

Making Sense of the World

A photograph shows us parts of the world, all bound together by the vertical and horizontal lines of the frame. Of the objects, people and places that are visible in the image, it captures nothing more than their outer appearance. A photograph is (necessarily) a superficial image. Only through thoughtfully organizing the relationships between the different parts, the image becomes infused with meaning. The superficial image turns into a text that needs to be read. Put differently: when we read meaning into a photographic image, we tend to ascribe it to an action of the photographer. It is his framing, his use of light, his viewing angle that makes the image to speak to us. When looking at a photographic image, we're not observing the world, we're looking at a worldview. Nevertheless, the forms and surfaces that inhabit the photographic image are more than geometric figures that the photographer can simply organize and manipulate. These surfaces and forms are too present, always suggesting there is more to them than what meets the eye. These opaque 'things' simply refuse to yield to the whimsical manipulations of the photographer (or to our penetrating gaze, for that matter). They manifest an obstinate sovereignty, presenting themselves first and foremost as sentient beings with a life of their own. In a photograph the world appears not as some accumulation of distant things, but as a space that is already animated by living presences. The objects that are caught by the camera, are no silent, passive partners in our dialogue with the world. They are forces to be reckoned with.

The first parcel was mailed on the 25th of May, 1978. Its target: a professor in materials engineering at Northwestern University. The addressee didn't trust the package, however, and asked a security agent to open it for him. An explosion ensued, leaving the agent with small injuries to his left hand. The next packages were sent to airline officials and in 1979 an attempt was made to use a mail bomb on an airplane. The attempt failed, but drew the attention of the FBI. A task-force was assigned to the case, but because the Unabomber, as he was by then called, used only common materials to construct his explosive devices, the task force came up empty handed. Over the next 17 years several other bombs would be sent or hand delivered to scientists, engineers and airline officials. In 1985, Hugh Scrutton, the owner of a computer store, would become the first victim killed by a mailed bomb. After a hiatus of about six years the Unabomber struck again. This time he not only mailed carefully crafted bomb letters to scientists, but also started to communicate about the reasons behind his attacks. He called or wrote to potential targets, warning them they would be next, and even wrote letters to *The New York Times*, signed by the acronym FC (which stood for 'Freedom Club'), in which he started to explain the reasons behind these attacks. In 1994, Thomas J. Mosser, an executive at Burson-Marsteller (a global public relations and communication firm, located in New York) would be the next deadly victim of a mail bomb. In a letter to *The New York Times* the Unabomber stated that Mosser was a legitimate target for the actions of the Freedom Club because of the role his company had played in defending Exxon after an environmental disaster caused by the oil company. Furthermore, he specified that he took aim at the company because it manipulated the public's mind. In 1995 the Unabomber would make his last deadly attack. The victim was Gilbert Brent Murray, the president of the timber industry lobbying group.

After this attack, the Unabomber started writing several letters to his past victims and to some media outlets, in which he showed a willingness to stop his deadly campaign. On one condition, however: at least one national and reputable newspaper would have to publish his 50-page manifesto. In the hopes that this publication would help the task-force in identifying the Unabomber, the FBI, the United States Department of Justice and the attorney general all recommended to publish the manifesto. Eventually, both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* would print the Unabomber's text verbatim on September 19th, 1995. The manifesto carried the title: *Industrial Society and Its Future*. In it, the Unabomber blamed the Industrial Revolution, and the society that sprung up with it, for robbing the human race of its close contact with nature. Mankind became shackled to machines, losing its autonomy, its freedom. Inevitably, the further development of a technological society, would end in a growing alienation from nature, reducing 'human beings and many other living organisms to engineered products and mere cogs in the social machine'. The only way to avoid this fate was to abolish the industrial system, which meant, in the mind of the Unabomber, to destroy science and those that practice or promote it. When reading his manifesto, a week after its publication, David Kaczynski recognized some of the opinions that his older brother Theodore held about the devastating role technology played in contemporary society. Comparing the published text with an earlier essay of his brother dating back to the early seventies, he felt there were enough similarities to assume his brother could indeed be the Unabomber. After confirming his suspicions, he reached out to the FBI. Finally, after a seventeen year long search they would arrest his brother, hiding in his remote cabin outside Lincoln, Montana, one bomb on the table, ready to be shipped to his next victim.

