

Vom  
Werden  
und  
Vergehen  
der  
Bilder

**Edgar  
Lissel**

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# Concentrations of Space

Inge Nevole

Borders form barriers – they separate, violently seal off spaces from one another. At the same time, they create connections. Borderlines are often not clearly defined; they are blurry, flow into one another and gradually dissolve. Edgar Lissel analyzes and evaluates the functions of borders. His works evolve slowly; they are products of meticulous, interwoven artistic processes, which correlate congenially with the content of the visual expressions. Light-specific factors, temporal overlaps, and irritating spatial positioning condense into complex image compositions in his works. Historical and scientific aspects form a superordinate framework that loosely connects his individual projects.

In his early work the artist experimented with the camera obscura. First, he converted a truck into a pinhole camera. The dark vault without a correcting lens (camera obscura) produced direct depictions of its real environment: focused through a tiny hole, light rays were directed into an otherwise darkened space. Large format photographic paper mounted opposite to the opening captured the light rays. The result was upside-down negative images; light becomes shadow, shadows shine in blazing light.

*Città del Duce* and *Illusion der Macht* [Illusion of Power] investigate the architectural remnants of dictatorships, which have been preserved to this day in Forlì, an Italian town in the immediate vicinity of Mussolini's birthplace, and in Berlin, Adolf Hitler's political center. The buildings – exhibitions of manmade self-aggrandizement – are staged with a pinhole camera in a stunning sharpness and with theatrical depth. The observer is directly confronted with the large-scale images of these buildings isolated from their urban context. The images cast a spell, fascinating and animating the viewer to enter

the (image) space. While the buildings in Forlì are portrayed in an austere black and white with different gray scales, in Berlin they are typically immersed in shimmering color, like an aura floating above the object. Only later, almost too late, does it become clear that the people have vanished from the images because of the extremely long exposure time.

Deception through stagings was a main strategy in both fascist and National Socialist architecture. Edgar Lissel adopted this maxim in his early works, placing an aesthetic veil over these self-referential gigantomaniac monuments. He beguiles and concocts illusions – our otherwise acute defensive mechanism against dictatorial self-representation is irritated anew, when not suspended on the short term. The artist confronts us firmly with the unfading latent danger of falling prey to their allure.

Edgar Lissel also used the camera obscura to create the series *Gotteshäuser* [Houses of God], presented once again in color. The images were exposed on similarly large, back-lit film transparencies, provoking associations with church windows. The buildings, important centers in the urban fabric, appear isolated from their usual surroundings and dramatized as sculptures. With their glowing colorfulness and the deserted sceneries, they feel distanced, like fragments of an alien world, but also dominant objects that endured the ages.

The relationship between inside and outside space is explored in *Räume – Fotografische Dekonstruktionen* [Rooms – Photographic Deconstructions]. In place of the truck, now an entire living room has been converted into a camera obscura. Furniture and personal possessions remained in the room; they reappear in the images as photograms. Upon

Città del Duce



Città del Duce



Illusion of Power



Houses of God



darkening the space, Lissel let light fall through a tiny hole onto a piece of photo paper installed in the room. In this way, it captured both the objects in the room and – inverted and upside-down – the situation of the outside space.

Almost coincidentally, large format house scenery and the white surfaces of the photograms combine into an overall image. Spatial borders seem to transcend; they are successively blended out, flow into one another, and gradually vanish. This interlocking of inside and outside space in Lissel's works suspends the semblance of reality otherwise characteristic for the images generated by the camera obscura and photograms. Although the individual objects usually remain recognizable as such, here they seem obscured; their position in space is nebulous. Similar to a collage or a paper-cutting, they seem to be draped on the background, but with the loss of three-dimensionality the image foreground merges into the back. The newly created third space is purely fictional, unique in its properties, and as such irreproducible.

Given the long exposure, time is also compressed and ultimately concentrated into a single image. Varying light moods, slow or oft-repeated movements, like the gentle fluttering of a dress hung out to dry, are perceived as disturbing blurs on an image otherwise marked by extremely sharp contours. People walking on the street, birds flying by, or fast motions characteristic of everyday urban life disappear completely. The household interior seems reevaluated, now imbued by the artist with a sculptural, monumental quality. The intimacy of the private is broken open; the inside space is put on public display.

In his next project Edgar Lissel worked with museum vitrines. He used black cloths to convert these spaces of glass for the presentation of artworks into a pinhole camera. It was important to maintain the presence of the museum exhibits in the glass cases. The resulting photograms return these sculptures and artworks from a bygone era – now in a symbiosis with the image of the outside space – back to their place of origin: the space beyond the vitrine. This intimate space, usually only viewed from the outside, is opened up, allowing the formerly segregated observer to explore the inner depths of the display. In this altered vantage point the objects appear in detail, often refracted and distorted by the edges of the vitrines and light reflections. The fusion of the objects with today's cityscape is irritating and confusing; the exact position or certainty about the “real” appearance is largely impossible.

A feeling of insecurity is evoked by photograms faintly reminiscent of people's figures, whose shapes turn out to be sculptures upon closer inspection. These objects, too, are removed from their museum context, visually modified, and therewith repositioned physically and spatially. Their transcendental bodies seem to float; material loses its weight in the encounter with the light-flooded outside space. After their escape from the narrow confines of the museum the figures appear weightless, as if redeemed.

A colossal building – a ruinous, slowly sinking submarine bunker from the Second World War – juts out of the sea like a monolith. Light worlds of water and clouds meet rough, massive walls. The underlying idea was to use this bunker, once a place of danger and destruction, as a space where new

Rooms –  
Photographic Deconstructions



Rooms of Glass



things can emerge. To this end, the flak tower was converted into a pinhole camera. As parts of the bunker were under the water surface, the photographic material had to be sunk in part as well. Therefore, light not only fell directly onto the photographic paper, the rays also reflected off the water surface and illuminated the porous building substance. Thus, the final image contains a layering of various exposure values. In combination with the blurriness of the colors, the works *Lichtbilder im Wasser* [Light Images in Water] seem as if they were painted on the photo paper.

In the context of Edgar Lissel's scenes exploring monuments and memorials, the pinhole camera works as a congenial counterpart. Originally developed to capture the outer reality as precisely as possible and used as an aid for detailed drawing, the camera obscura lost its importance in the early nineteenth century. Edgar Lissel redefines the application of the apparatus in a new artistic way. Although he remains quite true to reality in terms of the authenticity of the spaces and the depicted objects – no space was altered or dramatized in its content – formally his works are not about exact replicas of reality. Details, temporal concentrations, spatial overlaps, refracting and intersecting rays of light as well as irritating positionings lead to a conscious clipping and distortion of the objects. In the tradition of painting, they give way to a dematerialization of the object and thereby change the perception of space and time. Conflicts are never solved entirely. On the contrary, the artist stages them through discourse, leaving their interpretation open.

Light and time are also dominant factors in Lissel's complex work group *Bakterium* [Bacterium]. For this

project the artist cultivated photo-sensitive cyano bacteria in round petri dishes. Negatives were then projected onto the organisms as an activator. Similar to the development of a photogram, the bacteria settled upon the transparent spaces and avoided the dark areas of the negative projection. By changing the intensity and position of the light, the artist could manipulate the performative movement. The removal of the light source at the end of the process made a clear break. A documentary photo captured this one-off and irretrievable moment, which was followed by the ultimate destruction of the unconservable object. For the developmental process, the choice of the motif to be projected on the petri dishes was of central importance.

In *WASSER LICHT(ET) GESCHICHTE* [Water Light(s) History] Lissel returned to the sequence of the slowly sinking submarine bunker “Kilian”. Like the building itself, its image is also in a state of transition. The soft and subtle colors of the object amalgamate with the background; the normally delineating lines vaguely dissolve the complex. In *Selbstzeugnisse* [Self-Testimonials] the bacteria now became the image content. Viewed through a microscope, Lissel captured the streams of the bacteria flowing toward the light, while he controlled and manipulated their movement with a light source. Like strokes of a paint brush, they began to draw thin, vaguely broken parallel lines. Occasional overlaps of bacteria bundles created spiral or wave patterns, which ended in mountainous protrusions or crater-like depressions.

These peculiar microcosms continued in the work *Der Weg zum Licht* [The Way to the Light]. Three large-scale projection walls formed a nearly enclosed space that virtually absorbed the observer. On each

Light Images in Water



WATER LIGHT(S) HISTORY



Self-Testimonials



screen was a projection in subtle blue tones, precisely following the microscopic movements of the bacteria. Stasis and surges of movement alternated at irregular intervals. Fascinating forms became visible: spiraling vortices, intersecting rods, or tentacular particles depicting the wandering bacteria in real time. Not the bacteria per se but their movements became the brush stroke controlled by the light.

As a logical next step, Edgar Lissel explored typical motifs from painting in the project *Vanitas*. A dead fish, a rotting apple, a curled leaf – all of these objects are apparently in a state of decay. However, we are here once again dealing with bacteria images, which are simply reflections of the imagination of the artist – none of the presumed objects are real. Like the stream of bacteria guided by the light, Lissel also manipulates our stream of thoughts by calling upon our declarative memory. Due to our acquired knowledge, we immediately think we recognize a fish or an apple – the manipulative deception works.

An inversion of this concept took place in the series *Domus Aurea*, which was realized in Rome and Hamburg. As the departure point for this work, Lissel chose the frescoes of the colossal Roman building that Emperor Nero ordered to be built in 64 AD but remained incomplete after his death in 68 AD. Buried during the reign of his successor Trajan, the spaces were rediscovered in 1480. Recently found and extracted during excavation work, a red-colored bacteria culture called *Leptolyngbya* is today blamed for the ongoing destruction of the frescoes. Lissel employed these bacteria on the wall of an artificial room and illuminated them for several weeks with a negative image of an already destroyed fresco from the

*Domus Aurea*. This bacteria culture also oriented toward the brighter parts of the image and therewith began to reproduce the outlines of the fresco. Deconstruction and construction merged into a new independent image.

