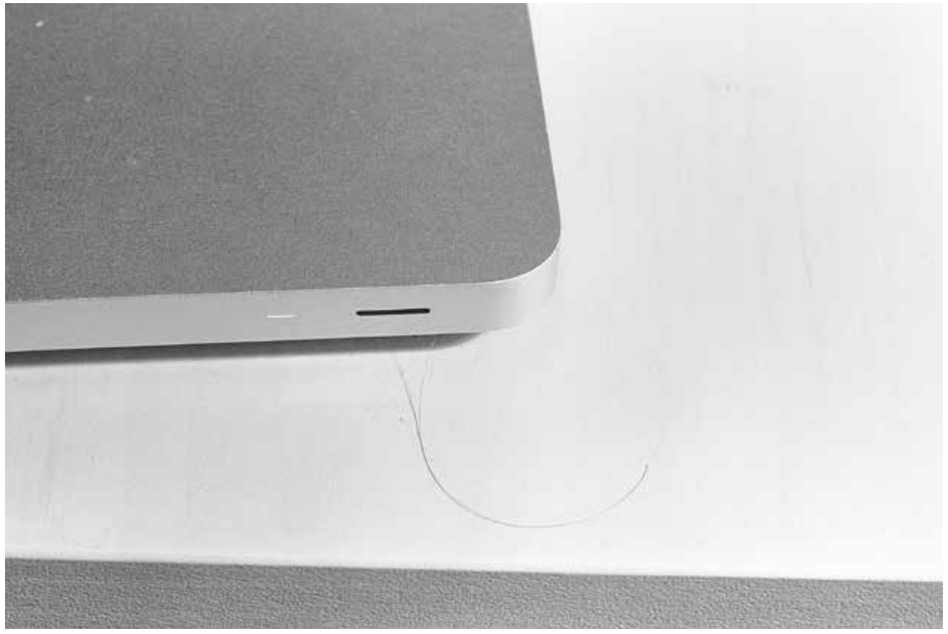
Carter Seddon: I've always been really interested in the relationship between photography and literature, which is a relationship that seems undervalued at the moment. I think the two are fundamentally linked. For example, in nineteenth-century photography many of the earliest choices of photographic subject matter were informed by literature, and literary descriptions of the visual world were in turn informed by the discovery of the way photography renders the world. And in my own work, I think of the process of arranging single photographs into a group as being analogous to arranging single lines of words into a poem. I also find an analogy between the reductiveness of the two media (or at least between photography and certain forms of poetry).

I often think of photographs in relationship to novels while I'm editing and organising single images. In this case, it was *White Noise,* because I'd been thinking about the relationship between technology and tactility. I'm interested in the way photographs can suggest tactility while themselves being smooth surfaces and also how this functions now that digital images are actually becoming responsive to touch. *White Noise* often refers to the condition of people who are imposing some form of sensory deprivation onto themselves to alleviate the overload of contemporary life by relating to the world in a mediated way. This is a condition that has clearly accelerated since the time of that novel. The photographic print is relevant to this because it's only an approximation of what it refers to – it can only suggest the sensations that the actual object would provide. I also think the oblique way in which photographs suggest physical sensation is closer to the experience of literature than to the experience of paintings or sculptures that are fully present as tactile objects.

Part of the interesting thing to me about photographs is how mute and absent they are in comparison to other forms of media. In regard to the titles, I'm interested in the resistance to language that photographs seem to exert and so I like the contrast between these two ways of describing something: the photograph that's describing the surface of something and a word that's naming it. I'm also interested in how a list of objects is generated by putting all these titles together, which then becomes itself a kind of poem that provides another set of connotations.

LB This show we're talking about was called Interface. If it were read as a noun in this construction, the interface would be the photographic print itself, our point of contact, the accumulator of information, instead of the more common photographic construction that it is the photographer who interfaces, the lens that encounters, etc. But this could also be contrasted with the user interface of various technologies.

CS I think of the print as the primary point of contact rather than as a secondary transcription of an exchange between the photographer and the subject. Maybe this is because a print has become such a formal way to view a photograph, as opposed to an image on a screen. Just by being a physical object with fixed dimensions it sort of reverses the traditional photographic construction that you described. But I chose *Interface* as a title more because of the way we interact with our environment through various kinds of interfaces. I was trying to photograph things in a way that resisted that mode of relating to the world while still acknowledging it. I wanted to focus on things that have a concrete quality, sort of accidental bits of unmediated activity – for example, the strand of hair sitting next to the computer in one of the photos and



Computer 2015, Carter Seddon.

accidents such as markings on the film itself.

The camera facilitates a different relationship to one's surroundings by acting as a mediator. I think everyone is affected by that now. As so much communication is done through the taking and sharing of images, everything presents itself as a potential photo opportunity.