In his text, Theodore Kaczynski never mentions photography.

'Let's kill the moonlight (FC)' is the title of a body of work by the Belgian photographer Jim Campers (°1990). The title combines the initials of the Freedom Club with a phrase taken from the second Futurist manifesto written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. The combination of these two sources seems contradictory: on the one hand a text that celebrates technology, on the other a diatribe against the rule of technology. Both, however, have (at least) one thing in common: they define technology as a destructive force that has the particular ability to free us from the bounds of nature. In the case of futurism this leads to a violently celebration of technology as a means for human kind to go beyond its 'natural' limitations, for the Freedom Club on the other hand the un-natural aspect of technology is all the more reason to distrust and vehemently oppose it. Technology appears here as the radical 'other' of nature. And yet, as a product of human ingenuity, technological ingenuity is also part of our human nature. Stemming from some deeply seated and innate ability of the human race to surpass its own limitations, technology can likewise be considered a celebration of human resourcefulness. Or rather, to put it more succinctly, technological imagination is more than just a part of who we are as humans, it is what *makes* us human. It is what distinguishes us from the animal kingdom. Through technology mankind became a cultural animal. It is this aspect of technology as a kind of dialogue between nature and culture, between the animal and the human, that is central to the photographic work of Campers.

The work consists of several photographs and a two pages long text, a collage of quotes taken from different sources. Parts of the text refer to the manifesto by the Unabomber, others to a novel by Tom Wolfe (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*) and one by David Henry Thoreau (*Walden*), still others are taken from an overview of architectural structures by Violet-le-Duc (*The Habitations of Man in All Ages*) while others contain bits of a discussion between the photographer and a friend. What these fragments share, is that they attempt to recalibrate the relationship between technological resourcefulness and nature. Some speak about a desire of living in close contact with nature and how the use of low-level technology (which means the use of materials and tools that are at hand) is able to simultaneously activate different faculties of mind and body. Others describe how drugs or even the light flashes of a stroboscope can alter our perception of the world and thereby engendering a new understanding of our being-in-the-world. Technology is here not a tool to dominate the world, it is not about following the strict rules of a blueprint or about acting according to a well-established plan. On the contrary, technology is a tool to communicate with the world, to open up new avenues of contact between man and nature (which is why hallucinogen drugs can be considered technological tools). Technology is here understood as a particular blend of abstract thinking and fantasy, a way of dealing with the world that combines two kinds of knowledge: one that is derived from the reasoning mind, and one that is obtained through direct tactile contact of an active body thoroughly engaged with the world.

The text does not colonize the images: the quotes don't describe what we're supposed to see in the photographs, but simply give a frame of reference so the viewer could grasp what is at stake here. The images, themselves the product of an industrial means of image production, seem to take human ingenuity as their subject. In one triptych for instance we see a young man in an urban park attempting different techniques to create a small fire (he fails). Another photograph presents a system to create containers that can be rearranged into storage spaces of different sizes. The image itself is a multiple exposure presenting how the structure, through adding or subtracting boxes, changes over time, adapting itself to the needs of its users. The two images stress the importance of flexibility and dexterity as the necessary tools for technological inventiveness. The other photographs deal with the same topic, but from a different angle. Most of them are taken in the South-Western parts of the United States, a lesser populated area of the country and from the 1960's onwards a fertile ground for groups and individuals wanting to experiment different ways of living outside the bounds of 'normal' society. The photographs hark back to a bygone period, recording the leftovers of a utopian ideal founded on the desire of living in close harmony with nature (of which the Unabomber's attacks were the dystopian counterpart). The nature in question, is a barren, inhospitable environment, at the same time beautiful and harsh. Nevertheless, as other images show, settlers still have found a way to inhabit this rough landscape. Images show the buildings they have erected or details of some of the clever contraptions they created to survive this wilderness. With the exception of one image, the spaces, buildings and interiors are devoid of any human presence (even in the single image where we discern a human figure, the man is so immersed in his actions that he doesn't seem to notice the photographer). The glaring absence of people suggests that this series is not at all about human settlement, but more about things and materials. In the end, this project manifests itself to be an anthropological study, more interested in the material culture of a (vanished)

society than in the souls that inhabit this hostile landscape. These images are about what is left when the utopian dream collapses.