

Gerhard Graulich

## Picture Rooms

An essential characteristic of contemporary photography is that, in it, the medium itself undergoes a self-questioning to arrive at an autonomy of the picture.

Irrespective of whether photography wishes to reproduce views, details and moments, and from the continuum of the pictures only a few exposures remain, photography nevertheless mediates specific insights into the representational world.

Especially space, time and picture come together in an indispensable dialogue.

According to the laws of awareness, photography reveals photographs, which bestows permanency to it. The photographic picture naturally contradicts the physiological view, which it carries out in a constant flow. But the things themselves oppose the positivism of the apparatus, because light and shadow, colour and film material have, collectively, a barely calculable life of their own, as paradigmatically the pictures of the Hamburg photographer, Edgar Lissel, also make clear.

Lissel is interested in the openness of his photographic realisations, above all in his current work in which he prefers to turn to the technique of the camera obscura. At the same time, he is in no way concerned with the principle as such, or with a return to the past values of the beginning of photography. Lissel uses much more the peculiarities of the camera obscura to relate things and rooms to each other with immediacy so that the pictures appear as unadulterated as possible, which naturally does not exclude the possibility of the view being distorted or overexposed. His long exposure times give the effect of an almost painterly dimension, which is mediated in the nuance of the grey and colour values of the motifs. It is nevertheless the light and shadow depictions in the interiors that are of an extremely subtle consistence. In contrast, the traditional lens apparatus creates pictures obligated to a functional understanding of the optical, and are distinguished by a corrective focusing of the reproductions.

In Lissel's conception of pictures, however, it is a matter of relationships in flux between the room and the object, of which he is continuously concerned with capturing. Since 1999 he has worked on his so-called glass-cabinet project, in which he exposes objects exhibited in various glass cabinets. Edgar Lissel visited

numerous museums for this, among others, the Focke-Museum in Bremen, the Hannover Museum of History, the Museum for Art and Trade in Hamburg, the Berlin Pergamon Museum and the Palace Museum in Güstrow. As unusual as the undertaking may seem, to convert glass cabinets into camera rooms, the consideration is nevertheless so natural, because in this process the objects are not only projected, but are taken into the factual space of the camera obscura. At Güstrow Palace, for example, Lissel chooses a glass cabinet from the showrooms of Italian painting and sculpture, in which an 18th century sculpture of Hermes – based upon the famous copy of the Statue of Giovanni da Bologna (1529–1608) – is exhibited. The sculpture, with its elegantly flowing movement, stands in the central axis of the exhibition rooms. If one looks outside, one sees the Law Courts in front of the museum, and the portal house through which visitors reach the entrance to the palace. In Lissel's picture, due to the principle of the pinhole camera, the portal building floats over, respectively, behind the head of the Hermes, while the sculpture in the glass cabinet presents itself erect. Because the light now falls upon the sculpture from behind, it appears bright, because the shadow room – meaning the area between the sculpture and the photographic paper – cannot, or barely, be exposed.

It is remarkable that Lissel has constructed a second room for the creation of large-format photographs around the glass cabinets, in which the opening for the incoming light has been drilled in the front wall; the photographic paper, however, is fastened to the rear wall of the glass cabinet. The objects farther back in the surrounding room appear as negative, while the object in the glass cabinet is perceived as positive. The counter-flow of the picture alignment, which contradicts the viewer's awareness at that moment, is noticeable. Because the perspective of the picture leads from the depth into the foreground, thus orientated to the viewer, the viewer attempts to reverse the process and to return the depth back to the rear. The aporia of the lighting finds its peak in the sculpture, because as the brightest object it dominates the picture, and apparently from the outside – which means from the front – it is exposed, although the light actually comes from the rear. This fact, which is valid for black-and-white photographs, is presented in colour photographs as an opposite, so that the relationship of figure and ground appears reversed there. If one views Lissel's pictures in respect of their subject, the constantly returning window motif is noticeable, which is to be seen in all of the works in the series. Photography certainly requires light, which as artificial, but also as natural light, can enter through the

window. The motif reference, however, is clarified, which, by the way, since the time of the Renaissance belongs to the topos of the modern definition of pictures, which goes beyond the level of documentation here, to newly formulate the symbolic dimension of the picture before this transparency.

Edgar Lissel's photographs actually present conjunctions between the interior and the outer room. In so far as the chosen exhibition pieces are shown in connection with the surrounding sphere, they leave the isolation of the glass cabinet sphere – but also the isolation of the museum. The glass cabinet is therefore open to discussion as an antiquated form of representation, because due to the hypertrophy of the object, it has lost its connection to the real sphere: due to its transparency, the glass cabinet makes visible without being visible itself.

At this point Lissel places his interest on the room construction, because the glass cabinet is always a means to an end, and is registered as a passive space. In so far as the glass cabinet, however, gains a new definition as a pinhole camera, it wins active features, which extends the view of the object, the limitation of the glass cabinet and the space.

Lissel's interventions constantly take place temporarily, and are bound to a great expenditure of energy. He sometimes requires up to one week for the setting up of an installation, as well as the exposure of the photographic paper. In which, by means of the principle of the camera obscura, the glass cabinets and the objects are included in the installations, and the respective space within them, respectively, around them, change into an individual sphere. This process was already constitutive in the artist's early photographs, as he realised picture rooms with the use of a furniture truck or individual living rooms, which through his intervention advanced to become defined rooms of art. In this is also one of the reasons to be seen why Lissel relinquishes additional manipulation in the darkroom. His interest lies primarily in the picture, which he wishes to conserve as a reproduction.