The Manipulation of Perception: Barbara Probst’s Exposure #106

Kate Sherman

ABSTRACT  My thesis analyzes a series of photographs entitled Exposure #106, by contemporary photographer Barbara Probst, through the lens of understanding visualized information. In the viewers’ attempt to discern the information within Probst’s photographs, they begin to “map” the space visually. I demonstrate, however, that the viewers come to find their attempts to map the space ineffective due to Probst’s use of camera angles, color, and the grid installation. Instead, viewers must find an alternative to grasp the space. Thus, I evaluate Exposure #106 by employing urbanist Kevin Lynch’s concept of cognitive mapping, or our ability to orient ourselves in the external world by mentally locating and organizing our surroundings. I argue Probst’s Exposure #106 may only fully be accessible to viewers via this method of cognitive mapping, in that it allows them to create their own cognitive map utilizing the content of Probst’s photographs as landmarks and boundaries in order to navigate visually the seemingly unmappable space of Probst’s fictitious world.

INTRODUCTION

Barbara Probst’s grids of photographs, most notably Exposure #106: N.Y.C., Broome & Crosby Streets 04.17.13, 2:29 p.m., 2013 (fig. 1), embolden viewers to search for connections between the images, encouraging us to read, interpret, and understand her installations as sequential narratives, laid out for us by the photographer. However, her works significantly challenge our first inclination to seek a narrative or map the space to understand the photographs’ relationships, requiring viewers to deploy their cognitive mapping abilities, instead. Exposure #106, composed of twelve large, 29-by-44 inch ultra-chrome ink photos, displays twelve seemingly disparate scenes.

Figure 1) Barbara Probst. Exposure #106: N.Y.C., Broome & Crosby Streets, 04/17.13, 2:29 p.m., 2013.
Ultrachrome ink on cotton paper;
12 parts 75 x 112 cm/29 x 44 inches each
In studying these works more closely, the viewer begins to understand that the photograph of the same scene fragmented by intricately manipulated angles to show various viewpoints of a New York City apartment and the corresponding street corner below. Interrupted by both the oscillation between color and black-and-white photographs and the meticulous arrangement of these photos in a non-sequential grid pattern, the viewer’s understanding of Probst’s photographs as a synthesized photograph may become deceptive, prompting the suggestion that all the scenes depict elements of the space and moment in which they were captured.

Probst’s photographs especially play on our tendency to inherently trust mapping and photographs. Probst’s images, often hung in a grid installation, initially appear as unconnected to one another. Upon careful inspection, though, the viewer is able to understand the photograph of the same scene in relation to each other in the space of a grid. Probst’s images, often hung in a grid installation, the photographs seeming to visually connect the very top left photo and the very bottom right photo. The photographs seemingly have nothing in common: the top left, in black and white, depicts a taxi driving down the street, while the bottom right, in color, shows a hand reaching for what looks to be an unblemished apple. Without the other ten photos, one might suppose they were taken in different places, on different days, or at different times, all of which each photo can relate to one another and establish boundaries of these territories. The grid does not merely act as containment for the map of the photos, but also to define the territories of the map and the space and moment in which they were captured.

The viewer is then able to explore, and theoretically, to travel through visually. The grid lays out the boundaries of the map, including both the exterior scene of the street corner and the interior scene of the NYC apartment, allowing the viewer to gain perspective as to what they are observing and attempting to navigate. The grid, as a map, also evokes scale, in that it suggests that the photographs have a corresponding spatial relationship, just as objects, places, or landmarks on maps do. The grid acts as a proportional tool for the viewers to connect the photos to each other. If the photographs were not displayed in a grid pattern, the viewers might not understand that the photos were all snapped at the same moment in time, as suggested in Probst’s title. For example, without the grid pattern to relate the photographs to each other, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to know that we were intended to visually connect the very top left photo and the very bottom right photo. The photographs seemingly have nothing in common: the top left, in black and white, depicts a taxi driving down the street, while the bottom right, in color, shows a hand reaching for what looks to be an unblemished apple. Without the other ten photos, one might suppose they were taken in different places, on different days, or at different times, all of which each photo can relate to one another and establish boundaries of these territories. The grid does not merely act as containment for the map of the photos, but also assists in the act of relating the photos to each other, exploiting the model of the grid to produce an axis in which each photo can relate to one another and establish, or terminate, relationships.