In *Myself* the artist personally became part of the work. An imprint from his body transferred bacteria on his skin into an agar nutrient solution. The growth process began, and an image of the body became visible. At certain points, however, the bacteria quickly took on a spontaneous life of their own; they only vaguely traced the body shape and formed an own standalone image. Similar to wet paint wiped away with a sponge, they created frame-like scattered dots, structured blotches, or fine fading lines, evidencing the continuous growth of the bacteria. While the soft structure of the skin barely left an impression in the solution, around the subtle edges of the outline of the body original, almost picturesque forms emerged.

Bacteria are one of the basic constituents of all life. Lissel uses them, intervenes in their development and their movement. Affected in this way, the bacteria tell stories, imitate motifs and scenes. The projected images only serve as loose guidelines. The simultaneous influences of light, time, movement, and space cause the individual components to condense into independent, irreproducible, and thus unique images, whose dynamic development process concludes with the disengagement from the context of the original content.

In his third major series *Fluoreszenz* [Fluorescence] Lissel takes the light and movement aspects of his earlier works and combines them in an enclosed installative space. A container situated in the port

Domus Aurea



Vanitas



Myself



of Aegina (Greece), in Berlin, and in Paris functioned like a camera obscura in principle. In *Mnemosyne I – Light Memory* Lissel employed luminescent afterglow pigments in place of photographic paper. A mechanism slowly opened and closed the lens of the camera obscura, alternating the container between complete darkness and glaring light. Gradually, an image of the respective urban or harbor environment began to appear on the coated canvas. Incidental daylight triggered the image development process; the illuminated color pigments eagerly absorbed the incoming light rays. Upon the subsequent darkening of the space by closing the lens, the luminescent pigments radiated the imprinted image back into the darkness. The container was illuminated by a peculiar light for a certain time – the fluorescent pigments preserved the already past scenes for some moments thereafter. Moments that were already history continued to glow with a slight time delay, until the image became weaker and vanished. Then the charging process began once again.

In contrast to his earlier works with the camera obscura, now Edgar Lissel produced concentrated impressions of longer term scenes. People strolling along the wharf, ships docking in the port, changing light atmospheres, or passing cloud constellations are unified into one image. Lissel returns to the original idea of photography by capturing a moment with the luminescent pigments. But the preserved image is erased and superimposed by new images just a few moments later.

The installation *Mnemosyne II* followed a similar principle, however it enhanced the aforementioned concept with another component. The observer once again entered a darkened room. Foils with thin vertical strips were mounted on the opposite wall, which consisted of alternating surfaces with

mirrors and luminescent pigments. Upon entering the installation, one only saw a fragmentary mirror image due to the diffuse light source. Suddenly, there was a piercing flash of light – the pigments recorded the shadow of the observer and preserved it for some moments. The role of the viewer changed abruptly; unexpectedly, one became the center of the installation. While there was still a sketchy afterglow of the first image, new flashes were already triggered at random intervals. The closer the observer approached the foil, the sharper the contours; when further away, the outline of the body blurred, becoming softer and more subtle. The resulting overlaps of numerous glowing shadows in different intensities in combination with the realistic mirror image created a dynamic process that documented the movements of the recipient. While you cannot escape your own reflection, you can free yourself from your shadow(s).

The individual, abstractly preserved traces of the shadow, which were in a permanent dialogue with the mirror image, were irritating and confusing at the same time. Only the memory of the observer in the space could connect the individual moments. The observer thus became an integral component of the installation; only the observer alone coordinated the images formed by his or her movement, and the reconstruction of the overall process was only possible with his or her knowledge.

Edgar Lissel's critical approach reveals new and altered ways of seeing. The unconventional perspectives and vantage points of his images surprise us; they seem illusory and manipulative. In his stagings of the phenomena of light, space, and time the artist achieves fascinating and enigmatic images of the moment, which endure as relicts of a world that cannot always be completely explained.

Mnemosyne I



Mnemosyne II

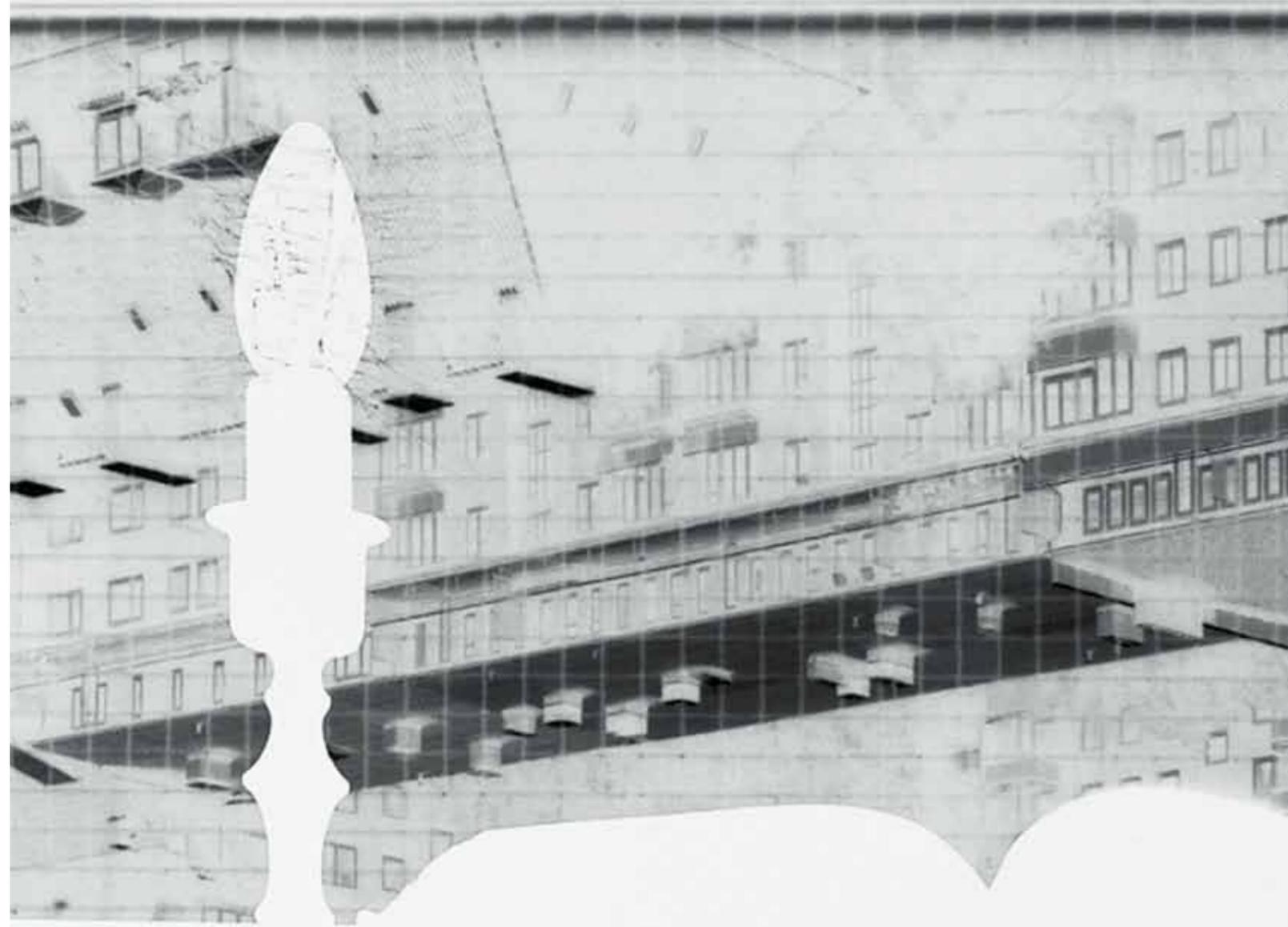
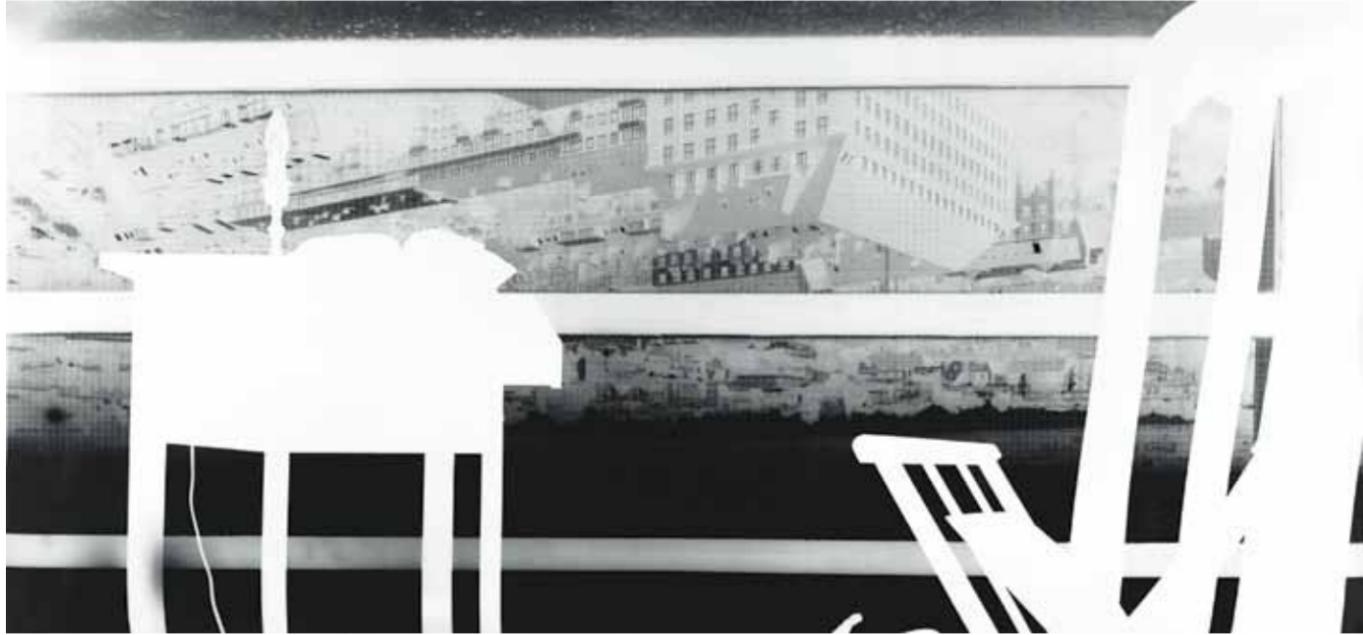


## Rooms – Photographic Deconstructions

1995–1997

Living spaces including the furniture and other everyday objects were converted into a traversable pinhole camera. The room is completely dark; light only falls through a tiny hole in the window onto the large sheet of photo paper mounted opposite to the opening.











