Objects, Materials, and Surfaces: The Photographs of Lynne Cohen

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ABSTRACT

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For more than three decades, Lynne Cohen has photographed unpeopled, semi-public institutional and corporate interiors. These haunting, foreboding pictures are frequently discussed for their subject matter: the rooms and what they contain are seen as anthropomorphic, with chairs conversing and plants crouching sedately in their plastic pots. The one-way glass of the windows in laboratories is exposed for its surveillance purposes, while the dummies and targets in factories and police ranges are named as surrogates for the people that are not to be found in these photographs. The works are measured against art movements of the past: Dada, Surrealism, Modernism, Pop and Minimal art. The shifts in the types of places that Cohen photographs have been noted, from living rooms up to military installations. What has been infrequently discussed is how the photographs have changed stylistically. In this thesis, Cohen's images are discussed in terms of their scale, the way that the objects and surfaces change within the prints, her unique framing, and her use of colour film within the past decade.

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Marsha Taichman, September 2006.

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Introduction

"An artist does not develop," Swedish poet and essayist Gunnar Ekelöf wrote, "He quite simply takes time to get to the bottom of things."[1] This is an apt description of Lynne Cohen's artistic career. Over the course of thirty years, she has ventured further and further into variations on the same subject matter: unpeopled institutional interiors. Cohen finds beauty in atypical spaces. The spaces become increasingly sparse and difficult to gain access to, moving from the confines of suburban living rooms to classrooms to observation rooms to laboratories to spas and military installations. What is Cohen attempting to illuminate with these images of places that exist unnoticed on a daily basis, and how does she attract and keep our attention?

This thesis is separated into four chapters based on formal changes in Lynne Cohen's work as they occurred chronologically. The first chapter is a review of the literature on Cohen from art magazines, newspapers, catalogue essays, and a thesis. Scouring through what has been written about Cohen's photographs enables me to see certain patterns of thought about these photographs. Frequently all the types of rooms are lumped together under the heading "empty interiors," which, for the sake of brevity, occurs in this thesis to describe her oeuvre. But each room seems chosen for its differences. What is especially interesting is mapping the observations that reoccur through the years, either because one author reiterates the ideas of another, or because some aspects of Cohen's practice have remained so consistent through the years. For instance, regardless of the use of an interior, the living rooms right up to the military installations have a surreal,

[1] Gunnar Ekelöf, quoted in Jean-Christophe Ammann, "Introduction: The Power of the Image," *XL Photography Art Collection Neue Börse* (Deutschland: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2000): 8.

dream-like effect, where objects and rooms are incongruous. This effect is remarked upon consistently.

Theories discussed in the literature review include kitsch, which is associated with Clement Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," originally published in 1939. Material culture is discussed by Paul Wood in his essay, "Commodification," where he references theories of mass culture and rampant consumerism. Ten writers and critics discuss the humour within Cohen's prints. Four of her photographs were included in a 1991 exhibition entitled *No Laughing Matter*, which focused specifically on humour in contemporary art practice. Curator Nina Felshin draws together an unusual grouping of artists for a novel show. Before reading the ideas of other writers, I did not think of Cohen's photographs as particularly funny. Rather, I thought of them as powerful - I thought that the artist was brave in her subject matter. In examining her images, especially before she moved into her more recent spas and military installations, almost all the photographs do have a humorous, ironic tone. This has led me to consider the power of humour as an ingredient in Cohen's work, and to measure its presence, especially in terms of scale.

Artist and critic Marvin Israel once commented on American photographer Diane Arbus' character, noting, "She was entranced by differences, the minutest variations. That from the beginning nothing, no two rooms, no two beds, no two bodies or any parts of them were ever the same. Finding the differences thrilled her, from the most glaring ones like

a giant to the smallest ones that just barely make *someone* unique."[2] Replace *someone* with *someplace* and Israel could easily be discussing Cohen's photographs. In Chapter One, the review of literature about Lynne Cohen's work, Arbus is cited in relation to Cohen's photographs eight times. Though the comparison is based on only two of Arbus's images, she is the artist that Cohen is most frequently compared to.

Two ideas frequently discussed in relation to Cohen's subject matter are surveillance and the uncanny, concepts derived from Michel Foucault and Sigmund Freud respectively. At first, these terms seem to allude to content – I have considered them as aspects of formal technique. As cultural references, they are incompatible. They create tension. Concepts of power and control seem conveyed through the institutional subject matter and the frontal, confrontational vantage point that Cohen assumes as the photographer. These images empower the spectator to look directly into the rooms, and to gaze freely upon what is found there. The uncanny, used to explain something simultaneously familiar and frightening, is an apt term to describe these images and their depictions of places where people work and sometimes socialize. In everyday life, with the distraction of human bodies acting out specific duties and functions, it is difficult to see what such places actually look like, or stand for.

Another factor that might lead a keen theorist back to the uncanny is the exploration of types, from living rooms to classrooms to dance halls to laboratories to spas to military installations. In addition to being bombarded with ordinary, yet extraordinary, imagery,

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[2] Marvin Israel in Sandra S. Phillips' "The Question of Belief," *Diane Arbus: Revelations* (New York and Toronto: Random Publishing House, Inc., 2003): 56. Italics mine.

one may consider just what it means to repeat and sustain themes in the face of the art market's demand for continual variety and newness.[3] Still another way that the uncanny is stylistically conveyed is through scale, which is so often skewed or exaggerated in her prints. While the enormous cardboard cakes and Tyrolean hats may not be immediately terrifying, and are more of a throwback to Pop art than an actual threat, they are unsettling.

Something that was apparent after completing the review of literature was that much of what is written about Cohen's photographs pertains to the content of her work as opposed to the stylistic changes that occur. Content is a sensible starting point for a discussion of Cohen's photographs, as it is what can be immediately seen and extrapolated from the photographic image. In her work, form usually follows content, rather than the other way around. I will go further with pursuing the formal changes in Cohen's photographs in this thesis. I am interested in the way the subject matter actually looks, how the prints and their presentation has changed over the past three and a half decades.

With the exception of a catalogue essay in Cohen's 2001 *No Man's Land* entitled "Appropriating the Everyday," by National Gallery of Canada curator of photography Ann Thomas, there has not been a single comprehensive study of Cohen's artistic career in terms of both form and content. It is my intention, through this body of work, to explore some of the major changes in Cohen's oeuvre, including her shifts in photographic scale, her custom-made frames that encase the images, which are an

[3] Jan Tumlir, "Uta Barth: Figures of Stasis and Flux," *white blind (bright red)* (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 2004): n.pag.

integral part of the art object, as well as her incorporation of colour materials, which she began to use in the late nineteen-nineties.

Chapter Two deals with scale in terms of both the objects within the pictures, and the magnitude of the pictures themselves. Theories of photographic scale from photographic theorists Philip Gefter and Amanda Doenitz, curator Martin Heifermann and semiologist Susan Stewart are discussed. When oversized objects become the focus of certain images, the size and scale of the rooms are thrown off entirely. In the mid-eighties, Cohen began enlarging her contact prints up to 75 x 100 cm on her own enlarger, but eventually had her prints expanded to sizes as large as 139 x 170 cm. This dramatic shift in scale fits well with the trends of contemporary photography, as it is currently less costly and more technologically possible to print big. Bigger images also suit Cohen's increasingly complex subject matter. When standing in a gallery or museum, there is more power in a large photograph of an army barrack or a parked tank than a 20 x 25 cm print, which could easily be taken down from the wall and peered at while being held. This chapter is enriched by an informal interview with Montreal photographer Michael Flomen, who prints Cohen's black and white work when it exceeds 75 x 100 cm. Flomen's own work can be as large as 120 x 180 cm, and his insights on what scale can accomplish visually, as well as the trend towards printing big in contemporary photography, have significantly informed my thinking.

Chapter Three, which examines materiality and framing of the images and the custom-made frames in which they are presented, framing is discussed using ideas from Henry

Heyderynk. Art historians Arthur Danto and Martha Buskirk, and cultural theorists Eugene Rochberg-Halton and Mihaly Csikeszentmihalyi provide the basis for my discussion about object-hood. When discussing the ready-made work of art, an object (or in Cohen's case, a place) salvaged from banality and appropriated as a work of art, it also seems appropriate to discuss Marcel Duchamp. This section deals with the objects contained in Cohen's prints, and how their surfaces and materiality are reflected in her custom-made frames. My discussion of framing encompasses both the image Cohen captures in the ground glass of her view camera, as well as the frames that she makes in which to present her photographs. Her works are then paralleled with other artists that make innovative use of the object and the frame.

Chapter Four, which focuses on the introduction of colour prints in Cohen's oeuvre, the ideas of colour theorists Freeman Patterson, and art historians Sally Stein, and Sally Eauclaire, as well as the photographer William Eggleston are used to formulate my ideas. Going back to the works of photographers active in the nineteen-seventies, such as Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, I explore how fine art institutions slowly accepted colour prints, and how they are now commonplace practice for contemporary photographers. Cohen did not start printing in colour until the late nineteen-nineties, although she took colour photographs for years before. What was the delay in printing and showing these works? Why did she choose to exhibit them when she did? What did they do to enrich her oeuvre? These are questions that I grapple with when going through her colour images, and when comparing them to the images of her contemporaries.

American writer Susan Fromberg Schaeffer said, "While everyone at one time or another will mouth the truism that truth is stranger than fiction, few people are actually willing to allow reality the variety, sometimes the shocking variety of which it is so demonstrably capable. Reality as they conceive it, does not allow for these aberrant events."[4] Lynne Cohen confronts the extraordinary within the realm of the ordinary in her photographs using formal strategies. In this thesis, I will map the formal changes in her photographic career, measuring how she does and does not fit into current art trends, and how the content of her work has been effected by her changing style.

[4] Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, quoted in Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1981): 173.

Chapter One: Thematic Overview of the Literature

Lynne Cohen's shifts in photographic scale, her attention to the sculptural within the images and in their custom framing, and her decision to print in colour as well as black and white have not gone unnoticed by art writers and critics, though these aspects have been put to the service of other arguments. In this section, I recognize and call attention to the themes that appear most consistently in the literature about Cohen's work during different periods of her career from the late nineteen-seventies onward. The reviews and essays are predominantly written in English, but there are some in French (compare, at last count, eighty-nine English to seventeen French notices, essays, articles and a Master's thesis) and there is one in Spanish, and another in German. The texts were mainly published in North America, with some important contributions from Europe. My survey of the literature ranges from 1974 up to 2005. Cohen began photographing in 1971, and thus began receiving critical attention about three years after starting her practice.

Themes in the literature are organized chronologically in this chapter. This timeline can only be approximate, reflecting the moments that certain observations began to reoccur, as some comments that were made in the seventies are reiterated in the twenty-first century. This is seen with critics drawing parallels between Cohen's photographs and certain images by Diane Arbus. Gary Michael Dault discusses similarities between works by the two photographs in 1977, and Georges Bogardi echoes these comments in 2002.[5]

[5] Gary Michael Dault, "Destination Europe, Art Gallery of Ontario, January 14 – February 14," *Artscanada* 212/213 (March/April 1977): 61; Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86.

The first section focuses on Cohen's artistic influences and the references she seems to make to artistic movements, such as Pop Art and Minimalism. Then we turn to content. Concrete elements of the "stuff" in Cohen's images are often discussed in the literature. The concept of archaeology will be investigated, along with humour and the anthropomorphic. These themes have been clustered due to their common elements of visual surprise and discovery. Keeping to the theme of overarching content, I will then catalogue discussions of the representation of nature in Cohen's practice. In her works from the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties, the rooms are imbued with nature in measured bits: a potted plant, a piece of wood, a backdrop of the forest papered to a wall. In this way, critics have noted that nature is contained, and the people who use these spaces exert something close to control over the organic, or the pseudo-organic, in the case of plastic palms and hat racks that mimic trees.

"Human Presence and Absence," "Surrogates," and "Surveillance" all relate to hiding and being watched. These categories deal with current issues of observation, of simulacra, of places and people not being what they seem. Foucault guides the discussion of these topics, notably surveillance, in texts such as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), though his theories are rarely cited directly in relation to Cohen's photographs.

The next section pertains to contemporary criticism. The section entitled "Surfaces, Materiality and the Sculptural," details the materials that compose the rooms that Cohen photographs, their slick countertops and cool tiles. Cohen fabricates frames for her images from plastics designed to mimic stone and marble, paralleling the surfaces found in these places and, in the case of her

black and white images, reflect the feeling of the colours of the room. The frames are a way in which her sculptural training is highlighted, but their actual construction is never discussed or written about.

Influences and References

Many authors situate Cohen in a framework of art historical references, either to the characteristics of entire movements or specific artists. Renaissance spatiality and the striking formal presence of Cohen's prints are subjects noted by Elaine Hujer: "[The images] are large in scale and often symmetrical. Deep space is indicated by grids—floor and ceiling tiles extending back into space like Renaissance perspective."[6] Cohen's large-format view camera proves ideal for her pseudo-architectural photography as it straightens vertical lines while concentrating the horizontal components of perspective.[7]

Petra Halkes introduces parallels between Cohen's images and the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement. During this period, artists tried to recreate natural harmony in environments that were growing increasingly industrial.[8] Some of Cohen's prints do evoke soothing elements of nature within institutional environments, perhaps through a contained jungle of plastic plants in an otherwise unremarkable hotel lobby, a series of birch branches hung with motley hats, or wallpaper dotted with fluffy clouds intended to calm the harried employees in a corporate

[6] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene." *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2001): C1.
[7] Frederic Paul, trans. Jonathan Bass, "Contaminating Darkness," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 82.
[8] Petra Halkes, "Lynne Cohen," *BorderCrossings* 21.3 (August 2002): 94.

office.[9] Halkes notes that synthetic materials are used to conceal concrete and steel with faux patterns of wood, leather, or stone, pointing to a time when artists and designers felt it was vital to incorporate natural forms into constructed artifacts and structures, also of importance when examining decorative motifs of Art Nouveau.[10]

Artists that have influenced Cohen's practice are mentioned by Elaine Hujer: "Keen-eyed art students will notice art-historical references - Kosuth clocks, Van Eyck mirrors, Beuys' blackboards, action-painted floors - that pop up uninvited."[11] Art becomes part of the everyday through elements of design that Cohen observes and authenticates in her photographs.

Cohen supports such readings when she comments that her inspirations are more often found in the areas of painting and sculpture rather than in the realm of photography. She names Guillaume Bijl, who roped off found interiors and transplanted them to gallery spaces, Richard Artschwager, for his sculptural use of linoleum, Naugahyde, plywood and Formica, and Donald Judd, for his clarity of sculptural forms.[12]

Photographic Precursors

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[9] This is image is also linked to the art of Magritte and Surrealism by Kenneth Baker, "San Francisco, Lynne Cohen, Robert Koch," *Art News* 92 (November1993): 172 and Margarett Loke, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W.," *Art News* 91 (May 1992): 128.
[10] Petra Halkes, "Lynne Cohen," *BorderCrossings* 21.3 (August 2002): 94.
[11] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene." *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2001): C1. These artistic quotations are also noted by Cohen herself in William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen." *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 28.
[12] Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *The Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4.

Sarah Milroy cites Cohen's avowed admiration for Bernd and Hilla Becher. Cohen credits the Bechers with rescuing photography "from its fate as a marginalized medium in the world of art."[13] Frederic Paul notes comparisons between the work of Cohen and Eugène Atget, but thinks other photographers who compile extensive records of people and places should also be mentioned, including August Sander, Walker Evans, Charles Sheeler, Albert Renger-Patzsch, all of whom were predecessors of the Bechers, and key figures in the development of Modernism. Jean-Pierre Criqui makes the grand claim that Cohen engages in a tireless dialogue with diverse historical and theoretical models that she is able to "transform and reinterpret."[14] Cohen is compared to contemporary German artists Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth, and her works have frequently been exhibited with theirs.[15]

Penny Cousineau compares Cohen's prints to the works of Walker Evans and Eugène Atget. All three photographers seem to have a conviction that objects and people in public and private space can be a valuable index of both collective and individual preoccupations.[16] In 1978, when Cousineau made this statement, Cohen was titling her images in order to precisely locate the viewer in the place where the image was taken (for instance, *Alpini Party, Lansdowne Park, Ottawa,* 1976), but since 1985 she has removed this information. The inclusion of these details makes it easier to fit her images into a tradition of documentary photography, so their exclusion represent a significant shift towards formal concerns.

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[13] Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *The Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4.
[14] Jean-Pierre Criqui quoted in Stephen Todd, "'Générique 2': Jeu de Paume, Paris, February 28-April 17, 1995." *Art + Text* 51 (May 1995): 81.
[15] Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *The Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4.
[16] Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68.

Atget, Evans, and Cohen each possess a style and a set of formal qualities that modulate and characterize their depictions of their individual subject matter. Features that typify Cohen's work include an interior view with a great deal of floor surface in the foreground, pronounced ceilings and overhead lights look like a stage set. Sometimes there are backdrops of murals or wallpaper that mock nature.[17] While Atget and Evans sought to document and represent reality, Cohen's project is solely artistic. Her photographs may be "straight," but she claims to make no attempt to catalogue the details from a certain time or place. That being said, her photographs are of places that exist, so they are factual. This point is stressed in an interview of 2004, conducted by Mona Hakim. "People early on assumed that I am a documentary photographer," Cohen says, "While it's true that I appropriate a documentary approach and some of the formal strategies of documentary photographers, I am not a documentary photographer and never aspired to be one."[18]

[17] Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68.
[18] Mona Hakim, "Interview with Lynne Cohen," (Montreal: Vox, Image Contemporaine/Contemporary Image, Montreal, 2004): [7].

Cohen and Arbus

Diane Arbus is a photographer whose work is often paralleled with Cohen's in the literature.[19] Cohen encountered Arbus's work when she was beginning to take pictures, and Georges Bogardi believes that Cohen may have recognized how her own style was different: while Arbus had an expressionistic, Freudian approach to her subjects based on anecdote, Cohen has an abstract, allusive style, "focusing not on the individual but the social; not illustration but demonstration."[20] Statements are made in some articles that suggest Cohen's stylistic debt to Arbus: "Borrowing from Arbus," Henry Lehman proclaims, "Cohen's interiors frequently include a mural."[21] This statement seems an exaggeration since almost none of Arbus's images include a mural and they are in no way integral to either Arbus of Cohen's oeuvre.

Arbus's images are predominantly portraits of people, but there are two images where her subject matter resembles the content of Cohen's work. One is *Xmas tree in a living room in Levittown, L.I., 1963* (Fig. 1), an interior with somewhat dated decorations and a tinseled-tree with piles of presents. The other is *A Lobby in a Building, N.Y.C, 1966* (Fig. 2), which frames a wall plastered with a mural of a seascape. Like Cohen's scenes, these images confront the viewer head-on and provide a psychological study of interior spaces. As Henry Lehman notes,

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[19] The similarities and differences between Diane Arbus and Lynne Cohen are discussed in works by Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86; Carol Corey Phillips, "Speaking Through Silence: The Female Voice in the Photography of Nina Raginsky, Clara Gutsche and Lynne Cohen," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990): 123; Gary Michael Dault, "Destination Europe, Art Gallery of Ontario, January 14-February 14," *Artscanada* 212/213 (March/April 1977): 61; William Jenkins, "Lynne Cohen: Interiors," *Image* 17.3 (September 1974): 12; Henry Lehman, "The image is fixed," *Montreal Star* (31 July 1976): D3; Mark Robbins, "Participant/Observer," *Evidence: Photography and Site* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999): 88; Giles Toupin, "Une photographie en train de s'affirmer," *La Presse* (31 July 1976): C15; Nancy Tousley, "Banff Purchase," *Vanguard* 8.8 (October 1979): 28.

[20] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86.

[21] Henry Lehman, "The image is fixed," *The Montreal Star* (31 July 1976): D3.

Cohen's images are more symmetrically structured, evenly lit and less atmospheric than those belonging to Arbus.[22]

One photograph made by Cohen that reminds us of Arbus images is *Dining Room*, n.date (Fig. 3). Central to the composition is a set of curtains hung on a metal rod. The fabric has been imprinted with a photograph of a thicket of spindly trees. Unlike Arbus's *A Lobby in a Building, N.Y.C, 1966* (Fig. 2), the photograph is not a close-up of the backdrop; rather, a section of a home is seen, complete with floating bar, innocuous shag carpeting, and a round, moon-like hanging lamp. With these elements, it is possible to envision the outdoors in an authentic way, as the carpet becomes grass, the lamp a moon. In Arbus's *A Lobby in a Building, N.Y.C, 1966*, one is faced with only a papered wall, its artifice made evident with the wedge of floor tile and the barely camouflaged electrical outlets.

Cohen and Arbus both expose viewers to places and people that frequently go unseen or unnoticed by the general public, as one might conclude when examining Arbus's haunting images of mental patients and transvestites or Cohen's laboratories that exist behind many sets of closed doors. Arbus's work does not invite the viewer to identify with those being photographed. Conversely, Cohen's images encourage viewers to imagine the situations that occur within these institutions.[23] The images by both artists challenge complacent ideas of normalcy by offering views of the strange in a direct, frontal encounter.[24]

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[22] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86.
[23] Carol Corey Phillips, "Speaking Through Silence: The Female Voice in the Photography of Nina Raginsky, Clara Gutsche and Lynne Cohen," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990): 123.
[24] Mark Robbins, "Participant/Observer," *Evidence: Photography and Site* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999): 88.

Dada, Duchamp and Surrealism

Cohen's photographs have been linked to the ideas behind many twentieth-century art movements. Like Dada, Cohen's prints capture aspects of reality that are strange, funny, and unsettling.[25] Her rooms are often called *found places*, suggesting a relationship to "found objects" and a kind of Duchampian fascination with ready-made art. The observation that Cohen's rooms are *found* is made and then questioned by Johanne Lamoureux when she writes, "[Cohen's] work deliberately plays upon the ambiguity between readymade and installation, between the found site and that set up. The places she records on film have a quality that is at the same time so artificial and bare, so schematic yet coordinated, that they sorely tax our credulity as viewers."[26] The credibility of the scenes is called into question, despite their naturalism. The bizarreness unearthed in the everyday is integral to Dada art.

Strangeness found amidst the ordinary, through incongruous object pairings and unusual juxtaposition, is also important when considering the legacy of Surrealism, a movement with ideas and aesthetics sometimes akin to Cohen's own.[27] Her photographs contain elements that

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[25] Kendra Taylor, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W." *Art News* 87 (October 1988): 177-178.
[26] Johanne Lamoureux, "Lynne Cohen's Photographs: Stages without Wings," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 84.
[27] Surrealism is discussed in works by Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68; Gary Michael Dault, "Lynne Cohen, Vincent Sharp, Geoffrey James: Yarlow-Salzman," *Vanguard* 12.3 (April 1983): 30; Wesley Gibson, "Lynne Cohen: Anderson Gallery," *New Art Examiner* 20.8 (April 1993): 37; Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen," *Artforum* 25.2 (October 1986): 132; Edward Leffingwell, "Lynne Cohen at P.P.O.W.," *Art in America* 88.6 (June 2000): 117; Margarett Loke, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W.," *Art News* 91 (May 1992): 128; Rob Powell, "Introduction," *Power Plays: Contemporary Photography from Canada* (Edinburgh: Stills Gallery, 1989): 3.

range from the metaphoric to absurd, but because these are interiors that people live and work in daily, they can frequently be rationalized or "de-hallucinated."[28] Edward Leffingwell seems to contradict himself when he comments on the "bright, surreal ordinariness" of the laboratories, spas, military installations and halls that Cohen photographs.[29] Can a place or the things contained in a room come across as simultaneously surreal and ordinary? The places are often recognizable for their most basic function, and their peculiarities are heightened when one might expect to find only the banal. Charles Hagen finds the Surrealist resonance of Cohen's prints "reminiscent of the pregnant stillness of Eugène Atget's streetscapes - a sense that the interiors themselves are struggling to articulate some obscure secret."[30]

Modernism

The content of Cohen's work has also been related to aspects of Modernism and the avant-garde. Sue Taylor comments on the nineteen-fifties feel of many of the offices and showrooms, and claims that Cohen's attempts to look "modern" inevitably fall flat.[31] The suggestion is that Cohen's work is intended to mock or deflate Modernist interiors, which does not seem to be the implicit project of these images. William Ewing declares, "In the air- and space-conditioned offices, modernism has gone awry."[32] At the same time, according to Charles Hagan, Cohen's approach is fundamental to photographic Modernism. For these critics, Cohen's work would

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[28] Gary Michael Dault, "Lynne Cohen, Vincent Sharp, Geoffrey James: Yarlow-Salzman," *Vanguard* 12.3 (April 1983): 30.
[29] Edward Leffingwell, "Lynne Cohen at P.P.O.W.," *Art in America* 88.6 (June 2000): 117.
[30] Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen," *Artforum* 25.2 (October 1986): 132.
[31] Sue Taylor, "Lynne Cohen at Printworks Ltd.," *Art in America* 78 (September 1990): 204.
[32] William Ewing, "Lynne Cohen: Room Readings," *Aperture* 106 (Spring 1987): 24.

seem to engage in a critique of Modernism from within the frame. Charles Hagen points out how the "tactic of framing aspects of the social landscape in order to emphasize their tacky weirdness is a staple of Modernist photography."[33]

Pop Art, Conceptualism and Minimalism

Critics have discussed the way Cohen's practice is influenced by Pop Art[34] and Minimalism.[35] Thierry de Duve sketches out Cohen's references: "One finds in her interiors loads of Pop and Minimal Art, Pattern Painting and Conceptual Art, all the furniture of Oldenburg and Artschwager lumped together, the Op art of Bridget Riley...neo-classical frescoes, popular Mexican baroque, New York, the moon and all the blackboards of Joseph Beuys."[36] At first this may seem a frantic mumbo-jumbo of styles, places, and things that appear in Cohen's photographs, but after reflecting on the scope of her work, and going back to specific prints, the references that de Duve makes are clear: the backdrop of a gentle, almost spray-painted landscape in a spa gives the illusion of a fresco, while, in another image, a grainy New York cityscape adorns a wall.

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[33] Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen," *Artforum* 25.2 (October 1986): 133.
[34] The influence of Pop art on Cohen's work is discussed by Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86; Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *The Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4; Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 14.
[35] The influence of Minimalism is mentioned by David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 18; Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 14.
[36] Thierry de Duve, "'Photographie d'ameublement.' A note on the work of Lynne Cohen," *Lynne Cohen* (Brussels: Edition Galerie Gokelaere & Janssen, 1990): 6.

