Ciel variable
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CIEL VARIABLE
ART PHOTO MÉDIAS CULTURE

Lynne Cohen, *Cover*, Cherbourg-Octeville : Le point du jour, 2009, 142 pp., col. ills. Bilingual text

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Lynne Cohen

Cover
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Cover, recently put out by the French publisher Le Point du Jour, presents the work of Montreal-based photographer Lynne Cohen. Cohen began photographing domestic interiors and has been pursuing a documentary-style description of institutional interior spaces for three decades. This book, her third, is dedicated to her work in colour, which she began to exhibit in this decade.

The subject of Cohenís recent photographic project can be described as the institutional spaces that make up the technical and professional habitats for various sorts of research, training, and recreation. The project could be classified as anthropological documentary, even though the absence of people in the photographs might then seem paradoxical. Many stylistic indicators argue that the work belongs with an audience made up of art specialists, and this perhaps is the source of the ironic humour revealed throughout the work.

It strikes me as provocative that in the book, Cohen has given each photograph a number rather than a title. This is drawn to our attention before we even open this elegantly simple-looking book: on the front cover is a photograph with its number (111) printed by its lower right-hand corner, just outside the edge of the photograph mounted, not printed, on the cover. The number is significant in itself, as it indicates that repetition is the name of the game. What then is meant by the fact that of the total of one hundred and eleven (111) pages there are eleven (11) blank but numbered pages, all of which fall on the left? A perfect one hundred images in total – perfect given the subject of the project.

This may be a fanciful observation, but the number on the cover leads right into, or out of, its photograph. The photograph presents an "empty" room tiled on every surface and feeling like a utilitarian space due to traces of scuffing around the frame of the single door. In one corner, a trapdoor is incised into tiled floor, and the single rectangular light embedded in the false ceiling gleams white. While the floors and ceiling are more or less white, the three walls match the canary yellow of this book's cover, and, strangely, the tiles are in an orientation and proportion matching that of the number 111 printed below in the corner. My sense is that Cohen is not referring to an actual system but is invoking the sense of something lying outside of human intention or control – something akin to photography's dimension of "automation." It is in these environments that we can also sense the eerie reverse of automation: the human working for automated processes – for example, the photographer working for the camera.

I have mentioned three walls, but what of the unseen, implied fourth wall? Could that invisible wall actually be the one at the rear interior of the camera box? This would propose a continuity between the room and the camera, a possibility to which I am disposed as it introduces two important dimensions of the habitat: the grid and the technical image. We need to remember that the "grid" is not only a feature of the built spaces that we are seeing into here but also the name of our global electrical distribution networks, and I think we could also use this word for what is often referred to as "the spectacle." Throughout the book, the grid appears in some form in nearly every situation, whether the interior is military, corporate, scientific, medical, or recreational; as Rosalind Krauss has noted, the grid is "an introjection of the boundaries of the world into the interior of the work."[1]

Jian-Xing Too, with her phrase "boxes within boxes," also introduces this notion in her essay in the book. This is one aspect of the grid form – the other being, of course, "boxes beside boxes." The combination of the two explains the urge to call upon Kafka, or perhaps Freud, to elucidate the sense of threatening morbidity that not only haunts photographs in general but already exists in the sites that Cohen has been photographing for the past three decades. For these reasons, it is tempting to affiliate her work with the surrealist concern with the alien or unhomely and its connection with death. By setting her subjects in a context of aesthetic contemplation, Cohen imbues what might otherwise be merely banal or even repellent subject matter with an attractive aura, and it is the resulting dissonance that invokes a desire to refer to surrealism. On the other hand, there is evidence of affiliation with minimalism and conceptual art through an interest in practices such as repetition and automation.

It is certain that many of the photographs in this collection document these practices, although their context is always sites such as laboratories, recreation places, and military training facilities – locations in which measurement and control systems prevail. What all the rooms have in common is their inhabitation by equipment. Even the furniture featured in some photographs resembles a form of equipment, but images such as sixty two (62) and sixty three (63) present classic control rooms occupied by steel cabinets filled with dials, buttons, and switches. In these two rooms there is no furniture or windows; they are simply airless, generic units.

In their simplicity and absence of detail, these two rooms become so ambiguous that they challenge our ability to separate fact from fiction: they could easily be movie sets. This ambiguity is important, as it implicates the viewer in the subject. Finally however, Cohen's response to this circumstance is to keep her distance, to remain "objective" and in a position of control, and this is what gives her work its documentary dimension. Other photographers have pursued this ambiguity differently, often by locating themselves within the photographically seen by nihilistically short-circuiting the distance that allows for control. Cohen respects the boundary of complicity, refusing the relationship with illusion or fiction.

If Cohen presents a documentary project that reveals our passion for surveillance and control, does this make her project a social and political critique, as has been sometimes proposed? Her subtle identification of the factors that sustain the uncanny in the realm of the familiar and the ordinary allows her to present the elements of inexplicability and wonder that are generally valued as art. It is less clear how this project is one of political practice, or that this should be demanded of it. She has followed, as photographers must, the imperatives of the technical apparatus: frame, isolate, fragment, repeat, and attend to the lens/shutter capacities with regard to lighting and motion. What is most pertinent is the relationship that she identifies between her means (photography) and her subject (the contemporary habitat). The continuity that she describes is that of a single apparatus, that of the technical image deployed variously in our habitat.

1 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, vol. 9 (Summer 1979): 50–64.

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