

Stephan Berg

## THE PHANTOM OF SPACE

A gray, highly polished floor extends to a large picture window through which one can see section of woods and a gently rolling meadow. There are three benches directly in front of the window, which is subdivided by pillars and a horizontal railing. People are sitting on the benches and observing the nature spread out in front of them, and as such, have their backs turned to us. Everything in this scene is geared towards a quiet and relaxed atmosphere. In the bright white light of a glimmering summer day, the nature visible through the window seems like a petrified police sketch of itself: faded and without movement for all eternity. A large tree seen in the middle of the window centers the composition, giving it an additional feeling of calm. In *Japanese Garden Osaka* (2002), one can watch the photograph turning the room into an image of itself, charging it with a somnambulant quality. This is true of the interior space on the one hand, which is turned into an almost incorporeal and suspended state by the white reflecting floor. However, nature also only appears in a fundamentally pictorial form on the other hand. Stringently framed by dark vertical pillars, nature appears within the image almost like a light box photograph.

A reference to this creation of an image within an image is also of consequence because the photographed space is the pavilion of a Japanese garden directly adjoining a museum, a building that draws its usefulness from the "staging" of pictures. In this context, it is possible to read two meanings into the whitely illuminated paleness that drenches the slice of nature visible in the window: as a allusion of a graphicness that evades all aspects of reality and that is constantly threatened with its disappearance, as well as a photographic self-reflection of the exposure process, to which the work thanks its existence. The motival transition between interior and exterior spaces that logically occurs here can surely also be seen as a metaphor for the fact that all of the events take place in an intermediate space in which explicitness and specification are not the main concern, but rather an ambivalence that sways between the image of space and the space of an image. Decisive importance is given to the role of the viewer, who is present in a two-fold way. First, in the guise of the persons who are looking at a section of nature transformed into an image, and secondly, in the guise of the camera's view, encompassing the entire scene from a perceptible, and thus from a deictical distance, making itself the representative of each and every viewer of this work.

The doubling of the image and the viewer, which is doubled fragmentally yet again by the highly polished floor, underscores Ute Lindner's central concern: The construction of images that create their own intermediate spaces; a place which, in its construed, phantomlike fragility, draws its reality by permanently mirroring itself, thus becoming its own doubleganger. This specific interest is already clearly manifested in an early group of works dating from 1995 entitled *Belichtungszeiten* (Exposure Times). For this work, Ute Lindner employed wall coverings from the State Art Collections in the Wilhelmshöhe Castle at Kassel that she was able to acquire because of a planned renovation of the galleries. On the surface of the faded, over 25-year-old carmine red felt fabric, one can clearly recognize the quadratric sections on which paintings by Veronese, Titian and Murillo were previously hung. The inscriptions on the original acrylic glass labels left such an indelible imprint on the fabric that it was actually possible to figure out exactly which painting once hung at a particular spot, now only visible as an empty rectangle. The only measure taken by the artist was to apply the material onto canvas stretchers and to present them as autonomous pictures. Aspects of this work dealing with institutional criticism has already been comprehensively dealt with (1). However, this group of works fits very neatly into a tradition of artistic thinking extending from Michael Asher and Louise Lawler to Christian Philipp Müller, according to which the circumstances of the museum that make works of art not only visible, but also readable, can themselves, under the right circumstances, also be the subject of an exhibition.

Over and above this, *Belichtungszeiten* is also a powerful discourse on the indissoluble embrace of appearance and disappearance. The images reveal traces of time-lapse photography that preserve things that have vanished in the guise of a phantom-like residue, allowing a new autonomous image to simultaneously resurrect itself. This is actually a double exposure, and it is possible to simultaneously recognize both the earlier work of art as well as its transformation. The disappearance of the one picture is as such the requirement for the presence of the other picture. Both images are superimposed over each other like doublegangers in as far as the picture that we can see derives its existence from the shadow of the picture that has vanished. Time and space become paradoxical categories in these works. On the felt fabric, the spot on which the paintings once hung are marked as an index and then resurrected at the same time by removing the cloth from its original spatial context. Not only is the time that each of the paintings hung on the wall in question stored in this imprint, but, in a larger sense, the annulment of this linear chronicity is also formulated in terms of a contemporaneity resulting from the liberation of the presentation from its original context.

The use of time-lapse photography as an instrument for creating images that reflect processually on the conditions of their own production and reception, thus swaying between presence and disappearance, was already utilized by Ute Lindner in her *Cyanogramme* series. In these works, the artist coated glasses with cyanide, which at first quickly turned dark blue under ultraviolet lights, but then underwent further formal and color changes in a process that lasted over a longer stretch of time. The artist achieved a meticulous intensification of this subject in 1996 during her stay

at Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris when she applied the photosensitive emulsion between the panes of her studio windows. The process of exposure lead at first to a complete darkening, which then gradually dispersed over time. Structurally speaking, the window served not only as a motive and as a vehicle for the image, but also as the starting point for a transformational process in which the original procedure was reversed. Instead of allowing light to enter the studio, the chemical solution of iron and salt formed a light barrier leading to its own negation. Robbed of its conventional function, it was nevertheless still readable as a self-generating image of a paradoxical intermediate space in which the loss of function set the massive effects of an artistic discourse into motion. At the same time, however, the recovery of the window's original function of mediating between interior and exterior spaces lead to the certain destruction of the artwork.