Probst develops the grid in a manner similar to scholar Hannah B. Higgins’ description of a grid, recognizing it as “an imaginary latticework placed over natural or cultivated terrain in order to show people where they are in relative terms and beyond their immediate sensory perceptions” (80). The grid connects the photographs, creating this “cultivated terrain” that the viewer can understand, and theoretically, to travel through visually. The grid lays out the boundaries of the map, including both the exterior scene of the street corner and the interior scene of the NYC apartment, allowing the viewer to gain perspective as to what they are observing and attempting to navigate. The grid, as a map, also evokes scale, in that it suggests that the photographs have a corresponding spatial relationship, just as objects, places, or landmarks on maps do. The grid acts as a proportional tool for the viewers to connect the photos to each other. If the photographs were not displayed in a grid pattern, the viewers might not understand that the photos were all snapped at the same moment in time, as suggested in Probst’s title. For example, without the grid pattern to relate the photographs to each other, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to know that we were intended to visually connect the very top left photo and the very bottom right photo. The photographs seemingly have nothing in common: the top left, in black and white, depicts a taxi driving down the street, while the bottom right, in color, shows a hand reaching for what looks to be an unblemished apple. Without the other ten photos, one might suppose they were taken in different places, on different days, or at different times, all of which each photo can relate to one another and establish boundaries of these territories. The grid does not merely act as containment for the map of the photos, but also assists in the act of relating the photos to each other, exploiting the model of the grid to produce an axis in which each photo can relate to one another and establish, or terminate, relationships.

In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes argues that photographs act as an authenticating medium, producing a record that what one sees has indeed existed (82).

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customed to understanding text accompanying a photo, is assumed to clarify the ambiguity photos can connote (Strauss 17). As David Levi Strauss asserts, the text accompanying photographs “is there to tell you what you are seeing and to tell you what it means” (17). This understanding of captions or titles as a clarifying statement becomes problematic in Probst’s works, as the works are not necessarily clarified by the title. In fact, one might argue the title creates yet another obstacle for viewers attempting to use Probst’s map, as it is not clear what is being exposed or what remains important enough to warrant the viewers’ attention. The ostensibly helpful- ness of the grid map comes to be more closely and critically evaluated in the next section, demonstrating that the relationships of the photographs suggested by the grid map may not actually be helpful for viewers.

**THE COMPLICATIONS**

Probst manipulates and challenges our desire to map her photographic spaces through the complications of the grid, the positioning of the cameras, the element of time in relation to mapping, and the use of color, or lack thereof. While the grid might seem to help the viewer understand the photos in relation to each other, it simultaneously infringes on our ability to map the space in its problematic suggestion of how it relates the photos. Similarly, the element of time and the manipulation of color cloud the viewers’ abilities to organize the photos, thus disrupting Probst’s creation of a useful map.

Multiple ways to read the photos—vertically, horizontally, or positionally—are in play as the cameras of Exposure #106 are almost always seen from the left side of the picture, while others are not. We seek to utilize the cameras as landmarks in one photograph to designate the origin for another. As the viewer comes to rely on knowing the origins, it becomes even more distracting when they cannot. For those photos with hidden cameras, the viewers might guess and assume the position of the camera that took these photographs and where it may have been situated. Though viewers of photographs typically assume the position of the camera without thinking, Probst’s works are unique, pushing their viewers to consider both the possible positions of the various positions of the cameras in the scenes. Consequently, this provokes their need to orient themselves, thus triggering their cognitive mapping abilities.

