

EVERYDAY SPECIFICS

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Lynne Cohen takes photographs of spaces and interiors. She frequently finds her subjects in places that are hidden from public view: in research facilities, medical laboratories, military and police schools, highly specialized factories, or in classrooms at universities and schools.

The images show technical equipment, wall cladding, cables, measuring modules, loudspeakers, and occasionally dummies that are used for experiments. The absence of actors scarcely allows us to surmise the contexts and functions. In Cohen's photographs, even everyday objects appear alien, puzzling, or threatening. A cot standing in a room with smooth white walls and cold lighting, a side table with medical equipment and an IV bag lose their purely curative purpose as medical aids. Associations can arise: one is reminded of inhuman experiments or questionable autopsies. A chair in a sparsely-furnished room with a concrete floor and a partition screen calls to mind an interrogation situation. Reports in the news about methods used by American and other secret services tell us that interrogations are not always performed using admissible means: sleep deprivation, fixation and beating, waterboarding, or being forced to wait or being bombarded with loud music for long periods of time are only some of the methods from the gruesome reservoir of psychological repressions. In her photographs, Lynne Cohen works time and again with ambivalence and associations and leaves the viewer in the dark about the actual functions of the spaces and equipment. She formulates a subtle critique of society by enabling ostensibly harmless situations to be interpreted as something abysmal and complex. However, the artist does not exclusively work in hidden and unknown places or arouse threatening associations. Her images also frequently include foyers, hallways, reception desks, and offices. In addition to leather seating arrangements and painting galleries in the executive suite, which represent power, influence, and the right genealogy, Cohen also takes photographs of the bizarre, the comical, the questionable-taste aspects of furniture and accessories. She encounters these renditions with a tremendous sense of humor and reveals the formal qualities of these everyday readymades.

Lynne Cohen has been taking photographs for more than thirty-five years, during which she has built up an extensive oeuvre. The Canadian counts among the most important representatives of conceptual documentary photography. Her work has influenced or flanked a whole row of other photographic works: in 1977, the American artists Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan published their book *Evidence*, which was reprinted in 2003.¹ The volume includes a collection of found black-and-white photographs from the archives of insurance companies, police and fire departments, hospitals, and laboratories. The images show places and occurrences we normally do not get to see: crime scenes or reconstructions of accidents or test arrangements with and without people, tests and explosions of all kinds condense these photographs into a pandemonium of the administered and engineered world. Lynne Cohen's work also includes similar forms and modi operandi of an absurd, abstruse, dangerous, indeed occasionally even perverted inquiring mind, much like the unpretentious depiction of social violence that comes to light in

the series *The Omega Suites*² (1991–98) by Lucinda Devlin. Devlin photographed execution chambers, death cells, or gas chambers, which serve the American justice system as fixtures for the execution of people on death row. The artist documents an archaic and morally highly contradictory procedure in a formally rigorous series and opens it up for discussion without comment. Lynne Cohen also proceeds with the same precision and rigor, except that she throws light on all areas of society. Thus she can also be regarded as the forerunner of Taryn Simon. In *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*³ (2007), Simon shows places and people in American society that are far from comforting. In addition to research facilities in which marginal areas of science are explored and commented on, Simon also makes portraits of people, and in an interplay of text and image, she succeeds in making their monstrous ideologies manifest. She shows that paradoxically, the icons of American freedom are based on violence and exclusion, on hate and fanaticism. Lynne Cohen's work also poses the question: How far can freedom go before it is twisted into its antithesis? When one looks at her photographs, one time and again has the feeling that one is witnessing processes and events that are uncontrollable and threatening, and that democracy and the social premises of a peaceful coexistence can only be maintained with a great deal of effort.

This superior view is only successful if a situation is looked at from the outside. For the specialists who work on a daily basis in the factories, universities, laboratories, or classrooms or who sit in front of control panels and monitoring devices and take measurements and make adjustments, their areas of operation are normal and necessary. Within their narrow framework, processes, arrangements, and possible results are merely put into relation to each other and only rarely scrutinized with respect to their undesirable consequences. However, consumers also often complacently encounter products. Their focus is on the immediate benefit and practical value. This is particularly astounding in the field of medicine. The research expenditure for the development of an effective pain tablet is immense. Yet pain patients do not inquire into the development, failures, and experiments, into the tests with test persons, or into the extensive evaluation of the findings before a medication can be placed on the market. The main thing is that the medication takes effect quickly and reliably. People who purchase a car are hardly interested in the time and effort the engineers and designers in the automobile industry have to invest in order to get it working. The background and the consequences of research disappear behind the need for mobility or for possessing status symbols. But not everything that is investigated and taught is ultimately applied. Many things are based on false conceptions and errors or follow personal interests that have no relevant connection to social needs. Time and money, resources and labor are often enough

invested in senseless projects whose marginal gain in insight is hardly worth the effort.

Lynne Cohen documents spaces that although they are in the midst of society, are unknown or unconscious to most. On the one hand, care is taken that the public is not informed of the existence of these institutions. People often do not want to know about them. It is more comfortable to limit oneself to one's own horizon and to forget about the existence of shooting stands, tank and flight simulators, factories for munitions and war machinery, of training facilities for the police and the fire department where they practice for killing sprees and other states of emergency. In much the same way we would like to suppress the medical laboratories for researching and combating disease and death. These things exist nevertheless; they surround us and in many respects represent the foundation of our society. We gladly take advantage of the blessings and certitudes of social organization and do not speak about the shoals of our own actions and insights. Virtually each one of Lynne Cohen's images contains this psychology of everyday life. The title that subsumes her works between 1971 and 2005—*Camouflage*—can be taken as an analytical commentary:⁴ it means concealment, and in terms of Cohen's work it can also be understood as (self-)deception. Something is there but one does not see it; one is not supposed to see it or does not want to. This ability of making something hidden or forgotten visible and documenting it is a fundamental quality of photography. At the same time, however, photographs only show a section and condense their message on the film of reality. Thus the title of Lynne Cohen's current series—*Clear Arrangements* (2007)—can be interpreted in either an ambivalent or ironic way. The clarity in these images is deceptive: in this case, clear arrangements are anything but simple certainties.

1 Mike Mandel, Larry Sultan, *Evidence*, New York 2003 (first edition: Santa Cruz 1977).

2 Lucinda Devlin, *The Omega Suites*, ed. Susanne Breidenbach, Göttingen 2000.

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

4 Lynne Cohen, *Camouflage*, Cherbourg 2005.