

Lynne Cohen
Lucinda Devlin

A PLACE

ΕΝΑΣ ΤΟΠΟΣ ΧΩΡΙΣ ΤΟΠΟ

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Thessaloniki biennale of Contemporary Art

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ΕΠΙΜΕΛΕΙΑ
Ηρακλής Παπαϊωάννου
CURATED BY
Hercules Papaioannou

ΠΑΡΑΓΩΓΗ
Μουσείο Φωτογραφίας Θεσσαλονίκης
PRODUCTION
Thessaloniki Museum of Photography

A PLACE WITHOUT A PLACE

Whether they be private or public, interiors have been a subject of the art of photography from its very beginning. Since then, a large number of photographers have taken noteworthy photographs of this subject, and created a significant artistic oeuvre of photos that at times were reminiscent of large scale still lifes, and allowed an investigation into the form and function of interiors over a period of approximately two centuries. In the 20th century it acquired greater resonance as the urban population expanded and became multi-layered. It was thanks to that urban population that advertising became established and industrial design acquired a mass appeal, thus laying the foundations for commercial photographs of interiors, frequently of very high standards, as a genre. Despite an abiding interest in the photography of interior spaces constructed by people, in which much of their culture is manifested, there are very few photographers whose work is dedicated to them. Among them, Lynne Cohen and Lucinda Devlin hold a distinguished position in the contemporary scene, and have, for approximately thirty years now, been examining the complex manner in which the photography of interiors constitutes a metaphor for the chief features of Western, mainly, culture.

The two artists share common features: they depict spaces to which access is frequently monitored, in which they do not intervene, although some of these spaces bring to mind *mise-en-scene*, raising suspicions that they might have been arranged. To a different extent, their photographs incorporate the documentary "aura", the intent of photography to classify, as well as typological methodology. Humankind is implied in their work through absence, as well as through the inevitable reading of every space as a field where knowledge, choice and pursuit are blended. They are both careful in the organisation of form and the use of existing light. Furthermore, they favour a frontal glance, a depiction of a highly detailed depiction and an extended depth of field that all evoke a sense of clinical neutrality. The similarities in their work though only go as far as a few general morphological or methodological elements; further examination allows subtle differences and essential deviations to come to the surface.

Lucinda Devlin's photographs seem to make up discrete series that often have a visible coherence in terms of subject matter. Thus, the *Pleasure Ground* series examines spaces, such as hotel rooms or spas, that frequently bear the stamp of a bizarre atmosphere which David Lynch might have chosen to illustrate one of his dark obsessions. Space is transformed into an ephemeral haven in which dreamlike fantasies are formed, with an instrumental role in the potentially complex process of seeking pleasure. The *Corporal Arenas* series investigates the spaces and the technology that have to do with the clinical handling of the human body (such as operating rooms or anatomy labs). As spaces, they appear to be linked with an algorithm whose invisible constant is mankind. The *Omega Suites* series depicts spaces in which the death sentence is carried out in the United States. At the distance of a witness or an executioner, Devlin observes the austere spaces and the equipment in them, introducing us to what is perhaps the most irrational and macabre space mankind has made: that in which human life is officially taken before a small audience, a space that is frequently blindingly, but not purifyingly, white. The last two series have to do with institutional spaces in which ritual-like procedures take place that exercise control over the human body, beginning with healthcare, and ending up with the "purification"

of the social body. It is thus perhaps not strange that an odd, sterilised nakedness arises from the photographs that brings forth the symbolic identity of each space, something to which the photographer contributes by eliminating every superfluous detail. Devlin's compositions imbue space with imposing clarity and create atmosphere by a sober use of colour. What lurks in all of the series is an intention to approach spaces in which voluntary or involuntary procedures are carried out on human existence; the results range from a playful use of myth to the ultimate end of life itself.

