

Darkrooms **by Maik Schlüter**

Atomic Power

Throughout the world, energy is generated for billions of people by atomic power plants that in turn produce huge amounts of atomic waste, which has to be disposed of or ultimately stored under great security and technological expenditures and enormous risk. The generation of energy using atomic power, including its civil and military use, is a controversial subject that covers all implications of evolution and destruction, progress and disaster, dream and trauma ranging from the everyday source of household power to the total apocalypse of the history of man and nature. Throughout the history of the use of atomic energy, the fatal and deceiving aspects of progress and technology in the 20th and 21st centuries can be traced. The destructive power of radioactivity found its preliminary shocking climax on the military level in the drop of the atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (1945) and in civil life in the GAU in Tschernobyl (1986). These facts are sufficient to make clear that atomic energy cannot be characterized as a blessing for mankind, as a clean and uncomplicated technology. Moreover it becomes clear that a modern, technically-oriented society always buys progress, freedom of life, comfort and wealth at a high and dangerous price.

Places and Functions

Laura Bielau is able to build up irritation, subtle suspense and a frightening atmosphere in her pictures. She shows us the less comely underground views of atomic power plants and ultimate storage facilities for atomic waste. The places that she photographs seem foreign and threatening. As direct and clear the pictures are, they give few clues about the true function and position of the place depicted. Her photographs leave no room for an open view or a relieving association: the rooms that she shows are closed units, dim, technoid and thoroughly functionalized. Her pictures possess an objective stringency and coldness. That is the connecting link for the collaboration with the American artists Lucinda Devlin or Taryn Simon. Both incorporate violence, threat, administration, alienation and an overlying, but contradictory understanding into their art. For her series, *The Omega Suites*³ (1991-1998), Devlin photographed injection rooms, gas chambers and electric chairs, in which death-sentence prisoners were executed. In the

formally stringent series, Devlin places these rooms in the centre of her work in an unspectacular way and forgoes any commentary. Exactly this wordless chain of shocking places of organized and legitimized killing shows how unmercifully and radically justice or society acts. Under the title *An American Index of The Hidden and Unfamiliar*⁴ (2007), Taryn Simon shows places and people of today's American society: Research laboratories of the pharmacy and medical industry, military and police facilities, forensic and pathological institutes, centers of political and religious fundamentalists, but also places where the waste of industrial life is stored. What Simon's impressively comprehensive research reflects in pictures, is concentrated in a few places by Bielau, who is able – like Lucinda Devlin – to make the basic contradictions of society to a central theme by using one example. Her work *scud* emanates justified doubts about the seemingly rational, secure and well thought out organization of technical and bureaucratic institutions and processes.

Dead Animals

Laura Bielau compares the dim underground levels of atomic power plants and atomic waste storage facilities to the morbid world of dissected and stuffed animal cadavers and opens up a macabre frame of associations, which is plausible and speculative at the same time: not only the super GAU contaminates humans and natures, also the creeping contamination by radioactivity causes sickness, degeneration, deformation and death. The animals that Bielau photographed in various animal laboratories are pinned down, measured, dried and finally dissected or stuffed. Some were found by a forest ranger in the direct vicinity of an atomic power plant. These animals are routinely examined by state veterinary offices in order to detect possible radioactive contamination. At the same time, these animals are often chosen because of their good condition (no external injuries due to shooting wounds, fights or other influences) as objects for dissection. An animal that has been stuffed is already a picture: In the dioramas of the natural science museums, the visitor sees dead animals that show an image of their previous living condition as life-like as possible. The fact of being directly confronted with the death of an animal once again points out that we humans slaughter, run over, poison or shoot down thousands of animals daily, but cover up and repress this brutal degradation of the animal to an object and consumer article by our glorification of the animal world. Animals are romanticized, made legendary or given

human characteristics. In a diorama, we see an intact and above all typically idealized kind of nature.

Hunting

scud translates to hunting. An archaic picture of the human's place in nature shows him hunting: existentially, hunting is the implication of the natural law of eat or be eaten. Over a long period of time, man learned various techniques of killing in order to survive, but also to rule. However, every regime ends sometime, its power is broken, openly or behind closed doors, it is damaged from the outside or it is an internal process of decay. When humans seek nature that is apparently untouched in dioramas or in zoos, then they do so under the paradox conditions of domestication, imprisonment and death. These scenarios have nothing to do with the assumed primitive harmony. Especially not if humans of the atomic age have created the highly complex and artificial threats themselves and are subject to the invisible attack of radiation and electromagnetic waves. Life was never peaceful and the world was always full of danger. However, the threats and methods, places and scenarios change constantly and with them, the dialect and logic of the conflicts. A culmination point of hunting is reached when hunters become the hunted and the assailant is invisible. Then the relationship between cause and effect is shifted and the strategies of defense must change. Especially when the offender and the victim are the same person, institution or society.

COLOR LAB CLUB

While Laura Bielau understands photography as a means of social reflection in her work *scud*, offering a challenging interpretation in her combinations of various picture worlds, she concentrates on photography itself and its context of origin in her work *Color Lab Club*. She works very personally and makes the history of photography as well as her own relationship to the medium the central theme. Bielau does not try to produce a stiff and dry illustration of the theory of photography, but rather utilizes the pictures' own power of reference to show processes, levels of meaning, techniques and effects of photography. This headstrong concept becomes most clear in the case of the series *Labgirl*.

In English, the term *darkroom* refers to at least two rooms: the darkroom for photographic laboratory work and a place for anonymous, usually fast and eruptive sex. The contrast between

two definitions could hardly be greater: clinical immaculateness and purist perfection on the one side, and lust, sexual passion and promiscuity on the other side. The opposite must not necessarily manifest itself: Bielau interprets the term *darkroom* in her own way and provocatively. She invites professional strippers to dance in the red light of the darkroom and to pose in tantalizing, classical pin-up positions. Thus, sensuality and an idea of sexual availability fill a room that is usually used for down to the second time measurement and the combination of developing solutions. At the same time, fascinating, provocative, lively, disturbing and precise pictures emerge from the laboratory. The Labgirls might be everything in one: professional, calculating and yet attractive.

The discovery of photography marks a historical cesura in the history of pictures, their production, reception and mass distribution. The French government, which bought up the patent and made this technique available to the public, had this fact engraved in stone and set up as a chunky monument on the side of a road somewhere. The monumentalization of this invention, however, says nothing about its potential as an art form. On the contrary. Just as a monument for a long-forgotten war, an important invention seems come to a standstill in stone reverence. Bielau points out: Photography can and must be constantly newly invented, used and interpreted. The statements and meanings of photographs are changeable and lend themselves to interpretation. Perhaps the greatest possibilities to overcome standstill and static manifestation in this medium exist in the context of the visual arts.

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¹ Lucinda Devlin, *The Omega Suites*, Göttingen 2000

² Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Göttingen 2007