Jérôme Delgado claims that Cohen was inspired by Pop, Conceptual and Minimal art, the movements in vogue when she began taking pictures, and that these influences have not changed thirty years into her career.[37] Sometimes these styles come together in photographs, as Elaine Hujer points to the manner in which "Cohen's photographs fuse the cool, slick geometry of minimalism with the recontextualizations of pop culture and the questioning strategies of conceptualism."[38] Sarah Milroy notes British Pop artist Richard Hamilton as a particular influence for Cohen, whose work she would have gotten to know during her year in London at the Slade School when she was an undergraduate.[39]

Cohen took up photography after receiving formal training in sculpture and printmaking. She was aware that her sculptures from the early seventies followed closely with the industrial aesthetic exploited by Claes Oldenburg, Richard Artschwager and Donald Judd.[40] By taking up photography, Cohen's innovation was more apparent, and there would be fewer questions about her originality.

Ann Thomas has written most extensively about the aspects of Cohen's photographs that responded to Pop, explaining that the sensibility behind Cohen's work prior to 1982 *was* Pop.[41] It is unclear why Thomas marks 1982 as the exact year that Cohen's work shifted away from a Pop aesthetic, but it is near the time when Cohen began enlarging her negatives. Common objects were given other functions, as she points out with *Office and Showroom*, 1980 (Fig. 4),

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[37] Jérôme Delgado, "Des no man's land incertains," *La Presse* (27 April 2002): R1.
[38] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene," *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2002): C1.
[39] Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4.
[40] Frédéric Paul, trans. Jonathan Bass, "Contaminating Darkness," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 82.
[41] Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 14.

where an enclosed room is covered with rows of linoleum samples that take the shape of briefcases, patterned in one-dimensional brick. Both the banality of the suitcases and their serial display on the showroom wall adhere to ideas of Pop.

Cohen links the distortions in scale that appear in her work to Pop.[42] Examples of this can be found in photographs from 1976 and 1980 that contain an enormous Tyrolean hat and an oversized airplane (Figs. 5-6). Cohen makes unusual, incidental objects appear monumental, not unlike Oldenburg's huge hamburgers and soft light switches. This phenomenon is further discussed in Chapter Three, which focuses on objects and surfaces.

Minimalism is more often related to Cohen's images in passing, as Gary Michael Dault observes, "Cohen's *Laboratory*, a steel-clad room with a chair and a screen and a lot of excruciating photographic 'silence,' is a nightmare of minimalist authority..."[43] Susan Butler points out Cohen's steady adherence to a minimal aesthetic through the regularity of her framing and her use of black and white.[44] The reader cannot be certain whether Butler is evaluating the black and white in terms of the photographic medium or the use of black and white in the materials of the frames, but I expect that she means the former. Vincent Lavoie refers to Cohen's later images as "Minimaliste et High Tech."[45] This is to say that Minimalism, like Pop art, has generally been associated with Cohen's photographs, but has not been thoroughly explored as a concept.

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[42] William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 28.
[43] Gary Michael Dault, "Photos Probe Meaning," *The Globe and Mail* (25 July 1998): C15.
[44] Susan Butler, "The Mise-En-Scene of the Everyday," *Art & Design* 10 (September/October 1995): 19.
[45] Vincent Lavoie, "Lynne Cohen: Galerie des Archives," *Parachute* 84 (October/November/December 1996): 56.

Kitsch

Cohen's early works are frequently called "kitschy" in the Greenbergian sense, or deemed emblematic of bad taste.[46] Clement Greenberg defines kitsch as:

> ...popular, commercial art and literature...Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility...Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times.[47]

This comparison is made much to Cohen's understandable chagrin, as she reveals in an interview with Pierre Dessureault, "There were accusations that the work was dealing with bad taste.

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[46] Kitsch is discussed in Cohen's photographs by Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86; Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68; Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003): 78; Gary Michael Dault, "Destination Europe, Art Gallery of Ontario, January 14-February 14," *Artscanada* 212/213 (March/April 1977): 61; Gary Michael Dault, "Lynne Cohen, Vincent Sharp, Geoffrey James: Yarlow-Saltzman" *Vanguard* 12.3 (April 1983): 29; Régis Durand, "Lynne Cohen ou l'effet de coupe," *Art Press* 145 (6 March 1990): 46; William Ewing, "Lynne Cohen: Room Readings," *Aperture* 106 (Spring 1987): 24; Jacquline Fry, "Lynne Cohen: Un theatre d'objets de plus en plus inquisiteur," *Parachute* 33 (December/January/February 1983/1984): 4; Paul Gessell, "A view with a room," *The Ottawa Citizen* (27 January 2002): C7; Stephen Horne, "Lynne Cohen, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax/National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa," *Canadian Art* 19.1 (Spring 2002): 90; Christopher Hume, "Cohen's Real-Life Places Can Look Really Unreal," *The Toronto Star* (23 June 1994): H5; Sol Littman, "This Woman Really Knows Her 'Kitsch'" *The Toronto Star* (31 December 1978): A14; Mary MacKay, "Society's kitsch speaks for itself," *The Windsor Star* (5 February 1988): C2; Naomi Scheman, *Engenderings: Constructions of Knowledge, Authority and Privilege* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993): 163; Sue Taylor, "Lynne Cohen at Printworks Ltd.," *Art in America* 78 (September 1990): 203.

[47] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays by Clement Greenberg* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 10-11.

When people made those sorts of accusations I wanted to follow them home and take pictures of where they lived."[48] Using the term "kitsch" shows the critic's distain for the inhabitants' (bad) taste and brings up questions of class. Cohen would rather her works be seen as evaluations of illusion and reality.

The analysis of Cohen's works as embodying kitsch is often related to her early prints, namely *Living Room*, 1972 (Fig. 7). This image details a domestic setting of a room with busily patterned wallpaper. The arrangement of furniture and decorations is astoundingly symmetrical. There is a coffee table and a couch in the center of the image. The couch is flanked with end tables that each display a lamp, and the shades have the same pattern as the wallpaper, as do the square, round and triangular pillows that adorn the couch. The space is personalized with a generous bowl of plastic fruit on the coffee table and another bunch hung on the wall, a porcelain cat and a small turtle perched on the couch. There are dancing figurines and a few china dishes on each side table, a few more dishes and small ceramic medallions hung on the wall beneath an imposing wooden eagle with its wings spread protectively over the couch. These cluttered furnishings that were likely intended by the owners to give the space a homely feeling are what onlookers may consider kitschy, tacky, or in bad taste.

The first time that kitsch was mentioned in relation to Cohen's work was by Sol Littman in an article entitled, "This woman really knows her 'Kitsch.'" Littman singles out specific images for their fake-leopard upholstery and urethane disguised as oak, furnishings that are "vintage Cohen," and then draws the conclusion, "The cumulative effect, though gentle and understated,

[48] Pierre Dessureault, "Lynne Cohen: Words and Images," Transcript from *View: The Canadian Photographer Series* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1985): 3.

is nevertheless depressing. It is as though pictures of the Queen, torn from weekend magazines and nailed to the wall, were our only art: As though the world had been furnished and decorated exclusively at the five and dime."[49]

Many assessments of kitsch noted in Cohen's prints are less disparaging. Georges Bogardi comments on the humour of kitsch in Cohen's photographs, citing *Living Room* as a point of reference.[50] Bogardi does not overlook Cohen's interest in deception, manipulation, and control and feels that, bearing her more serious agenda in mind, it is difficult to see these works as benign. He echoes Cohen's frustrations with her work's description as "kitsch," questioning what authority critics have to use the term. Bogardi insists that we ask whose standards and tastes decide what is and what is not kitsch.

Archaeology and Material Culture:

Beginning in 1978, writers claim that Lynne Cohen is an "archaeologist," or refer to her photographic practice as archaeological, and mixing the disciplines of art and archaeology, which were never entirely separate.[51] This concept reflects the way that she chooses a theme, hunts down a particular type of space, and allows for the surprises that each place presents. She

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[49] Sol Littman, "This Woman Really Knows Her 'Kitsch'" *The Toronto Star* (31 December 1978): A14.
[50] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86.
[51] These references to archeology can be found in works by Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen," *Artforum* 25.2 (October 1986): 132; Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W Gallery," *The New York Times* (17 January 1992): C28; Bernard Lamarche, "Lieux de l'insolite," *Le Devoir* (19 September 1999): D10; Johanne Lamoureux, "Stages without Wings," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 83-84; Sol Littman, "This Woman Really Knows Her 'Kitsch,'" *The Toronto Star* (31 December 1978): A14; Margarett Loke, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W.," *Art News* 91 (May 1992): 128, Janine Marchessault, "Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada," *Artforum International* 40.9 (May 2002): 187; Pierre Théberge and William A. Ewing, "Preface," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 6; Ann Thomas, "Lynne Cohen: Matters of Fact," *Matters of Fact*, ed. Carol Lowrey (New York: 49th Parallel Center for Contemporary Canadian Art, 1986): 1.

secures permission to record the contents of each of these rooms, which can be a process unto itself. Speculations about the constructedness of the images come up repeatedly in the literature, "as if the mounted hunting trophies, the motel room wallpaper with its life-size depictions of landscape, the plasticized flirtatious jungles of hair salons were so many meticulous reconstructions, as if Cohen anticipated an ironic, fictionalizing archaeology of contemporary interiors."[52] It seems viewers are stumped by the places that actually surround them, struck by the utter strangeness of their everyday environments.

Charles Hagan writes, "Ms. Cohen functions as a kind of contemporary archaeologist, uncovering the day-to-day life of a hidden civilization. Judging from the architecture and décor of these rooms, the civilization is a strange one indeed."[53] In an earlier article from 1986, Hagen is more specific in his assessment of Cohen's work, claiming that the anthropological function of her photographs is derived from her critical, analytical distance from the subject matter. These rooms are inscribed with narrative, and can offer information about the people that use them.[54]

The idea of excavation and organization in Cohen's work can be described as a photographic index of human artifacts.[55] There is the tacit suggestion that Cohen has unearthed places that always existed, but, as inhabitants, we neglect to notice them, and pass through oblivious to their

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[52] Johanne Lamoureux, "Stages without Wings," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 83-84.
[53] Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W Gallery," *The New York Times* (17 January 1992): C28.
[54] Charles Hagen, "Lynne Cohen," *Artforum* 25.2 (October 1986): 132.
[55] Janine Marchessault, "Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada," *Artforum International* 40.9 (May 2002): 187.

strange decorations: "the sixties motifs, the Formica masquerading as mahogany, the half-dead rubber plant in the corner."[56]

Calling Cohen an archeologist is saying that she notices details, but what does it suggest to connect the disciplines of art and archaeology in these articles and essays? It seems to account more for Cohen's process than her product. Edward Leffingwell expounds upon Cohen's method of finding and capturing rooms:

> Cohen tracks down these hermetic places, often alerted by an image available in print media. She gains access through a businesslike courtship, calling on the approaches that seem most productive, including the use of legitimate university letterhead alluding to her professional stature. If necessary, she identifies herself as an artist. Her work seems unobtrusive, as if she would constitute no threat or unreasonable interruption to the day-to-day operations that these various sites bring.[57]

It is often challenging to find the location and dates of Cohen's work, as she stopped including the specifics of the images in the mid-1980s. In this way, the viewer must also work as an archaeologist or a detective to uncover where these places are and when the pictures were taken. One clue Cohen offers viewers is that they should look for sensory details. She explain that when figuring out her images: The fun is archaeological so that dates need not be specific. For myself, I actually tend to associate different eras with different smells-for instance, the earlier photographs, which concentrate on domestic spaces, smell like baby powder, or wet dog or shag carpet, the later photographs of industrial areas and workplaces might be about odours of chlorine, plastic or gasoline.[58]

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[56] Pierre Théberge and William A. Ewing, "Preface," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 6.
[57] Edward Leffingwell, "Lynne Cohen at P.P.O.W.," *Art in America* 88.6 (June 2000): 117. Cohen taught at the University of Ottawa in 2000.
[58] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene." *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2001): C1. This is also discussed extensively in slightly different terms in William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview

Consumer culture and commodities are frequently mentioned in relation to Cohen's practice, as these photographs record types of interiors and offer a sense of the activities that take place within their confines.[59] "Her pictures are social studies," George Bogardi proclaims, "meditations on how we organize our private nests and how others design for us the public spaces in which we conduct our lives."[60] These places bespeak an (un)conscious yearning for something beyond material culture.[61]

Cohen's photographs "provide a catalogue of contemporary living and gathering spaces," Penny Cousineau reflects while drawing attention to their strange typologies. "Exotic motifs-homogenized, stereotyped versions of the African, Egyptian or Italian-are favored for restaurant and beauty parlor fixtures; emblems of nationalism-flags, American eagles, pictures of British royalty-for homes and banquet halls."[62] These places, drawn mostly from the photographs of Cohen's early career, are more frequently dismissed than the more somber later works because of their tendency to capture our "kitsch consumer lifestyles."[63]

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with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 30.

[59] These references to consumer culture and commodities can be found in works by Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86; Stephen Horne, "Lynne Cohen, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax/National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa," *Canadian Art* 19.1 (Spring 2002): 90; David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 17-18; Ann Thomas, "Environments Here and Now," *Environments Here and Now: Three Contemporary Photographers-Lynne Cohen, Robert Del Tredici, Karen Smiley* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1985): 13; Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001): 10-11; Peter White, "Wall-to-wall photo show unpleasant visual deluge," *Globe and Mail* (28 January 1977): 14.

[60] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 86.

[61] Nancy Baele, "Art in the everyday world," *The Ottawa Citizen* (3 February 1991): E1.

[62] Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscananda* 35 (October/November 1978): 68.

[63] Stephen Horne, "Lynne Cohen, Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax/National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa," *Canadian Art* 19.1 (Spring 2002): 90.

Humour and the Anthropomorphic

Humour is at the heart of Cohen's practice in her early works, as the later images become increasingly sinister, sparse and foreboding. In 1992, four of her prints were included in a traveling group show entitled *No Laughing Matter*, organized by Independent Curators Incorporated in New York. Nina Felshin refers to the way Cohen's photographs display some kind of an incongruity, and that what viewers find funny is contingent on a variety of cultural, sociological and psychological variables. What is laughable to one person might merely elicit a shrug from another. David Byrne says that Cohen's interiors are "funny in a creepy kind of way," and Felshin wonders if the inhabitants of these places would perceive any humour in them.[64] She states that the strangely juxtaposed objects and the kitschy décor (which she presumes does not seem unusual to the inhabitants) seem darkly humorous in the context of art.[65]

The image *Office and Showroom*, 1986 (Fig. 8), included in the *No Laughing Matter* exhibition, is a terrific example of the comical and the absurd present in Cohen's images. In this room, the white walls are stenciled with geese in flight, flocking together from the bottom of one wall up and across to another where the ceiling traps them. Positioned by these geese is an elaborate display of birdfeeders on a stand. With only one exception, the feeders are empty, but there seems to be a lingering chance that they might hold food for these one-dimensional creatures. There are two imposing branches that rest on the carpet near a potted plant. Are these pieces of

[64] Nina Felshin, "No Laughing Matter," *No Laughing Matter* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, New York, 1991): 10.
[65] Nina Felshin, "No Laughing Matter," *No Laughing Matter* (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, New York, 1991): 14.

the outdoors brought in intended to be decorative? Are they used as part of the display, and if so, what are we being shown? These salvaged bits of nature look especially silly and strange beside the stark little desk that obscures only a few birds, cornering a little metal chair into the wall. An electric calculator and a shiny telephone perch on the desk's surface, and their cords tangle around one of the branches on the floor.

The fact that all of these objects are together in one room seems funny, as if the room should be an installation that parodies the real world.[66] This bizarre sense of comedy is encapsulated by Susan Butler when she explains, "Woodland scenes, geese in flight, glittering city skylines all turn out to be so much wallpaper; anything with leopard spots and four legs is sure to be a fake-fur covered chair."[67]

Humour could be found in a single object or detail in the rooms photographed. Paul Gessell arsserts that there is an element of humour in nearly every photograph that Cohen takes, explaining, "It could be that humanoid shape of a bed, an embarrassing blob of mould or a collection of store mannequins transformed into a choir. Cohen finds humour where most of us would only find a grim, industrial space."[68] It has been said that there is irony, anxiety, sadness, and a primal longing for connection to society just underneath this laughter.[69] Her prints are never just a quick laugh or a cheap shot.

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[66] Pierre Théberge and William A. Ewing, "Preface," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 6.
[67] Susan Butler, "The Mise-En-Scene of the Everyday," *Art & Design* 10 (September/October 1995): 19.
[68] Paul Gessell, "A view with a room," *The Ottawa Citizen* (27 January 2002): C7.
[69] Laughter paired with irony and anxiety is discussed by Wesley Gibson, "Lynne Cohen: Anderson Gallery," *New Art Examiner* 20.8 (April 1993): 37; laughter tinged with sadness is described by Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68; and laughter as a desire for connection within society is mentioned by Nancy Baele, "Meaning of Humanity in Empty Rooms," *The Ottawa Citizen* (24 September 1988): C2.

Not only do viewers laugh at these images, it is possible that these rooms are actually laughing at themselves. The idea of rooms as both comical and almost human is noticed by David Mellor, who classifies these places as "dust-free rooms that find it difficult to keep a straight face, empty shooting galleries bursting with stifled giggles, guffaws that are left behind, still sticking to a mortician's wall."[70]

Without people, the objects within the rooms certainly become the subjects and characters within each place, displaying a range of emotions. Elaine Hujer comments, "Anthropomorphism just happens - desks crouch, light switches stare with baleful eyes."[71] Cohen has said that these rooms model for her: "Suddenly chairs become the personalities in the room and seem to be posing or in conversation."[72] Cousineau picks up on the human traits found in Cohen's images: "Against backdrops of murals and wallpaper, which, fittingly, mock reality, the inanimate-chairs, tables, planters, ashtrays-mimic human comportment. Sofas recline, hairdryers dressed as if for a safari, their mouths gaping, converse, or turn to gaze out of frame. Tables wear skirts; Lucite silhouettes relax at home."[73] This type of language reinforces the idea that without people, the objects and décor take the place of the relationships and interactions that might occur there.

Representations of Nature

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[70] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 20.
[71] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene," *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2002): C1.
[72] Gail Fisher-Taylor, "A Journey to the West: Thoughts on the Banff Purchase," *Photo Communiqué* 1.4 (September/October 1975): 7.
[73] Penny Cousineau, "Lynne Cohen, International Centre of Photography, March 22-April 16," *Artscanada* 35 (October/November 1978): 68.

Many offices, showrooms, spas, swimming pools, restaurants and lobbies incorporate suggestions or representations of nature. Ann Thomas eloquently observes, "Wilderness is reduced to a benign element of décor."[74] There are animal skins, moose antlers, and pieces of driftwood. One might find murals that depict tropical vistas, peaceful landscapes with snowy mountains or photographs enlarged to wall-size of thickets of pine trees. To complement or further contribute to this illusion, fake rocks or plants may be placed nearby, providing three-dimensional proof of the outdoors. A stuffed animal, like an elk posed on a wheeled platform or a moose head mounted on a wall, serve as mascots or subjects in many photographs.

Perhaps nature has repossessed these rooms, reclaiming the concrete floors and gritty tiles. This could be a kind of camouflage creeping across a world full of culture. Nature and culture collide in offices adorned with wallpaper patterned to look like sky or a huge eagle swooping off an enormous canvas and into a reception room. David Mellor cynically muses, "Here is the jungle, trimmed and tamed and relocated in a beauty parlor or zoned away in a vacation paradise."[75]

Surfaces, Materiality and the Sculptural

It is not surprising that Cohen's work is compared to sculpture based solely on the fact that this was the medium that she moved away from when she came to photography. Cohen claims her

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[74] Ann Thomas, "Environments Here and Now," *Environments Here and Now: Three Contemporary Photograhers – Lynne Cohen, Robert Del Tredici, Karen Smiley* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1985): 13.
[75] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 17.

works are Ready-madess,[76] which reinforces the comparison between her own work and the art of Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp is best known for taking commonplace objects from their natural settings, sometimes altering them slightly or simply interjecting his authorial license, and then heralding them as works of art, and his work will be discussed further in chapter three of this thesis.

Cohen finds commonplace environments and, with careful observation, images them in dramatic ways. Within the photographs are symmetrical lines, tiled surfaces, cold overhead lights, and faux-natural materials. It has been noted that some of Cohen's photographs are so imbued with Formica, linoleum and plastic that they resemble constructed Thomas Demand images.[77] She uses unique materials in the frames to enhance their sculptural presence (without detracting from the fact that they are photographs) with their heavy borders and object-ness. Unlike Duchamp, Cohen is highly involved with and attached to the spaces that she photographs, although this is often difficult to tell from the cool, professional images that she produces.[78]

Human Presence and Absence

Cohen's photographs never contain human beings.[79] The fact that the places that Cohen pictures do not include people is paradoxical, according to Georges Bogardi, as her interiors are

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[76] Sarah Milroy, "A photographer's long-time space probe," *The Globe and Mail* (9 March 2002): R4.
[77] Janine Marchessault, "Ottawa: Lynne Cohen, National Gallery of Canada," *Artforum International* 40.9 (May 2002): 187-188.
[78] Lynne Cohen, Keynote Speaker, Entanglements: Collisions and Tensions Conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, 9 May 2005.
[79] The exciting exception to this statement is *Resort Lobby*, reproduced in *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 16. Behind a cluster of potted plants on the left-hand side of the

recognized and recognizable for their consistent lack of inhabitants.[80] These unpeopled rooms reek of human presence: "The chairs are still warm, the writing on the blackboards has just been erased, the photographs seem to have been made a second after the inhabitants departed, just before the lights were turned out."[81] It has been said conversely that these rooms are devoid of human life, as if "anesthetized...They evidence places that are rigid, inflexible and remarkably inhuman."[82]

Despite this human absence, much is described about human behavior and relationships, providing choices about the places where we live and work.[83] Cohen's *Men's Club*, c.1977 (Fig. 9) is an interesting example of an unpeopled space haunted by human presence.[84] The lounge contains three rows of framed portraits of middle-aged men wearing tasseled fezzes, offering a clue about the people that use this space, people that convene and plan and celebrate here. Two large leather chairs, shiny and used, face one another as if conversing themselves, recalling human proportions and relations, if not providing seats for the men in the club at that moment. Ann Thomas reflects, "When clustered together, empty chairs, with their obvious fashioning after the forms of human anatomy and their strategic placements, hint at conversations both past and future."[85] David Mellor muses about the presence of absence, explaining, "Some empty

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image sits Lynne Cohen's mother, Sophie, who accompanied her on this particular photo shoot. Though she is not visible in the image, she sat on a leopard-printed chair and smoked.

[80] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 84.

[81] Thierry de Duve, "'Photographie d'ameublement.' A note on the work of Lynne Cohen," *Lynne Cohen* (Brussels: Edition Galerie Gokelaere & Janssen, 1990): 4.

[82] John K. Grande, "Lynne Cohen: No Man's Land," *Vie des Arts* 46.187 (Summer 2002): 93.

[83] Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 14.

[84] This image is noted for its lack of inhabitants by Linda L. Brown, "North Carolina, (Not Pictured) The Presence of Absence, The Light Factory, Charlotte, April 4-June 7," *Art Papers* 22.6 (November/December 1998): 57; and Susan Butler, "The Mise-En-Scene of the Everyday," *Art & Design* 10 (September/October 1995): 19.

[85] Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 14.

chairs are inhabited by ghosts, the ghosts of dearly departed friends...while others are inhabited by bogies."[86]

Unpopulated, these rooms seem bleak. The furniture can act as "mere ciphers or echoes of human presence [that] seem to reflect the sensory and spiritual depletion of the spaces."[87] How can so much be read into an empty space? Can the objects and places that we occupy tell so much about us, and is the verdict that grim? Certainly the lack of humanity is frightening, and can serve as a call to action for the viewer. I wonder if the same places would be foreboding if they were photographed from identical vantage points with people performing appropriate, distracting activities.

Surrogates

The objects found in the rooms that Cohen photographs often stand in for humans.[88] Some things actually show a human likeness, presenting a surrogate or simulacrum, as seen with the army of plastic dummies standing guard in a factory, or the targets at a shooting range that display realistic, convincing expressions of fear. These stand-ins serve to simulate humans, acting as the closest thing to people that can be found in the images. They imply human existence while showing only degrees of likeness.

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[86] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 23.
[87] Susan Butler, "The Mise-En-Scene of the Everyday," *Art & Design* 10 (September/October 1995): 19.
[88] The idea of surrogates appearing in Cohen's images has been noted by Anne Dagbert, "'Double Mixte' Jeu de Paume," *Artforum* 33 (Summer 1995): 116; Petra Halkes, "Lynne Cohen," *BorderCrossings* 21.3 (August 2002): 94; and Christine Marcel, "Double Mixte (Générique 2)," *Parachute* 79 (July/August/September 1995): 37; Stephen Todd, "Générique 2: Jeu de Paume, Paris, February 28-April 17, 1995," *Art + Text* 51 (May 1995): 81.

In the mid nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties, human figures began to appear in Cohen's interiors as skeletons, targets or dummies, and Ann Thomas points out that these objects are similar to those found in the works of Edward Kienholz and George Segal. Thomas emphasizes that the surrogates are not necessary to communicate a message about human existence.[89] Like the anthropomorphic chairs and plants within Cohen's compositions, these objects both stand in for the absent bodies, as well as gesturing to the types of activities that go on within these spaces.

Not only are there simulacra of humans in Cohen's photographs, but also of nature. The airless, windowless interiors are adorned with potted plastic plants and painted landscapes on the walls, their once new finish displaying signs of wear by the time Cohen arrives. In much of the décor in the photographs from the nineteen-seventies, wood paneling replaces wood, concrete mimics marble. With the slick frames she fashions to complement her photographs, mass-produced materials often resemble those of higher quality. Nothing is what is at first seems, suggesting that the world is a shoddy, cheap imitation of itself.

Surveillance

If there were inhabitants in these unpeopled places, there is evidence that they would be watched or controlled based on the mechanical devices and props present in the rooms. Even in some of the seemingly benign domestic interiors captured in Cohen's early career, there are signs that

[89] Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 15.

that absent inhabitants are somehow being kept orderly. The aforementioned *Living Room* (Fig. 7) demonstrates how a space can exert control over an audience.[90] The sofa is centered in the composition, and the great symmetry of the pairs of things on either side, from the pillows to the side tables to the lamps look out at the viewers menacingly, despite their artifice of meticulous decoration. With the image's tight framing and contrived perfectionism, the home becomes a stage set, where every move is calculated.

In Cohen's early images, laboratories and classrooms were frequently equipped with security devices and other modes of surveillance. The works from the nineteen-eighties bear witness to an increasing system of mind-control in training centers, psychology labs and security organizations, institutions that Cohen exposes as places for a "normalized" subject.[91] These images entreat the viewer to take a second look at the seemingly benign or neutral presence of observation devices and why they are there.