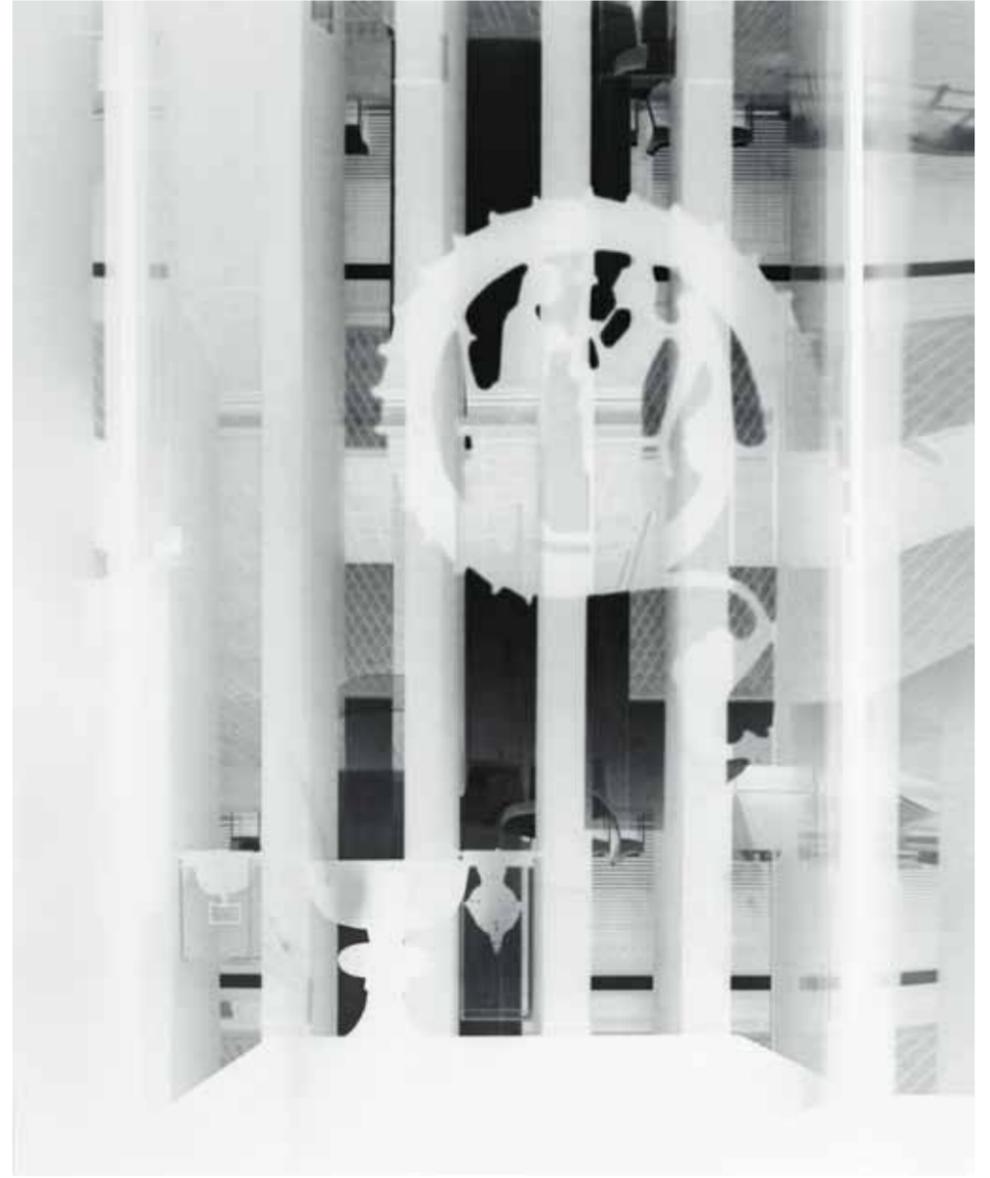
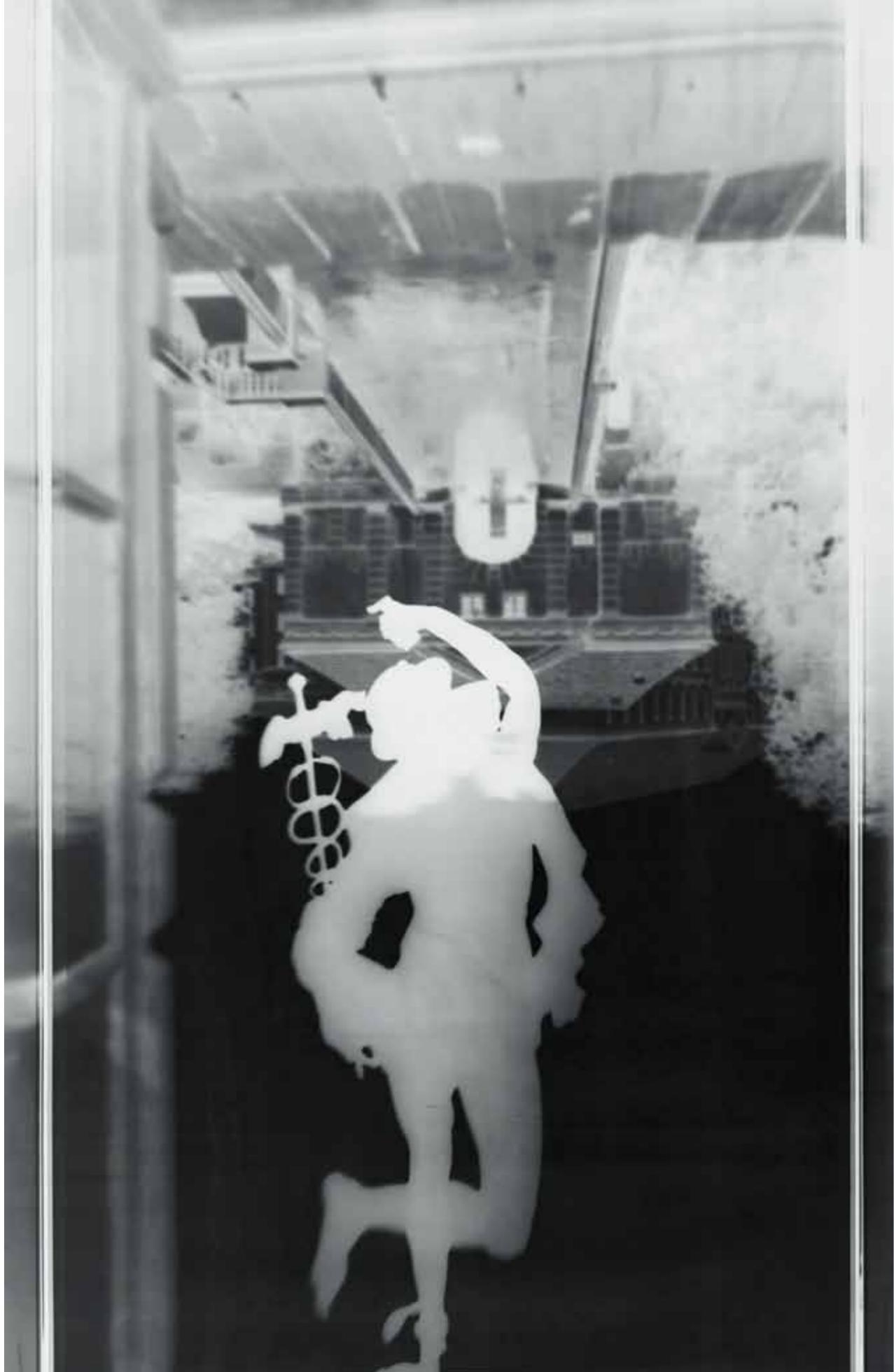