Probst’s framing of each photograph acutely contributes to triggering our desire to cognitively map them, as well. As photographer Jack Kligerman notes of photography, “Looking through [the viewfinder], one sees only part of a world, not the whole world. From the photographer’s point of view, the selective process involved is a creative act. The aperture isolates for perception a fragment of one’s sensations located in space and time” (177). In the way Probst frames her photos, she conscientiously omits certain elements and includes others to prompt our desire to map the relationship between the photographs, yet disrupts our abilities to do so solely based on the gridded map she provides. The omitting of certain elements interrupts viewers’ abilities to rely on her grid and motivates us to turn to cognitive mapping as an aid instead.

Probst’s use of color and black-and-white photographs, similar to the use of the grid and the element of time, clearly disrupts the viewer’s use of Probst’s map. With the exception of the use of black-and-white or color, the oscillation between the two disrupts our understanding of the timing of the photos. Felicity Lunn’s catalog essay on Probst comments on this, stating:

> Related to the revelation of process and this element of performance is Probst’s treatment of the role of time. She juxtaposes black-and-white shots with color images to recode the same scene and, although we know that these were taken simultaneously, the “vintage” feel of the former images collides with the more contemporary appearance of the latter, undermining the subjective nature with which time is experienced (23).

In an interview with Frédéric Paul, Probst also comments on this phenomenon, stating, “The coexistence of color and black-and-white photographs within

standing, that the photographs must relate because they are in the same grid, that complicates the viewers’ readings. Because they appear to relate due to the way they are displayed, viewers must then make sense of the other, seemingly conflicting elements in the photographs that cause disruption: the oscillation between black-and-white and color photographs, the switching from the interior to the exterior scenes without a clear order or reason, the distracting and perplexing way the photos attempt to utilize the grid as both a relational tool to connect the photographs, as well as a disruptive one, alerting the viewer that her allegedly useful map is actually disorienting. Instead of using Probst’s disruptive grid to map their position, the viewers must turn to different methods in order to connect the scenes to one another, focusing on the individual elements within the photographs.

*Exposure #106* prompts its viewers to map the relationships between the photographs through its content, such as the meticulous framing of each photo in conjunction with the visibility, or invisibility, of the camera that took the pictures. These photographs force viewers to automatically assume the viewpoint of the camera, at times without the knowledge of where the camera may be situated. In doing so, they mentally position themselves to the objects and other people in the scene and, often, to the viewer’s self from the camera’s viewpoint (rather than their own), placing themselves in relation to each of the objects shown: the apple on the table, the taxi on the street, and the people in the room all act as the landmarks for the viewer to connect the photos into one coherent pictorial model in their minds, or, more simply, a cognitive map (Owens 10). As the viewers consciously seek out the interior, and, to a lesser extent, the exterior scenes and the objects and scenery, they are encouraged to understand the sequential narrative in a moment in time. Attempting to read each photo in a sequential order becomes both inefficient and obstructive, in that no order or sequence is apparent, but it also becomes important to discuss between the photographs that is not immediately accessible or clear to the viewer visually, coloristically, or positionally. The viewer is left to wonder, if these photographs were indeed captured at the same simultaneous moment, then how did it happen?

Probst’s implementation of the grid causes issues for viewers, leaving them uncertain about how to read the photographs, but it also becomes important to discuss the way the grid complicates the photographs by compelling viewers to find the relationships between them. The grid allows the viewers to seek the relationships between the photos, in that the viewers know that the photos do relate since they are organized in this manner, by the same photographer, utilizing the same objects and scenery. However, it is exactly this under-
The process of cognitive mapping, as described by Fredric Jameson, utilizes the ability of the human mind to locate itself and organize its surroundings perceptually in order to map its position in the external world (83). Jameson marks that the use of cognitive mapping may be called upon in urban daily life to “invoke a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the city’s structure as a whole” (90).

In other words, when inhabitants of the city feel compelled to employ their cognitive mapping abilities, they create personal representations of their location, which they may then use against the unappable spaces they occupy. Jameson continues to assert the term cognitive mapping has flexibility as a concept to be applied to many other notions: “[C]ognitive mapping in the broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with unlined, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality” (90). This, in particular, relates to the application of cognitive mapping most relevant to Barbara Probst’s photography.