Cohen uses her camera to mirror the implements of surveillance, acting as a scrutinizing witness, watching the way we are being watched.[92] She has been called a spy for her photographs.[93] James Meyer writes, "Whereas the classic documentary photography would show soldiers in battle or as victims of oppression, 'humanizing' the content to elicit the spectator's sympathy, Cohen depicts the mere apparatus of control: the responsibility for oppression lies not in some

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[90] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 87.
[91] Carol Corey Phillips, "Speaking Through Silence: The Female Voice in the Photography of Nina Raginsky, Clara Gutsche and Lynne Cohen," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990): 122.
[92] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 20.
[93] Peter Goddard, "Fear Factor meets art," *The Toronto Star* (11 July 2002): J8.

profound or transcendent meaning... but in human institutions."[94] By removing people, we are able to see institutions for their tyrannical characteristics. It is as if the workers and workplaces have gone to battle, and the workplaces are dumbly victorious.[95]

Carol Corey Phillips talks about a kind of "permanent alteration" in Cohen's work, a term originally coined in an unrelated context by Julia Kristeva.[96] A permanent alteration involves a double discourse that asserts and then questions power. This relates to Cohen's practice in the way that she documents surveillance devices, including microphones, one-way mirrors, and recording equipment. These images, when regarded collectively, contain evidence of surveillance across North America, and, since the location of the images is no longer specified, perhaps internationally. This tactic also proves Cohen's counter-surveillance upon the power structure.[97]

The Uncanny:

The 'uncanny,' or, in German, '*Unheimlich*', is a psychoanalytic term discussed by Sigmund Freud. It refers to that which is frightening but that also leads back to the known, old and

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[94] James Meyer, "Lynne Cohen, P.P.O.W.," *Flash Art* 25.163 (March/April 1992): 114.
[95] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 21.
[96] Carol Corey Phillips, "Speaking Through Silence: The Female Voice in the Photography of Nina Raginsky, Clara Gutsche and Lynne Cohen," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990): 123.
[97] Carol Corey Phillips, "Speaking Through Silence: The Female Voice in the Photography of Nina Raginsky, Clara Gutsche and Lynne Cohen," *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990): 123.

familiar.[98] The word "Heimlich" itself belongs to two sets of ideas that are very different from one another without being contradictory: on one hand, it means what is familiar and agreeable, and, on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.[99] The uncanny provokes a profound psychic disturbance, even if it only initially concerns a certain material resemblance or doubling.

The uncanny is a concept that is frequently used in relation to Cohen's photographs beginning in about 1987.[100] Her images depict places that are at once familiar and immediately recognizable, and are yet strangely unsettling. The activities that transpire within seem foreign and ominous, and can induce anxiety in the viewer. Georges Bogardi states, "Lynne Cohen's photographs, with their uncanny fusion of the strange and the familiar, are semiological minefields, crammed with mute signifiers, mute because the artist has excluded from the frame those bits of human activity that would cue us to the context, the everyday function of the spaces that we see." [101] It is as if, in the absence of people, only part of the story is told, and, as viewers, we have much less to relate to.

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[98] Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 220.
[99] Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 224-225.
[100] The uncanny is first discussed by David Mellor in "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 21. Other theorist who talk about the uncanny in concert with Cohen's work are Sue Taylor, "Chicago: Lynne Cohen at Printworks Ltd." *Art in America* 78 (Sept. 1990): 204; Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 88; Jean-Pierre Criqui, "The Scene of the Crime," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 89; Johanne Lamoureux, "Stages without Wings." *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 83; Petra Halkes, "Lynne Cohen," *BorderCrossings* 21.3 (August 2002): 94; Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene," *Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2002): C1; and Helen Parkinson "Home in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Canadian Contemporary Photographers and the Contested Terrain of Home," M.A. Thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 2004): 38.
[101] Georges Bogardi, "No Man's Land," *Canadian Art* 19.3 (Fall 2002): 88.

It is difficult to discuss the uncanny without discussing the idea of home, despite the fact that the "Unheimlich" does not directly translate as "unhomely."[102] Cohen's work and the idea of home is a component of a 2004 Carleton University Master's thesis by Helen Parkinson. Parkinson touches upon on how Cohen and photographer Susan McEachern employ the *unheimlich* to destabilize the model home, concentrating on Freud's secondary meaning of the uncanny's concealment, privacy and secrecy, where the homely reveals elements concealed "that ought to remain hidden but [have] come to light."[103]

An integral component of the uncanny is the sense of disquietude that accompanies the experience of a place, person or thing that was once familiar. This is discussed by David Mellor almost affectionately as the "unease and hilarious horror" that can be found in Cohen's prints.[104] The artist offers a chilling view of the engineered world, the way that the places that we experience are constructed to such an extent that we can never really feel comfortable. Even the functions of the rooms, ordinarily demarcated by the objects and tools that they contain, are blurred. Spas resemble showrooms, while classrooms seem like laboratories.[105]

One particularly favorable way to induce feelings of the uncanny is when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not and whether an inanimate object becomes too much

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[102] Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 219.
[103] Sigmund Freud in Helen Parkinson's "Home in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Canadian Contemporary Photographers and the Contested Terrain of Home," M.A. Thesis (Ottawa: Carleton University, 2004): 38. This definition of the uncanny is also discussed by Jean-Pierre Criqui, "The Scene of the Crime," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 89.
[104] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 20.
[105] Pierre Théberge and William A. Ewing, "Preface," *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 6.

like an animate one.[106] Cohen makes this possible when she captures corralled elements of nature, and furniture standing in for inhabitants. David Mellor points out that Cohen's rooms display a "blinding absence of intimacy"[107] and believes that Cohen attempts to assuage this unease by playing up elements that offer a kind of counter-domain, citing such examples as a wooden hut with a tiled roof huddled in the corner of a home renovations store. Mellor's instinct suggests that as viewers we look for shelter in Cohen's interiors, but I am less optimistic that it can be found. More often than not, there is nowhere to hide on these flat photographic surfaces.

Despite these references, there is a sense that the uncanny is used as a kind of catch phrase lifted from popular culture when used in relation to Cohen's photographs. The concept of the familiar found in the shockingly unfamiliar is integral to these images of empty interiors, as well as to contemporary art in general. What is disconcerting is that the brief exhibition reviews and catalogue entries that provide discussion of Cohen's work bring up the uncanny without getting into a rigorous argument of the psychological implications of the term. While there are constraints of word limits, and many ideas piqued by these prints, writers generally explain that these are photographs of ordinary places made incredibly strange when revealed through her lens.[108]

For my research, the most useful writings about Cohen's photographs dealt with materiality, the sculptural, and any conversation of these prints as objects. I found little discussion of the changes in the size of Cohen's prints, save for Ann Thomas'

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[106] Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955): 233.
[107] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* by Lynne Cohen (New York: Aperture, 1987): 17.
[108] This is said nearly verbatim in Sue Taylor's "Chicago: Lynne Cohen at Printworks, Ltd." *Art in America* 78 (September 1990): 203.

"Appropriating the Everyday" in the *No Man's Land* catalogue, and Cohen's own observations in her 2005 monograph *Camouflage*. Fitting these photographs into a trajectory of other art historical movements, namely Pop Art and Minimalism, helped me to perceive a larger context for the images, while the parallels to other photographers grounded my ideas of where Cohen's ideas and imagery find roots, from the Becher School up to her contemporary counterparts. Discussions of documentary photographers such as Eugene Atget and Walker Evans demonstrate how Cohen's works do and do not fit into their lineage. Many articles in the archaeology section were useful in providing me with a vocabulary with which to discuss the materials within Cohen's images. The most surprising discovery was realizing that so much of what has been written about Cohen and her work has been repeated over and over. Though her images have shifted in terms of form and subject matter at a very gradual rate, it is disconcerting to see the same ideas spouted almost without consideration. That said, it has been useful to map the trends of both Cohen's photographs and the writings concerning her work over the past thirty years.

Chapter Two: How Scale Affects the Content of Lynne Cohen's Photographs

...the world is becoming open to us.
We are in an era characterized by changes of scale.
-Marc Augé[109]

Since 1971, Lynne Cohen has been photographing domestic interiors, creating a visual catalogue of resorts, lobbies, showrooms, offices, classrooms, shooting ranges, laboratories, spas and military installations. Over three and a half decades, her work has shifted gradually, as she incorporates each new kind of room with the previous ones. Her titles have become less specific over the years, naming each place for its function rather than for its singular characteristics.

For instance, an image that was once entitled *Corridor, Biology Department, State University of New York, Potsdam*, was later pared down to *Corridor*.[110] By abbreviating the titles of the photographs, Cohen believes that she is able to avoid making the images documentary, or about the qualities of any one specific place. She puts forward an image of a room or a hallway with its hanging skeletons, photographs of trees, posters of German military uniforms and such assorted accessories that make it an individual place, and ensures, with the title, that it only fits into a broad system of classification; an interior typology.

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[109] Marc Augé, trans. John Howe. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York and London: Verso, 1995): 31.
[110] Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal, Kingston, London and Ithaca: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003): 95.

The greatest change in Cohen's practice has been her shift in scale. In the mid-eighties, Cohen's photographs jumped in size from 8 x 10 inch (20.2 x 25.4 cm) prints, produced as contact images from her large-format negatives, to more imposing, confrontational prints as large as 139 x 170 cm.[111] Cohen claims that this decision to enlarge her photographs was an attempt to make her works "much less precious, [and] more threatening in the way that I think about the subject."[112] Indeed, the small, black and white prints have a more humorous, voyeuristic appeal to them. Looking at each image, the viewer is allowed into a scene that is strange, but not threatening. In order to see the small photograph's contents, one has to stand close to it and peer in, rather than standing back and being affronted by the subject matter, as one might with the larger, later works in both colour and black and white.

In this chapter, I will explore how scale affects the content of Cohen's photographs and the history of the contact print aesthetic. First, it is necessary to examine why photographers in general decide to enlarge their prints: the financial advantages (as a larger print can be sold for more money than a smaller one), the technical advances of the photographic medium, and the impact of big prints within museums and galleries. What are the results of this trend to shift upwards in scale? Regarding Cohen's work, is bigger necessarily better? I will look at the visual effects and implications of imaging objects that are gigantic or very small; how scale is ambiguous or at times fully abstracted within her prints. Then I will look at the technical merits of Cohen's large-scale works and the

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[111] This is seen with the image *Military Installation*, 2001, dye coupler print, as found on the Olga Korper Gallery website (www.olgakorpergallery.com).

[112] Ann Thomas, "Lynne Cohen," *The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts 2005/Les Prix du Gouverneur general en arts visuals et en arts médiatiques 2005* (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 2005): 29/30.

view camera. This is perhaps best illustrated by comparing Cohen's work to the works of some of her contemporaries, including German photographer Candida Höfer. Höfer's method of taking pictures involves shooting with a 35-millimeter camera and any available natural lighting in addition to set lights, and then enlarging her negatives. What makes this comparison so valuable is that both photographers are fascinated by space, and locate similar rooms to use as sets. They differ in their rendering of colour, light and scale.

The Big Picture Effect

The size of photographs in contemporary art has been expanding steadily along with their importance in the eyes of the critics and their value in the marketplace.[113] Size can be power, seduction, trickery, and propaganda all at once. What does it mean when a photograph is the same size as an advertisement and is not being used to sell anything but rather to institutionalize art? Often times, photographs can be measured in metres rather than centimeters, and this changes "not only how pictures look, but how we look at pictures."[114] This upward shift in image size alters the way photographs are perceived formally and physically.

Photography is a much newer development than the archaic techniques of painting and sculpture, and is steadily gaining credibility in the art world. By making authoritative,

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[113] Philip Gefter, "Why Photography Has Supersized Itself," *The New York Times* (18 April 2004): AR 29.
[114] Philip Gefter, "Why Photography Has Supersized Itself," *The New York Times* (18 April 2004): AR 29.

large-scale prints, photographs compete with paintings for wall space and with sculptures for physical presence in the realm of museums. Canadian photographer Jeff Wall makes prints encased in light-boxes in the range of 1.52 x 2.13 metres and refers to historical paintings with his work. Wall's *The Destroyed Room*, 1978 (Fig. 10) refers directly to the monumental painting, in terms of scale and subject matter, to *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, by French artist Eugène Delacroix (Fig. 11). By gesturing to a historical work in an already reputable medium, Wall is able to measure himself against the canon and compete for dominance with a painting.

While at one time size was seen as a limiting factor in printing, technology has advanced and improved at an alarming rate. Vastly enlarged images used to lose their descriptive qualities and reflected instead the tones and grains of the paper and the film. Cohen uses and has always used a view camera that produces 20.2 x 25.4 cm negatives, photographs can be contact printed without compromising definition or detail. There is nevertheless a limit to how much an image can be enlarged. Cohen says, "I want the pictures to open up when you look at them close to. There should be more rather than less to see."[115]

Joel Sternfeld, an American photographer whose images from the series "American Prospects" were displayed in the nineteen-eighties as 40.6 x 50.8 cm or 50.8 x 61 cm prints now exhibits the same images in monumental 114.3 x 132.1 cm format. Sternfeld had the original contact prints scanned electronically for preservation, and now prints the photographs digitally on fine paper. Using the computer, Sternfeld is better able to

[115] William A. Ewing et al. "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen." *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 30.

control the tone, sharpness and clarity of his work. He claims, "We're at a tipping point...The digital print is becoming the look of our time, and it makes the C-print start to look like a tintype."[116] While Cohen's photographs have not been digitally converted and her prints are made using traditional chemical processes rather than an inkjet printer, her increase in size is a testament to photographic and aesthetic change.

Marvin Heiferman, American curator and writer, observed, "In our culture (1) pictures are everywhere, and (2) the bigger they are, the better they control us."[117] However, while virtually any photograph *can* be enlarged today, not all of them should be. If a composition is not strong, it will not look important or pleasing when covering the span of a wall. That said, Cohen's images hold up well when enlarged.

The increase in scale that occurred in Cohen's photography has the consequence of distancing her from the production of her own photographs. Though she still executes all her own images and handles the cumbersome view camera herself, she does not print any images larger than those about 27.9 x 35.6 cm. Cohen is involved in the design and colour choices of her frames, but their fabrication is entrusted to others. The process of printing and producing artworks on such a large scale is entirely different from her earlier practice.

She recalls:

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[116] Philip Gefter, "Why Photography Has Supersized Itself," *The New York Times* (18 April 2004): AR 29.
[117] Marvin Heiftermann, "How Big the Picture? How Deep the Sea?" *This is Not a Photograph: Twenty Years of Large-Scale Photography 1966-1986* (Sarasota, Florida: The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1987): 19.

> The move to larger prints came in 1980. Once I saw the pictures larger, I realized there was no good reason to continue contact printing. The larger prints were less benign, and the subjects looked even more like constructions. Also, while the subjects in my work tend to push you away, the big pictures have a seductive quality that draws you in. It is harder to keep the larger photographs at a distance emotionally—they are like picture windows that you can fall into. The bigness heightens the three-dimensional qualities and makes the view feel more a part of the space of the picture. This is something I appropriated from art history. I use the sort of devices you find in Baroque painting to implicate the viewer physically and psychologically.[118]

Scale within the images

Sometimes within Cohen's photographs, the scale of objects is ambiguous. She muses, "All too often, the world seems to me to have been fabricated by an architect out of foam-core. The scale of things is nearly always off, and incidental things look monumental."[119] Semiologist Susan Stewart insists upon the theatricality of all miniatures, which could be likened to some of what Cohen classifies in the previous quotation as "incidental things." Regarding miniatures as objects has the effect of suggesting the miniature's use, purpose, and context in spite of its stasis. The small objects in Cohen's images are not, strictly speaking, miniatures, but they do gesture to the larger forms that they imitate.

The objects that are the focus in Cohen's prints are, conversely, frequently oversized. Tyrolean hats, gigantic birthday cakes and various flight simulators bombard the frames and suggest a kind of decorative humour, the pregnant moment before a crowd bursts into peals of laughter. These strange things actually become the environment, setting the tone

[118] William A. Ewing et al. "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen." *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 29/30.
[119] William A. Ewing et al. "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen." *No Man's Land: The Photography of Lynne Cohen* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 28.

for the entire scene. The function of the objects is not always apparent, and often times they serve the purpose of festive decorations. This is illustrated quite effectively in an untitled image of a swimming pool in her most recent publication *Camouflage*, n.date (Fig. 12). Here, a stark sports center shaded in grays and whites is highlighted only with the functional tiles on the bottom of the pool that demarcate the lanes for swimming laps. On the wall beside the pool, a huge frog paddles along in profile. The frog seems to be doing the front crawl, knees bent and flippers poised, nostril and ringed eye above the thin line of water painted across the wall. The details of the frog's animated posture, dark spots of various sizes and the keen sparkle in its eye only add to its presence and impact. Stewart offers the concept, "Exaggeration...is not simply a matter of change in scale...The more complicated the object, the more intricate, and the more these complications and intricacies are attended to, the 'larger' the object is in significance."[120] While the interior is otherwise serious and practical, the frog provides lightness and quirky ornamentation to the otherwise subdued décor. It entirely sets the mood of the room.

Cohen uses a large-format, or view camera, to produce her images. The term "view camera" is generally taken to denote a medium-to-large-format camera that is practically always mounted on a stand.[121] These cameras are set apart from others because of their great capacity for precise adjustments in terms of creating and focusing a reversed

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[120] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Durham, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984): 89.
[121] Eastman Kodak Company, *Photography with Large-Format Cameras* (Rochester, New York: Eastman Kodak Company, 1973): 3.

composition on a ground-glass screen at the back of the camera.[122] The large-formats that are generally used are from 10.2 x 12.7 to 20.3 x 25.4 cm. Also available are cameras that take 27.9 x 35.6 and 5.7 x 8.3 cm film, but they are more difficult to use, namely the latter, as it is difficult to access the results on a smaller format camera and because the work is tiring to the eyes.[123]

The view camera has been Cohen's instrument of choice throughout her more than thirty-year career, and for good reason. While a hand-held camera can easily photograph any aspect of its subject, a view camera remains fixed on a tripod and captures only the area of the field seen in the lens within the format of the negative.[124] The technical quality of the images produced with large-format cameras is unrivaled.[125]

This device is ideal for taking pictures of architectural and industrial spaces, as the photographer is able to control the geometric "distortions" that are inherent in any lens.[126] The way that architecture works within the interiors that Cohen chooses lends itself best to the use of significant movements that can only be accomplished with a large-format camera.[127] Vertical lines of walls are straightened and made more grid-like while still

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[122] Eastman Kodak Company, *Photography with Large-Format Cameras* (Rochester, New York: Eastman Kodak Company, 1973): 3.
[123] Eastman Kodak Company, *Photography with Large-Format Cameras* (Rochester, New York: Eastman Kodak Company, 1973): 3.
[124] John P. Schaefer, *Basic Techniques of Photography* (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992): 45.
[125] John P. Schaefer, *Basic Techniques of Photography* (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992): 45.
[126] John P. Schaefer, *Basic Techniques of Photography* (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992): 45.
[127] Ted Harris, "Why Large Format?" *View Camera* XIX.1 (January/February 2006): 4.

giving the impression of the horizontal components of perspective.[128] The view camera is of great merit in industrial photography, "where limpid, crystal-clear *definition* is of the utmost importance, avoiding the intervention of any perturbing factors such as the photographic medium itself coming between the subject and the viewer."[129] It is possible to adjust the view camera so as to maintain focus in all areas of the image simultaneously, controlling the apparent perspective and depth of field of the image. As a result, the spaces have a natural, as-is aesthetic. The negatives can be contact printed to produce a 20.3 x 25.4 cm image. If and when these negatives are enlarged, it is possible to see more rather than less; the image becomes more detailed rather than losing clarity.

When Cohen's Aperture publication *Occupied Territory* was released in 1987, there were no dimensions given for the images reproduced. This could be accounted for by the fact that the images were specifically compiled and printed for the purposes of the book rather than to be hung in a show. It is more difficult to explain the fact that there are no dates accompanying the images in this volume. Rather, Cohen provides an index with the sections of photographs (designated *Facsimiles*, *Conglomerates*, *Preoccupations*, *Sanctuaries*, *Dislocations*, and *Controls*). The section titles are virtually interchangeable, and the titles of the individual images seem intended to baffle rather than elucidate.

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[128] Frederic Paul, trans. Jonathan Bass, "Contaminating Darkness," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 82.
[129] Frederic Paul, trans. Jonathan Bass, "Contaminating Darkness," *Lynne Cohen: Lost and Found* (Paris: Hotel des Arts, 1992): 82.

For instance, in *Sanctuaries*, what appears to be a basement recreation room is given the title *Resort*, n.date (Fig. 13), and is replete with wood paneling, as well as large mottled tiles on both the ceiling and floor. The room is lit from a few dim lights in the ceiling and a single lamp, shaded with a translucent seascape, just off-center in the composition. Decorating the walls are framed topographic maps and unframed aerial views of landmasses. It would be a strange but innocuous image, even worthy of the straight classification of "sanctuary," were it not for at least two threatening elements. In the left hand corner of the space, a crumpled tarp seems to cower in the corner, covering the shape of what could be a body. Slightly closer to the center, a seemingly molten gouge mars the tiles, leaving cracks, burns and skids in the floor. The onlooker is left to puzzle what kind of an onslaught took place here. I would be inclined to envision this room fitting in to the section *Dislocations* or *Preoccupations*, but perhaps *Sanctuaries* is the perfect ironic title: In such a foreboding place, with strange but familiar (or at least identifiable) elements, is it possible to feel safe or even comfortable? Would this image be more laughable on a small scale, and more menacing when blown-up large?

In general, Cohen's prints made through the nineteen-seventies are small scenes that the viewer can imaginatively enter. To view them best, one must closely approach a hung work to examine the details of the rooms, the furnishings and decorations. Within the frames, the photographs of places are small stages that the viewer can enter, tiny scenes of bizarre real life. The larger the works become, the more readily an onlooker can imagine physically entering them, if he or she so dares.

There are 20 boxes of Cohen's work prints at the National Gallery of Canada that contain 1130 photographs (818 black and white prints, 284 black and white negatives, 27 colour negatives and 1 colour print) and 28.5 cm of textual records, which she donated to the museum's library and archives in 2004. Close study of these fonds confirms that content of the images is not the deciding factor for their scale. There is not one kind of room that Cohen chooses to enlarge. Laboratories, classrooms, and police ranges are printed in a variety of sizes, and are uniformly more ominous in larger format. It is easier to observe the details of the images when they are increased in size. The work prints preserve elements of the compositions that are lost to the viewer in the book-sized format.

In *Classroom*, c.1996 (Fig. 14), a work that I have been particularly fascinated by since encountering it at the National Gallery of Canada's 2001 retrospective of Cohen's work, depicts a laboratory with a dead calf splayed on a metal table, one quarter of its hind end carved away. The calf is the focal point of the image, something that was once alive amidst the angular, antiseptic operating room. What had previously escaped my attention was in the right-hand corner of the photograph. In a steel sink, another animal carcass is readied for butchering, this one more likely a deer. This detail was immediately apparent when I saw the 27.9 x 35.6 cm work print. Even the soft gradations of the fur are visible on a creature that was cornered off to the side of the print when seen in 20.2 x 25.4 cm format. The content of the photograph, the adjustable stools and examining table, the flecked tiles on the floor are all more noticeable when the images are made larger.

Very few of the work prints were more aesthetically pleasing when rendered small. In general, the dance halls and waiting rooms seem most successful when they are contact printed, while the images of laboratories and factories and military installations look best large. The more intimate the photograph, the less the image needs to be enlarged to readily convey its content. The more terrifying or repetitive the subject matter of the print, the more significant the impact of its enlargement.

An image of a factory from about 1990 (Fig. 15), where pale mannequins are fabricated limb by limb becomes much more strange and foreboding when displayed as 111 x 129 cm framed artwork, as found in the *No Man's Land* exhibition, rather than as a contact print. Cohen donated a 27.9 x 35.6 and a 50.8 x 61 cm work print to the National Gallery, and comparing the two side by side offers a shocking contrast in impact. In a composition with few true blacks, but much white, the 50.8 x 61 cm image appears in large, geometric white and gray shapes. The trunks of mannequins hang from hooks in the ceiling, and pop out as a disembodied group of dancers, caught standing in place. The viewer is confronted with a cardboard box full of hands attached to arms up to the wrists. The picture is both creepy and humorous, and in a larger print these qualities are more evocative and evident.

One image that work that works well as a contact print is *Party Room*, 1976 (Fig. 16). The intimacy of the space in that hall, the round backed chairs congregated around square tables, and the central arrangements of a semi-circle of tables lit from underneath that seems to levitate and glow from beneath the pleated white tablecloth all seem familiar,

even festive. When examined as work prints, the image is, to my eye, most successful at the size 27.9 x 35.6 cm rather than 40.6 x 50.8 cm. The sense of anticipation accompanying a scene ready to be populated is delivered person to person in small format. There is intimacy and seduction within the 27.9 x 35.6 cm print, and the viewer is seemingly invited to be a guest in the small setting. In the catalogue for Cohen's 2001 retrospective *No Man's Land*, the image is listed with the framed dimensions of 47 x 43.5 cm.

Ann Thomas offers a theory on why certain prints work in certain sizes. When Cohen is dealing with a situation that is absurd and funny, as embodied in *Party Room*, a room intended for a gathering now waiting to be populated, a small size does work well. If Cohen is addressing a large issue, for instance, when she photographs classrooms, she must acknowledge issues of how to impart knowledge. What sort of symbol system is functioning? What are our models and schemata? These are bigger issues. Thomas thinks that the spaces printed large lend themselves to hallucinatory, lost-in-space feelings, whereas with the diaphanous table found in *Party Room*, the image captures a smaller absurdity, and the space is sort of cluttered and crowded, which is the same with her sort of domestic interiors.

Larry Towell, a Canadian photographer, supports including photographs in galleries, but claims, "I'm not sure that the art gallery is the best place for photography. You're competing there with painters and sculptors – it's their historic venue. Photography looks

better in books and magazines."[130] Cohen's images could not be printed much larger to present in book-format without being bound into oversized volumes. The works that she chooses, or is asked to include in shows is almost always large and larger, closer to the scale of paintings. The exception to this is her recent show *Camouflage* at the Carleton University art gallery. Here we find a series of Cohen's vintage prints, all measuring 45.7 x 50.8 cmframed after being neatly locked behind cold Formica borders. Four huge prints of the most recent images are installed at the end of the show, covering 142.2 x 116.8 cm, including 10.2 cm white plastic frames. Cohen acknowledges that it is only recently that she recognized that the large and small photographs work well in concert. She writes, "From the mid-eighties, when I began to produce large-scale photographs, I shelved pictures that I thought would work better small. At the time I was disinclined to show small photographs with large ones. Only later did I realize that they could live well together."[131] The large and small prints are hung on separate walls, which makes it easier to look at each kind, and each image has been carefully selected to be displayed at the chosen size.

