

# infinite *Combinations*

*Marianne Mueller is best known for her archive, an extensive library of photographs she has continued to accumulate for more than 20 years in her studio in Zurich, Switzerland. Mueller's art draws from this giant pool of images. Besides taking pictures continuously, she revisits and rearranges every photograph she takes to create new, revealing combinations. Here, she talks about her FreePort [No. 002] project for PEM, her inclusion of video and furniture, and the visual "irritations" that characterize her work.*

## **HOW DID YOUR PROJECT EVOLVE?**

My main idea was to go through the museum's photographic archive. It was a mystery. I knew there were 800,000 or so images. I kept asking for a list, or a category by themes, but everyone kept saying, "Well, we have from the beginning to today and all over the world and it's hard to say." I tried to prepare myself. What could they have? Maybe portraits, landscapes, colonial albums, ships, classical genre? I tried to map this to the structure of my own archive. There are no files and no keywords in my archive, just a strong chronological system. Anticipating the discovery of the PEM archive, I started to set up categories for what I have: legs, arms, trees, cars, interiors, stones, towers, architecture. A list of about 15 things. I put everything in envelopes according to themes.

My radius for categorizing is quite limited as my radius as a 44-year-old woman living in Europe is limited. I was interested in enlarging this experience through the archive of PEM, which goes back to the beginning of photography and around the globe, to add the aspect of history, diversity and time. Then when I came there I thought there's no way to look at all these things!



Marianne Mueller installs her FreePort project, *Any House Is a Home*. Photos by Walter Silver/PEM.

## **WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO FREEPORT?**

First I was approached about combining two archives, mine and the museum's, together with Phillip Prodger, the photo curator. Later, I met Trevor Smith, the contemporary art curator, in Basel. He told me about the FreePort project and I thought it was very interesting. That approach worked much better for me than a traditional photo exhibition where somebody asks you to show a body of work. In those cases you send your prints; they're framed and put up. I'm really interested in the installation and environmental aspects and how the images connect with what is there.

## **WHAT DOES 'FREEPORT' MEAN TO YOU?**

A free port is a place where things are stored temporarily or put together, free from a specific nation, notion or policy. They are in transit somehow. For this FreePort project I thought about New England and England, the history, the first people coming over, which is all very present in the museum. So I think this has to be inherent somehow. It's a very special place.

## **DID THE CITY OF SALEM INFLUENCE YOUR PROJECT?**

The work at PEM was determined by the people I met in Salem, all the trips and research, and the pictures I took of Salem, of historic houses, fences, towers and interiors.



#### **WHY DID YOU INCLUDE OBJECTS FROM PEM'S COLLECTION?**

The choice of furniture and shoes had to do with the location of the museum's photo gallery, on the balcony above the American Art Gallery. I discovered a photo, *Ship's Monument*, from the 1890s, which documents a stack of ship models, canoes in that same space. I thought, why not build up a tower that would carry historical pictures and contemporary pictures and finally connect these two floors again? I liked that the American gallery talks about the vernacular and daily life, many things I'm interested in in my personal work that also exist in my archives.

*My images make a connection for a certain context and then they collapse again — they go back into my archive and reappear in a different combination.*

—Marianne Mueller

#### **HOW DID THE TOWER TAKE SHAPE?**

I was collaborating with Johnston Marklee, an architectural company in Los Angeles, for a couple of years. They designed the monument. I said I need a structure that links these two gallery levels, that is simple, cheap to build and can hold photographs. They came back with an idea that goes back to Zurich, a Swiss architect and artist Max Bill, who was active in the 1930s and '40s. He has a series, *Fifteen Variations on a Single Theme*. These images, lithographs, started with an eight-sided shape and different angles that continue inward, always one angle less, until you end in a triangle. They started with that lithograph and made it three-dimensional. Max Bill was never really cool to my generation. He was just a Zurich concrete artist. Mark Lee [of Johnston Marklee] is on the West Coast, I'm on the East, and he takes his idea from Zurich where I come from!

#### **YOU'VE SAID THAT YOU'RE INTRIGUED BY THE CHOICES MUSEUMS MAKE REGARDING WHAT GETS PUT ON VIEW.**

I was moving around from the historical houses to the museum storage area, to museum galleries. And when I visited people in their homes they had the same historical furniture but a different way of treating it. They might have a garden chair from the 19th century, but they really sit on it, or it's in the rain and it's OK. I'm interested in how you deal with objects. What does it mean when they enter a museum where their status changes and they become untouchable? How do you decide what to bring up into a gallery and what kind of conservation process is required?

#### **IS WALL COLOR PART OF YOUR INSTALLATION?**

In the museum, wall paint gives an atmosphere, like the backgrounds for *The Emperor's Private Paradise*. It's more symbolically used. I wanted to use it like real wall paint like the beautiful house colors in Salem. I set up still lifes with wall paints — I went with historical and a few contemporary colors — that refer to the objects and photographs. It is also a reference to monochrome or monochromatic painting and the avant-garde, the exploration of one color and examination of changing values.

#### **IS EACH VIGNETTE A TRIPTYCH?**

Yes, sort of. If you look at the McIntire sofa, the color on the wall makes sense. It gives a nice distance or space. This picture of a nude lying on a sofa is turned sideways. And the sofa is shown from the back. These are all little irritations, things to think about. On the back of the sofa is a beautiful extension, a buffer. It's sculptural and very touchable. The wood for the photograph frame matches the sofa frame. Each combination, each triptych, references and cross-references. This particular one is more about shape. The sofa is very elegant, like a little animal with character.

#### **IS ONE ELEMENT MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANOTHER?**

My work is about finding a democratic way of presenting all things with the same intensity. By doing this, where everything stands on itself — wall paint, photographs, objects — it takes all the things out of their timeline, their linear historical context. I don't care if this was built in the 1500s or who gave it to whom. I just want to take it as what it is.