LB I'm really intrigued by how much your pictures feel like they're really asking me to look, and to consider, from a first-person position. This seems like a redundant thing to say about photography, but it has a much more palpable sense in these pictures. It's a position I intuitively know how to inhabit and yet doing so feels oddly alien.

CS I like the idea of photographs that see from a first-person position. In making the work, I placed a kind of limitation on possible subject matter by using a 35mm camera and a macro lens that lends itself best to photographing things that are within a few feet or less of the camera. I have a sense that most people (including myself) seem increasingly to be inhabiting a world contained in a few feet of space around their heads and meanwhile there's this vast expanse around them at all times, especially in Los Angeles. I wanted to depict that enclosed world and make photographs that evoke that sensation through the way the photograph is constructed spatially.

LB You're using photography as a tool for describing the immediate world around you, which is a way of thinking about photography that has recently felt rather passed over. Is this lack something you were thinking about? And more generally, do you find yourself drawn towards the conversations swirling around the medium?

CS I'm interested in describing the immediate world around me, but often I'll re-photograph an existing image, set up a still life or buy a small prop just to photograph it, so the process lacks the documentary authenticity of someone like William Eggleston and has less emphasis on directly describing a particular place. In terms of recent conversations around photography, the ones I'm more interested in are those that have to do with a renewed interest in approaches to photography that seem aligned with the Pictures Generation – a kind of varied subject matter and assortment of genres in one exhibition, like Roe Ethridge to name an example. I was recently reading an interview with Christopher Williams and John Miller where they describe their work from the 1980s as involving the idea of the 'normative' picture and normative modes of presentation. I'm attracted to that idea as a goal, and it creates a framework for freely adopting various types of subject matter from pre-existing photographic categories that when placed together can create more poetic, oblique associations amongst each other. The excess of information that photographs and films provide makes it impossible for a photographer to control all of the associations that will emerge from an image or group of images: there's a third meaning outside of intention. It's very difficult to leave a group of photographs open in this way and still retain enough relationships between them so as not to be totally arbitrary.

LB Can you talk about your shift to colour in this new body of work?

CS One of my reasons for working in black and white was that it equalizes things, and disparate images can be cohered through the recognisable formal language of black-and-white photography, but I felt like I was repeating myself after a while. So with these photographs, I've been trying to use colour in such a way that that coherence is still there by reducing the amount of colours in each photo and creating correspondences between photos through them.

LB Does this relate to 'normativity'? In the darkroom era there was a sense that behind every colour photograph was a black and white one and now I'd say this relationship has been inverted. Or are both black and white and colour within the normative grammar of photography? The photographers you mentioned before have been widely influential on our generation, but in your work I find a more specific correlation to other strands – the early pictures of James Welling come to mind, which were also made in Los Angeles. In his pictures, the lens feels less calculated, or determined in its use, and more romantic. I can imagine that the romantic cuts against the grain of the normative but I find this quality (which I'm quite possibly misnaming) a really intriguing aspect of your pictures. I'm thinking of a lineage of photography that passes through Czech photographers like Sudek as much as through the Bauhaus, or Man Ray, or other American commercial photographers like Horst or Outerbridge.

CS Yes, in the black and white photographs, I was definitely informed by Man Ray and Surrealist photography's treatment of objects, especially in the photographs of Wols, and also Outerbridge's early black-and-white still-life photographs. Surrealist photography in particular relies a lot on the single image as a kind of complete fragment. I like the focus on the single image and there's something inherently

romantic about the idea of a fragment, or something for which the greater context has been lost. But since I see this romanticism and somewhat melancholic quality as inherent to the medium I try not to add to it too much. In terms of this idea of the normative, I think of it as photographs meant to be understood as art – matted and framed – they could be colour or black and white. There's been a lot of discussion about photography relating itself to sculpture recently or about the objecthood of the photograph, so the emphasis has been much less about looking and reading the photograph itself and more about its material presence. This is usually less interesting to me than just hanging a photo on the wall in the conventional manner, since it places the pictorial qualities of the photograph in the background. The idea of the normative image and the normative display is relevant to me now because I want people to continue to read the photograph. Its particularities as an object are also important, but I like the idea of the initial encounter to be with a recognisable, almost clichéd object – a framed and matted art-photograph – and then for the reading to become more complex from there.

LB Ah! I see what you're getting at. I would agree that recent discussions around photography have been about object making and not about picture making. And I further agree that the latter is a more exciting and complicated territory. I also hear what you're saying vis-a-vis the romantic, though I hadn't thought about it quite that way. But following this line about the picture and the fragment, I want to ask about the way time functions in the work. Thinking through their temporality from outside amounts to a kind of 'tense' problem that has almost a science-fiction quality.