## Rooms of Glass

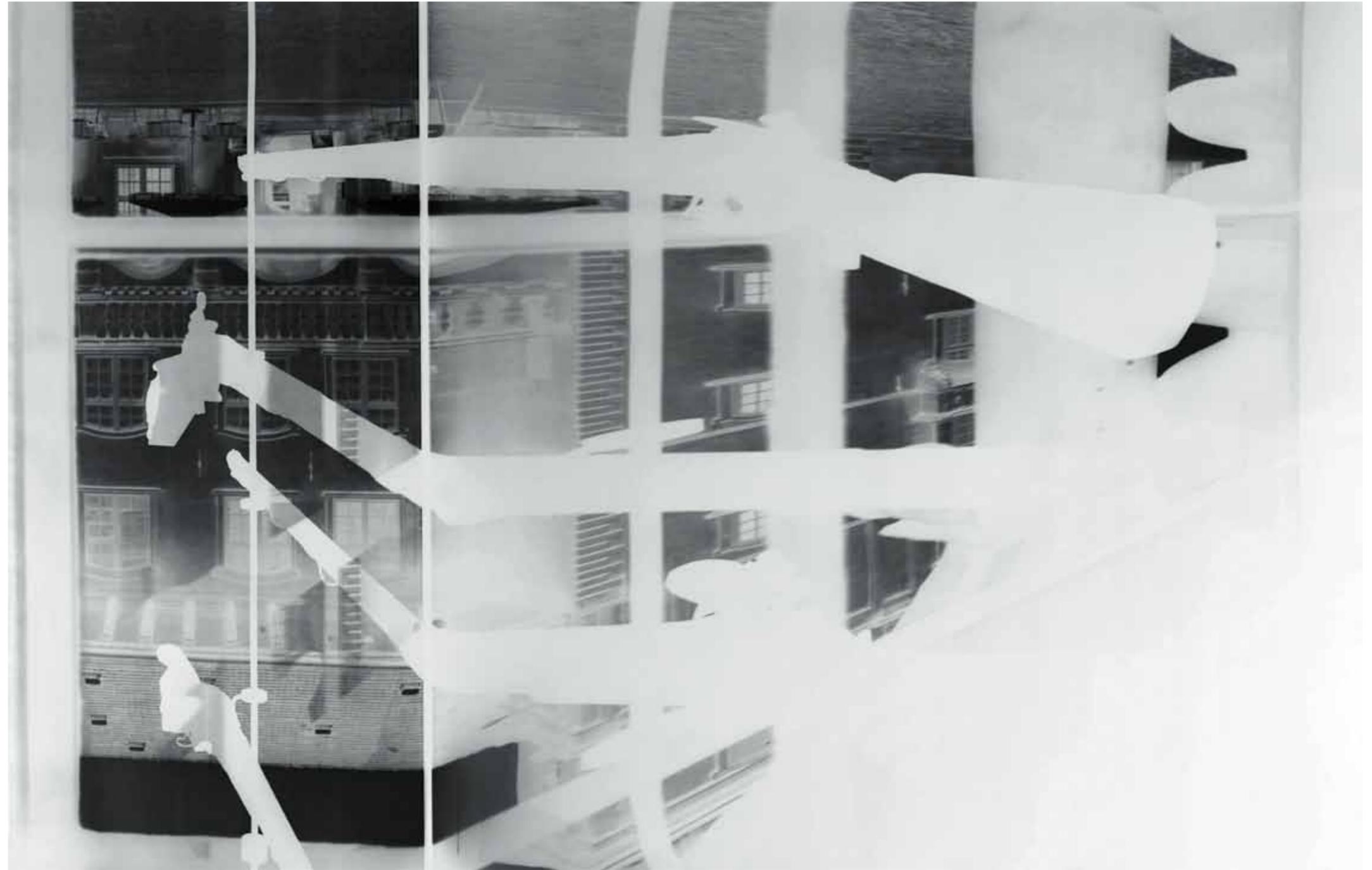
1999–2002

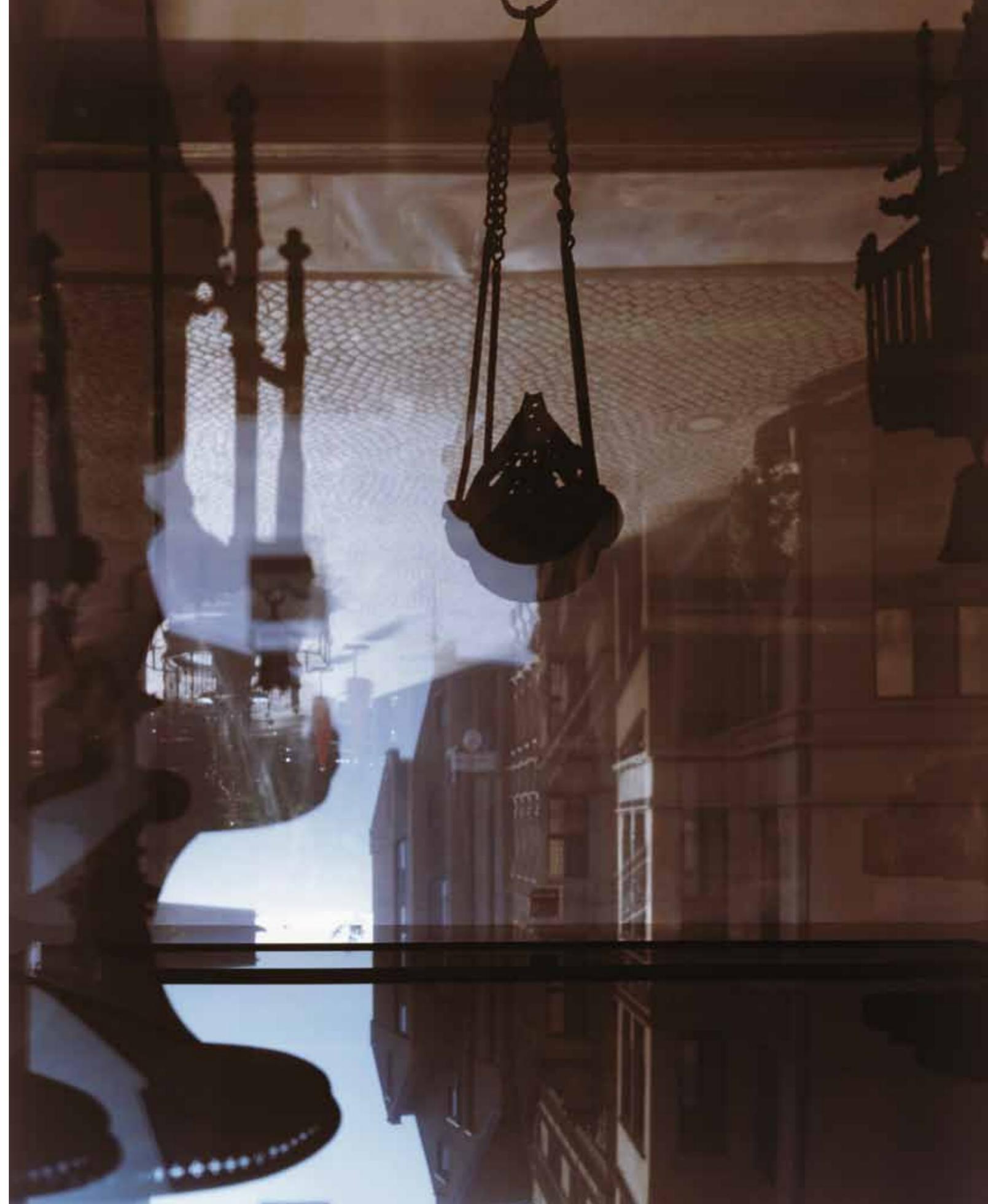
Vitrines in museums together with their exhibits are covered with black cloth, turning them into a camera obscura. In this way, the artificiality of the vitrine space is emphasized while a new productive function is attained: a camera producing pictures.

















## Light Images in Water

1997

The starting point for this work is a flak tower of a submarine bunker, which is converted into a pinhole camera. Photographic paper was partly sunk into the water. The special situation, where parts of the photographic material as well as segments of the bunker are under the water surface, causes the light not only to fall directly onto the photographic paper – the rays also refract and reflect off the water surface. Thus, the final image contains a layering of the different refraction factors of the light rays.







## Bacterium – WATER LIGHT(S) HISTORY

1999/2000

Cyano bacteria are cultivated in round petri dishes and poured into an agar nutrient emulsion. Due to their photo-tactical properties, they tend toward the light. In my first project with this image medium I projected a negative of the submarine bunker Kilian from Kiel onto the bacteria. The organisms migrated away from the dark areas and settled upon the transparent, light-flooded parts of the image.







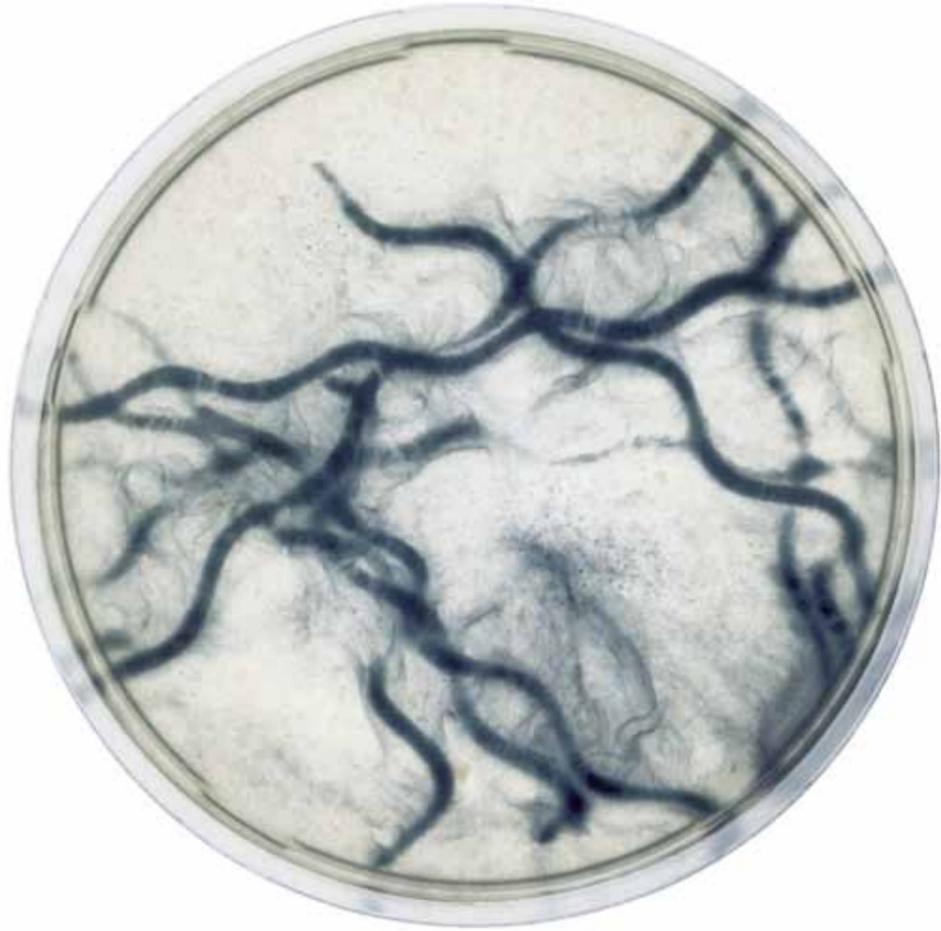


## Bacterium – Self-Testimonials

1999/2001

In this project I once again dealt with the phenomenon of cyano bacteria moving toward the light. Microscopic images of the bacteria are projected onto petri dishes filled with bacteria solution. Upon exposure to the lit negatives for several days, the organisms, due to their light dependency, emulate their own micro image.









