

# Initiatives and Expansions

A conversation between Beate Petersen Else Marie Hagen

Translated by Sol Kjøk

*In your earlier works, you used intricate constructions to examine the relationship between plane and space; foreground and background, surface and depth. The same holds true for this exhibition, if in a slightly different way. One is hard pressed to determine what is happening in terms of movement, where in the room the planes are located, and what their scale is. Also, your latest works seem to be more about time. You have said about the images in this show that you strive to make visible that which occurs in the middle of a chain of events; can you say a bit more about that?*

I wanted to call attention to the work process and to focus on that which resists becoming an end result and to which we don't necessarily ascribe value. The process behind a photograph is not very visible; the traces of changes of minds and accidents are barely material and thus seamlessly integrated in the completed image. The process cedes the floor to the subject matter.

Photography as art is closely linked to other forms of images that, for obvious reasons, emphasize easy readability. In the commercial field, the pictorial elements often rely on visual conventions to convey a clearly defined subject matter, and that affects the way in which these images are decoded. Visual preferences are tied to social context, a result of which may be that clarity and details that are important for easy interpretation are given greater emphasis than volume and depth, which are more linked to bodily experience. Parallel to the general need for quick legibility, it is important to leave room for doubt and ambiguity. We need these openings to preserve the connection between various types of experiences – both of an existential and of a more political nature. This may be a matter of establishing an interface between internal and external processes.

*Perhaps we may say that in many of your works, you are dealing with a fundamental issue, namely the very nature of photography and what it can do. But how to comment on the production of images in the world through producing more images? How do we use pictures to say something about pictures? Isn't that difficult?*

Because of its commonalities with other types of images, the photograph is able to slip in and out of the general image stream; to observe it both from within and from a distance. Oftentimes, it is in the very distance – or closeness – to other pictures that the comment lies. But rendering the image's subtler qualities perceptible is a challenge. We are so used to deciphering codes swiftly, asking ourselves: what does this image want to say to me? Because we are so quick to decode content related to an evident subject matter, we miss other meaningful aspects of the picture.

But as we know, everything depends on the situation and what the various images actually aim to address. We are faced with complex renderings of reality every day, and obviously, the impulse and ability to extract the essential is crucial. Last night, I entered a living room where the TV screen was displaying a still image: graphic forms and colors pushing against a thin, organic line meandering across the picture; refugees on the run along a path winding through fields and meadows. The abstract and aesthetic elements were so powerful that they became absurdly distracting; I found myself unable to simultaneously process information from such widely divergent fields. This is indicative of the world at large. And yet, essential questions may hide in a puny corner of the great whole. It might then be worthwhile to isolate this tiny part to make it visible. This makes it easier to extract the full potential of the small area.

*How did you approach this in your new works?*

As far as this exhibition goes, I have restricted the narrative aspect of each image by setting them all in the same space and by using simple, somewhat abstracted props. I have tried to place the focus slightly off the immediately recognizable part of the motif. A photograph may be both of something and about something. There are more similarities than oppositions here, but even so, I see of as a more distanced representation than about, and I have tried to get inside the situation to be present in what is taking place. This is not a given, when you also need to maintain a certain overview to take pictures.

*For your earlier photos, you often put in considerable concrete efforts prior to the shoot. One example is the photograph entitled 'Cover 1', which was part of an installation included in the exhibition called "Det synlige" [The Visible] at Galleri K five years ago: it shows a young model posing on the edge of a catwalk you had constructed in the gallery space, wearing clothes you had dyed in various shades of pink and flesh tones. But the images you are exhibiting now came about in a slightly different way?*

Yes, previously, I have often had a specific visual idea that I largely followed. This might entail coloring the model's clothing with fabric dye, painting the walls in the exact right nuance, or making other prearrangements. But that working method is not descriptive of how I created these present images. This time, not only did I refrain from planning, but I also consciously decided to depart from my earlier approach.

As mentioned, it has always been important to me that my work read as images, not as documentation of a situation. Otherwise, the photo you referred to, Cover 1, for example, would come across as documentation of a performance. There is no clear dividing line here. But there is a difference that intrigues me, and so I endeavor to understand which components come into play.

*And what are those components?*

The relationship between space and surface is one such component. Or accepting the fact that the pictorial space is in reality flat, and then use it as an active visual element in the same manner as light, dark, color and sharpness. When I construct spatial arrangements in the gallery space, I also think of these installations as a pictorial approach.

*To me, some of your previous works read as incredibly complex descriptions of spaces, rather than flat surfaces? In particular, I am thinking of the images where you shoot a room which you subsequently use as the setting for installations that are then again photographed and combined with constructions moving into real space, or from one room to another?*

It is a dialog between image and space. It is a matter of examining how they speak to one another and of mapping the physical conditions of the space: where does the viewer enter, which aspect of the room comes into view first, etc. The space as volume, and its image, exist parallelly. It also may have something to do with the relationship between closeness and distance. You experience the space and try to orient yourself in it; to gain an overview by taking in an image of the room. As with the news flow, where events are reported so quickly that you must simultaneously process the actual event and the story being told about it.

Our natural inclination is to turn what we see into a narrative. Equally strong is the drive to perceive space in an image that we know to be flat. We go to great lengths for the illusion. I am concerned with maintaining the illusion as well as with breaking it down, and in both cases, with establishing a language for what is happening.

Despite the fact that we are dealing with increasing amounts of visual communication, speaking about images remains difficult. The relationship between word and image is complicated, as is the power balance between the two. For instance, I feel that the visual qualities related to the tentative or cautious are hard to convey in writing when discussing art. It is challenging to find the terms for this type of content, or it may be seen and criticized as a lack of direction or point of view. But the way I see it, the image has a special ability to express that which otherwise eludes us.

*Your earlier works are often rather subdued and stringent. For example, in your previously mentioned exhibition at Galleri K, you tore up the paper the catwalk was wrapped in, but in such a way that it took on a sculptural form. It wasn't just randomly ripped apart. At first glance, your current project strikes me as rougher, more reckless?*

My working method has followed what I've been striving to capture: the unstable. That which collapses, takes shape and changes. I have refrained from directing each piece towards a planned end result and rather remained open to what appears along the way. The use of long shutter speeds contributes concretely to this working method, as you cannot know exactly what is being captured. This has dealt me some surprises, and often new tracks to follow. With that, the context where the image is captured has gained a different significance for me. While it used to be what was required in order to realize my works, the situation itself now contains a greater register of possibilities.

My studio has also been important. For more than two years now, I have had a work space on the top floor of Oslo City Hall, which has offered me some opportunities I didn't have before. It is almost frightening how much the room has influenced my work, and this made me think about the extent to which the studio affects the art being created there. In this space, I can move around freely, the camera has sufficient distance, and I can work on several things simultaneously. Quite simply, I have the necessary physical space for experiments and useful detours.

*While the photograph may relate strongly to a real and concrete world, I feel that the act of photographing is a rather abstract process, since the image forms during that one moment when the shutter is pressed. A painting, on the other hand, is more concrete, because its process is more traceable. In many ways, a painting is a record of time. But in your most recent pieces, you have used long exposure times and captured the movements constituting an act. So perhaps one may say that these works are closer to painting?*

A painting may show you its structure as layers of time, but all the same it possesses a strong presence because of its traces of action and the distinct materiality of paint. A photograph can appear on many surfaces and in various forms, but always with this thin, and yet directive layer that points to a time and place outside the image itself. It is my hope that my work is effective on levels beyond this type of reference; that the attempts, efforts and coincidences occurring throughout the process will linger as a presence that reaches into the viewing context.