Cohen's contemporary, German artist Candida Höfer, solves formal problems with a 35 mm camera. Her mission appears to be dissecting architectural space into something compositionally pleasing in two-dimensional form. Höfer's works are consistently large-scale, and at the largest, they span 152 x 215 cm. These images are less foreboding than the ones Cohen makes, mainly due to their comparatively warm colour palette and tamer, busier content. Höfer photographs cultural institutions such as libraries, concert halls,

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[130] Robert Fulford, "Photography and its discontents," *Canadian Art* 1 (Spring 1995): 62.
[131] Lynne Cohen, *Camouflage* (Cherboug, France: Le Pont de Jour, 2005): 195.

and museums, in addition to the hallways and waiting rooms that are close in content to Lynne Cohen's photographs.

The key difference between work by Cohen and Höfer is the clarity that their images are able to keep when enlarged. Höfer enlarged her images from 35 mm negatives up to about 1998, and, as a result, the prints can have a grainy look and the quality of the images can be compromised. There is a limit that an artist can enlarge her prints before they stray from their original integrity. Höfer only virtually prints in colour and occasionally includes a few people or reflections of people in her images.

Examine Höfer's *Musée des Arts Décoratifs Paris* 1984 (Fig. 17). Despite the impressive location where the image was taken, and the dimly lit galleries in the background, the glassed-in room that is the focus of the composition looks more like a stenography school. The slick desktops, the repetitive drawers and the manual typewriters poised for use could easily stand in as props for a Lynne Cohen photo shoot. At 38 x 57 cm, this is a relatively small photograph for Höfer, but is comparable, in terms of subject matter, to Cohen's black and white images from the late seventies and early eighties of laboratories and classrooms. The difference of effect and impact of these photographers' works stems from the use of colour rather than scale in this instance. Höfer capitalizes on the hanging lights above the tables, their florescent glare dispersing smudged white lines. Beyond the glass wall, where one imagines that the museum lies, the solid walls of the galleries are creamy and glowing. A few people pass through the open space, and there is no sense of claustrophobia, as one might expect from even the safest of Cohen's rooms. Though the

typewriters that perch on the mint green tables are steely and cold, the surroundings are softened by the unnatural light, and the scene is given a feeling that is neither threatening nor entirely unpleasant.

Scale impacts greatly on the content and reception of Lynne Cohen's photography. While certain photographs will always remain contact prints, Cohen takes the problem of choosing images for enlargement seriously, a process that influences the meaning of her work.

Chapter Three: Objects and Surfaces: Materiality and Space in Lynne Cohen's Photographs

The magic of photography is that it is the object which does all the work.
-Jean Baudrillard[132]

People search for images of paradise but cannot find anything other than objects in this world.
-Ivan Klima[133]

We cannot know who we are...except by looking in a material mirror.
-Daniel Miller[134]

Objects are of great significance in Cohen's photographs. The images encourage the viewer to speculate about what each room is used for, and what takes place in these rooms. Most of her photographs are similar in terms of set-up and vantage point so that questions are forced about what constitutes the differences in these places. The key to these differences is objecthood - their appearance, relative scale, and character. In this section, I argue for the anthropomorphic nature of things, loosely informed by the arguments of Jean Baudrillard, Paul Wood and Arjun Appadurai. After Minimalism, we find a new generation of artists fascinated by objecthood and framing, including Rachel Whiteread, Matthew Barney, and Christian Eckart. Though each artist discussed in this chapter has a unique practice, separate motivations for production, and disparate messages that they wish to convey; they, like Cohen, are by no means working in a vacuum, nor are they free from the burdens of history. The ready-made will be discussed in relation to the object, as well as its importance to the found objects within Cohen's

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[132] Jean Baudrillard, quoted in David Campany, *Art and Photography* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003): 235.
[133] Ivan Klima, quoted in Andy Patton, "Lustrous Surfaces of Gold," *Disturbing Abstraction: Christian Eckart* (London, Ontario: ArtLab, University of Western Ontario, 1996): 28.
[134] Daniel Miller, "Introduction," *Materiality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 8.

photographs. In this section, it will become increasingly clear why Cohen's prints can be compared to sculptures and three-dimensional wall works.

The second component to this chapter is framing, in terms of the image and the image-object. Cohen has custom frames made for her photographs, a feature that certainly has historical precedents, but is of great importance to her practice. Cohen is a photographer who was trained as a sculptor, and now uses her sculptural background not only to emphasize objects within her prints, but also to customize their presentation. I analyze the use of the frame and the concept of containment.

This chapter deals with aspects of materiality and the actual objects within Cohen's photographs, as well as the frames in which they are presented. There are four different kinds of objects and ways of framing discussed in terms of rooms and objects. The first group is the types of rooms and objects that appear to attract Cohen's attention, the second is the framing of these objects that create a tableau. Thirdly, there is the making of an image-object that serves as a representation of the setting, and fourthly the creation of a frame from the image-object.

Cohen commissions frames that become a vital part of the object, and thus the viewing experience. These encasings reflect the surfaces and subject matter within the prints. The objects found in the rooms that Cohen photographs are what provide the character and narrative within the images, encouraging viewers to make their own associations about the places. By taking pictures of unpopulated institutional and, occasionally

domestic interiors, Cohen uses fine control and resolution of the view camera to detail and describe the contours of these space, their surfaces, and materials. Her work illuminates scenes from the everyday, bringing places that go unnoticed and unrecorded to the public's attention. In doing so, she can effectively address broader issues and concerns, including institutional identity, rapid modernization, cultural alienation, and the pervasiveness of surveillance in the workplace.

Things

The great American poet William Carlos Williams wrote, "No ideas but in things," an aphorism which became his modernist dictum.[135] It is difficult to write a convincing poem about an interior vision, a political situation, or a social injustice. These feelings or nuances are best grounded in imagery, in the very stuff of the world. Write a poem about a chair, and in the descriptions the readers can hear the anger, or the tenderness, or can imagine the scenes that transpired in the room occupied by that chair. Further still, write about specifics: the Naugahyde leather that covers the chair, its shiny orange patina, the way its surface is cold to the touch in the winter, while in the summer it sticks to the backs of the sitter's legs. The more specific and vivid the description of things in the poem, the more compelling the piece becomes.

Objects depicted in Cohen's photographs function the same way. They exist in a prearranged configuration of positive and negative space, and there is room between said

[135] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions Press, 1963): 14.

objects for interpretation. The things in the rooms all relate to the human body, by standing in as surrogates, or even by referring to a straightforward purpose through their objecthood, as chairs are there to be sat on, and countertops to be used for production spaces.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller argues for the "humility of things...objects are important not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but often precisely because we do not 'see' them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so."[136] In Cohen's 1987 monograph *Occupied Territory*, there are eighty-seven photographs, each depicting a room. Within these rooms, the reader will find two hundred and thirty-one chairs, sixty-one tables, three backboards, two swimming pools, three televisions, eight free-standing lamps, thirty-one electrical outlets, twenty-five targets, twelve potted plants, and sixteen animals preserved using taxidermy. These objects endow the rooms with their quirky personalities (in the anthropomorphic sense) and refer to the purposes that these places might serve. However, one might assume that a sturdy-looking table, shrouded with a clean white sheet, and a device wielding switches, dials, and a suspended spring would be a laboratory or examination room in one image from 1994 (Fig. 18), but Cohen titles the work *Spa*. While the objects can offer clues as to what the rooms are used for, there is no guarantee that Cohen's titles will correspond with the objects or atmospheres.

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[136] Daniel Miller, "Introduction," *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 5.

Laura Kleger suggests that Cohen was drawn to interiors as a kind of Duchampian ready-made, both banal and extraordinary.[137] The term "ready-made" denotes a work of art that is "already" created through mass production, but whose readiness to be made into art is delayed by its technological history and whose terms are inassimilable to an artistic technology.[138] They force the spectator to reconsider objects and situations with which they are already familiar. Ready-mades do away with the very gesture that signifies creativity: the intervention of the artist's hand.[139] This observation fits with Cohen's earlier artistic tendencies. Cohen's deadpan images of living rooms and lobbies from the early nineteen-seventies are captured from the same vantage point, in an almost formulaic, straight-on manner.

While she was still in art school, Cohen considered undertaking projects that involved resituating household objects and furniture into a gallery context. Around 1970, Cohen wanted to recreate the corner of a room and enter it in a student show. She bought the linoleum, brought in a chair, a blond wood table with a gooseneck lamp attached and submitted the whole set up and gave it a huge price. Although no one purchased the work, she remembers it as a beautiful piece.[140] It was a Lynne Cohen photograph in three-dimensions. She eventually used photography as the most direct medium to access

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[137] Laura Kleger, "Inside, Accumulated: Lynne Cohen," *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2005): 293.
[138] Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995): 76.
[139] Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1995): 76.
[140] Interview with the artist, 13 March 2006.

the social and political questions that interested her.[141] By taking photographs, she is recording a ready-made environment that will arguably endure longer than any in situ setting.

Cohen remains astonished at how much of the world seems like a ready-made. As Marcel Duchamp literally collected and transformed fragments of the real world, Cohen collects photographically. By using photography, she is recording and commenting on a place or a scene as working space for certain specific groups and individuals, presenting the space as a "contemporary ruin."[142] They are deceptively neutral images that have the capacity to truly affect the onlooker.

For instance, with Cohen's photographs there is strength in numbers. When seen in series in an exhibition space, rows of laboratories and spas displayed at eye level appear penetrating. They ask of the viewer: Why are these places being brought to our attention? Where did all the people go? The images are strange yet ordinary, unconventional but expected. The real questions become: Why have we never noticed these spaces? Why do these pictures need to arrive at art institutions in order to be properly examined and acknowledged? When these works are gathered together in one place, it is possible for the viewer to see both the distinctiveness of each singular work, and their potential to function together in concert.

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[141] Laura Kleger, "Inside, Accumulated: Lynne Cohen" *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Photography*, ed. Lynne Warren (New York: Routledge, 2005): 293.
[142] Martha Langford, "The Power of Reflection." *The Power of Reflection* (Montreal: Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts, 2001): 11.

Cohen intends to show how life imitates art, and how often these strange yet everyday places and objects bear resemblance to episodes in art history.[143] Thierry de Duve makes the analogy that, "The interiors which Lynne Cohen photographs are...an encyclopedia of masterpieces at a discount blended as wallpaper...One finds in her interiors loads of Pop and Minimal art, Pattern Painting and Conceptual Art, all the furniture of Oldenburg and Artschwager lumped together, the Op art of Bridget Riley and the walking stick figures of Marey, a Kandinsky living room and a Mondrian bar, some supermarket Noguchi worked over by Charles Eames."[144]

One of Cohen's untitled, undated photographs (Fig. 19) displays a close-up of an off-centered electrical outlet running down a gloomy, water-stained wall, with the occasional thick drip of paint. A Barnett Newman painting may come to mind, where a canvas is spread with paint and vertical zips of various widths, the long, paint-covered electrical cord covered in a metal tube becomes the focal point of the composition off to the right hand side, and the box which holds two outlets protrudes like a small found object from the artwork. This contraption occupies a small area in the pictorial space, similar to actual unassuming outlets in the walls of public and private interiors, but is the subject of the photograph.

Unlike the majority of Cohen's subject-settings, this is not a room punctuated by objects and furnishings. It is a single outlet attached to a watermarked wall. It is Cohen's fascinated acknowledgement of an object that we ignore in our everyday surroundings.

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[143] Robert Hicks, "Lynne Cohen at P.P.O.W.," *The Villager* 28.4 (4 December 1966): 19.
[144] Thierry de Duve, "'Photographie d'ameublement.' A note on the work of Lynne Cohen." *Lynne Cohen* (Brussels: Edition Galerie Gokelaere & Janssen, 1990): 6.

In paying tribute to a detail, a small power source, Cohen calls attention to her observation as well as the materiality of the object that we behold. Lynn Meskell echoes this in the sentiment: "Materiality represents a presence of power in realizing the world, crafting things from nothing, *subjects from nonsubjects*. This affecting presence is shaped through enactment with the physical world, projecting ourselves onto the world."[145] Cohen effectively fetishizes the outlet, selecting it as the interior detail that will stand for the whole room, and the subject matter for the entirety of the composition.

In many of Cohen's photographs, especially the ones from the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, the objects found in the images provide a suggestion of nature in captivity: plastic plants, papier-maché rocks and pieces of wood. Art historian David Mellor muses, "The old divisions between culture and nature show seams that buckle."[146] This contrast is seen in the image *Recording Studio*, 1978 (Fig. 20). In this frontal view, an office space resonated with unnatural light, and the furnishings and decorations seem lit from below. To the left in the photograph, a metal table held up by a padlocked safe, which is loaded with audio-visual equipment. Beneath the table is a huge tape deck, as well as an impressive tangle of chords that power the many devices. The floor is carpeted with a closely shorn rug, and two chairs, one barstool with a small backrest covered in a plastic laminate, and one Naugahyde recliner offer places for the room's potential occupants to sit. Plastic fish fly across the walls, arched and animated. They endow the scene with its bizarre, almost surreal character, acting as more than just decoration. These fake fish contrast the mass-produced objects that allow the viewer to

[145] Lynn Meskell, "Objects in the Mirror Appear Closer Than They Are," *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 51. Italics mine.
[146] David Mellor, "Welcome to Limbo," *Occupied Territory* (New York: Aperture, 1987): 17.

read the room's function: the sound equipment, tape deck, and the small television all imply utility. They also date the room. Since there are no people, the viewer may be inclined to see the objects as anthropomorphic stand-ins. The furnishings are enough to suggest what takes place within the rooms without revealing exactly who uses them, and, in this case, the title instructs the reading of the image as a studio space.

In *Hat Trees*, 1978 (Fig. 21), the natural and man-made objects found within the image seem to be competing for dominance. Consider the white birch branches, huddled into tree-like configurations within the obviously interior setting. Their bases are swaddled in a dark fabric, part knit, part high-end Astroturf, and their little limbs are hung with, of all things, hats. Not rugged hunting hats, not practical toques for withstanding the winter's cold, but ladies' hats: fancy, feminine confections of felt and ribbon. Near the center of the composition, the viewer will find a mirror, which reflects the door to the room and the edge of a wall, patterned with a laminate that resembles a wall built of fitted cut stones, neatly juxtaposing the man-made and the natural in the rectangular frame of the mirror. Close inspection suggests that the space is a hat boutique. A small table and chair in front of the mirror provides a makeshift vanity. On top of the table sits a rogue frilly cap on a hat stand and a hand-held mirror, perhaps to aid the customer in seeing the front and back of the accessory simultaneously. It is stylish, then, to decorate *au natural*, where the consumer feels she is a part of the outdoors, preparing to buy hats that will likely be worn in urban settings. This is a strange paradox of a marketing ploy, one where there is a happy and unchallenged union between man and (false) nature. This is a tactic that we

as a culture have become desensitized to, that we are resensitized to through this cultural experience.

Framing

Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.
-Gilbert Keith Chesterton[147]

The frame plays an important role in Cohen's photography. In the discussion that follows, it is important to recognize the two stages of this process. First, there is the literal picture taking, setting up the shot compositionally, and framing it on the ground glass. Then there is the presentation of a photograph as a framed object with a structurally and aesthetically complimentary border of additional materials and presented behind glass, framing the picture. The term "framing" here indicates the photographic act, and "frame" indicates the photographic object.

A photograph is selected rather than conceived.[148] The subject matter in Cohen's photographs is delineated only by the edges of the film, and thus designated as important, although there is more to the space that was left out of the shot. Where Cohen stands, sets up the view camera, and takes the picture is her main intervention in these found places. These are the parts of the rooms that represent not only the entire space, but also the types of rooms designated by her titles ("Spa," "Classroom").

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[147] Gilbert Keith Chesterton in Henry Heydenryk, *The Right Frame: A Consideration of the Right and Wrong Methods of Framing Pictures* (New York: James H. Heineman, Inc., 1964): 90.
[148] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966): [9].

In Cohen's opinion, the process of framing the pictures within the camera or establishing a composition does little to disturb what is going on in the image. The framing is meant to be unobtrusive, and to make the viewer feel that the edges of the image are somewhat arbitrary. The customized frame commissioned for these photographs also serves the important purpose of reiterating the fact that the photograph that she presents is not documentary, finishing it as an overt art object, enforcing both the art world and the ready-made's reliance on context.[149]

"There are four aesthetic reasons for framing a picture," explains Henry Heydenryk in his guide *The Right Frame: A Consideration of the Right and Wrong Methods of Framing Pictures*: "...to focus and limit the eye on the composition of the picture itself; to reinforce significant, but sometimes elusive, elements and colour tones in the picture; to increase the size of the picture; and to serve as a transition between the picture and the wall behind it."[150]

The use of the frame as artistic content is one of the characteristics of international avant-guard art.[151] That said, the frame is rarely discussed in relation to the work of art, although in terms of two-dimensional imagery, the two are inextricably bound. According to Modernist practice, in order for a painting or photograph to be completed, it

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[149] Context is pointed out in relation to Andy Warhol's silkscreened multiple *Brillo Boxes* and Duchamp's ready-mades in Allan Antliff's "The Making and Mauling of Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Made," *Canadian Art* 23.1 (Spring 2006): 60.
[150] Henry Heydenryk, *The Right Frame: A Consideration of the Right and Wrong Methods of Framing Pictures* (New York: James H. Heineman, Inc., 1964): 33.
[151] Reesa Greenberg, *Edge and Image* (Montreal: Concordia University Art Gallery, 1984): [1].

must be hung and finished with a frame. The lack of a frame also constitutes an aesthetic decision. Some art practitioners accept the house frames of museums or galleries, which generally correspond to what adheres to the design and decoration of the venue rather than being tailored to the specific works. Some artists provide guidelines about how their works should be displayed, while others take it upon themselves to construct their mounts and frames. Such is the case with Lynne Cohen's photographs.

Cohen has explained that she was often disappointed with the museum house-style frames and felt that it was important to carry out the decisions about the appearance of her work up to the end product. By making her own frames out of plastic, Cohen closely controls the presentation of her work, thus avoiding a patron or gallery or museum framing her works with materials such as polished aluminum or blond wood, which may provide an unobtrusive, neutral casing, but do not necessarily expand interpretive possibilities. She believes it to be her responsibility to make these photographs (which I have called image-objects) into (art) objects.[152]

From the mid-nineteen eighties onwards, Cohen has been framing her black and white prints with coloured Formica frames as a way of introducing a set of associations carried by colour. Choices were sometimes based on colours she remembers from the actual scenes: the pale blue of tiles, or the butter yellow colour of a wall. The frame becomes a materialized memory of the scene. In doing so, Cohen feels that she is better able to recreate the actual colours of the rooms than if she was using colour film, and colours a black and white image just by adding a frame. She uses the same plastics to frame her

[152] Gallery talk with Lynne Cohen at the Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, 9 March 2006.

colour photographs, but with a limited colour palette of white, black, and gray, effectively eliminating the remembered colours from the scene.

Cohen's photographs and frames are given equal weight visually. She says, "Ideally [viewers] should feel as though the picture could extend beyond the frame into the space in which they find themselves and feel as if the frame through which they are looking just happens to be there and is not impenetrable. When this works, the barrier between the space depicted and the world in which viewers find themselves dissolves."[153]

Cohen acknowledges her training as a sculptor in an artist's statement when she writes:

> [I] explore how my photographs could function as three-dimensional objects as well as photographic windows on the world. I thought that if I could figure out a way to make the frames resonate with the subject matter of the photographs, the link to my earlier work in sculpture would be more tangible. In the end I decided to use Formica partly because of its prevalence in the kinds of public and private places I photograph and also because it serves as an ironic reminder of yet another kind of illusion and artificiality. The resulting pieces now seem to me more complete as objects and the boundary between the picture and the world more ambiguous."[154]

These frames connect with her background in sculpture, a field that she wanted to remain close to through her photographic practice.[155]

Thelma R. Newman writes, "Plastics have created a silent revolution in our time...[It] happened so quietly, so functionally, that we seemed to be suddenly surrounded or

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[153] Interview with the artist, 13 April 2006.
[154] Lynne Cohen, unpublished document, n.date, n.page.
[155] Gallery talk with Cohen at Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, 9 March 2006.

touched everywhere by plastics in some form."[156] Cohen's plastic of choice in her framing is Formica. Formica is an inexpensive plastic laminate popular in home and institutional decorating since the nineteen-fifties. Cohen selected it for her frames because it is common in both public and private places, it is fabricated photographically, and it echoes the marble, granite, stone and other surfaces within the photographs, so that the organic "is boosted up and reformulated for convenience and perceived durability."[157] The simulated marble framing an image of a spa is reminiscent of the marble sometimes embellishing actual spas. The green frame encasing a military installation reminds the viewer of canvas or camouflage gear.

One image that was particularly enhanced by a custom-made frame was *Police Range*, 1990 (Fig. 22), as presented in the 2001 *No Man's Land* show at the National Gallery. Printed at the size of 114 x 139 cm, the confrontational photograph depicts a shooting range with a frontal point of view. It is as if the viewer is privy to what is just behind the open door, and then he or she then assume the standpoint of the target shooter.[158] The action is packed into the back of the space, found in the stacks of dusty car tires, and wooden planks. Metal spools that bear a suspicious resemblance to the cogs found inside car tires act as stands for the three cardboard targets, ready to attack. Here we find human surrogates, threatening the viewer with their two-dimensional glares, and a pistol cocked and aimed by a male figure furthest towards the back. These figures are not life-like, and their deeply shadowed, brightly coloured presence is reminiscent of cartoon bad guys and a Pop art sensibility, despite the fact that this is a black and white image. The

[156] Thelma R. Newman, *Plastics as an Art Form* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Books, 1964): 1.
[157] Kathleen Finely, "Lynne Cohen." *Arts Magazine* 66.8 (April 1992): 73.
[158] Kenneth Baker, "San Francisco, Lynne Cohen," *Art News* 92 (November 1993): 172.

photograph is framed in a Klein-blue plastic, which does much to accentuate the possible colours that the cutouts might be: the rough denim of the jeans and jackets, the blonds and browns of their neatly rendered hairdos. Additionally, the shiny finished frame contrasts the dark grit of the concrete floor, the grimy bricks that form the claustrophobic walls of the range. One begins to see colours where only black and white is provided because of the frame.

Another example of an artist who maintains tremendous control over the frames of his prints is American multi-media artist Matthew Barney. Best known as a filmmaker, Barney also takes a hands-on approach to his practice, closely overseeing and instructing the construction and fabrication of his sets, costumes and fantastical characters. Barney sells objects and prosthetics from his films, notably the five-part opus the *Cremaster* cycle, as well as process prints that highlight certain scenes or their characters. These photographs can be purchased with custom-made frames made of "self lubricating" acrylic or plastic.[159]

Consider *Cremaster 1: Orchidella*, 1995 (Fig. 23). Though the subject matter of Barney's image is substantially different than Cohen's own, the frame is remarkably similar in its use of plastic. Seven women appear to protrude from the photograph, an effect achieved with a close-up, overhead shot. The group seems to be costumed in plastic. White is the dominant colour. Six of the women have floury powdered faces, white collared shirts and white hats that appear molded in rounded lumps, like snow-capped mountains or a hardened version of a soft-serve cone. The ringleader, at the front

[159] Nowhere is the term "self-lubricating" defined.

and center of the composition, dons a dress one might associate with the late Marilyn Monroe, with a plunging ruffled neckline that stands stiffly upright at the shoulders and a hoop skirt. Even her hands look rigid and plastic. These details are highlighted in the shiny, flat white plastic frame, thin enough so as not to detract from the image, but wide enough to assert its aesthetic presence. There is no matting between the frame and the image, which visually links the photograph's content and the way the piece is encased.

Cohen's later images also parallel a constructed tableau by their large-scale format since the nineteen eighties, formidable printing, Formica frames that mimic materials such as marble and granite, her use of Denglass, which eliminates reflections so that the viewer is directly confronted by the subject matter. "I want the viewer to imagine entering the photographs" Cohen claims, "I want the pictures to have a dimensionality which is tangible."[160]

Her frames are integral aspects of her work, insistently present. The materials used are blatant in their colours and surfaces, and even in the realm of contemporary art where basically anything goes in terms of material, very few artists use industrial materials such as Formica and plastic laminates that mimic the surfaces of the objects within the photographs.

A notable exception to this generalization is the work of the Canadian artist Christian Eckart, for whom the frame is also an integral part of the artwork, if not the artwork itself. His paintings are actually constructed objects, made from materials that allude to

[160] Interview with the artist, 13 March 2006.

both high art and the everyday, including "gold leaf, Plexiglas, Formica, enamel and latex paints, birch plywood, pine, poplar, mild steel. His colours are ready-madess, selected from paint charts and plastic chips; the saturated hues people wear, use in their houses, choose in cars and respond to in other objects such as art works."[161] Eckart was able to reduce painting to a physical object with two component parts: a surface and a frame. The surface could be interchangeable with other surfaces while the frame exists as an architectural reference within the work or in the work's actual setting.[162] In these hybrid painting-objects, the frame is a fetish object, the organizing matrix of the spectator's gaze.[163]

In *White Painting #621*, 1990 (Fig. 24), Eckart takes a mixed media object and chops it into four, unequal rectangles of white, inexpensive plastic-covered wood framed in gold-plated wood and hung as a single piece with the parts set at different levels. Here is a marriage of common surfaces and the appearance of a gilded, discontinuous border. The very white panels that are being framed, which perhaps allude to the white paintings of Kasimir Malevich or Robert Ryman,[164] are less valuable than the edging itself, reversing the more frequent coupling of a cherished art object enhanced with a carefully considered frame.

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[161] Nancy Tousley, "Painting in the World: The Work of Christian Eckart," *Christian Eckart: The Power Chord Cycle* (Alberta: The Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 1991): 12.
[162] Nancy Tousley, "Painting in the World: The Work of Christian Eckart," *Christian Eckart: The Power Chord Cycle* (Alberta: The Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 1991): 13.
[163] Joshua Decter, "Christian Eckart: The Self-Representation of Abstraction," *Christian Eckart: The Power Chord Cycle* (Alberta: The Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 1991): 9.
[164] Mark A. Cheetham, "Christian Eckart: Placing Abstraction," *Disturbing Abstraction: Christian Eckart* (London, Ontario: ArtLab, University of Western Ontario, 1996): 12.