Cognitive mapping is often deployed without our decided awareness in order to assist in navigating our disorientation and dislocation. Wayfinding in any environment we inhabit is integral to our lives, as it is rooted in our ancestral necessities as animals (Lynch 3). Mental images of our surroundings hold vast practical and emotional significance to us as individuals (Lynch 4). Our environments play social roles for inhabitants; an ordered environment creates emotional security and heightens the potential depth and intensity of the human experience (Lynch 5). Because the mental image of our immediate environment is so crucial to our navigation, and subsequently our lives, our minds deploy cognitive mapping in order to orient us when our sense of surroundings is disordered. As participants in an environment, we do more than simply observe. As Kevin Lynch states, “We are not simply observers of this spectacle, but are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants. Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all” (2). Thus, whether navigating a city or a photograph, viewers turn to their cognitive mapping abilities because they see themselves as being an integral element in the way the environment works.

To alleviate this time-lapse confusion, Probst’s photographs play on this default characteristic: our desire to navigate our environment and engage with the scenes in front of us. In Jens Ehrman Rasmussen’s article “Sculpting in Time,” he assesses one of Probst’s other works, Exposure #94:

> It is impossible to know what the house on that corner looks like but we can, nevertheless, form a mental picture of the model’s presence through the middle of the street from the opposite corner. I write that we can but this is, perhaps, something of an understatement. Maybe it is closer to the truth to say that we can’t not. The three images together come close to the conceptualization of the space where the model is walking. Exposure #94 triggers a mental and, ultimately, fictitious three-dimensional space that has some relation to a real space but is exactly that—a fiction (71).

Rasmussen states that Probst’s photographs not only encourage, but require the viewer’s cognitive mapping abilities. Viewers discover that Probst’s gridded map does not inherently lead to a coherent understanding of the scene. Rather, viewers must turn to cognitive mapping as a replacement for the ineffectiveness of Probst’s supposed map in order to create a cognitive map highlighting the props, or landmarks, they’ve come to identify in the fictitious space. By following these landmarks, then, viewers are able to cohesively unite the broken down “situations or events into several instances of the same moment” (Rasmussen 69).

In a classic work, The Image of the City, Kevin Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves: grids such as those of Jersey City, in which none of the traditional markers (monuments, nodes, natural boundaries, build perspectives) obtain, are most obvious examples. Dis-alienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical re-conquest of a sense of place, and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated environment, which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories (89).

In this quote, Jameson describes that the “dis-alienation” of the traditional city deploys the use of cognitive mapping. Without the typical boundaries or markers of the territory for viewers to be able to fully understand the terrain, they rely on cognitive mapping as a coping device, hoping to orient themselves amidst their disorienting whereabouts. Jameson writes here of the lack of “traditional markers” in a grid that most forcefully necessitates cognitive mapping. In Probst’s photographs, too, the manipulated camera angles and breaks in the scene prevent viewers from understanding particularly notable landmarks. Rather, viewers are left to assign their own landmarks to the photographs via cognitive mapping. Among the props used throughout Exposure #106, I have chosen to discuss the apple, the taxi, and the standing woman as the three most prominent landmarks.

Lynch describes landmarks as “the point references considered to be external by the observer,” those physical elements that may be singled out from their surroundings due to their uniqueness or singularity (78). Landmarks are more easily identified, and more likely to be chosen as a landmark for the navigator, if they “have a clear form, if they contrast to the background, and if there is some prominence of spatial location” (Lynch 78).

Using Lynch’s categorization for landmarks, the apple allegedly maintains a clear form in that it has bites taken from it, branding it as unique. The next landmark, the taxi, possesses a clear form and, because no other taxi is present in the photographs, viewers may assume this taxi is a landmark unique to this specific space and moment. The last landmark, of course, remains her clear form, in her striped shirt and in that she is the only standing woman in the room.

All three of these landmarks contrast with their backgrounds beneficially in the color photographs: the bright yellow of the taxi contrasting with the brown molding of the window pane, and the bright red of the apple contrasting with the brown table and apricot hues of the seated woman’s hand. In the black and white photos, however, these distinctive colors become obsolete, making distinguishing the landmarks from their backgrounds more difficult, again initially impairing the viewers’ abilities to map the space.