Lynne Cohen's photographs seem at first glance to belong to more loosely contained bodies of work, although one can distinguish in them certain thematic territories. In the black and white photographs of the early period she concentrated on the multifaceted relationship between reality and art in ordinary spaces such as offices, hairdressers', sitting rooms or libraries. Locating the artificial materials that constitute the synthetic surface of commonplace reality, she posed the deeper question of camouflage in the contemporary world. In an interview, she noted that, to her eyes, the world always seemed to be full of finished works of art that made her feel as if she were photographing *readymades* in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp, satisfying her attraction towards visual and conceptual contrasts and deceptions, or ambiguous messages¹. Over the last twenty years, she became interested in institutional spaces to which access is restricted (military labs, police firing ranges, surveillance rooms, etc.), environments that constitute their own realities. Besides camouflage, the works of this period emphasise notions of manipulation and control. The viewer is frequently unable to conclude precisely what the depicted premises are used for, as the photographs appear in many cases captivatingly vague, despite their being very detailed, giving rise to feelings of alienation and uneasiness. The photographs of this second period seem to be more introvert and distant, like puzzles that resist being solved or being located in space and time. Frequently, the foreground is empty, creating an irresolute distance between the viewer and the space. Along with the shift in subject matter, the scale of her work has become substantially larger, and relatively recently colour has been added as a potential choice, as well as a presentation that points the works as objects and not only as framed images.

If Devlin is interested in interior spaces as specially formed shells in which a range of particular activities take place, Cohen seems to focus her attention on the shell itself, seeking to investigate the gap between appearance and function. The spaces in almost all the photographs, except for those from the *Omega Suites* series, denuded of visible clues as to their function, appear alternatively as threatening or seductive stage sets. The two artists utilise in a similar manner the sense of emptiness and fullness that arises from environments that are rationally structured, but from which there seems to be no escape. The spaces of the photographs seem mostly unfamiliar and unused, strangely empty of present time, yet laden with a multitude of social and political connotations.

Precisely forty years earlier, Michel Foucault introduced the concept of *heterotopia* to denote spaces that are beyond all others, although one can actually point to their position in the real world, places that are frequently accessible under certain conditions

or through rituals - in contrast to utopias which are imaginary, non-existent places². The photographs of this exhibition investigate spaces that are in the spirit of *heterotopia*: spaces that are real, that have an effect on human existence, in which, however, there are no, or cannot easily be, personal references or roots in time and space; spaces, finally, that constitute *a place without a place*³. A suitable context in which to depict such a place is photography, in correspondence with what Foucault proposed for mirrors, that constitutes an *heterotopia* in itself: it creates a virtual space while existing in the most immediate, material form.