White Painting #621 operates as a reversal of what Cohen accomplishes in the presentation of her photographs. While Cohen's works unify image-object and frame, highlighting the materials, Eckart's work accentuates the difference between the surfaces in his pieces, with the carved wood and attractive gold framework overpowering the smooth white plastic and wood it contains. E. H. Gombrich argued that when a frame is appropriate, we simply do not see it because it effectively, seamlessly conveys to viewers the mode that they would encounter the artwork that it frames.[165] It is when the frame is gaudy or inappropriate when viewers become abruptly aware that there is a frame. An effective frame calls attention only to the work that it contains. Eckart's construction calls attention to its materiality in a very different way that Cohen's image-objects do.

British sculptor Rachel Whiteread uses predominantly industrial materials in order to craft her rooms and objects. They are self-contained units; tangible masses that record empty, ephemeral space. Whiteread almost always makes casts from used objects or surfaces, as seen with *Untitled (Orange Bath)*, 1996 (Fig. 25). Whiteread studies the body by analogy, selecting daily, mostly domestic objects to stand in for or suggest human presence.[166] She casts these objects, and their interiors become the art object, making the final sculpture a negative of the thing itself. Over the years, Whiteread has used plaster, rubber, concrete, pink and yellow dental plaster, resins, felt, iron, aluminum and painted bronze.[167] She wants her materials to bear the shadow of the object and the

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[165] E. H. Gombrich, quoted in Daniel Miller, "Introduction," *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 5.
[166] Lisa Dennison, "A House is Not a Home: The Sculpture of Rachel Whiteread," *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001): 31.
[167] Molly Nesbit, "Casting Out," *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001): 133.

traces of anonymous use, explaining, "I always use secondhand materials, as I want to emboss the residue of use on the surfaces of the pieces."[168] I am reminded of Cohen's early halls, where the deep scratches on the hardwood floors index each community dance and civic meeting.

Sometimes Whiteread uses materials to mimic other materials, as Cohen has accomplished with her frames, where in the case of the latter, Formica acts as granite or marble. In Whiteread's sculpture there is a greater attempt for mimesis that involves the whole artwork rather than the frame: sometimes plaster acts as marble or anthracite, iron as rubber, rubber neoprene as beeswax, fiberglass rubber as pitch, and polyester resin as water.[169] When casting entire rooms, Whiteread literally catches all the room's imperfections and protrusions, from hardwood scrapes to caught electrical bits, providing an index of objects and surfaces. Both artists address the sense of puzzlement the viewer might feel in encountering these representations of places that we somehow manage to function in and that are now eliciting a physical response from their viewers.

Whiteread's art-object is manifest, while Cohen's art-object is symbolic. Philosopher Kenneth Walton would argue otherwise. In his essay, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," Walton explains that the photograph is not received as representation of an object, but the as the object itself. He asserts that the viewer of a

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[168] Rachel Whiteread, quoted in Molly Nesbit, "Casting Out," *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001): 135.
[169] Molly Nesbit, "Casting Out," *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001): 147.

photograph feels that she/he is actually seeing the scene that was photographed.[170] This idea directly contradicts what John Szarkowski, among others, famously asserted about the challenge that faces photographers: that the factuality of photographs, no matter how convincing, was not the same as reality.[171] The subject and the picture (image-object) are not the same thing, although in the end that would seem the case. Considering the history of this problem, Szarkowski writes, "It was the photographer's problem to see not simply the reality before him but the still invisible picture, and to make his choices in terms of the latter."[172]

The stories of Whiteread's objects, what is seen and what the viewer is left to imagine, become the crux of the artwork, like Cohen's photographs. The emptiness of places that Whiteread fills with concrete or plaster function a way of defining space other than the manner in which Cohen does with her camera. Whiteread's at times obsessive repetition of subject matter, fabricated using materials reminiscent of the ones that Cohen uses, is neatly encapsulated when Whiteread says, "As one develops as an artist, the language becomes the language of the pieces you have made previously, building up a thesaurus, really."[173]

The objects within and the frames around Lynne Cohen's photographs offer much potential for association. What may seem like photographs of empty rooms become

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[170] Kenneth L. Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* (December 1984): 252.
[171] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966): [8].
[172] John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966): [8].
[173] Rachel Whiteread, quoted in Molly Nesbit, "Casting Out," *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2001): 141.

inventories of things if we take into account what is actually there, what can be seen when there are no people to provide the distractions of their own stories told through their faces and by their body language. Cohen's is a language of objects, heightened by the crafted frames that play up the surfaces within the images, providing a dialogue between the inside and outside of the frames, as well as the settings in which they are hung.

Chapter Four: How the Integration of Colour Photography Affected Lynne Cohen's Practice

In 1998, Lynne Cohen realized that there was something that she wanted to say about colour that had nothing to do with its ability to heighten the 'true to-life' appearance of the spaces she photographed. Nor did this message pertain to photography's picturesque or graphic characteristics, but rather, it related to its synthetic and chemical nature, and the properties that make colour as 'unnatural' as plywood, aluminum, foil or Styrofoam.[174]

When Cohen began taking pictures in colour, her subject matter did not immediately change. She was still drawn to places like spas, laboratories, and military installations. The vantage point, predominantly indoor lighting, and sterile setting remains the same through the years. Cohen began to produce colour photographs concurrently with her black and white images in the late nineteen-nineties, and the first time that they were displayed was in 1999 at P.P.O.W. in New York City.[175] Taking these images began as an experiment, and their printed versions have had the effect of distancing the viewer further from her already foreboding photographs of semi-public spaces. This was the most recent aesthetic change in her oeuvre. All at once the tableaus that used to be captured in black and white advance in colour in 1999, alive in the royal blue mattresses cushioning military installations (Fig. 26) and the creamy, yellow-green undertones of

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[174] Ann Thomas, "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 19.

[175] Ann Thomas cites 1998 as the year that Cohen began to work and print in colour in an acquisition request made on September 20, 2000 at the National Gallery of Canada, and in "Appropriating the Everyday," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001): 19.

observation room walls (Fig. 27), suggesting an overall mood in the picture while offering the viewer more information.

In this chapter, I argue that the colour in Cohen's photographs often distances the viewer from her confrontational prints. The recent colour works are similar to the older ones in terms of style, composition and, to a lesser extent, subject matter, but different in terms of naturalism and effect on the public. I examine how these photographs convey mood and temperature through colour.

Cohen's colour work will be considered in relation to the work of her predecessors and contemporaries, including William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, two of the forefathers of modern colour photography, and Martin Parr, who, like Cohen, focuses on types, though types of people rather than places. I will discuss a photograph by Andres Serrano, where the subject matter dissolves into a coloured abstraction, and an image by Robert Walker, where colour and content are paired seamlessly to put forth an authentic urban sprawl. Two photographs by Scott Fortino will also be analyzed, as his images of jails, schools, and other Chicago buildings are reminiscent of the spaces that Cohen chooses to photograph.

Cohen's printing from colour negatives began as an experiment. She explains:

> What prompted me to start working in colour as well as in black and white is that I became interested in the way colour film records colours wrongly. Once I let go of the idea of getting the colour right, I could set about capitalizing on the way colour film subverts the psychological weight we accord things in the world. Now what strikes me as peculiar is that the colour pictures seem to be made from much greater distance even

> when the same lenses and equipment are used. The colour acts as a distancing device, and the pictures appear to have been taken from miles away.[176]

When Cohen began to encase her images in faux granite, quartz, and Formica frames, she was, in her own mind, starting to work in colour.[177] While the photographs were still black and white, the frames carried the impression of certain colours and materials that Cohen remembered from the sites that she photographed. Colour images were a logical progression for Cohen after she began enlarging her large-format negatives and incorporated a single colour into her custom frames. Cohen's motivation to make colour pictures had nothing to do with increasing the realism or authenticity of the spaces she that she photographed. Rather, colour heightened the synthetic nature of the chlorine-scented spas, and the airless, antiseptic laboratories.[178] In the colour images, the viewer's senses are awakened with the unnatural red, blues, greens, yellows and grays. Natural and artificial light is accentuated with the range of colours now present, rather than shades from black to white.

As discussed in the previous chapter focusing on objects and framing, prior to 1999, Cohen used colour only in the materials of her frames, and she argued that black and white photographs could be made into "colour" photos with the addition of a single colour in the plastic frame. During an interview, she said, "The frames fill in the dimension of the colour in the [black and white] work. I think that colour is often about

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[176] Lynne Cohen in conversation with William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 31.
[177] Conversation with the artist, 11 July 2006.
[178] Ann Thomas, "Lynne Cohen-Essay," *The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts-2005* (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 2005): 30.

memory, the memory of the dominant colour one cannot remember or forget."[179] Her choice of framing thus plays off the colour palette of the room from what she can recall. The colour photographs are more objective, depicting close to what is actually in the space, while the colour frames provide the viewer with a subjective colour that Cohen recollects from the room.

It is possible to surmise the colours of certain objects in Cohen's pictures regardless of the fact that the early images are black and white. The colours imagined in the black and white works, like the frequently cited orange-brown of Naugahyde, are made manifest in the frames. With the use of colour and décor, it is possible to date Cohen's images to a decorative period.

When Ann Thomas, curator of photography at the National Gallery of Canada, discovered that Cohen was printing from colour negatives, she strongly encouraged her to include these prints in the *No Man's Land* exhibition. Cohen accumulated these negatives for years before, sometimes of the same or similar compositions as have been exhibited in black and white. During 2000, when preparations were undertaken for the National Gallery's retrospective of Cohen's work, Thomas persuaded Cohen to allow these recent prints to be included with the gelatin silver ones displayed in their custom-made frames.[180] Thomas explains, "For many years Cohen had resisted working in

[179] Interview with Bert Danckaert, unpublished, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Lynne Cohen Fonds, File 3, Box 19, n.pag.
[180] Unpublished transcripts of "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," National Gallery of Canada Archives, Lynne Cohen Fonds, File 1, Box 19, n.pag.

colour, feeling that viewers knew already that 'the Naugahyde was either orange or beige.'"[181]

The stylistic differences between black and white and colour photography have rarely been defined. One distinction between the two reads as follows: "In black and white photographs, composition and emotional impact are determined by form alone—shapes, lines, textures, and perspective. All these are created by tones. In colour photographs, form usually establishes the structure of the composition, while colour usually has the greater impact on our emotions. We tend to identify physical objects by their forms, and then to like them or dislike them for their colour."[182]

It is fascinating to compare photographs taken at the same site in black and white and colour. Their differences are be striking. There are two versions of the same spa taken three years apart in 1994 and 1997 (Figs. 28-29). Both are frontal shots depicting a slightly hexagonal structure of pipes and tiled columns central within the compositions. The colour photograph is taken from a closer vantage point, judging from the reflection of the overhead ceiling lights in the pool below. The photographs show a therapeutic pool, with ramps and seats submerged in the water. Large columns, fixtures and pipes make the space look stately, as do the steps into the pool, which seem to go underground. The subtle variations in the two rooms are the signs on the walls on the left-hand door and the central back wall, along with a few obscure objects in the background of each composition that are hard to discern.

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[181] Ann Thomas in a letter to National Gallery of Canada Acquisitions Committee, Ottawa, 20 September 2000: 2.
[182] Freeman Patterson, *Photography & the Art of Seeing* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985): 13.

Because the images have such similar content and compositions, it is possible to evaluate the role that colour plays in these two particular images. In the colour photograph, we are presented with a room that is almost monochromatically sky blue, with highlights and occasional painted surfaces in white, as seen with the ceiling, walls and fixtures. The blues are saturated, thick, and heavy in the space. There are reflections of the lights and overhead pipes in the pool, but even the water appears dense, almost solid. The turquoise that we see alludes to the sharp scent of chlorine used to mask odors. Sight and smell are magnified to the point where they are unpleasant, dizzying.

Compare this to majesty and stature of the 1994 version of *Spa*. Cohen calls this image a Fra Angelico, with its plunging perspective and clean geometry.[183] The black and white reduces the room to its angles and shades. The lines of the columns become straighter, the tones more distinct. Coupled with the faux granite frame the image is often shown in, it becomes a classic, regal work of art.

After the 2001 exhibition *No Man's Land*, gallery-goers commented that they often did not notice the difference between colour and black and white images, despite the fact that they were hung side-by-side.[184] The transition between the various prints was so smooth, aided, no doubt, by the colour frames encasing the black and white images and the muted shades framing the colour pictures. The colours of both image and frame are subtly deployed that it takes a second glance to register that the photograph is or is not in

[183] Conversation with the artist, 11 July 2006.
[184] Conversation with Lynne Cohen, 11 July 2006. This is also discussed by Blake Gopnik in "Cohen enters world of colour," *The Globe and Mail* (26 April 2000): R5.

colour.[185] Cohen says that her intention is never to draw attention to the colour, but rather, she "wants it to be as neutral as the other formal devices that [she] exploits,"[186] including the point of view, photographic scale and framing the image within the ground glass, as well as in a frame.

Certain interiors that Cohen photographs in black and white, such as her domestic settings and classrooms, communicate colour according to the décor and objects used within the rooms. Her later works are more institutional, namely the spas and laboratories, and they contain light, creamy walls and noxious blues that are hard to discern in black and white. When provided with the colours, these explosively saturated, synthetic hues show the viewer how unnatural these places actually are.

The colours of objects and surfaces seem obvious in the early image *Professor's Living Room*, 1972 (Fig. 30). The viewer is faced with a room apparently used for leisure: a television cowers in the corner, plush beanbag cushions sag around the perimeter of the space, waiting to be occupied, and vertical paintings adorn the two-toned walls. While one cannot be certain of the actual colours of the room, the wood veneer around the television seems to be a chocolate brown, the right hand wall a gray-flecked laminate designed to look like stone, and the shaggy area carpet a lush cream. The space feels inviting and dated.

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[185] Lynne Cohen in conversation with William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 31.
[186] Lynne Cohen in conversation with William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 32.

Cohen once said, "When people [used to ask] why I didn't work in colour, I responded that I did. In much of my black and white work there are clues as to what the dominant colour is...Nobody needs to be told the colour of wood paneling, plywood and stainless steel. You can fill it in yourself."[187] This begs the question of why anyone would have reservations about Cohen's motivation for working in black and white as opposed to colour film. The answer relates to timing. From the nineteen-seventies onwards, colour photography was gaining credibility in the art world, and by the nineteen-eighties it was hugely pervasive. Why was Cohen taking so long to participate in this trend, and what was stopping her? There is no reason that Cohen cites for not printing in colour earlier, nor for what prompted her to start when she did.

During the second half of the nineteen-seventies, American photography was overshadowed by what photographer Lewis Baltz considers "one pervasive pseudo-issue": the fast inclusion of color in photography.[188] Baltz cites the "rush to color" starting on May 25, 1976: the day that William Eggleston's exhibition of seventy-five dye transfer prints opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, along with the publication of a monograph entitled *William Eggleston's Guide*.[189] This was followed two months later by a second one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art of work by the contemporary American colour photographer Stephen Shore. Arguably the single

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[187] Lynne Cohen in conversation with William A. Ewing et al., "Camouflage: An Interview with Lynne Cohen," *No Man's Land* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2001): 31.
[188] Lewis Baltz, "American Photography in the 1970's: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die," *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (Harmondworth, England: Viking, 1985): 163.
[189] Ibid 163. It should be mentioned here that two years before *William Eggleston's Guide*, Szarkowski curated another exhibition of work by Helen Levitt at the Museum of Modern Art. This was a slide show composed of colour images of New York City street life. The Museum of Modern Art exhibited color images as early as 1953, when photographer/curator Edward Steichen displayed a selection of color prints by Saul Leiter. For additional information, see Malcolm Jones' "Not Black and White," *Newsweek* (24 February 2006) <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11529823/site/newsweek/GT1=78>, n.pag.

most prestigious art institution handling photography in the United States thereby placed its imprimature on colour photography, a medium that previously received little credibility in the art world.[190]

John Szarkowski wrote, "For the photographer who demanded formal rigor from his pictures, color was an enormous complication of a problem already cruelly difficult."[191] Eggleston and Shore both decided to explore colour photography at a time when the dominant opinion was that "art photography" was black and white. The two artists share a strong commitment to the use of colour as a descriptive element in their photographs. If colour were removed from their respective photographs, the compositions frequently fall apart.[192] Here are photographers whose work is not merely black and white photography with colour added.

Cohen's photographs hinge less on colour than do the images of Eggleston and Shore. Though the compositions that she chooses to shoot in colour are compositionally successful, and may be less compelling shot in black and white, she is capable of photographing well without colour. Her work existed for close to thirty years without colour, and, since her subject matter and style has shifted so subtly since the onset of her use of colour film, it is easy to see how successful the photographs remain before the its

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[190] Lewis Baltz, "American Photography in the 1970's: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die," *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (Harmondworth, England: Viking, 1985): 163.
[191] John Szakowski "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 8.
[192] This observation was made about William Eggleston's photographs in Malcolm Jones' "Not Black and White," *Newsweek* (24 February 2006)
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11529823/site/newsweek/GT1=78>, n.pag.

inclusion. The benefits of the addition of colour, though captivating, are in some ways elusive.

Ann Thomas says, "I think that colour [for Cohen] is...not just colouring in...It's not in-fill information. Because...the parameters of her compositions are so grounded, and she understands so much about why she is composing the way that she is, there haven't been big compositional changes; I don't think that colour changed that very much. She almost harnessed the colour to fit into her composition and I suspect that she wouldn't make a colour photograph of something unless she was able to get that particular compositional structure."[193] While I agree that the choice of images that have been shot in colour is not at all arbitrary, I think that colour only adds certain qualities to Cohen's images. Colour proves to be seductive, antiseptic, and, at times, extremely expressive.

In his essay accompanying *William Eggleston's Guide*, John Szarkowski cites two significant categories of problems that arise when using colour photography.[194] The first is the black and white photograph made with colour film, where the challenge of using colour is overlooked by the artist. The better photographs found in *National Geographic* magazine were examples of this variety: "no matter how cobalt the blue skies and how crimson the red shirts, the color in such pictures is extraneous—a failure of form."[195] Szarkowski acknowledges that these images are often interesting, even if colour is extraneous. This is sometimes the case with Cohen's images.

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[193] Interview with Ann Thomas, 9 March 2006.
[194] John Szarkowski, "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 8-9.
[195] John Szarkowski, "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 8-9.

In Cohen's *Laboratory* (Fig. 31), taken in the late 1990s, the unusual, claustrophobic room looks contrived and constructed. Wooden crates are filled with triangles of foam wrapped in a thin plastic. These same objects entirely cover the walls, poking out in ominous but ultimately cushy spikes. The padding is presumably to insulate the sound from the six black box speakers that form a stacked triad in the room, their cords snaking into the walls. In the very center, perched on a metal table with wheels, is a scratched torso of a dark turquoise dummy. Aside from individual objects, the composition could effectively be rendered in black and white, though the colour punctuates the composition with areas of interest. While the black speakers would remain black, the patches of sky blue floor and the shiny dummy are central to the colour image, and in black and white, the depth and pattern would be the focus rather than the hues and bright focal points.

The second kind of problem Szarkowski mentions involves photographs with beautiful colours in pleasing relationships, where the content then becomes insignificant. These images can resemble Synthetic Cubism and Abstract Expressionist paintings. "It is their unhappy fate to remind us of something similar but better," he writes, "Most color photography, in short, has been either formless or pretty."[196] Perhaps it is true that young photographers that start out using color film see it as one aspect of the medium rather than an ornament, or as a separate issue entirely.[197] This is not the case with Cohen's

[196]John Szarkowski, "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 9.
[197] Lewis Baltz, "American Photography in the 1970's: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die," *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*, ed. Peter Turner (Harmondworth, England: Viking, 1985): 164.

colour photography. The colour does not flood the composition or overwhelm the image.

American photographer William Eggleston declared that the nominal subjects of his photographs were no more than a pretext for making colour pictures.[198] Eggleston's prints can be sinister, disquieting, cloying, and claustrophobic. In Eggleston's work, "we see uncompromisingly private experience described in a manner that is restrained, austere, and public, a style not inappropriate for photographs that might be introduced as evidence in court."[199] Eggleston's colour images accentuate the heat and tensions in the American South of the United States during the nineteen-seventies up until today.

This is epitomized in Eggleston's photograph *Greenwood, Mississippi, 1973* (Fig. 32). The image is of a red ceiling. There are only a few other objects within the frame: a bare light bulb attached to the crimson ceiling with three electrical cords covered in white plastic, some wooden fixtures painted black where the wall and the ceiling come together, as well as what we can only assume to be a black window frame, and a trio of small posters displaying diagrams of sexual positions in loud primary colours.

Eggleston describes the image aptly when he writes:

> *The Red Ceiling* is so powerful that...I've never seen it reproduced on the page to my satisfaction. When you look at a dye-transfer print it's like it's red blood on a wet wall. The photograph was like a Bach exercise for me because I knew that red was the most difficult colour to work with. A little red is usually enough, but to work with an entire

[198] John Szarkowski, "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 5.
[199] John Szarkowski, "Untitled," *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002): 11.

> red surface was a challenge...I don't know of any totally red pictures, except in advertising. The photograph is still powerful. It shocks you every time.[200]

This picture demonstrates an instance where colour becomes the point of the image, blended faultlessly with the content of the photograph. This issue is discussed by Freeman Patterson: "Effective visual expression often depends on our understanding that the actual subject matter is not necessarily a situation or an object, but rather can be forms, colours, or certain qualities found in the subject matter. The situation or object is only a vehicle for bringing us the real subject matter—perhaps the colour red, and whatever it evokes in our emotions."[201]

The colour red is the focus of Andres Serrano's photograph from *The Morgue* series entitled *Burnt to Death III*, 1992 (Fig. 33). The viewer is confronted with an image of the inside rib lining of a burn victim that is realistic and abstract, delightful and dismaying, grisly yet seductively beautiful in its thick crimson bumps and splatters.[202] Serrano says, "When one works with difficult subjects, it is necessary to put beauty back into the accomplished work."[203] Without the benefit of the title, curatorial texts, or wallboards, the viewer is left to suspect that this image captures some corporeal gore; something once living that now is dead. We must guess what being or limb is displayed. The image is dominated by connotation and the opulent, pulsating red of the Cibachrome, and rather loosely pertains to the disturbing content.

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[200] William Eggleston in *William Eggleston: Ancient and Modern* (New York, Random House, 1992): 28.
[201] Freeman Patterson, *Photography & the Art of Seeing* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985): 115.
[202] Robert Hobbs, "Andres Serrano: The Body Politic," *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994): 43.
[203] Andres Serrano in Robert Hobbs, "Andres Serrano: The Body Politic," *Andres Serrano: Works 1983-1993* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1994): 21.

The vibrant blood in *Burnt to Death III* offers more cultural, historical and social associations than the red ceiling in Eggleston's *Greenwood, Mississippi*. What the two images share, which is far removed from the project of Cohen's colour images, is a meaning and impact that hinges on the colour. These images could not exist without the beating red that emanates from the prints.

In certain photographs, the mood of the image is clear, and can be attributed to the photographer's use of colour. The southern heat is palpable in William Eggleston's *Untitled*, 1971 (Fig. 34). The camera is positioned in an upward shot that captures the sky, resplendent in azure blue streaked with white, interrupted only by a group of seven taut power lines. The viewer is positioned beneath a corrugated tin roof shaded in dusty greens and grays, with orange highlights near the peak. At the top of the roof perches a sign that indicates that the building probably denotes either a fruit stand or a restaurant. It declares in bold apricot letters on a faded white background, **PEACHES!** On top of this sign we find a smaller, but no less potent logo for Coca-Cola in the classic white on red combination, dating the image with the stylized ad. Littered across the rooftop is what seems to be a smattering of wind-fallen peaches, fermenting in the damp heat. To the left of the tin surface is a tangle of dried root.

This is the very stuff of the old American South: blue sky, fleshy fruit, roadside stops. The colours are incredibly demonstrative of the physical and sensory perceptions that Eggleston was experiencing at the time the picture was taken, of the thick air and sweet-

smelling rot. None of this heat, this atmosphere, would be possible or as convincing in a black and white photograph.

Egglston's use of colour can be airless, syrupy, and saturated in comparison to Stephen Shore's "reserved, restrained combinations of neutrals and rich hues so fundamental to the aura of ostensible detachment."[204] This is seen in Shore's *El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas* (July 5, 1975) (Fig. 35). Shore's artistic paradigms are order, balance, and serenity.[205] There is a series of repetitions formally in term of shapes and colours. The chevron shape appears twice in the tree branches; once in the tree's cast shadows, in the perspective of the white lines at the crosswalk, and in the sharp perspective of the buildings in the background.[206] The colour yellow-orange recurs in the photograph in manner that unifies the composition, and accentuates the late-morning sun that hazily illuminates this El Paso intersection.

Shore speaks to the importance of light in colour photography: "Colour film is wonderful because it shows not only the intensity but the colour of light. There is so much variation in light between noon one day and the next, between ten in the morning and two in the afternoon."[207] The effect, as opposed to the technique, dominates the image.[208] When Cohen photographs interiors, there is infrequently a difference between the lighting of a

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[204] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981): 184.
[205] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981): 26.
[206] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981): 26.
[207] Stephen Shore, artist's statement from *Uncommon Places* (New York: Aperture, 1982). Accessed on-line, July 25, 2006. <http://www.afterimagegallery.com/shore.htm>.
[208] Sally Eauclaire, *The New Color Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981): 26.

shot taken in the morning or the late afternoon, as there are no solar clocks when there are no windows.

In her colour prints, Cohen frequently presents a more acute awareness of light than in her black and white works - one that is weightless yet tangible.[209] The light itself can become the subject of the image, and, like Eggleston's *Greenwood, Mississippi*, can conjure a mood. This is seen in *Club*, 2001 (Fig. 36). The conference room or gathering space is tiled with large squares of plastic laminate that serve to mirror the florescent and solar light that pours over the floor. The walls are painted a light egg yolk yellow, with areas of the walls cast in shadow and highlights. The dark stained wood that forms the doors and window frames also picks up light in ways that are made more dramatic in colour than black and white. The darks and lights in many of the colour images become more prominent, atmospheric, and affecting.

While the light in Cohen's *Club* is luscious and sensual, the purpose of the space is difficult to read. The viewer cannot be sure what this space is used for, and, if we are to believe the title of this work and consider this room as some type of a congregation space for a club, what kind of a club meets here? The chairs encircling the tables and the large-tiled, beige floors could suggest many activities, but perhaps the framed images of horses on the back wall suggests an equestrian club. While the predominant yellow colour within the photograph makes the room more inviting than some of the cold spas and classrooms, it is difficult to know how to feel about or react to such a room.

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[209] Elaine Hujer, "Photos capture the scene." *The Hamilton Spectator* (6 July 2002): C1.