# Life, another time

Hubertus von Amelunxen

Since its invention photography has been about the disappearance of everything that it continuously presents to us. Without expecting the images or perhaps yearning for these shadows, and with each image and every glimpse, time becomes vague, space totters, loses depth, sometimes its color, always its reference points, and with all the looking we do not know anymore if we lack more images or, in fact, the world itself. An inhuman invention, said Thomas Bernhard; for Gustave Flaubert an unbearable replication of absence.

In his approach to photography Edgar Lissel has always returned to the origins of the photographic, as if possessed by a desire for the apparent disappearance. He seized the medium, the apparatus, where it resides between the hidden trace, the undoubted has-been, but remote from our contemporary view and the luminous present. Not only has he experimented with the camera obscura under the most dauntless conditions and inverted the things of the world. In the 1990s he consequently began tests on bacteria, algae, and other rather invisible signifiers, which carry the photographic to the deepest core of nature, where creation and destruction are entangled in a dense transformation, yet distant from the gaze and lifetime of humans.

For Lissel it is always about auto-graphic and auto-reproductive processes. His art resides in the immediacy of photography, light writing – and his devotion to bacteria is perhaps remotely founded in etymology, in the root of the Greek *bakterion*, a “small staff” or “rod”, which is related to the scriptural in images. Lissel employs photography as inversion, reversing our view of the world and the things of the world while placing us, so to say, in the view of the world upon us. His art transfers spaces into the properties of their viewpoints, providing the stories of the spaces with a seeing, as it were, which we are only able to conceive as such in the gradual manifestation of the image. Perhaps unconsciously in keeping with an idea of Walter Benjamin originated for the concept of history, concerning what would happen when photographed people or buildings stand as witnesses against their present observation, Lissel often used interiors for the exposure of the external: inverted in their historical constellation so that the testifier bears witness to his testimony.

The bacteria and algae have not let go of him. The algae avoid the dark areas and “creep” into the bright. These cyano algae or cyano bacteria are photo-autotrophic; that means they independently produce their oxygen through photosynthesis and,

Rooms –  
Photographic Deconstructions



Bakterium



as schizophyte organisms, self-reproduce asexually – just like photography. And they are also very short-lived with life cycles fulfilled in a matter of a few minutes up to a few hours; through successive duplication, however, they multiply quickly, and die or reproduce in Edgar Lissel’s works on the way to an image.

The biomorphosis of the bacteria causes them to grow into an image in a type of phototonic – light-generated – mimicry and to behave in dance steps, incredibly slow dance steps, arriving after hours, days, or even weeks at the final iconic formation of the image. This self-evident yet extraordinarily painstaking path is accompanied by hundreds of thousands of reproductions and equally as many bereavements.

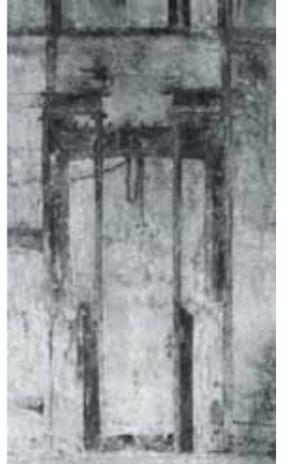
If the algae were light bearers made image, Edgar Lissel took yet another, more intricate step further in his obsession with inversions with the bacteria of the Domus Aurea, which became truly iconophagous beings on the frescos in the fabulous Roman palace of Nero. He takes the likewise photophile bacteria from the walls, cultivates them on another carrier, and then projects an image of the crumbling fresco onto the bacteria culture for several days, causing a new

image to emerge transplanted at another location. The works of Edgar Lissel are rooted in ruins and preserve even the process of decay as creation.

On September 18, 1931 Walter Benjamin spoke about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD in a Berlin radio broadcast: The devastation of the blossoming city was as veritable for the people back then as is the preservation for people today. This uncanny inversion of associating destruction with preservation is also intrinsic to the works of Edgar Lissel. Thus, one can infer a concept of photography from them, which asserts that the reproductive is also the destructive, that each repetition nevertheless feeds the hope for a next.

It is only consistent that Lissel’s latest works focus on the body, the body itself, conceived as completely irreproducible, the own singular body, just a naked imprint in brine, surrounded by diffuse points and fibers in the image, scattered; and this one image looks like the sex was amputated, around it ejaculates like from Anselm Kiefer’s *20 Years of Solitude*, moments intended for nothing and no one anymore.

Domus Aurea



# Domus Aurea

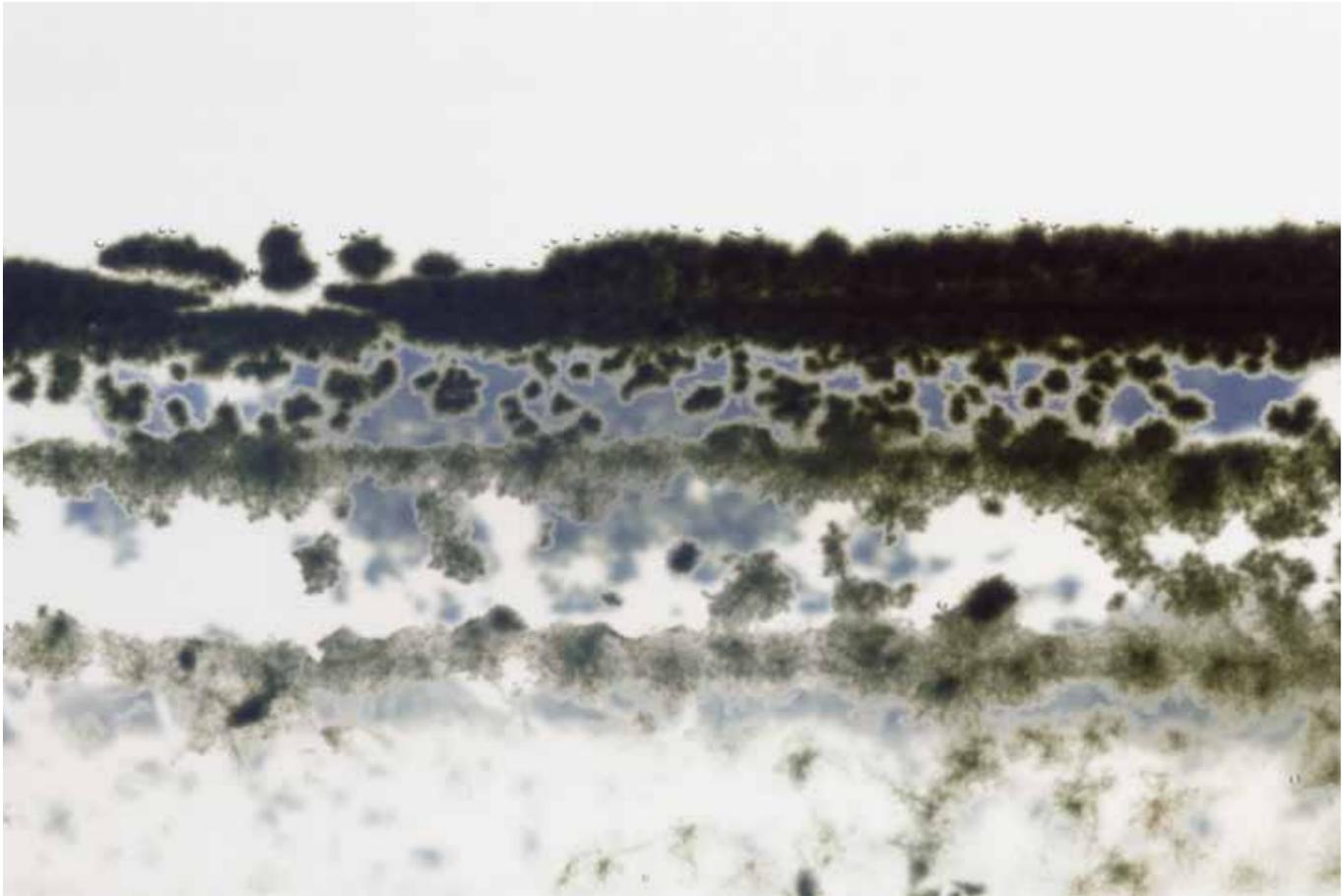
2005

Domus Aurea was built around 64 AD by Emperor Nero but remained incomplete after his death. Buried during the reign of his successor Trajan, the underground spaces and their frescoes were only rediscovered in 1480.