For the final standard Lynch proposes, landmarks are more easily identified if the items have a prominence of spatial location (78). For all three landmarks, this may be true upon first consideration. Yet, the landmarks are fleeting and ephemeral: the taxi will continue driving on that street or turn onto another, leaving its exact camera-recorded position regardless; the apple has already begun to decompose, if not to be eaten in the moments after the photo by the seated woman; and the standing woman would presumably become bored with staring out the window of this New York City apartment and need to move on to other activities. In the ephemerality of these objects, the prominence of spatial location on a physical map becomes lost as the objects move. When viewers cognitively map the space, with the aid of the photographs, however, they recognize that because mental cognitive mapping is bounded to an ephemeral period of time, they were all present in one specific moment in the space, allowing them to unite the elements across time.

In observing the position of the apple in the photographs, it serves as a beneficial landmark for the viewer. Only one side of the apple shows bite marks, exposing the apple’s inner fruit. These distinctive colors are evident in the background or the periphery of other photographs in the grid, allowing the viewer, if perceptively tracking the apple, to understand where it lies in relation to the other elements and in the space. Because viewers may note where the same apple is placed in several of the shots, they are able to connect the critical relationship between the photographs, using the apple as a stationary reference point to map the position of the other objects. This relationship may be established through the positioning of the other elements on the table on which the apple sits, such as the crumbs or the bottle, the table itself, or the woman’s arm reaching for the fruit. When the woman’s arm is present, or even just her thumb (as is the case in the top row, second column photo) or the bottom of her hand (as is the
case in the bottom right photo where the fingernail of her ring finger grazes the top of the photo just before being cut out of the frame), the viewer is able to create relationships between these objects (and subsequently, the photographs), understanding the positioning of the woman’s hand in relation to the apple, which in turn supplies an understanding of the positioning of all the objects within the space.

The interior and exterior scenes are connected only by the two central photos, in which the viewer can finally see that the two main landmarks, the taxi and the apple, are related. The two landmarks of each scene can be connected through a third, and possibly the most important, landmark: the standing woman wearing the striped t-shirt. In the second row, third column of Exposure #106, the standing woman has her back to us, allowing us to see, in the image’s deep focus, both the entire back side of her body facing out the window and the table behind her where the apple sits as the second woman reaches for it. This photo includes the landmark of the interior scene, the apple, and the other landmarks in the room, such as the table, the bottle, and the second woman reaching for the apple. In the photo in the second row, second column, the photo shows, again, a zoomed out depiction of the exterior scene through the apartment window, crucially including the back of the apartment. Probst’s work Exposure #106 triggers cognitive mapping attempts to permit a coherent understanding of this scene in order to cope with the disruptions, seeking out landmarks in the photographs, such as the taxi, the standing woman in the black and white shirt, or the apple which sits on the table in the apartment. Probst’s work Exposure #106 challenges the viewer to interpret the moment the photos were captured, seemingly calling on and then refutes the suggestion of any order for the photographs included. Probst manipulate, too, the elements of time in both “mapping” the ephemeral and confusing her viewers’ habitual readings of photographic color, pushing viewers to map the space cognitively in order to mitigate this interference in time. Exposure #106 challenges the viewer to interpret the moment the photos were captured, seemingly calling on and then complexly encumbering her map to encourage the use of cognitive mapping in order to understand her photographs as a single synchronized moment.

As demonstrated, the tendency to use Probst’s grid map to find our position in relation to the photographic landmarks in Exposure #106 becomes more detrimental than it is beneficial. Probst disrupts this mapping with her black-and-white to color changes and refutes the suggestion of any order for the photographs included. Probst manipulate, too, the elements of time in both “mapping” the ephemeral and confusing her viewers’ habitual readings of photographic color, pushing viewers to map the space cognitively in order to mitigate this interference in time. Exposure #106 challenges the viewer to interpret the moment the photos were captured, seemingly calling on and then complexly encumbering her map to encourage the use of cognitive mapping in order to understand her photographs as a single synchronized moment.