Contemporary British photographer Martin Parr and Lynne Cohen both make visually manifest types in their series works. As we have seen, Cohen records types of places, while Parr often catalogues people in their natural habitats with the humour and canny of photographing animals in a zoo. His aim is to capture national stereotypes, and in investigating these people, he uses the objects to type them. Parr displays "...an intense interest in the ordinary coupled with an appreciation of how quickly, through the act of representation, the ordinary can become absurd and remarkable."[210] His art is imbued with both utter boredom and absorption, which makes his images paradoxically forgettable and fascinating.

Examine Parr's *Untitled* (Fig. 37), from the series *Common Sense*, 1995-1999. This particular series of images focuses on details of people and portraits of things rather than cataloguing people within their environments. In this image, we are presented with a close-up shot of a round wooden tray covered with a gold-coloured doily. Perched atop this platter are seven petit fours, looking as menacing and toxic as any of Cohen's chlorinated blue swimming pools. These sweets are nestled in brown and white striped paper liners, and are shaped, with a small cylindrical cake attached to a larger, square cake, into candy-pink pigs. They are resplendent in their hard icing shells, with white and brown details for eyes, ears, and snouts. The confections are nothing short of nauseating in their excess. The overblown, hysterical look of these pigs would not come through in a black and white print, nor would their social commentary seem so ascerbic. The desserts scream out a kind of indulgence that occurs when delicacies and obscenity marry, and they seem to leap off the page in their bright conviction.

[210] Val Williams, *Martin Parr* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002): 24.

Colour provides a hyper-reality in Robert Walker's images, showing an urban existence where it is challenging to discern between the human, the industrial, the commercial, and the fabricated. The series *Color is Power* contains images of bustling cityscapes in New York, Warsaw, Montreal, Paris, Rome, Toronto, and Provincetown. Like Cohen's images, Walker's are not located with a district or a city, but seem to suggest an urban sprawl in any metropolitan area. One particularly layered image is of New York City from 2002 (Fig. 38). The location is made evident only by the large green-cab of a concrete truck in the foreground, labeled with the corporation's name, address and telephone number. The viewer is bombarded with colours: the dark charcoal of pavement, the white cylinder of a cement mixer, brown buildings, and the steel grey of concrete supports. It is only upon close examination that the viewer realizes that the skyscrapers behind the truck are actually a flat mural, given dimension by their colour and form. All these elements give the overall impression of a city, the honking, overlapping, motion-filled excitement of it all. Colour is integral to this vision, as it is how more of us see and experience the world. As American photographer Joel Meyerowitz says, "Color is always a part of experience. Grass is green, not gray. Black and white is a very cultivated response...When we look at photographs that are in color, it's like looking at the world."[211]

Scott Fortino's photographs are reminiscent of Cohen's images in terms of subject matter and style. Fortino's pictures are executed from more experimental angles than Cohen's

[211] Joel Meyerowitz to Bruce K. MacDonald in "A Conversation: Bruce K. MacDonald with Joel Meyerowitz, July 22-26, 1977," *Cape Light: Colour Photographs by Joel Meyerowitz* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978): n.pag.

frontal shots, though both succeed in creating balanced compositions. Instead of being documentary and industrial, as photography has inherited from the Bechers and the New Topographics, Fortino's straight images are emotional: the photographs are drenched in patterns of light, shade, and atmospheric colour.[212] His images are endowed with a warmth and humanity that Cohen's most often lack. More so than Cohen, Fortino insinuates his subjectivity into these empty institutions.

Fortino's photograph entitled *End of cell block corridor, police facility, Pullman*, 2004 (Fig. 39) is a dead end, a white concrete wall straight ahead, and a bright orange one perpendicularly to the left. The two walls meet with a yellow strip of concrete, which directs the viewer's attention to the overhead security camera. It hovers over the cell, completely conspicuous in its white metal brackets. A single electrical outlet is located too high on the wall for easy access. To the right, there is a prison cell mostly cropped from the image, but left in the frame are an unlocked gate of royal blue bars, obscuring the edge of a royal blue bench built into the cement. The stark room is terrifying, despite the fact that there is no sense of a tortured inmate or sub-standard cell conditions.

The colours instill fear in the viewer: the complementary orange and blue not only accentuate our entrapment, but also seem to patronize and mock the inmates with their lively schoolhouse cheer. Perhaps the intended effect was to perk up those who are locked in, but such a startling colour seems to invite violence. None of this would be

[212] Judith Russi Kirshner, "Introduction," *Institutional: Photographs of Jails, Schools and Other Chicago Buildings* (Santa Fe, New Mexico and Staunton, Virginia: Center for American Places, 2005): xi.

revealed in black and white, nor would the composition benefit from the balance of blue and orange.

In the image *Stairway, Northside College Preperatory High School, Albany Park*, 2004 (Fig. 40), Fortino almost seems to paint with sensual light and colour. The viewer seems to float above a stairwell, and the area pictured is reduced to the geometry of its lines and angles. While the walls are likely tiled in gritty beige laminate, the overhead florescent light endows them with a mother-of-pearl iridescence. It is the colour alone that provides this space with its interest. The subtle gradations of tans and grays and small licks of pure white dissolve the photograph into panels of colour, not unlike an abstract painting. The viewer is presented with an unusual vantage point of a liminal place where people walk through to get from outside to inside, inside to outside and from room to room. With this photograph, we see the beauty in the everyday: the unadorned tiles and metal railings that we collectively use and take for granted and rarely, if ever, regard as aesthetic.

Coming across Fortino's image immediately reminded me of Cohen's *Laboratory*, 1999 (Fig. 41). This is another print that completely hinges on the fact that it was made as a colour print. Colour is an absolute necessity in this tableau. A staircase near the upper left hand side of the composition shows an exit from this bizarre space, and also gestures to an otherwise obscure walkway that outlines the perimeter of the room. In this training area, pot lights hang from the exposed metal tracking in the ceiling, and strange equipment made from wood, metal, and cement litter the floors. Occasionally, an object

will be identifiable: a tripod, or some cables bundles, knotted and hung from the ceiling, but the image describes the entire room rather than the individual things it contains. The colour serves to completely unify the space pictured.

What makes *Laboratory* so remarkable, much like *Stairway, Northside College Preparatory High School, Albany Park*, is the symbiotic way that light and colour coexist. From the suspended ceiling lights, the shiny concrete floor is luminous. Each light from overhead is resplendent, and complimented with a smudged reflection on the surface of the polished floor. The colour temperature of light can dramatically effect the mood of the photograph and the viewer.[213] With the addition of colour, the viewer is impressed with the streaks of blue that can be seen in the floor, as well as the different shades of white that could not be revealed to the same extent in a black-and white image. There is something magical about this collection of odds and ends; tools in some kind of unmarked laboratory that seems deceptively small because all of the clutter is pushed near the mid-to-background of the composition. The silver-gray gradations scatted across the floor cast from the overhead lights compliments the green floor mat, the wooden structure to the left, and the tangles of electrical cords suspended from the ceiling.

Colour proves an interesting addition to Lynne Cohen's oeuvre. While the dye coupler works are not superior to the gelatin silver prints in potency and stature, they do offer different information and details about similar places, distancing the viewer further from the already foreboding interiors. Occasionally, as seen in *Club* (Fig. 36), colour softens the scene with its gentle light and gentle colourss, enticing the viewer into the scene.

[213] Freeman Patterson, *Photography & the Art of Seeing* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1985): 113.

Through this examination, I find that Cohen's photographs do not rely on the use of colour, but its strategic use serves to reveal new aspects of places that already seem familiar in her works.

Conclusion

Upon seeing Lynne Cohen's *No Man's Land* retrospective in 2001, my initial reaction to this comprehensive collection of work was that this woman had guts. To stake an artistic claim on photographing room after room of interiors devoid of people, littered with the remains of their activities, was a bold move. The only way to ensure that these photographs were interesting, even moving, was to draw attention to what was left behind: the things in the images. It has taken some audacity on my part to infill some of the analysis on Cohen's work that seemed to be missing. Curators, essayists, and critics had established certain ideas about these photographs, and the literature that emerged after Cohen's retrospective followed suit. My perception that certain aspects of these images remained under discussed led to this thesis.

Very little has been written about the formal aspects of Cohen's photographic practice, namely her shift upwards in scale and her custom-made frames. My objective was to elucidate these less explored aspects of her work. By examining some of the major shifts in Cohen's photographs over the past thirty-five years, such as the enlargement of her images, her distinctive frames, and her inclusion of colour film to offer new and different information about her subject matter, it is possible to gain a heightened awareness of her strategies and come away with a better understanding of her practice overall.

There are many qualitative observations in this thesis. For one, the larger Cohen's images, the more foreboding they are. When enlarged, the negatives that hold up most effectively are the ones with frightening subject matter, including the military

installations and factories, or where many elements, such as targets or mannequins, are shown in repetitious formations. The images that work best as contact prints are the dance halls and living rooms, where the prints become small stages that the viewer can step into. Small prints deliver better punch lines, while the bigger prints convey more weighty concerns, including industrialization, surveillance, and the militarization of our society. Cohen's oft-cited sense of humour (of the Tyrolean hat and gigantic birthday cake variety) advances more readily in the smaller works.

Cohen uses colour frames made from plastics and laminates to encase her photographs. They are man-made materials that frequently mimic the organic. These materials are used in order to capture her memories of the spaces that she photographs, while simple black, white, or gray frames enclose the colour images. The way that the photographs are framed proves both unique and innovative, finding few parallels in photography or two-dimensional art in general.

What is perhaps most interesting about Cohen's framing, however, is this idea of mimicry: the frames serve to mimic the objects and materials within the rooms that she photographs, while also acting as a memory notation, a means of preserving her subjective, expressive recollection of a room. Insects do the same thing: they adopt the colour of the environment to camouflage their presence. It seems that Cohen has adopted this strategy, where the frame, which reiterates her compositional framing, introduces her into these environments. This personal inscription of colour through the frame counters the pseudo-objectivity of the images themselves. They are cold. They seem impersonal,

or, at the very least, institutional. It is understandable why they would be mislabeled as "documentary." The gesture of adding a personalized, unique frame ensures that the images are recognized as art objects while inserting Cohen's experience of the pictured place into the gallery space where the photograph is hung. Within the cool, industrial language adopted by Cohen, her frames are expressive.

Cohen comes to incorporate many stylistic changes into her oeuvre with trepidation. It is possible to infer, based on her late arrival to the colour and large-scale trends within contemporary photography, that she would not have made these advances in her work until she was sure that the art market would embrace them. When one of Cohen's printers proposed the idea of enlarging her negatives to sizes larger than 75 x 100 cm, she was quick to agree. Comparing prints produced at different sizes proved to be difficult, and would have yielded almost nothing without recourse to the Cohen fonds of proof prints at the National Gallery of Canada. This research proved that the prints that Cohen chooses for enlargement have certain qualities, ones that Cohen began to pursue in her choice of sites. The size suits the particular images, providing the viewer with a space that she or he could enter visually. The turn to colour followed the same logic. Cohen began to use colour to intensify mood and experience within her images, depicting hyper-real blues and saturated reds that allow these places to look further away, more difficult to penetrate. A subtle difference between the black and white pictures, with their memory-notation frames, and the colour pictures, with their neutral frames, is nevertheless very telling.

This thesis is greatly enriched by interviews and discussions with curators, photographers, artists, and Lynne Cohen herself. Without the insights and observations brought by the people who design, fabricate, and present these photographs and photographs comparable to those by Cohen, it would not have been possible to make some of these arguments or come to these conclusions about the photographs from a historical standpoint. These histories have not been told previously because the photographs, taken as equivalents for the real world, did not invite such discussions. They were simply there, complete as found objects. The artist's touch was absent.

I remember the feeling of standing in front of Cohen's photographs at the *No Man's Land* exhibition. This was the first time I saw these works. It was only by chance that I noticed the large banner with the cool white, blue and yellow spa hanging against the glass exterior of the museum and was intrigued by this straight depiction of a place, where the room became a character, and the photograph a portrait. Cohen has a touch. She has done much to elevate everyday places, or those areas that go unseen, including the art museums where her pictures are presented. To have a once sterile turquoise pool, imbued now with chlorine and rot, photographed and enlarged to history painting scale and status is revolutionary. This is the real Duchampian gesture: rather than the object alone being presented as the work of art, it was an image of an object that was validated. Cohen's photographs make visitors aware of the art institutions in which they are being seen, as the clean, attempting-to-be-anonymous rooms in the images serve as a reminder that the place that they are standing attempts to be a neutral backdrop to show art.

Standing in front of a Lynne Cohen photograph is enough to make me reconsider my surroundings, how places are used and what they are used for. Trying to recreate the show in my mind, and comparing my memories with the museum's documentation, I realized that there was not one single work in the show that struck me; rather, it was the overall impact of seeing these places as if for the first time, as if they had never existed without photographic proof. There was such great attention paid to light switches, electrical cords and fixtures, and the surfaces of floor tiles and wood paneling came alive in the photographs. What does it mean for images to seem more real, somehow more authentic, than the actual places? Is that the success of the image-maker or the downfall of society? Cohen's formal photographic representations of actual places pose these questions, and answer them in terms of both human experience and intervention.

Figure 1: Diane Arbus, *Xmas tree in a living room, Levittown, L.I.*, 1963, gelatin silver print, 50.8 x 40.6 cm. Collection of Michael and Joan Salke, Naples, Florida.

Figure 2: Diane Arbus, *A Lobby in a Building, N.Y.C.,* 1966, gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

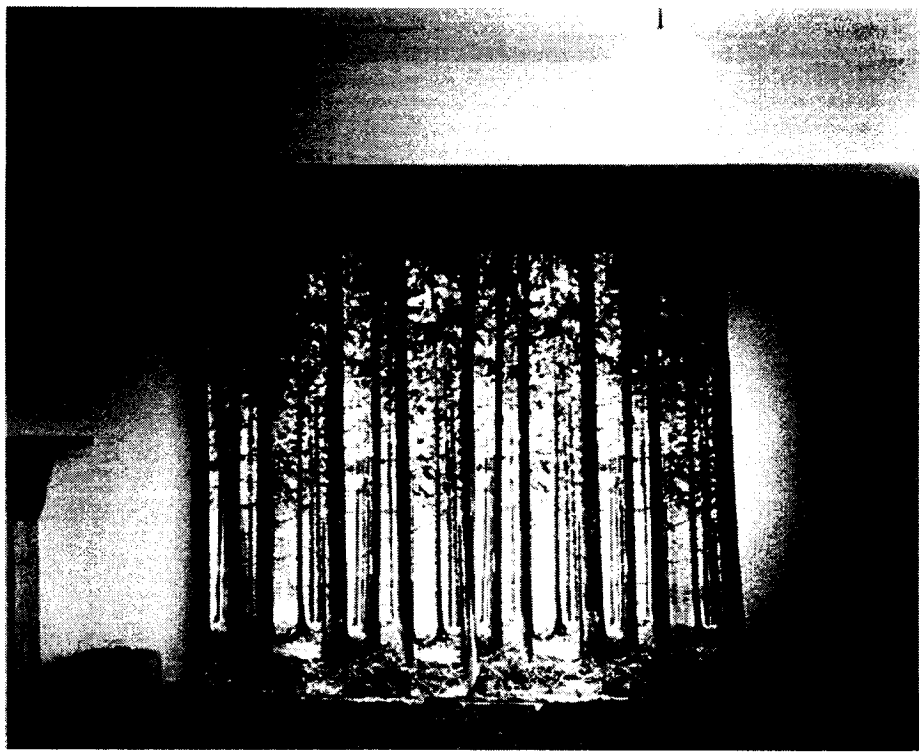

Figure 3: Lynne Cohen, *Dining Room*, gelatin silver print, n.date, 40.64 x 50.8 cm framed. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

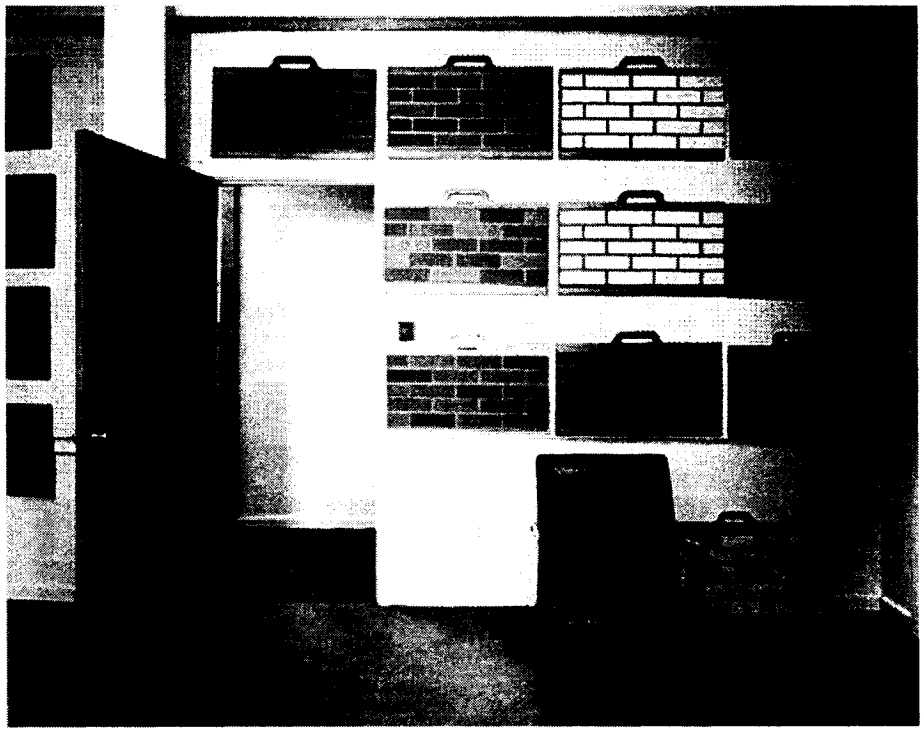

Figure 4: Lynne Cohen, *Office and Showroom*, 1980, gelatin silver print, 111 x 129 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

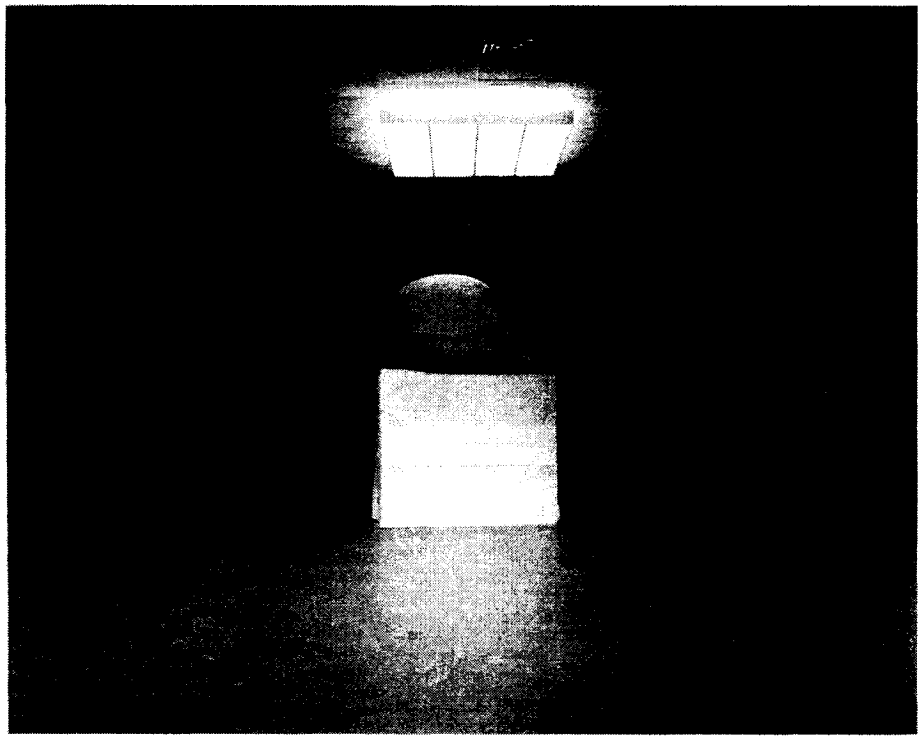

Figure 5: Lynne Cohen, *Party Room*, 1976, printed 1986, gelatin silver print, 47 x 43.5 cm. Collection of Andrew Lugg, Montreal.

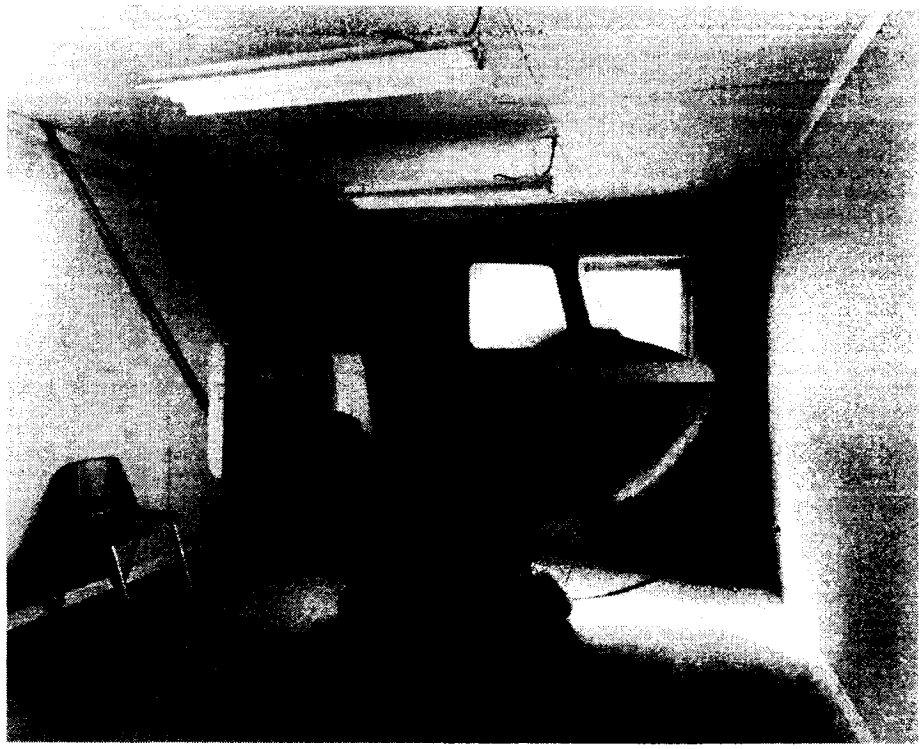

Figure 6: Lynne Cohen, *Flying School*, 1980, gelatin silver print, 111 x 129 cm. Collection of Michael Flomen, Montreal.

Figure 7: Lynne Cohen, *Living Room*, 1972, gelatin silver print, 43.5 x 47 cm. Collection of the artist.

Figure 8: Lynne Cohen, *Office and Showroom*, 1986, gelatin silver print, 111 x 129 cm. Collection of Motel Fine Arts, New York.

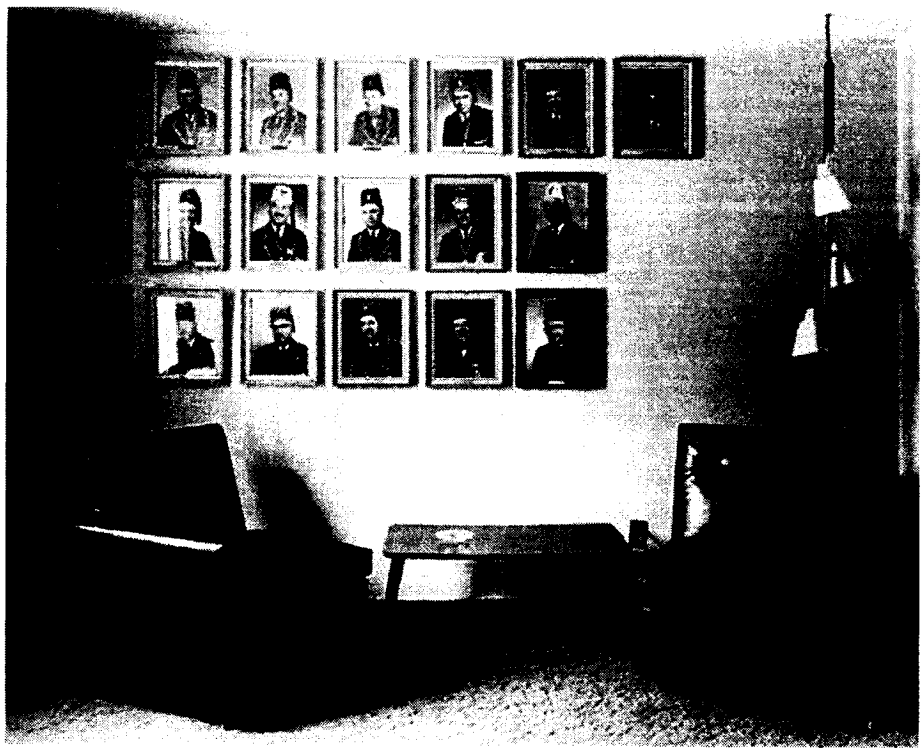

Figure 9: Lynne Cohen, *Men's Club*, c.1977, gelatin silver print, 127 x 132 cm. Collection of the artist.

Figure 10: Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, transparency in lightbox, 159 x 234 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Figure 11: Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, oil on canvas, 392 x 496 cm. Collection Musée de Louvre, Paris.

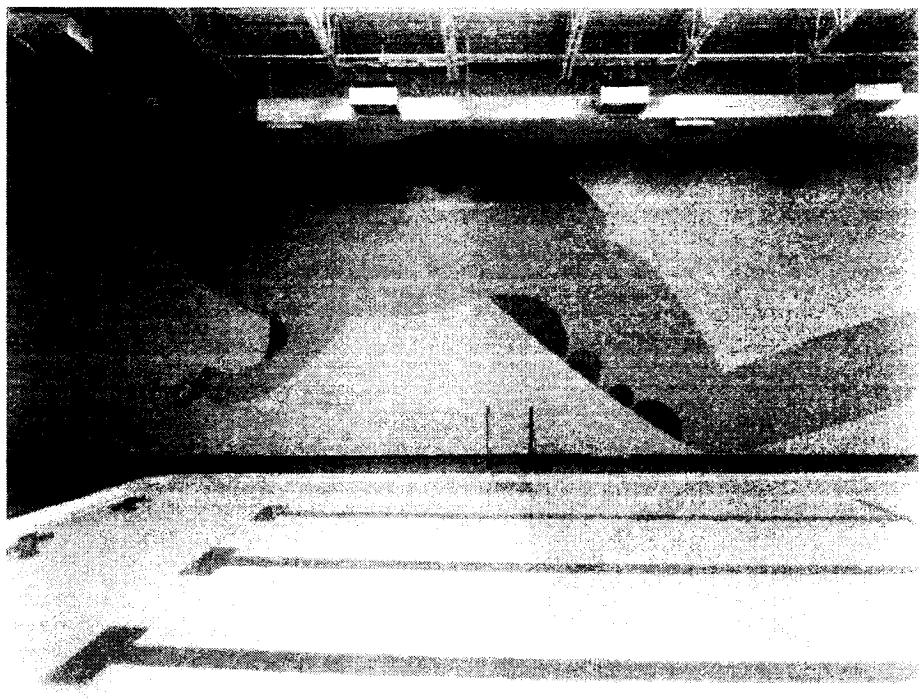

Figure 12: Lynne Cohen, *Untitled*, n.date, gelatin silver print, 45.7 x 50.8 cm framed. Collection of the artist.