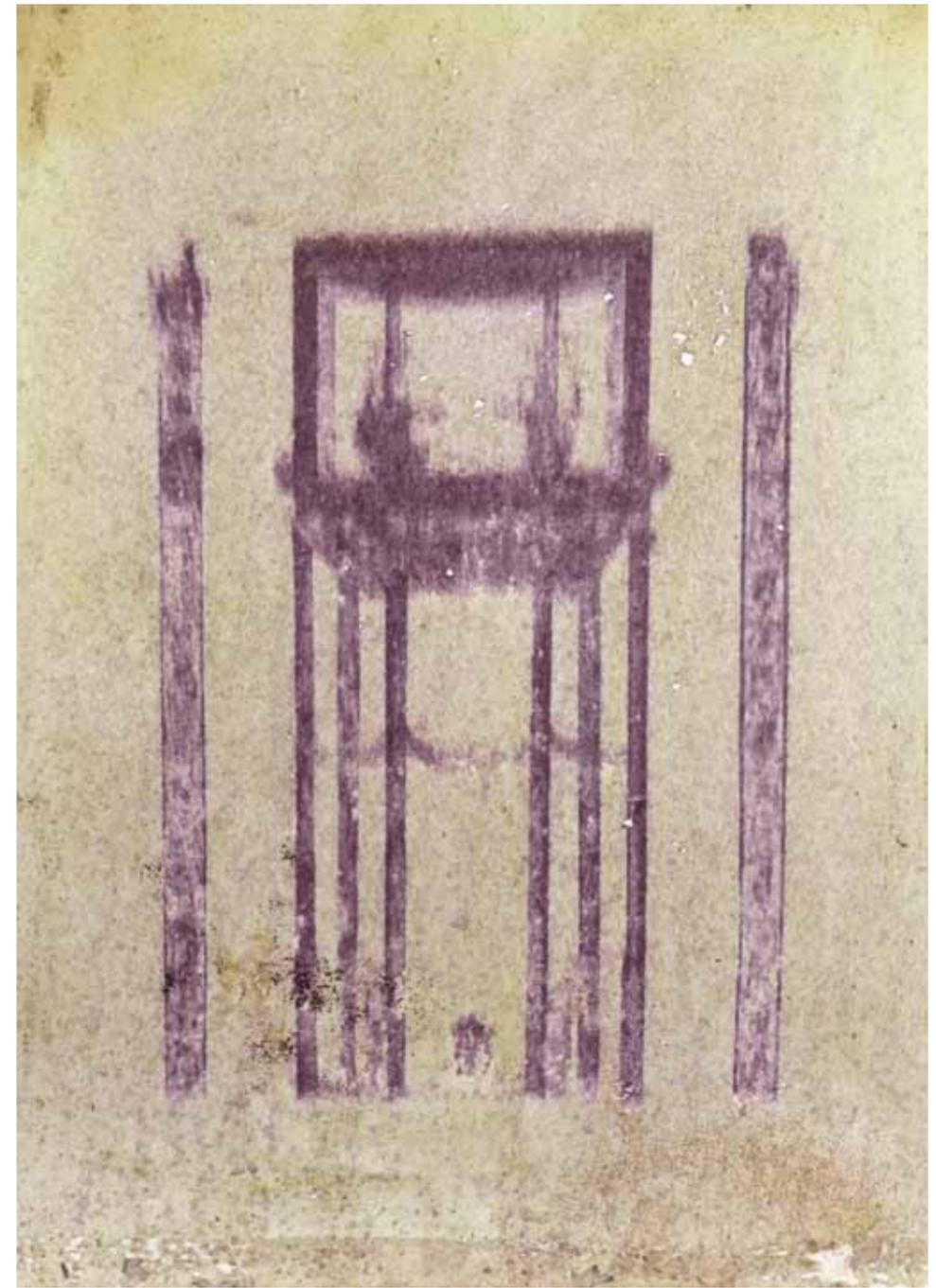
During recent excavation work a bacteria culture was discovered and extracted which is blamed for the destruction of the palaces' frescoes. In my work the same bacteria are applied to plasterboards and illuminated for several months with the image of an already destroyed fresco from Domus Aurea. Destructive in their original context, the bacteria grow toward the light and form a bacteria image of the fresco in the constructive process I initiated. The medium of destruction is inverted and employed at a different location to create a new image world.











# Iconography in the Production of Images

Martin Hochleitner

In the framework of the lecture “Kunst über Kunst” (Art about Art) at the Institute of Art Studies and Philosophy in Linz I had the opportunity to introduce Edgar Lissel’s project *Domus Aurea*, which deals with one of the most important examples of Roman mural painting in the Fourth Pompeian Style from the first century AD. Beforehand, the artist had provided me with different materials, such as architectural depictions of the “Golden House”, details of the antique murals, documentation of archaeological and restoration work, microscopic imagery, along with a series of photographs documenting the various development stages of the final bacteria fresco on plasterboard.

An attentive observation by a student led to a discussion that addressed central questions about Lissel’s artistic position. The student noticed that the artist had chosen different types of information on his website to describe the images that were shown in the lecture. Most of the presented images were simply tagged with keywords like “The Site”, “The Original”, “The Research”, “The Light”, “The Archive”, “The Medium”, “The Negative”, or “The Projection”. But the webpage also featured images whose titles “Bacteria Landscape” and “The Bacteria Fresco” were enhanced with detailed information about the respective scale and the technique employed. On one hand, the student had identified a differentiation made by Lissel himself between documentary imagery and those images designated as artworks; on the other hand, she described the phenomenon that essentially every image shown by Lissel could possess artistic virtues in the reception of the work. Hence, she had captured the artistic frame through which Lissel’s work to date must be viewed. Each of his three major work series – *Camera Obscura*, *Bakterium*, and *Fluoreszenz* – are

process-oriented configurations, which can result in images but also convey their production conditions as a decisive qualitative criterion of the artistic work as well. A basic principle manifests here, which reveals three constituent factors: First, the artistic process is highly determined by the apparatus. Second, Lissel’s visual language is media-analytical and media-reflexive. Third, the artist opens an intensive dialogue with the history and theory of photography in each of his projects.

As much as these three aspects constitute each individual image, they are also evident as interwoven elements in each work. Each project is both a contribution to photography and a metaphor for the photographic image as such. Or in other words: When Lissel creates a specific conceptual framework to generate images, he is always aware of the technical and historical requirements of image production. Hence, each image also comprises a history of the photographic image in its conception, reception, and effect. At the same time, each work conveys its own iconographic reference system. Iconography no longer serves Lissel as a medial network for external content – image and iconography become one. A system emerges that thematizes itself through its own constituent factors and media correlations. Beyond current discussions on narration and reduction in photography, Lissel’s work proves to be a fundamental reflection on photography and its position as an artistic medium. Independent of other content-related focuses and the concrete project structure, each work is infused by the artist’s profound contemplations upon photography. The essence, properties, and conditions of each image by Edgar Lissel thus become decisive elements of the work in the context of art history and through the means of photography.

## Bakterium – Vanitas

2000/2001

Once again bacteria are cultivated in petri dishes and poured into a homogenous solution. They are exposed to light in contact with various image-objects like a fish, flies, or a leaf. Similar to photograms, the objects allow only those light rays to fall onto the bacteria cultures which they don't absorb themselves. The bacteria migrate to these bright areas and settle there. The image objects are subject to their own decay. During the course of the several-day image creation process the object changes. The decay of the original is juxtaposed with the emergence of the image.









## Myself

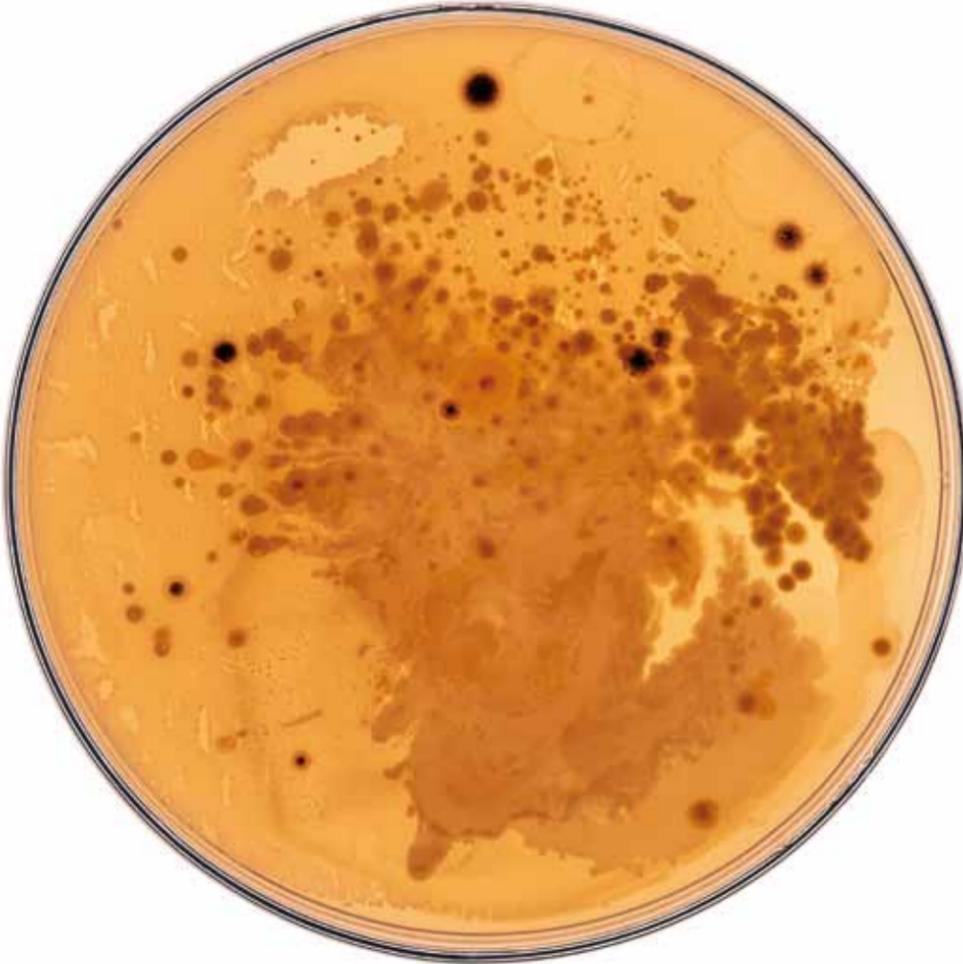
2005–2008

Human skin is a habitat for various kinds of bacteria cultures. An imprint of my body in an agar nutrient solution transports the bacteria it is carrying, which then continue to grow in the coming days in the form of my body. In this way, my body produces a biological image of my body. Afterwards, this scientific experiment set-up is documented photographically and transferred in an image context.