### WHERE DOES THE TITLE COME FROM?

I'm a big admirer of Gertrude Stein, who said, "Any house is a home." I like the rhythm of her language, the repetition, the single word and the meaning (dis-) connected to that word. She listens to the sound, the presence a word generates, modifications of that word and plays around with referent and reference. "House" is the theme of the whole installation. Home is a meaning that brings us to an inner or emotional life, which all has to do with private vs. public, and the archives full of objects from houses that were homes, and what makes it out of storage to be on view, and can a museum be a home? Every house has this emotional dimension/potential. I try to break up the illusion of home-like situations that museums create. I try to not imitate the home in the museum, but to create one.

I had another title in mind, "Everything in its place and a place for everything," a quote from Benjamin Franklin. But then I figured out it might have a different meaning for those who grow up with it in their ears than it does for me.

### WHY DON'T YOU USE TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTIVE WALL LABELS?

The whole installation is FreePort, *Any House Is a Home*. The names of the paint colors are the titles of the segments in the show. Bulfinch Blue, for example. There's a photographic title and description of the sofa. We point out the three elements. My titles are often "Untitled," then in parentheses, something either poetic or descriptive. The title for the lady over the sofa is *Quiet please*. I try to find a new order for/from things and a poetic reading/meaning in the end.

### WHY DON'T YOU SAY WHERE YOUR PHOTOS WERE TAKEN?

They come from around the world, but it's important that it doesn't matter and that it doesn't show. People would say, "Oh she's in India." I'm not interested in this biographical or geographical notion. I'm interested in the relation the viewer generates actively with the work, like a mirror.



The tower in Marianne Mueller's FreePort [No. 002] unites the objects in the American Art Gallery with the second-floor Photography Gallery.

### YOU OFTEN PRODUCE GROUPS, LIKE THE NEWSPAPER PROJECT, OR WHERE IMAGES ARE ARRANGED ON TABLES, OR THE SELF-PORTRAITS YOU TOOK OVER A SERIES OF MONTHS. CAN ANY ONE OF THOSE SINGLE OBJECTS STAND ON ITS OWN?

When somebody buys a single picture, it stands by itself. The person creates the context by where he puts it and how he wants to live with it. Then it's out of my radius. As long as I'm responsible, I try to build up and control the context by myself. This grouping from PEM will never reappear in any other context. It wouldn't make sense.

### TELL US ABOUT YOUR VIDEO PORTRAITS.

People are self-conscious if I'm taking a picture. But when they are in front of a video camera, there's usually a moment when they start to lose tension. They sit in their own body. They arrive somewhere. Then it's very open. I want them to gaze into the camera, to have a presence. This is also a reference to the portraits hanging downstairs in the American Art Gallery. The main idea for me, by choosing people like Carry the security guard or Rachel the student, was to bring people from the outside into the museum. Like bringing things from the basement storage areas up to the galleries.



Rachel engages Marianne Mueller's camera and visitors via her video portrait.

**WHY DO PEOPLE SAY YOU ARE EMPOWERING?**

That's nice to hear! What does it mean? I don't know. I'm a passionate person. I have to figure out what I'm doing, not like an intellectual or pure conceptual approach. It's more about finding a relationship. Then in the second round I try to analyze it. I can put all my energy into this. When I wake up in the morning it's streaming and alive. Work has to be intense and focused, then you maybe get lost and lose energy, but there are happy moments when things come together and start to make sense. It's always about perception. Always going forward and backward and then a moment when I'm confident it's the most I can prepare. Then you go for the details. It involves a lot of brain and stomach and hard work and maybe that creates a sort of aura.

**WHAT EFFECT DO YOU HAVE ON YOUR STUDENTS?**

I'm teaching in Zurich. The students were very depressed, low energy, saying they don't know why they should make photographs. The school told me that was normal. I said, no, it's not. I guess I push energy in. We discuss things and I encourage the kids to go on with this, try this, then we meet again. I try to structure their work and way of working a little bit. There has been incredible improvement, just great.

**ARE YOU BRAVE?**

I never think I'm brave but others tell me I'm incredibly brave. I take it seriously. It's my life. Happy that even after 20 years of doing it I still feel I want to do more, bigger. I'm still not bored. It's very challenging.

**IS THERE A QUESTION YOU DON'T WANT TO BE ASKED?**

People ask me if I have a message. I don't have a message. I have a way to look at the work and the world, a way to bring things together or balance things in a way that they empower themselves.

**DO YOU HAVE A GOAL FOR THIS EXHIBITION, SOMETHING IT SHOULD IMPART TO VISITORS?**

It's not my job to explain this. I'll be gone and this baby has to walk by itself. It will be the visitor that brings it to life by his own personal baggage and experience and hopes. It can't be my job. Like if you write a book, it's not yours. It's an offering. People might get irritated or angry, all interesting reactions.

This installation also talks about the way things are presented, about representation and museum policy, institutional art education, how you transfer information so everything is explained, and this stands for that.

Kids are a great audience. They don't have all these ideas in their mind that they can do it better. They look and run to the other corner of the space and make their way through things. Art that kids love is good art. Maybe it's honest. I have no idea.

**WHAT DID YOU ENJOY ABOUT COLLABORATING WITH PEM STAFF?**

The great thing is to work with people in so many different disciplines. I'm asking Paula Richter, curator for exhibitions and research, "What do you think about Victorian yellow?" She says, "What do you mean? In tapestry or in wall paint? Which period? What is the use?" I'm just thinking of yellow. There is so much knowledge and expertise here.

*Interview conducted by Lisa Kosan, PEM director of editorial and design.*