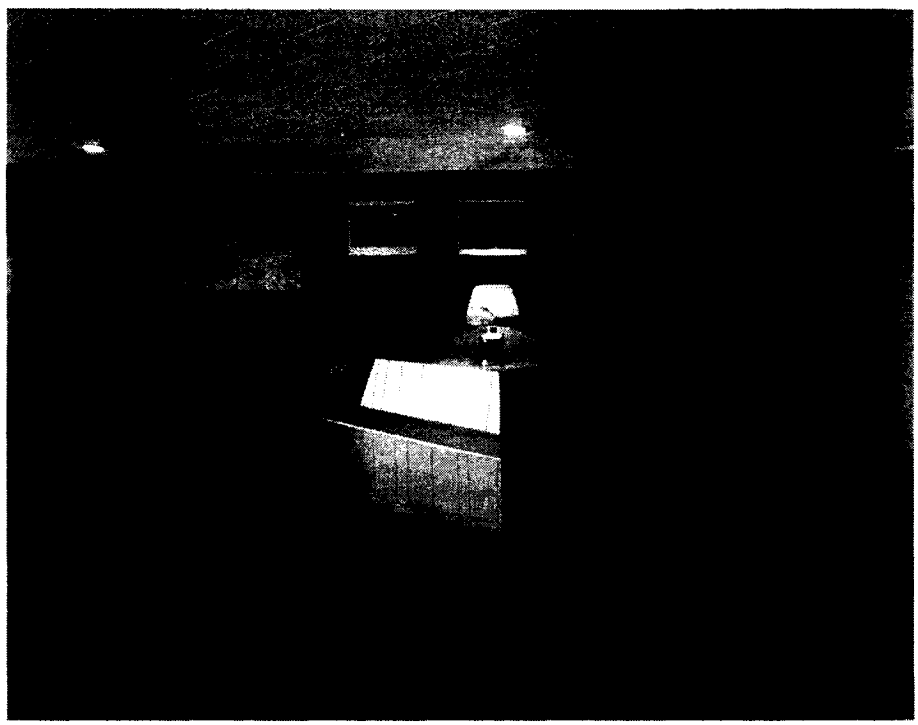

Figure 13: Lynne Cohen, *Resort*, n.date, gelatin silver print. Collection of the artist.

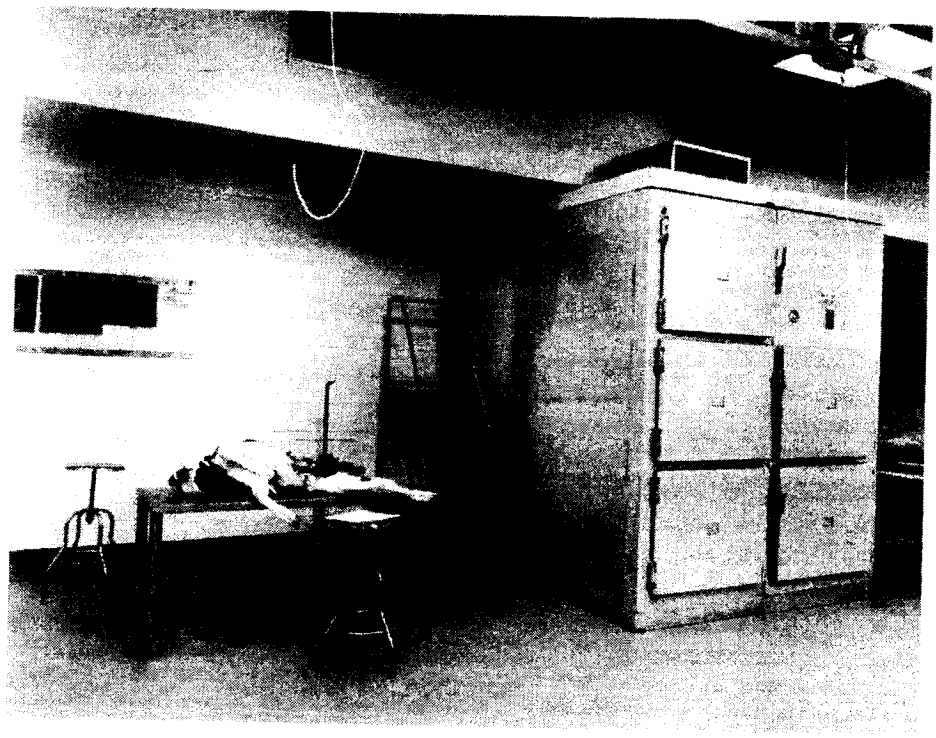

Figure 14: Lynne Cohen, *Classroom*, c.1996, gelatin silver print, 111.8 x 129 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

Figure 15: Lynne Cohen, *Factory*, c.1990, gelatin silver print, 111 x 129 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

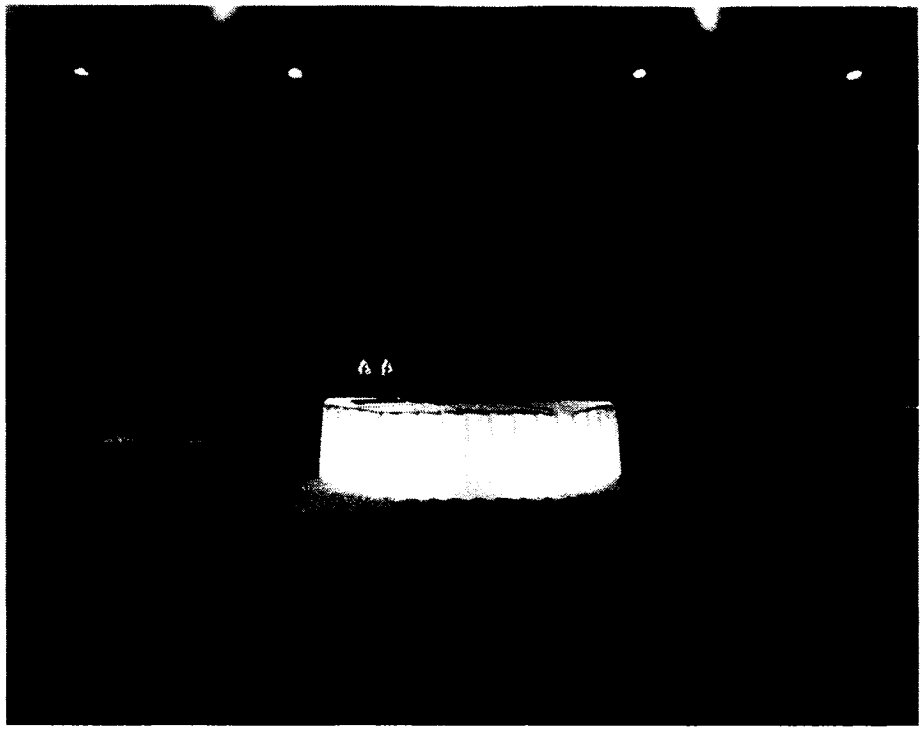

Figure 16: Lynne Cohen, *Party Room*, 1976, printed 1986, 47 x 43.5 cm. Collection of Andrew Lugg, Montreal.

Figure 17: Candida Höfer, *Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*, 1984, dye coupler print, 38 x 57 cm. Collection of the artist.

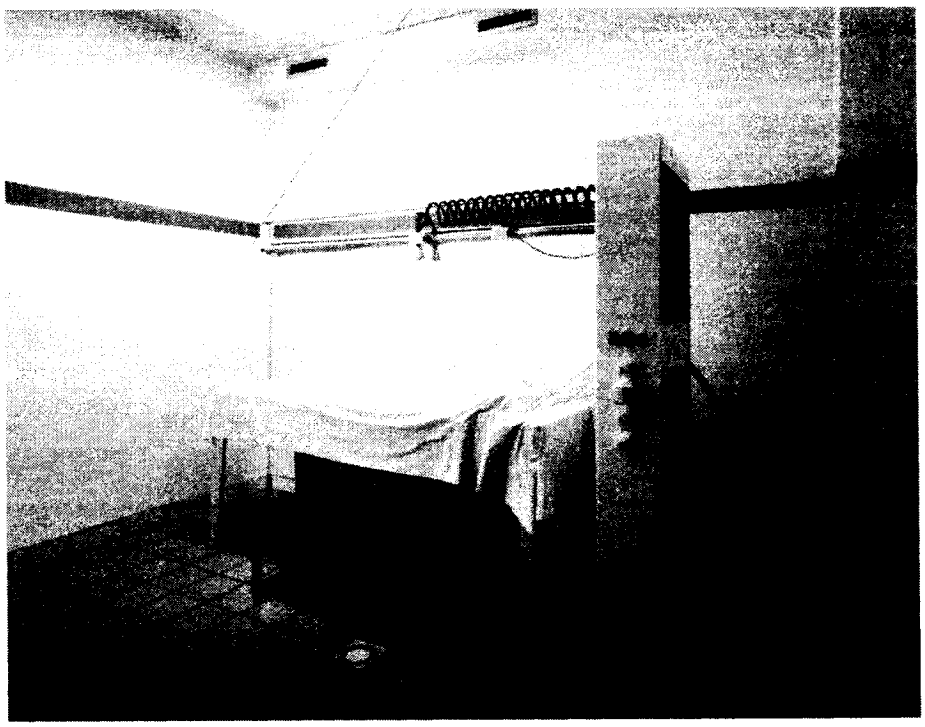

Figure 18: Lynne Cohen, *Spa*, 1994, gelatin silver print, 70 x 80 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

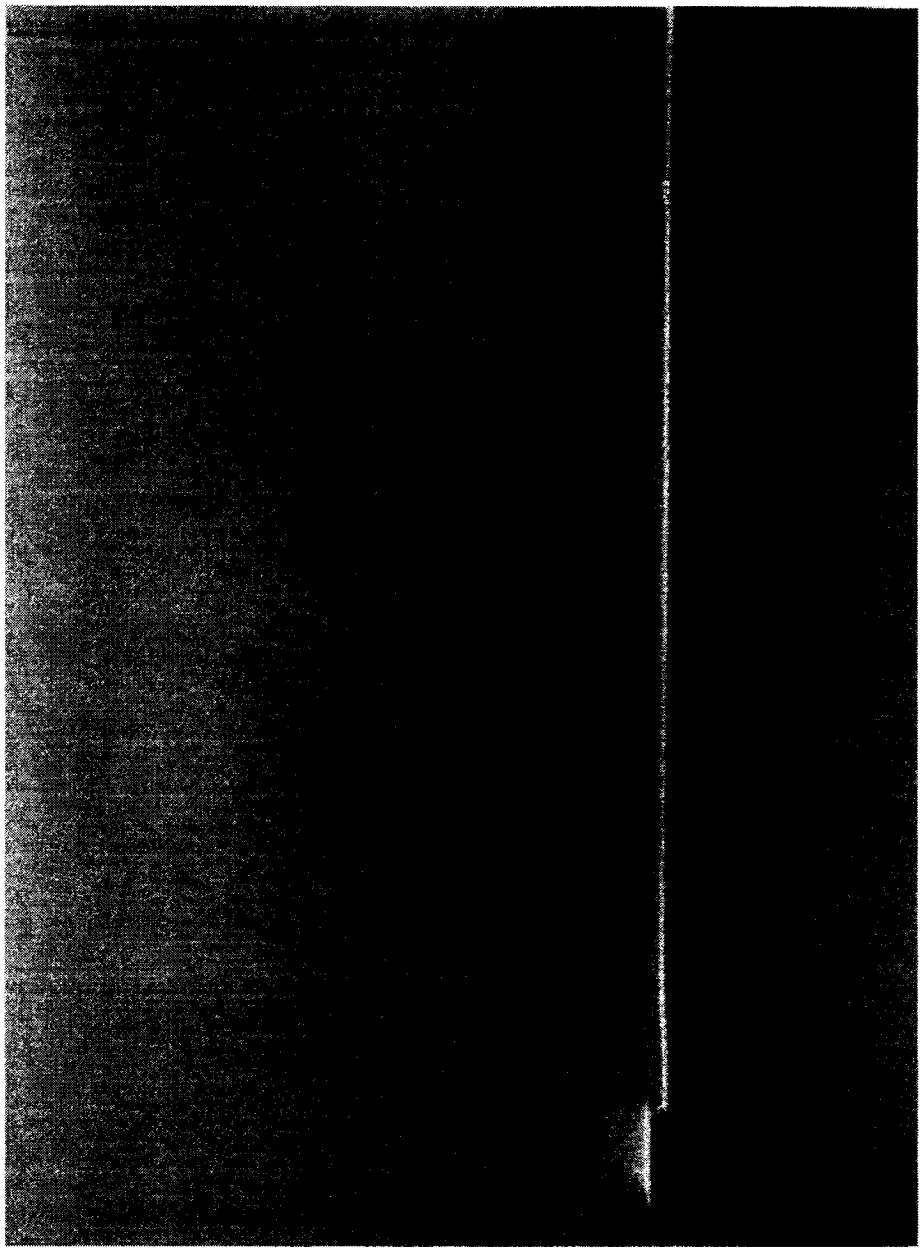

Figure 19: Lynne Cohen, *Untitled*, n.date, gelatin silver print, 45.7 x 50.8 cm framed. Collection of the artist.

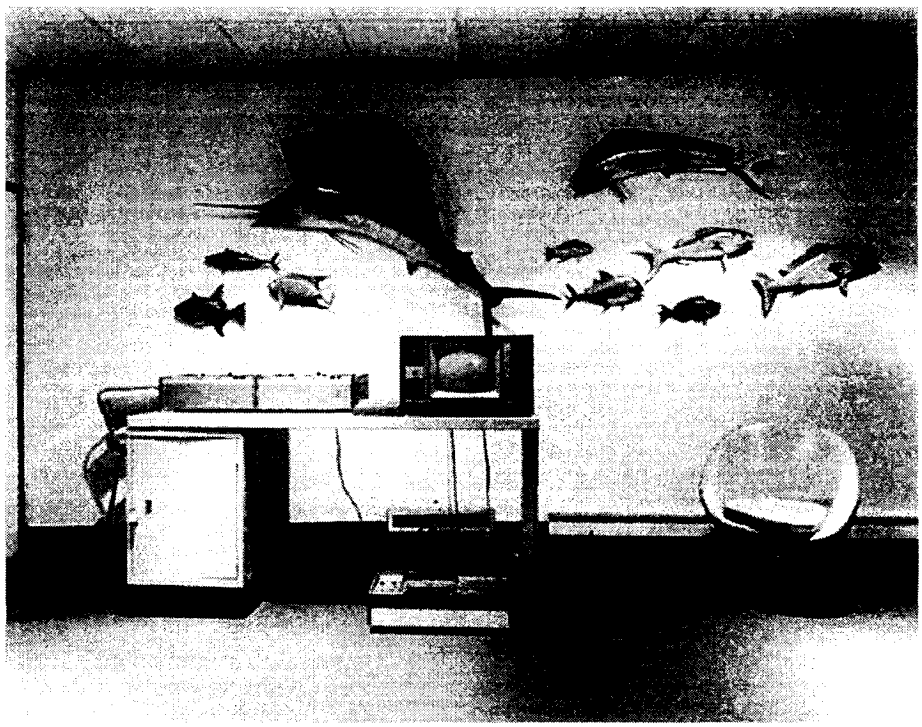

Figure 20: Lynne Cohen, *Recording Studio*, 1978, printed 1989, gelatin silver print, 43.6 x 43.7 cm. Collection of Andrew Lugg, Montreal.

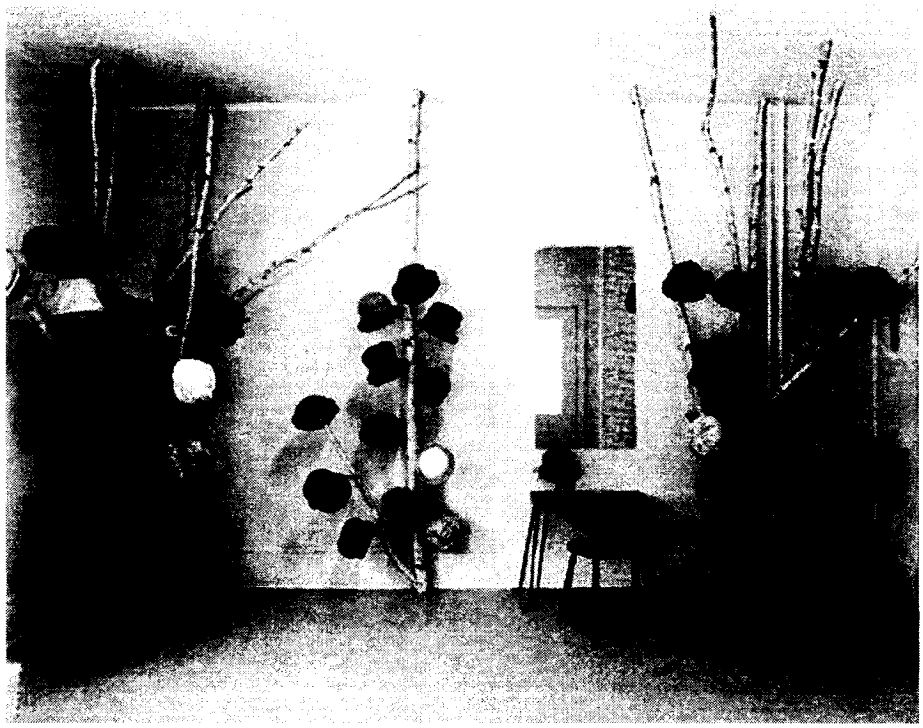

Figure 21: Lynne Cohen, *Hat Trees*, 1987, printed 1989, gelatin silver print, 111 x 129 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Figure 22: Lynne Cohen, *Police Range*, 1990, gelatin silver print in plastic laminate frame, 114 x 139 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

Figure 23: Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 1: Orchidella*, 1995, laminated chromogenic process in artist's "self-lubricating" plastic frame, 135.6 x 110.8 cm. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

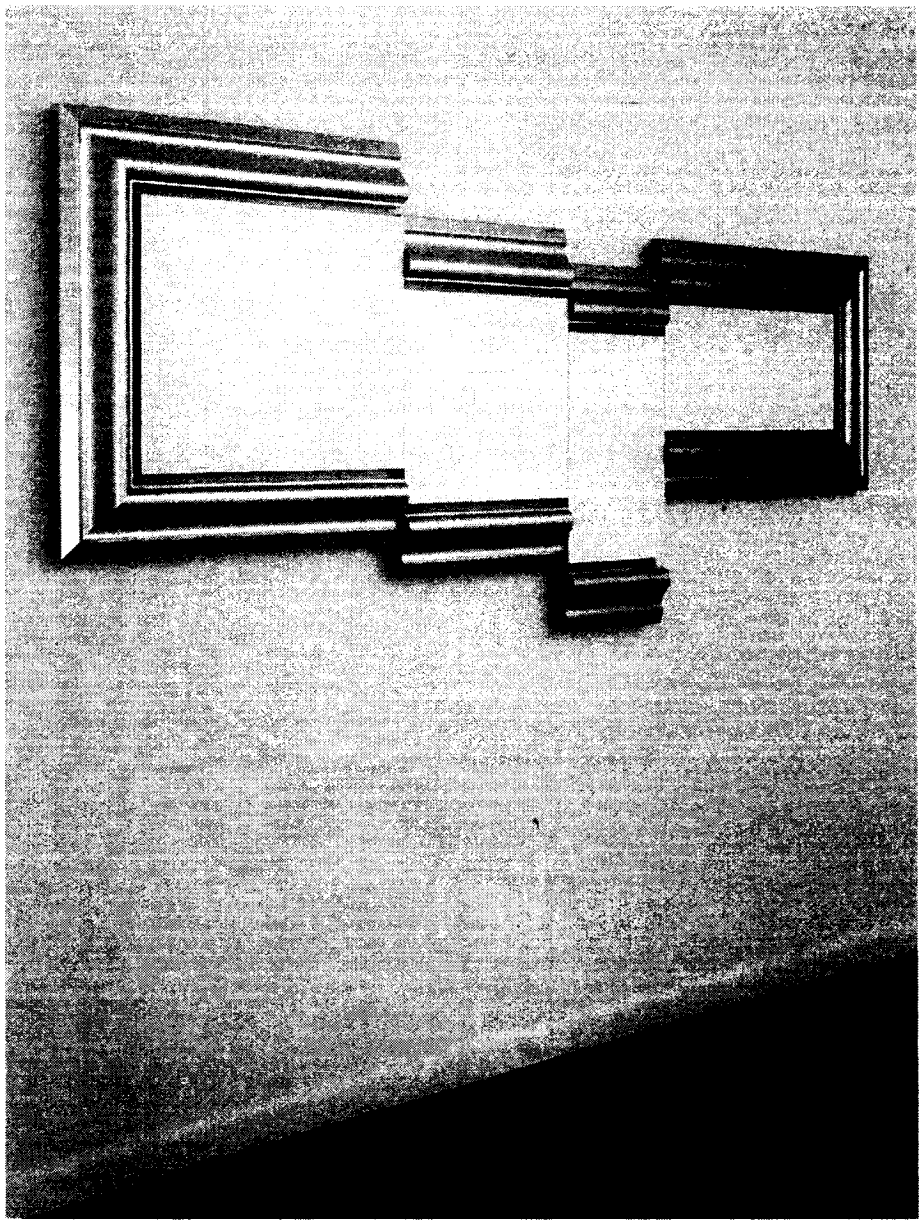

Figure 24: Christian Eckart, *White Painting # 621*, 1990, textured Formica on birch panels with 23-carat gold-leaf on pine and poplar moulding, 107.9 x 229.8 cm. Collection of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, Salsbourg.

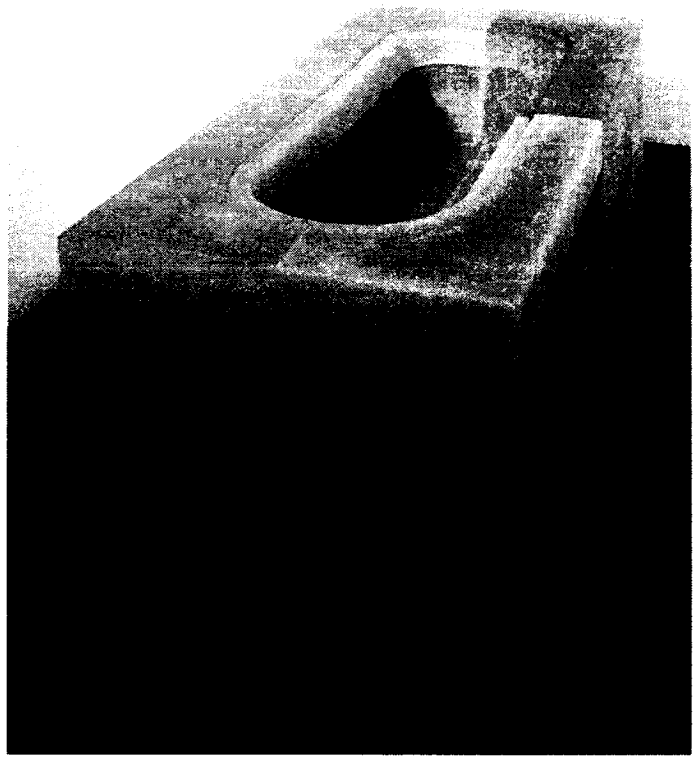

Figure 25: Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Orange Bath)*, 1996, rubber and polystyrene, 81.3 x 208.3 x 109.2 cm. Collection of Saatchi Gallery, London.