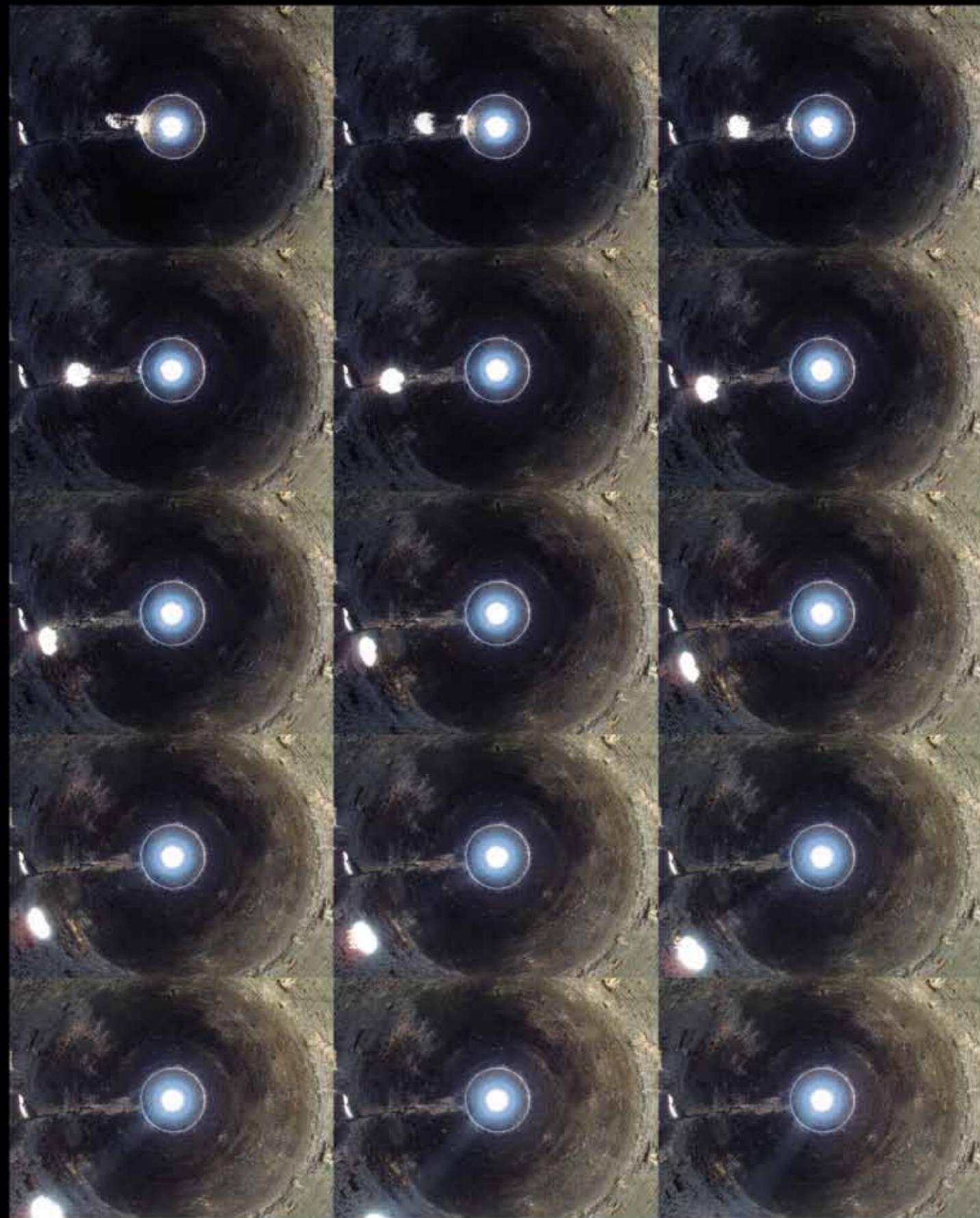


## Sphaera Incognita Progression

Dome, Pergamon 2006

The site of this work is one of the oldest originally preserved Roman domes in Pergamon. Light falls into the space through the oculus of the dome. Following the wandering position of the sun, the ray of light slowly feels its way along the vault, changing the illumination of the interior with its fluctuating intensity. The lighting of the object changes analogous to our perception and historical knowledge.

Film: circa. 3 minutes and still image on light box.

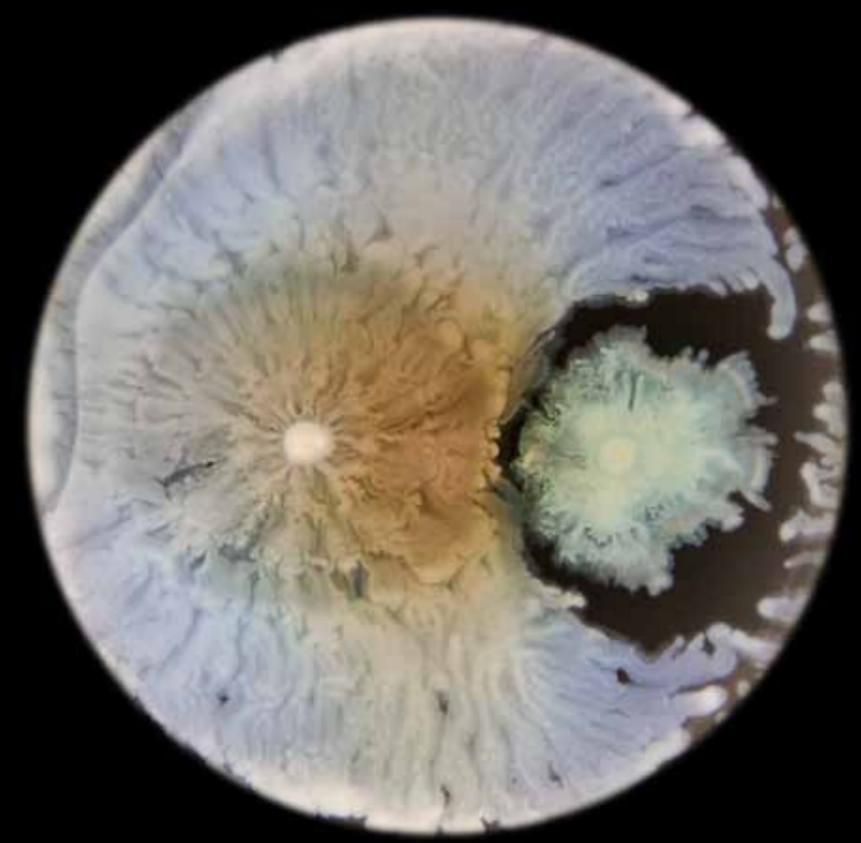
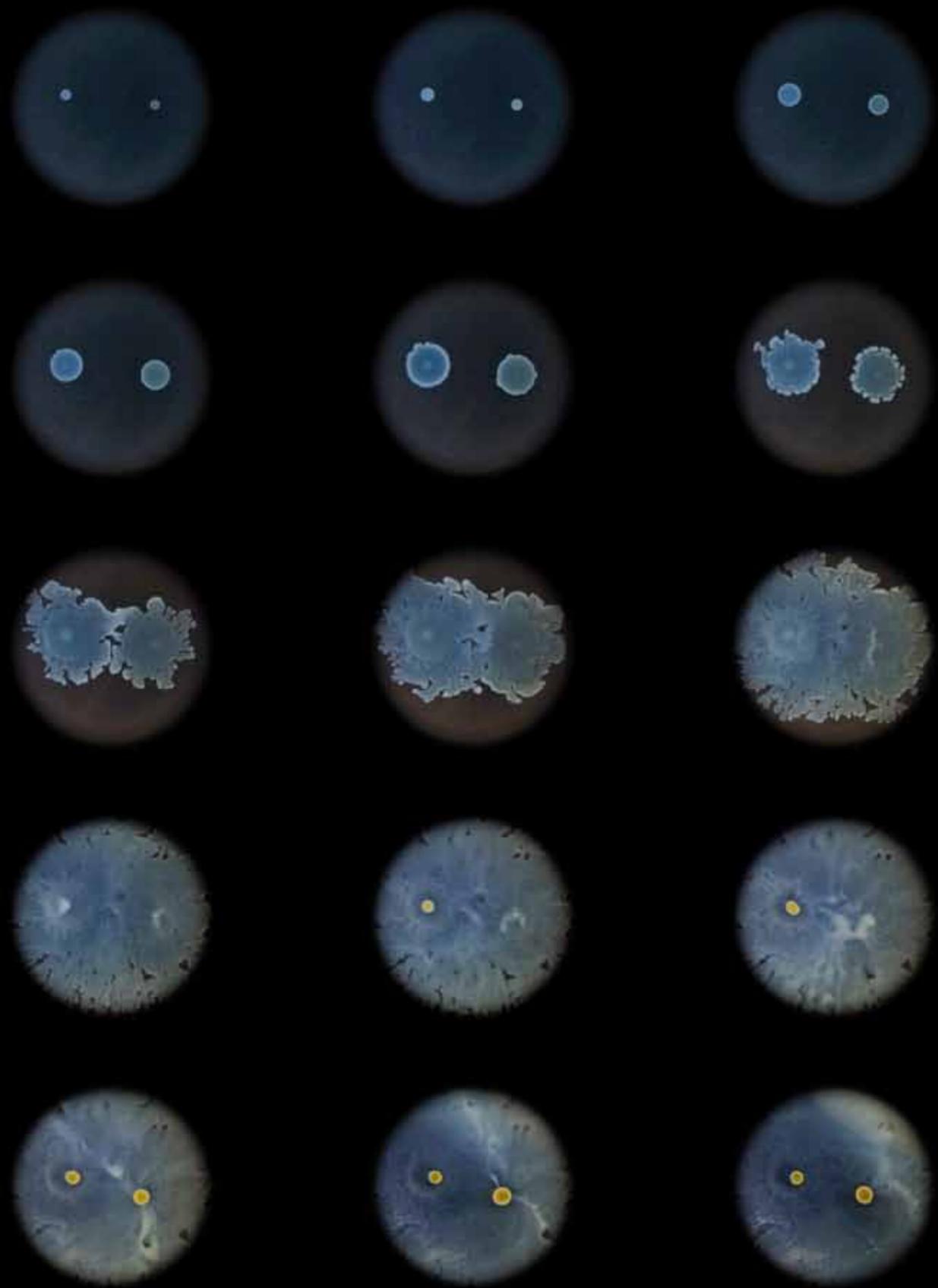


