

LOTHAR BAUMGARTEN

A Voyage or 'With the MS Remscheid on the Amazon' or the Account of a Voyage Under the Stars of the Refrigerator

1968 – 1972

35mm-slide projection, including 81 glass-slides

Running time: 13 minutes

Colección Patricia Phelps de Cisneros

A Voyage... by Lothar Baumgarten is the first of several artworks by the artist relating to South America. Most of these artworks were made after his travels in the Amazon and a sojourn with the Yanomami indigenous community in Venezuela's Orinoco river basin during 1978–1979. However, A Voyage... is, in fact, created from the artist's domestic ruminations while living and working in Germany. By experimenting with ideas and materials found locally, as well as by studying arts and cultures from home and abroad, Baumgarten imagines and visits other contexts. The resulting conceptual journey is poetically projected in A Voyage... This 35mm-slide installation brings together images of the artist's first explorations and body of work, and anticipates the landscapes and materials in which he would immerse himself during the decades that followed. Without a specific linear narrative, but with an underlying thread of nature's movement through various cultural registers, A Voyage... combines three kinds of materials: photographs by the artist; found images; and illustrations and texts drawn from historic publications.

Included in the slide carousel are photographs of Baumgarten's ephemeral sculptures, assemblages, and installations, mostly from the mid- to late- 1960s. The artworks portrayed were created at his home and studio and sometimes installed in temporary exhibitions or outdoors. They represent Baumgarten's first work with elements drawn from the natural environment, and show his experimentation with the duration, conceptions, and extensions of their apparent transience. The specific materials he used included the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal; for example: natural pigments, edible plants, and feathers. Among the resultant images are his now iconic Culture – Nature, showing a macaw feather placed inside a secret niche in a parquet floor, and Pyramid, one of his ephemeral, richly-colored tetrahedron artworks sculpted with milled natural pigments. As the artwork's title suggests, other imaginary landscapes are created inside the artist's refrigerator. One slide pictures a butterfly resting by a Flora brand butter canister. Another shows a bowl with a mountainous-like serving of green gelatin served over a river of milk.

These images by the artist could individually be thought of as conceptual still-life compositions, yet the montage of the images, in juxtaposition with other types of imagery, information, and sensibilities, accumulates meaning through sequence. The movement of the slides in the carousel symbiotically projects the artist's journeys into various cultural landscapes. The so-called found images Baumgarten includes in A Voyage... range from postcards to image plates de-accessioned by museums. Among the found images is a close-up of an ocean liner (one of several cigarette-box paper-collectibles featuring ships), and points to the MS Remscheid, known for its transatlantic route from Germany to South America. For the most part, images of this type have more irregular surfaces or rougher edges than the rest of the

slides in the carousel. Their very appearance evokes less a finding than a recovery; more a recognition than a discovery, much like the feelings provoked by both the encounters and disenchantments, as well as in the learning and deskillling processes involved in any kind of travel—be these of associative thinking or of physical displacement.

The illustrations and fragments of texts that Baumgarten includes in A Voyage... are drawn from two publications, both from the artist's ever-growing library, which he often consults for references and inspiration. One of these publications is by the Italian artist and ethnologist Guido Boggiani, known for his late-nineteenth century portraits of the indigenous communities of the Gran Chaco in South America. The second one is by the German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, who published a comprehensive, five-volume report on the indigenous communities in Venezuela and Northern Brazil after his travels there between 1911 and 1913. Texts and black and white images drawn from these sources are evident in A Voyage... and they follow common tropes of early ethnography. Their visual aspect marks a difference from the artist's primarily color photography and the coarser texture of his found images, all of which are intermixed in the projected slides. For example, succinct anthropological texts (in German) describe details of a culture; depictions of indigenous people, their activities, constructions and landscapes, are methodically captured, with an implied taxonomy suggested in their composition. Particularly in the portraiture by Boggiani, subtle details in the arrangement of pose and his use of robes evince the tropes of neoclassical portraiture that informed Boggiani's purportedly scientific lens.

In the early 1970s, Baumgarten was influenced by the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Not surprisingly, an exploration of myth is present in the work created by Baumgarten in this early period of his artistic trajectory. Similar to the structural approach of myth, A Voyage... puts at play relationships between images that may trace a voyage that was or could potentially be undertaken, rather than narrate the story of a journey itself. Baumgarten's experience as a young artist and student at Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf during the 1960s was also influential, though in a different way. At this art school, where Joseph Beuys among others were teaching, the creation of art in new media was fostered. In this respect, it is worth noting the alternative uses of the typically demonstrative nature of a slide-carousel that A Voyage... has set forth. Invented in 1962, only a decade before this artwork was first exhibited, 35mm slides and carousels were an affordable way to create moving-image presentations, hence their increasingly common use in lecture halls, and, particularly, given the discipline's reliance on images, in art history lessons. Baumgarten's chosen medium is a riposte to this educational tool. But without relying on didacticism, it is through the poetic nature of art that learning ensues.