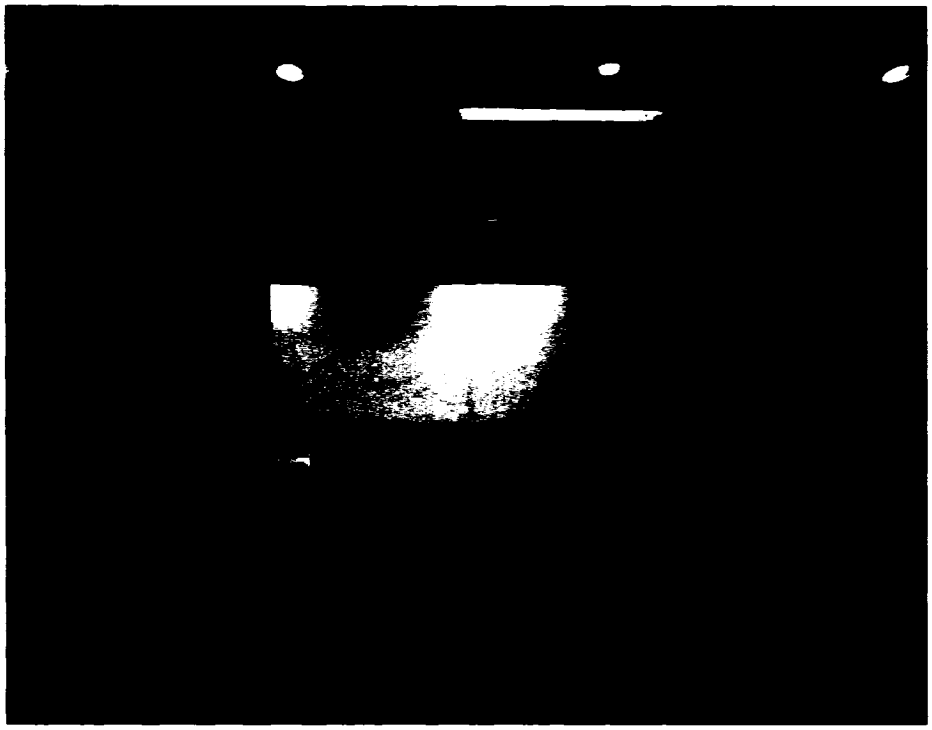

Figure 26: Lynne Cohen, *Military Installation*, 1999-2000, dye coupler print, 122 x 158 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

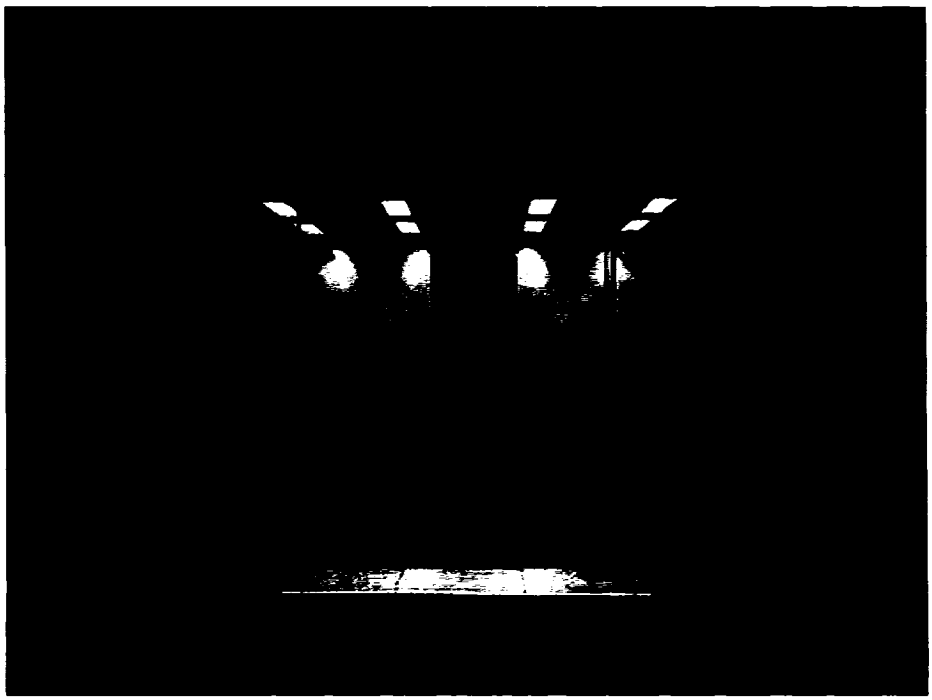

Figure 27: Lynne Cohen, *Laboratory*, 1999, dye coupler print, 111 x 131.6 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

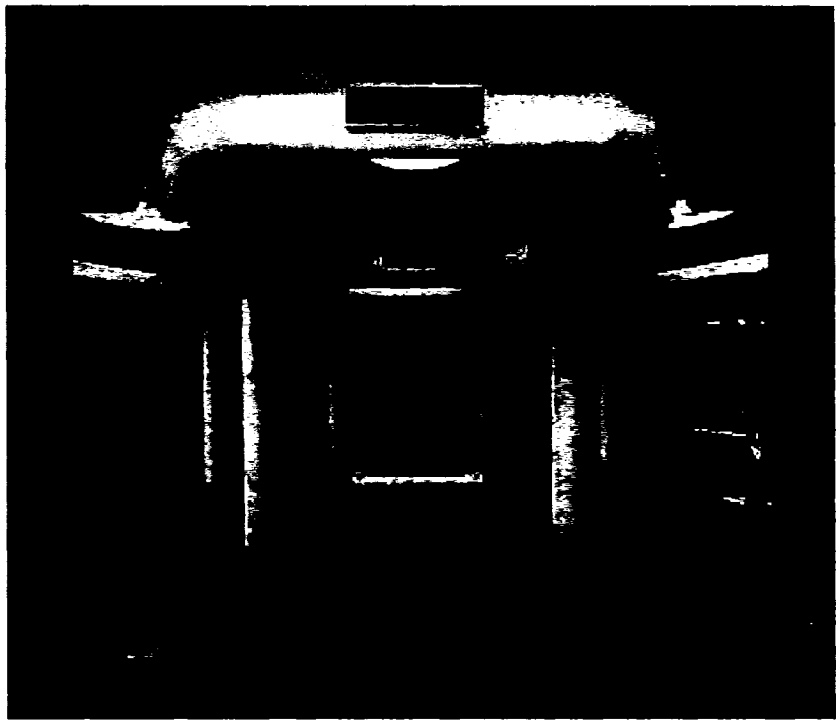

Figure 28: Lynne Cohen, *Spa*, 1994, gelatin silver print in Formica frame, 113 x 138.7 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

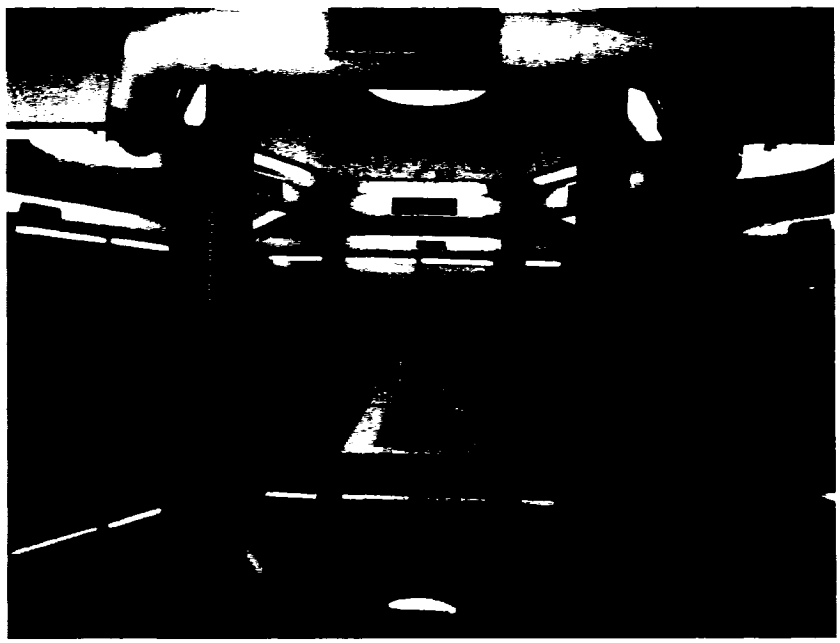

Figure 29: Lynne Cohen, *Spa*, 1997, dye coupler print, 101.6 x 127 cm. Collection of the artist.

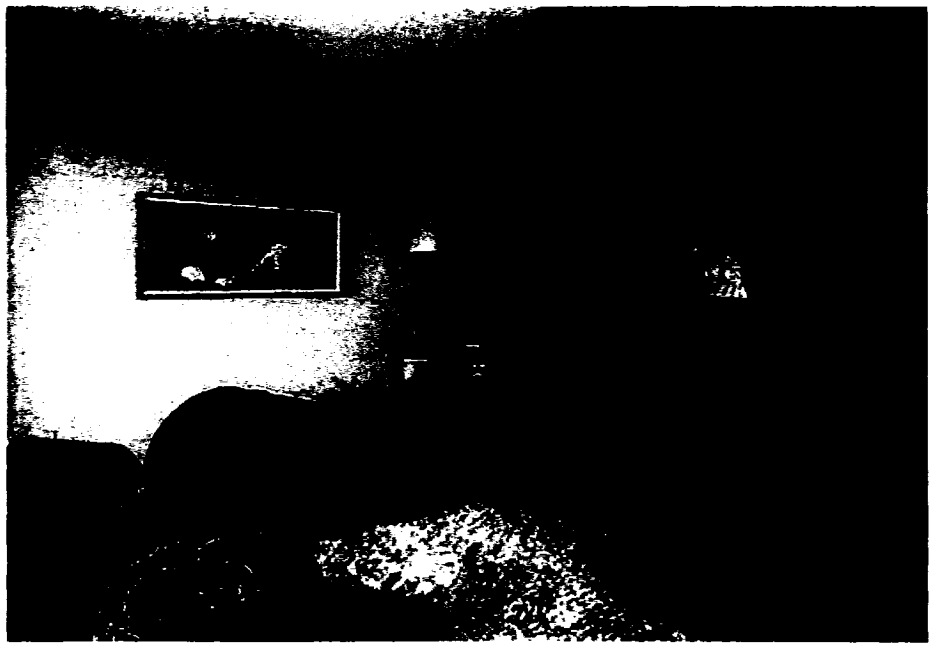

Figure 30: Lynne Cohen, *Professor's Living Room*, 1972, gelatin silver print, 43.5 x 47 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

Figure 31: Lynne Cohen, *Laboratory*, late 1990s, dye coupler print, 122.5 x 158.2 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

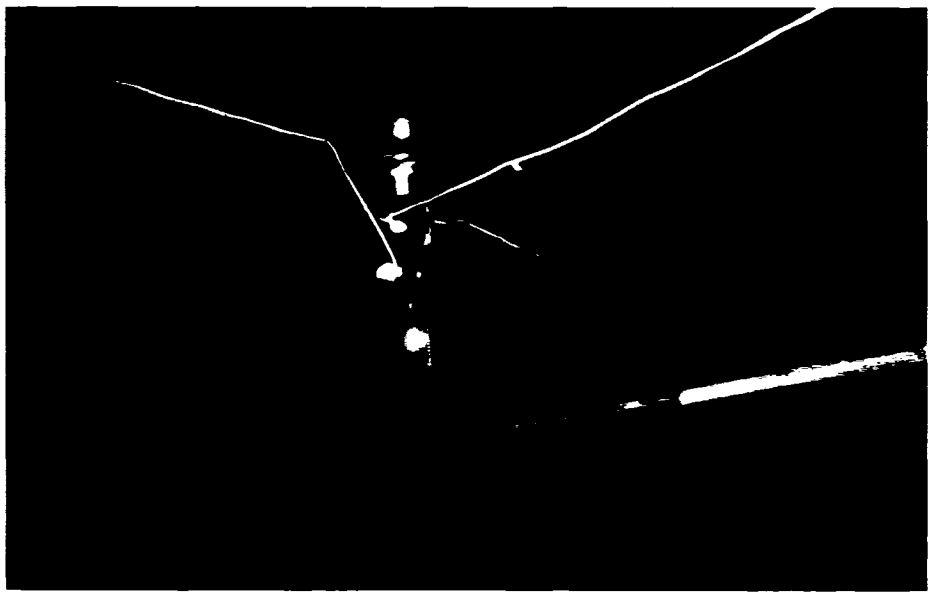

Figure 32: William Eggleston, *Untitled (Greenwood, Mississippi)*, 1973, dye transfer print, 50.8 x 60 cm. Collection of Paul Ringger, Jr., and Keenon McCloy, Memphis, Tennessee.

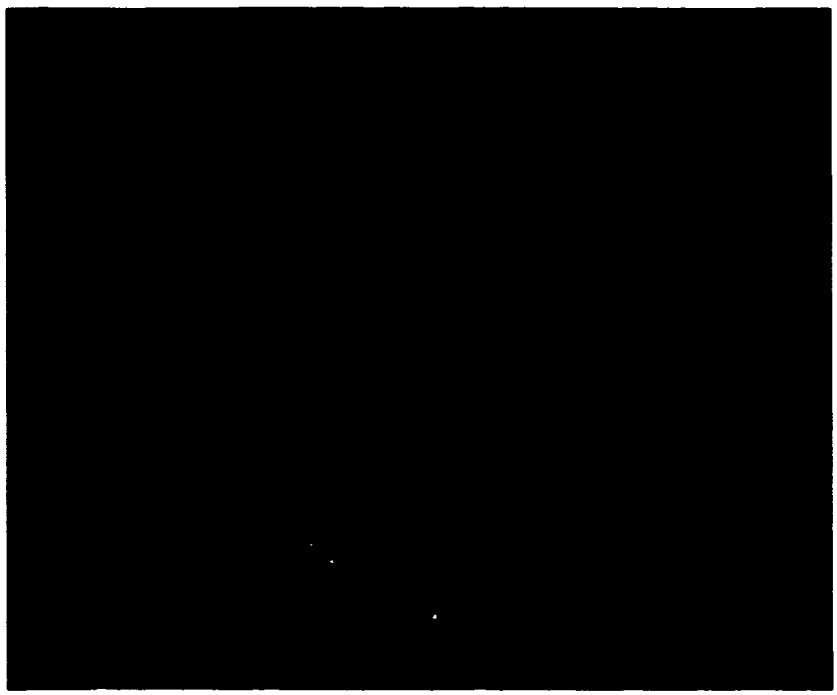

Figure 33: Andres Serrano, *Burnt to Death III*, from *The Morgue* series, 1992, cibachrome print, silicone, Plexiglas, and wood frame, 125.7 x 152.4 cm. Collection of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

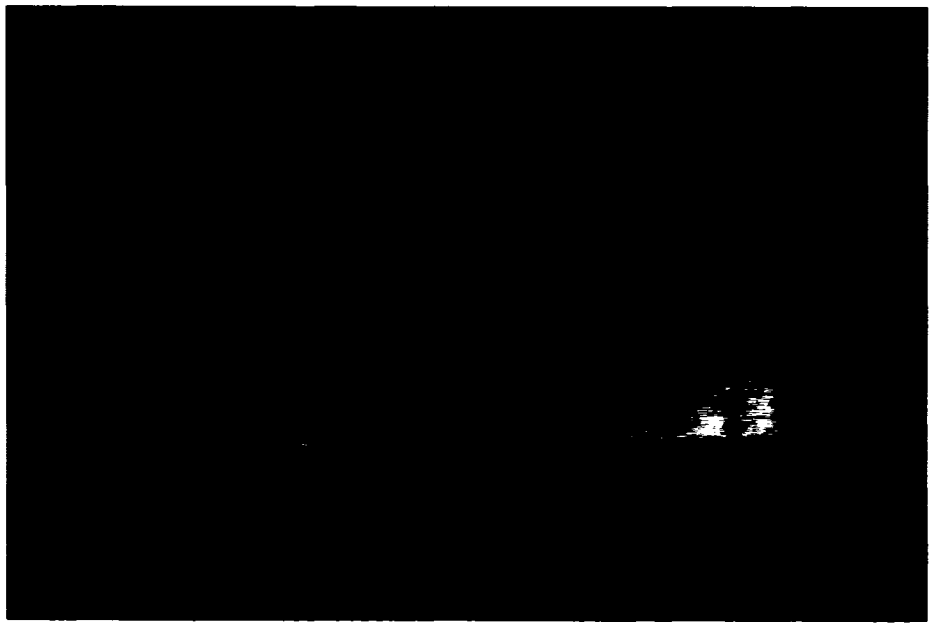

Figure 34: William Eggleston, *Untitled*, 1971, dye transfer print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm. Collection of Bruce Berman and Rose Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

Figure 35: Stephen Shore, *El Paso Street, El Paso, Texas, July 5, 1975*, Ektacolour type-c print, 35.6 x 43.2 cm. Collection of the Light Gallery, New York.

Figure 36: Lynne Cohen, *Club*, 2001, dye coupler print, 127 x 153.4 cm. Private collection.

Figure 37: Martin Parr, *Untitled*, from the *Common Sense* series, 1995-1999, c-print, 102.9 x 157.5 cm. Collection of the Rocket Gallery, London.

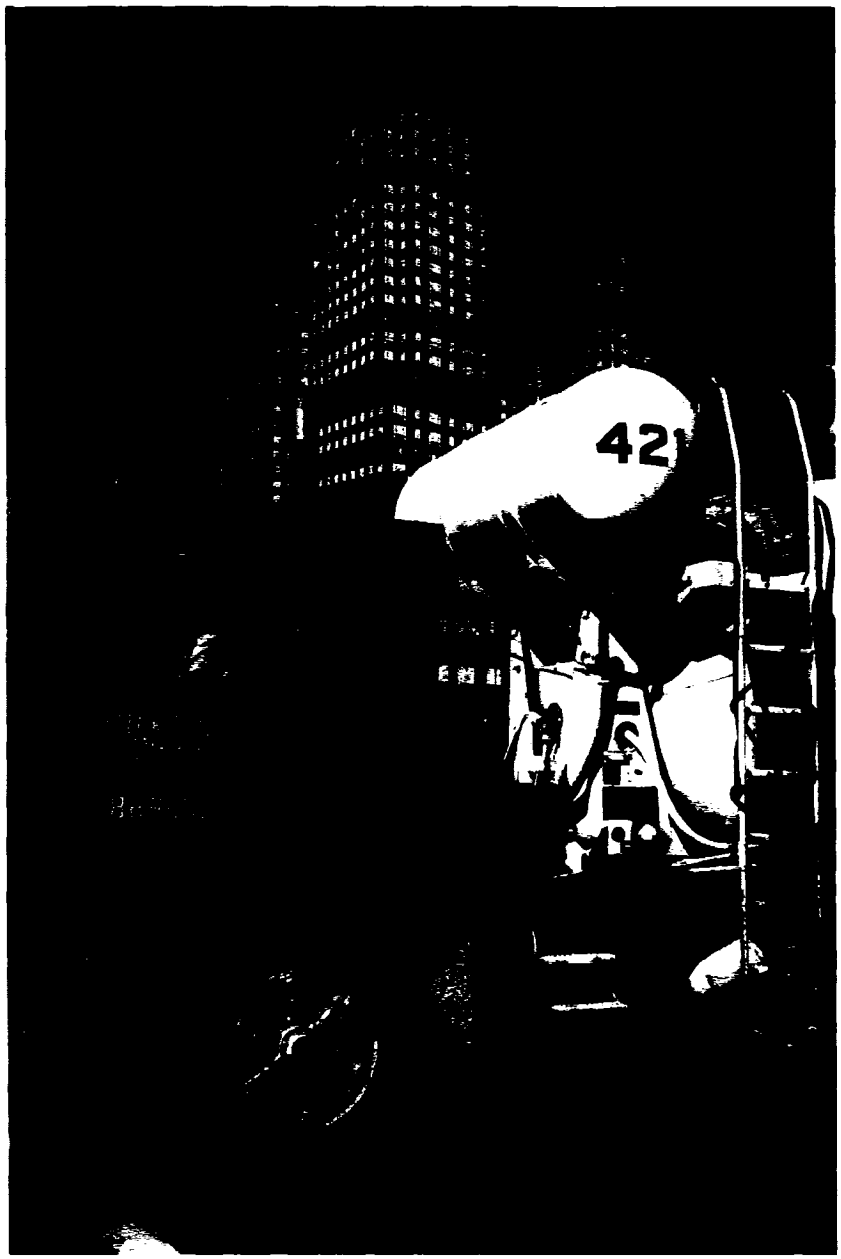

Figure 38: Robert Walker, *Untitled*, from the *Color is Power* series, 2000, colour print on plastic film, 50.8 x 61.6 cm. Collection of the artist.

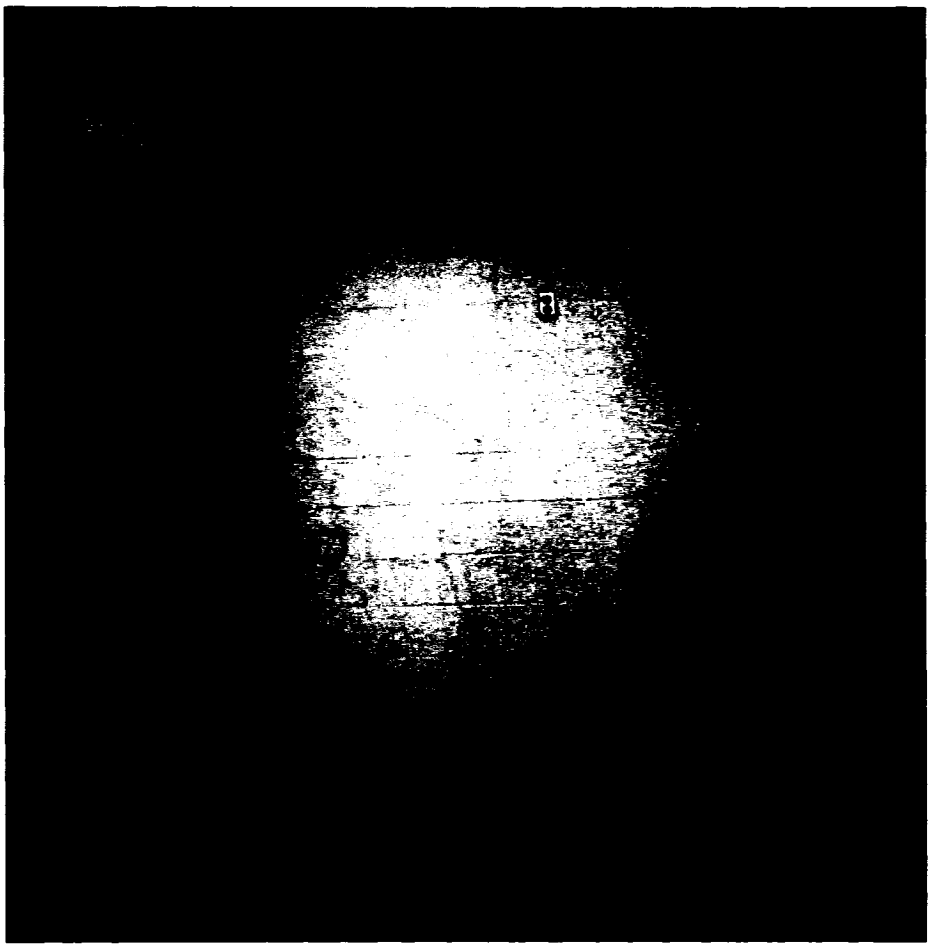

Figure 39: Scott Fortino, *End of cell block corridor, police facility, Pullman*, 2004. Collection of the artist.

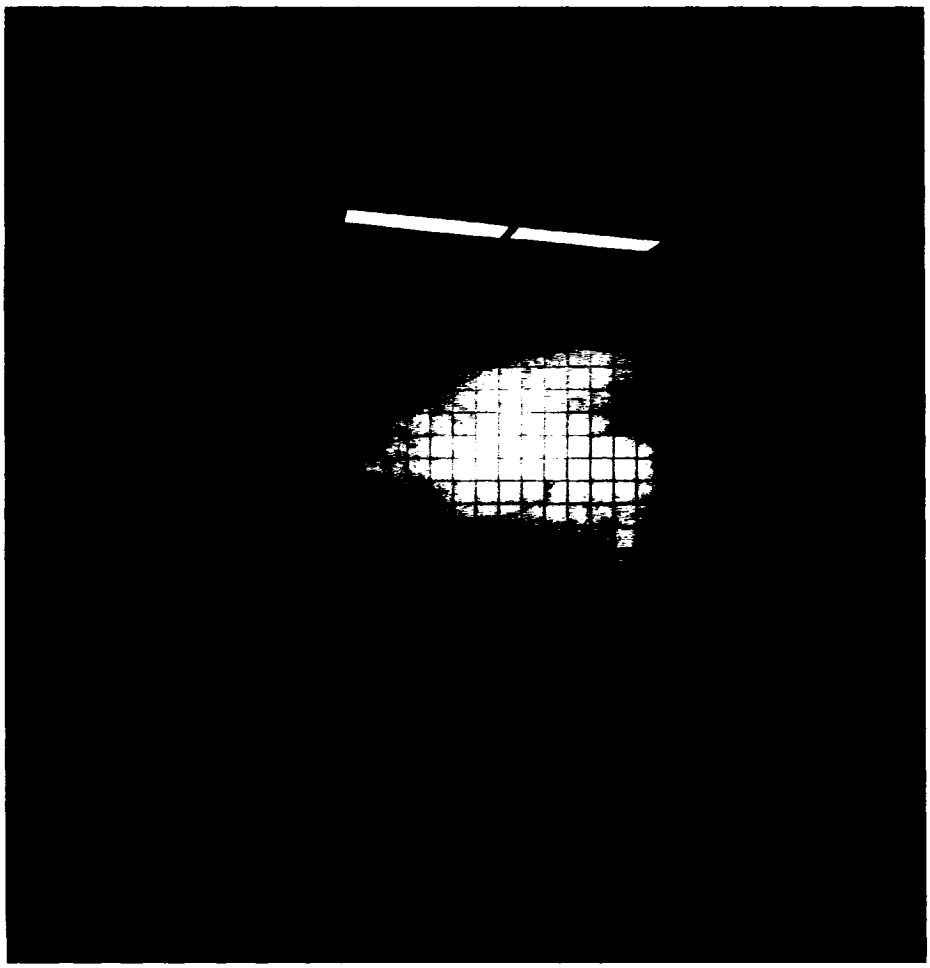

Figure 40: Scott Fortino, *Stairway, Northside College Preparatory High School, Albany Park*, 2004. Collection of the artist.

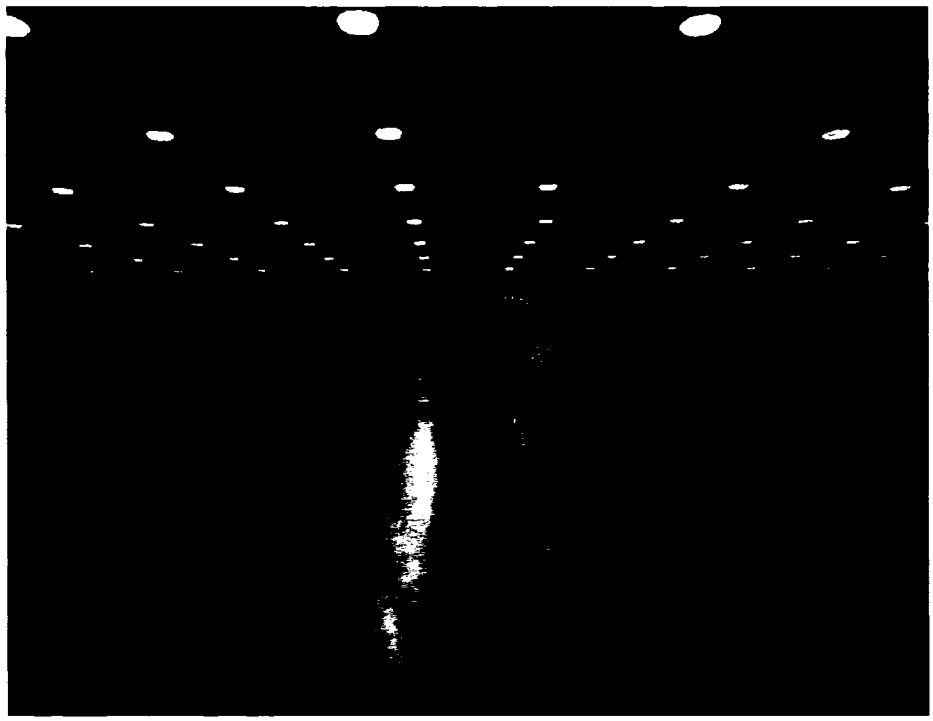

Figure 41: Lynne Cohen, *Laboratory*, 1999, dye coupler print, 111 x 131.5 cm. Collection of P.P.O.W., New York.

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