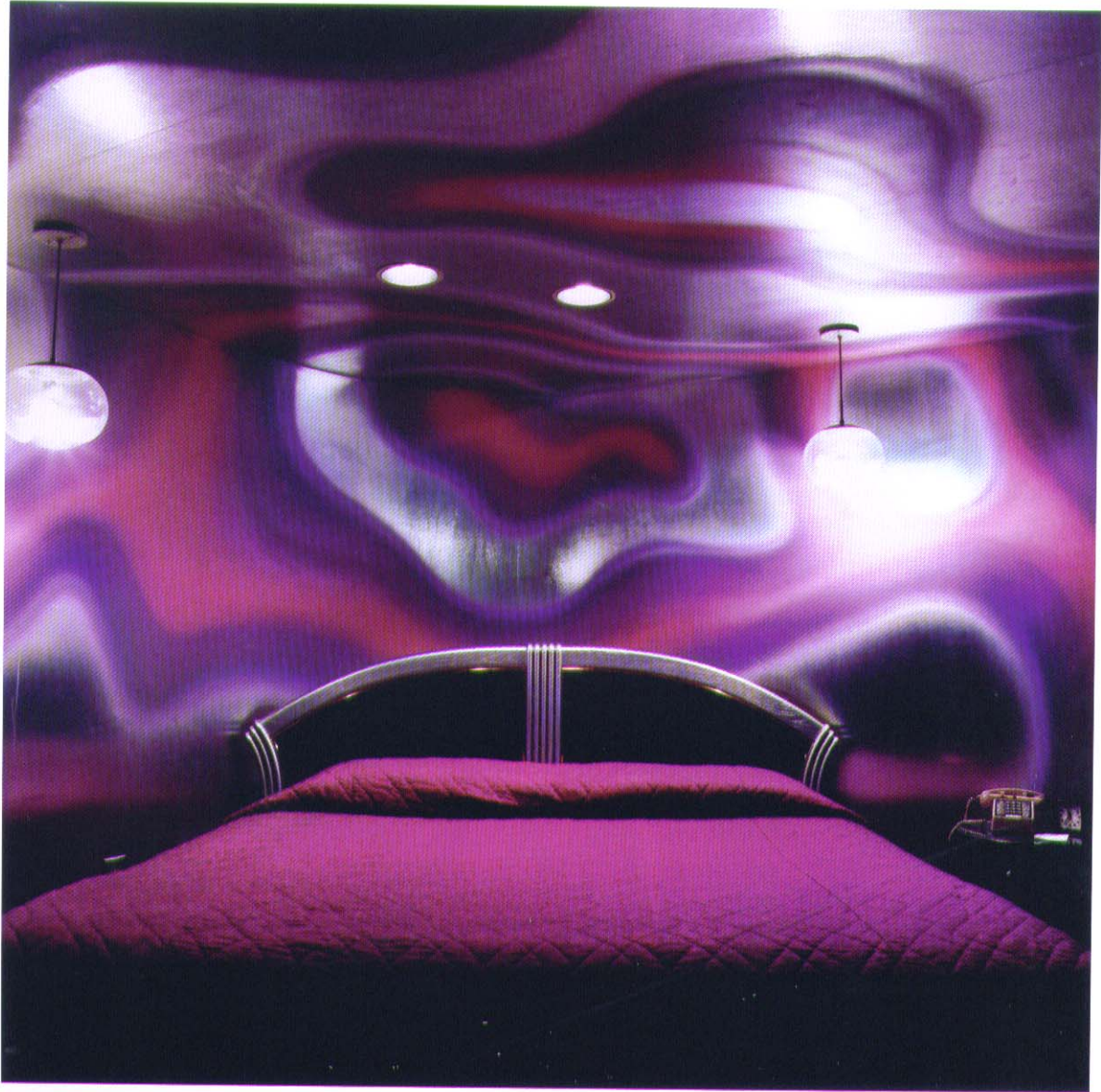
In contemporary, mainly Western, societies, one can observe an increasing social complexity and a differentiating process that is the result of the modernism of the 20th century, leading to a situation in which people have become the subjects of experiences through an ever more densely woven network of "special" spaces that constitute self-contained microcosms. In this sense, one wonders to what extent the contemporary world increasingly defines itself as a continually lengthening chain of heterotopic experiences into which one enters voluntarily or compulsorily, where one works or is destroyed, where one consumes or is consumed, a chain of more or less strange places that constitute tesserae in a complex and synthetic reality. This chain, as the photographs of this exhibition underline, seems to include mainly places that are not inhabited but inhabit us, designed as fields of action on human wills and freedoms, continually expanding the presence of heterotopic islets within the realm of the social fabric.