CS I think the traditional idea of photographs as past tense has recently gotten more complicated. While it's still the case that most photographs refer back to a specific moment in time, there's also the postmodern idea that behind a photograph is just another photograph. And I think the later idea has become second nature and is now built into the tools of digital photography. Photographs are more malleable now and seem to refer primarily to other images rather than to a specific moment in time. And another thing is how quickly photographic images are seen. There isn't the delay that film imposes; images tend to be viewed now more or less simultaneously to the experience itself. It seems there's a kind of flattening of the past-tense quality of photography as well as an increased disposability and a kind of dispersion of references. In general, the use of personal photographs seems to be less about memory and has become closer to the role commercial photography once played. In my photographs I think the flattening of tenses that you mentioned has been informed by these kinds of shifts. Some of the photographs could have been taken at any point in the last fifty years and some are very specific, but they're all treated more or less equally. It's somehow more lateral, rather than always pointing backwards to a moment in time, or at least the idea of recording a precise moment in time is not all that central for me.

Carter Seddon (b.1986, San Francisco) lives and works in Los Angeles, andcompleted his MFA at the University of California, Riverside in 2013. He has had a recent solo exhibition at Jenny's, Los Angeles and participated in various exhibitions including Night Gallery, Los Angeles; Riverside Art Museum, Riverside and Proof Gallery, Boston.

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LOST IN COLLABORATION

The story of a highly successful, failed project between Daniel Spoerri and Dieter Roth
by Maria Horvei

On 17 October 1961, at 3.47 in the afternoon, artist Daniel Spoerri traced all the objects gathered on the blue tabletop of his Parisian hotel room onto a large sheet of paper. Paper clips, wine stoppers, matchboxes, burnt matches, spice jars, cutlery, leftover bread, spilled salt – nothing was left out or deemed too unimportant. Each outline – eight in total – was then numbered and annotated in a corresponding note. In a sober, mock-encyclopedic style, Spoerri described one object after the other, noting details such as visual appearance, text printed on packaging, the cost of the item etc. A good deal of the notes were also furnished with additional anecdotal material, such as the circumstance of the object's acquisition, the use it had been put to, stories relating to friends and acquaintances of Spoerri, short descriptions of how the object ended up on the table in the first place or other tidbits of information. Whenever he felt it necessary, Spoerri added footnotes to the notes for further elaborations, engaging the help of his good friend, the artist Robert Filliou, to correct his memory or his French. Using the money he was supposed to spend on invitations for an upcoming solo exhibition, Spoerri had the tracing of the objects – forming a ' 'map' of his cluttered table – and the corresponding notes printed into a small, 54-page booklet. 'The game I suggest', Spoerri wrote, 'is to choose a shape on the map and look up the corresponding numbered paragraph in the text'.[1] The title of this odd little collection of descriptions and anecdotes was *Topographie Anecdotée du Hasard*.

Most of the 1,500 original copies of *Topographie* were sent out in the mail as a combined invitation to and catalogue for Spoerri's imminent exhibition, which opened at the Galerie Lawrence in Paris in February 1962. In a much later interview, the artist admitted that it had not excited enough interest for many copies to be read, let alone kept. In fact, he guessed that most of them had been thrown away soon after reaching their recipient.[2] Today, this first edition of the *Topographie* is a sought-after collector's item, but we should cut the first recipients some slack: the simple layout of the book, with its pages filled with one note after the other, made the thing look rather … well, boring. Paired with the sober descriptiveness of Spoerri's writing, it is understandable that the charm of *Topographie* remained somewhat elusive upon first viewing.

Yet some people did read it – and some even enjoyed it, recognising its understated humour and playful take on the quotidian as a worthy subject of art – a notion that was becoming increasingly widespread in the artistic and intellectual circles of the Paris avant-garde at this point. Among those who came to admire Spoerri's effort were two of his own friends: American artist and poet Emmett Williams, who lived in Paris at the same time as Spoerri, and German artist Dieter Roth. Both individually approached Spoerri and asked if they could translate the book in order to make it available to a larger audience – to which Spoerri not only said yes, but also allowed them to add their own footnotes to his original notes, thereby expanding the volume with their own reflections and associations.

So the book grew. Note upon note was added to the simple outline of the objects on Spoerri's table, with fewer and fewer of them having to do with the actual objects themselves. Williams' translation and 're-anecdotation' (Spoerri's term for adding material to the text) appeared through Fluxus artist Dick Higgins' publishing house Something Else Press in 1966, under the title *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (re-anecdoted version)*. This then became the basis for Dieter Roth's German translation of the book, which appeared as *Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls* on Luchterhand Verlag in 1968.
Spoerri loved the former, and hated the latter.

1 Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (Done with the help of his very dear friend, Robert Filliou, and translated from the French, and further anecdoted at random by their very dear friend, Emmett Williams; enriched with still further anecdotations by their very dear friend Dieter Roth; with 100 reflective illustrations by Topor)* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 23.

2 Daniel Spoerri in conversation with Alistair Brotchie and Malcolm Green, editors of the 1995 edition of the *Topography*. Transcript available from Daniel Spoerri Archives, Swiss National Library.