In her Exposures series (since 2001), various central aspects of Lindner's earlier works come together. The over 2-meter large, digitally processed photo-collage depicts views of various museum galleries (among them the Neue Galerie in Kassel, the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin and the Akademie der Künste in Berlin). Not only were all the artworks digitally deleted from these spaces, but by integrating visitors from various other large international museums into the modified rooms, Lindner also altered the logic of the architecture. Similar to *Belichtungszeiten*, Exposures also reflects on the perception of institutionally transmitted works of art. However, Ute Lindner does not do this with the intention of offering a strict systematical reappraisal of the art industry. The very fact that she reassembles museum spaces taken from various contexts implies a considerably more poetic and romantic approach. In this work, as well as in the series of large-scale color photographs und light boxes depicting Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz in Berlin (since 1998) and the panoramic views of Kobe (2001), an intermediate space is created in the foreground that functions according to the laws governing the logic of dreams. Accordingly, the scenarios seem devoid of space and time. The visitors are shown standing and sitting in long white corridors and complex stairway situations, as well as in bare rooms as if they themselves belonged to the exhibition that they in fact wanted to view. Ute Lindner regularly stages the moment of viewing as a self-reflective, theatrical action. In Exposures (*Die Akademie der Künste*) from 2001, all of the persons are busy looking, but it is not clear what they are looking at. The viewer of this photograph thus becomes a voyeur of a desire of sight in which nothing can be seen, of sight going around in circles.

As recognizable in other of her works as well, Lindner consciously positions her works near paintings. In *Cyanogrammen*, she articulates this in the choice of material, as well as in the painting-like pictorial application. In *Belichtungszeiten*, a close correlation to the history of painting is noticeable. This relationship is expressed in Exposures compositionally, for example the elements and motives from Dutch interior paintings of the seventeenth century made use of in Exposures #5. In addition to this, the technical production logic also reveals aspects of paintings. Most of her works are therefore printed on watercolor paper with non-fading ink and then finished with a wax varnish. This method does not necessarily stem from the desire to create paintings using photographic or digital resources, but to give her pictures an ambivalence and to medially generate an indistinctness that prevents a definite characterization and definable subject.

This is also especially true of Ute Lindner's photographs of urban architecture. Her views of Kobe, as well as of Potsdamer Platz and Alexanderplatz in Berlin, are not first and foremost concerned with researching an exact topographical and architectural reality. Their interest lay primarily in the display of a spatial and pictorial development concerned primarily with artificiality, emulation and topological uncertainty. With this perspective, the Potsdamer Platz seems like a giant model that picks out its own construed nature as a central theme. Kobe is turned into a faded panorama without any identifiable orientation point or panoramic comprehensiveness. The city's expanse is anonymous and potentially unending, resembling in these images a rather confusing, labyrinth-like mirage peopled by archaic primeval beings that are in the end revealed to be the gigantic cranes in the harbor. It is interesting to note that the artist achieves these alienating effects – as opposed to the Exposures – completely without the help of digital means, using only the camera view or longer exposures, like in the nocturnal photographs taken at the Alexanderplatz.

A touch of narrative is recognizable in these works, and their cinemascope format creates a connection to film and its dynamic of movement. However, the narration remains only as hints and denies any linear gratification. The images are enamored of playing with uncertainty and they refuse to let themselves become explicit. In a park in Kobe, a visitor lies stretched out on the ground in the exact center of the composition between trees that seem like clones of themselves. Tokyo Park (2002) could be a peaceful image. Irritatingly, however, the head of the person lying down is completely veiled. Even if this detail as such is congenial to the situation of a relaxing midday sleep in a urban park, the veiling produces an uneasy sinking feeling of absence and irritation that corresponds to the vibrating ambivalence between presence and absence accompanying almost all of the artist's works. The veiled figure of a – most likely – sleeping Japanese person seems by itself to be a metaphor for the entire work. It represents a paradoxical simultaneity of presence and withdrawal, of obviousness and secrecy. As such, it is also a sign representing the fact that the meaning of the space that we can see and in which the action unfolds, essentially stems from the segment that we cannot see and which also plays a part.

(1) See, for example.: Thomas Wulffen: Ränder. Zu einer Archäologie des Betriebssystems Kunst, in: Ute Lindner: *Belichtungszeiten*, Kassel, 1997 (exhibition catalogue), p. 6-10 and Hans-Dieter Huber: Bilder und Schilder. Das Dispositiv der Ausstellung als Bild der Geschichte, in: *Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße in Bremen 1997* (exhibition catalogue), p. 33. [in: Ute Lindner. All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream, Galerie Robert Drees, Hannover/Berlin 2003]