Hercules Papaioannou

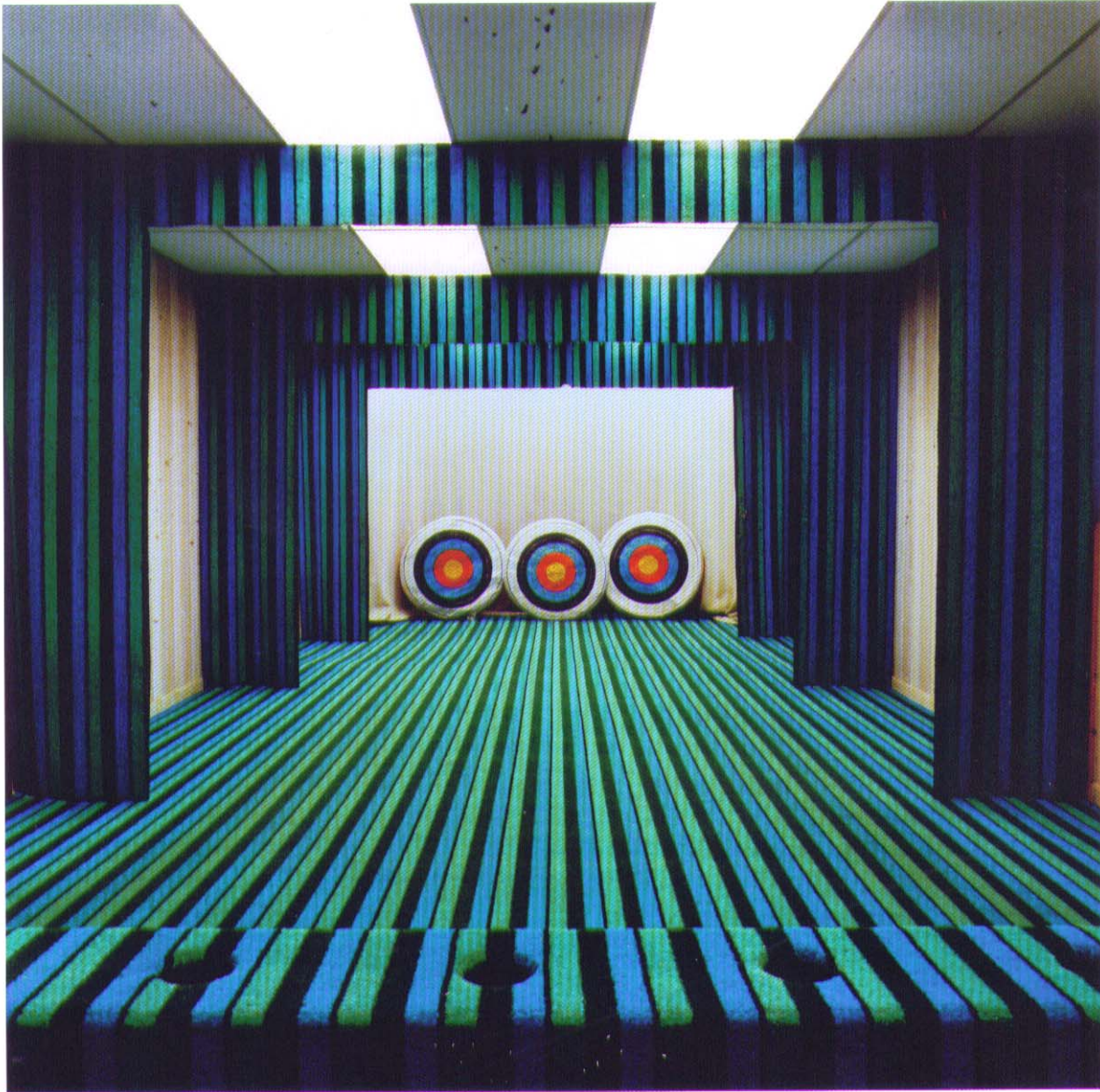
¹ Excerpt from an interview with Lynne Cohen in February 2001 by William E. Ewing, Vincent Lavoie, Lori Pauli and Ann Thomas, "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen", in Lynne Cohen, *No Man's Land, The Photography of Lynne Cohen*, National Gallery of Canada – Thames & Hudson, London 2001, pp. 26, 29.

² Foucault, Michel, *Des Espaces Autres*, was presented as a lecture in March 1967 and later published in *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in October of 1984.

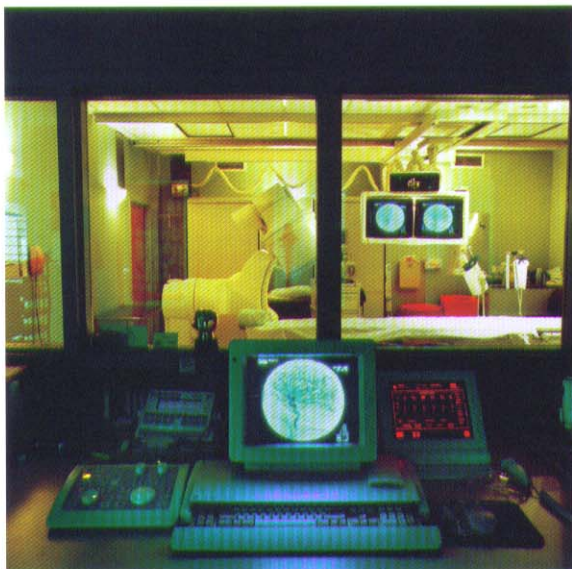
³ *Op. cit.*



Παλμικό δωμάτιο, Ξενοδοχείο Σέρατον, Βάλλεϊ Φόρτζ, Πενσυλβανία 1990.
Pulsations Room, Sheraton Hotel, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania 1990.

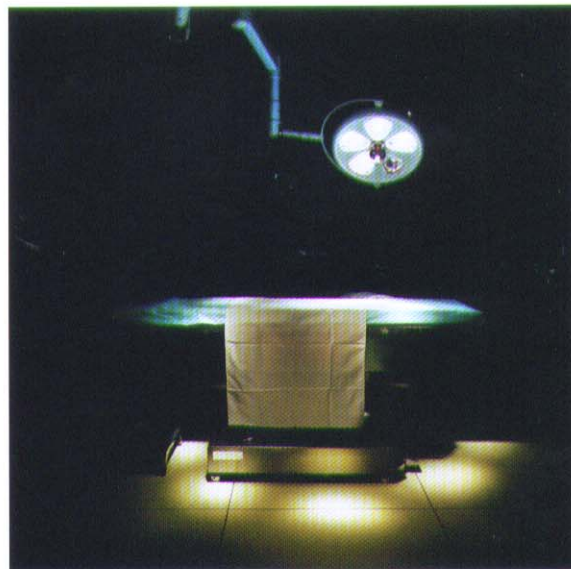


Δωμάτιο τοξοβολίας, Paradise Stream, Όρος Πόκονο, Πενσυλβανία 1979.
Archery Room, Paradise Stream, Mt. Pocono, Pennsylvania 1979.



Αίθουσα Λαπαροσκόπησης, Γενικό Νοσοκομείο Φόρεστ,
Χάτισμπεργκ, Μισισσιπί 1998.

LCA Room, Forrest General Hospital,
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 1998.



Χειρουργείο #8, Γενικό Νοσοκομείο Φόρεστ,
Χάτισμπεργκ, Μισισσιπί 1998.

Operating Room #8, Forest General Hospital,
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 1998.



Εργαστήριο Μακροσκοπικής Ανατομίας, Πανεπιστήμιο της Καλιφόρνια,
Ρίβερσαϊντ , Καλιφόρνια 1982.

Gross Anatomy Lab, University of California,
Riverside, California 1982.



Γραφείο Κηδεϊών, Ντιούιτ,
Νέα Υόρκη 1986.

Funeral Home,
Dewitt, New York 1986.



Θάλαμος εκτέλεσης με θανατηφόρα ένεση, Πολιτειακή Φυλακή της Νεβάδα, Κάρσον Σίτυ, Νεβάδα 1991.
Lethal Injection Chamber, Nevada State Prison, Carson City, Nevada 1991.



Ηλεκτρική καρέκλα, Σωφρονιστικό Κατάστημα Γκρήνοβιλ, Τζέηρατ, Βιρτζίνια 1991.
Electric Chair, Greensville Correctional Facility, Jarratt, Virginia 1991.