## Sphaera Incognita Encounter

Pseudomonas bacteria, Nottingham 2007

Since roughly the 1960s research has been conducted under the term “quorum sensing” on the ability of various bacteria cultures to communicate with one another. Today the assumption stands that an information exchange takes place between bacteria of the same species – but also between different cultures as well – through the production of different molecules. In collaboration with scientists from the University of Nottingham, I produced images and films that facilitate insights into thus far uninvestigated scientific realms. Two different bacteria cultures interact with one another in a petri dish. Beyond the scientific context, the images and films reveal transformative powers and the magic of the hidden.

Film: circa. 3 minutes and still image on light box.

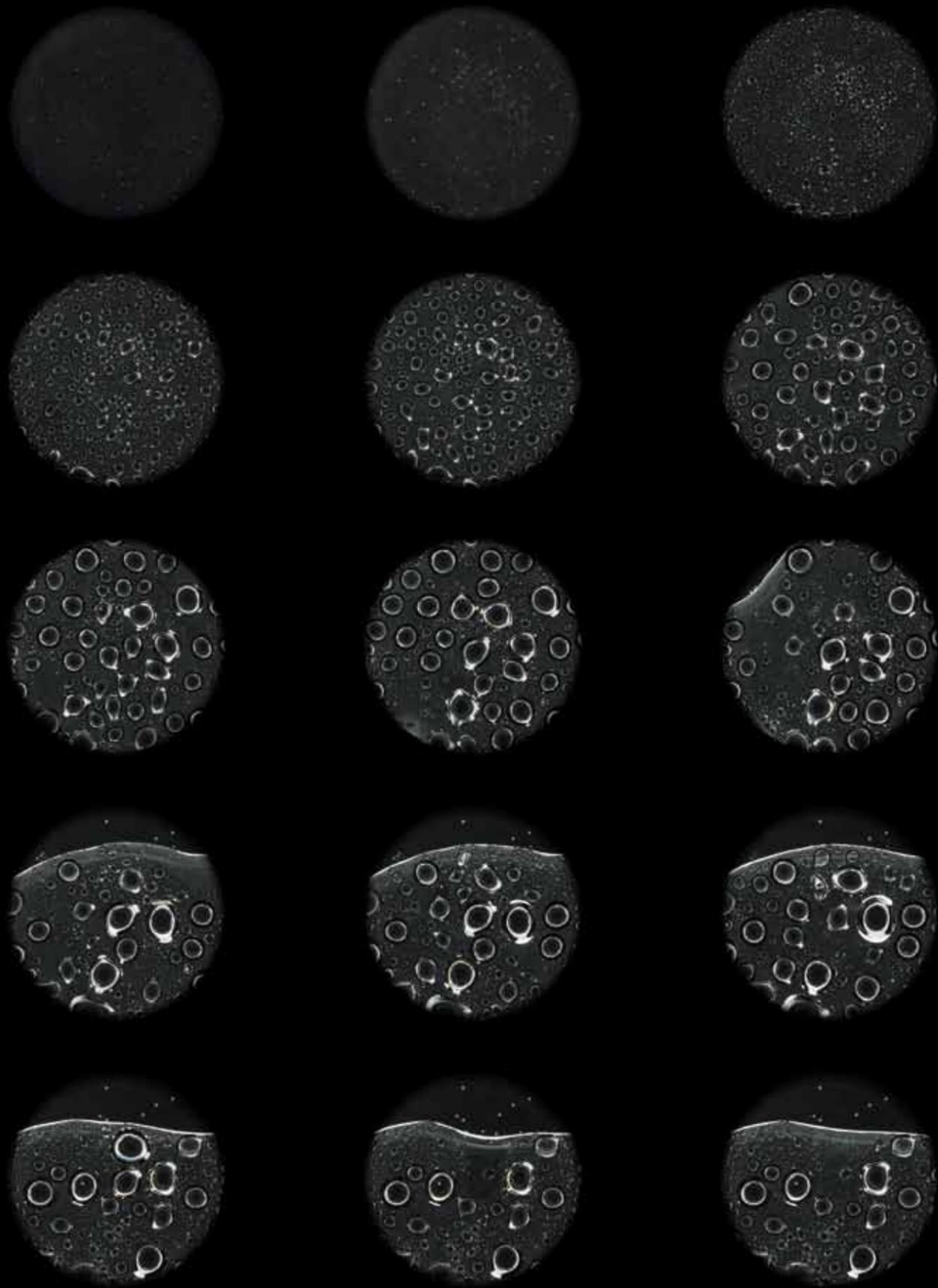


## Sphaera Incognita Transformation

Condensation, Vienna 2008

Water is caused to condense in a closed system. A process of constant transformation begins on the interface due to the different inside and outside temperatures. Water drops form, become larger, connect with one another, and disappear. In the voids that emerge new smaller drops immediately begin to develop, and the process continues. Over a period of 24 hours I documented the experiment with the camera and subsequently concentrated them into stills and a three-minute film.

Film: circa. 3 minutes and still image on light box.



# Sphaera Incognita – Spherological Interpretations of Space

Claudia Weinzierl

With the project title *Sphaera Incognita*, born from artistic intuition, Edgar Lissel not only achieved a succinct description for the methodology and content of his recent works, he also defines spaces that do not serve as sections of the world but as soul space systems.<sup>1</sup> If you follow the evolution of Edgar Lissel’s work, you expose yourself, almost unnoticeably, to a continuous liminal experience. As Inge Nevole’s contribution explains, the method and manifestation of his art are both a playful and consequent exploration of the power relations between the inside and outside.

Power residing outside implies a world view conditioned by the imperial categories into which we have been “thrown”<sup>2</sup> without being asked, which we stand in no relation to and, in the best case, can observe and investigate as a foreign object. Dissection, categorization, and evaluation take place under the guise of enlightened rationalism and objectification of the mind. The maxim: total explication! The receptive, passive process of seeing as an inner opening to the world is replaced by the mobilization of reconnaissance patrols, which should breach and conquer the borderlines of the world anchored in the outside, as if it was enemy territory. This cognitive, aesthetic, and imperial occupation of the world necessitates dogmas and operates with a focusing of the gaze that blinds out everything “other”.

Edgar Lissel’s gaze is quite the opposite: With great abandon and concentration his view pursues the magic of the hidden, the buried, the overlooked – on the other side of presence. The investigative eye does not settle for cognitive seeing alone, in preserving the discovered; rather it leads the mind through the realm of seeing into the realm of looking. In the lucid atmosphere of this metamorphotic (dream)scape all things appear eloquent, all particles elementarily filled with life energy, the horrors

of *vanitas* dissolved in the creative process of growth and decay, and as the gaze sinks into the essence of things, consciousness itself begins to change. The power that holds the world together at the core depends on a moving, lively equilibrium of physical and mental energies that sustain interconnected life. In this sense, Edgar Lissel transforms the research of scientific processes, venturing beyond the threshold of proven methodologies and achieved results – to the innermost of phenomena. He transposes experimental set-ups into filmographic artworks in which scientifically explicated elementary particles like light<sup>3</sup>, bacteria<sup>4</sup>, and water molecules<sup>5</sup> coalesce with our sensitive, intimate (inner) memories in meditative time frames. In a “rite of passage” he subjects himself and us to an aesthetic experience of the events, transforming the enquiring, judging mind into a marveling one – he submits the directedness of thoughts and the will to the mood of a receptive passivity, an enthused realization. Resonance spaces emerge in which the painful experience of the human distance between his/her physical inside and the things “out there” is temporarily suspended. The surrounding world becomes an oscillating sphere of interwoven, mutually corresponding processes of becoming.

*Begegnung* [Encounter] from the series *Sphaera Incognita* is an impressive example of how an interdisciplinary project with the University of Nottingham, which investigated the abilities of different bacteria cultures to communicate with one another, led to an almost cosmic filmography. Before our eyes, the factual of this molecule exchange between two protozoa in the petri dish transforms into an allegory of the erotic as elementary power of lively exchange: We see a successful performance of our secret knowledge that a true encounter with the other is possible by surrendering all resistance, by dissolving into one another, and having

the ability to return changed and strengthened in our individual self. “*It is perhaps as a result of these influences that it is precisely the most primitive form of union between living beings, the total fusion of single-celled organisms, which corresponds, by the strangest of symbolism, to what the mind, in its most ethereal dreams, perceives as perfect happiness in love.*”<sup>6</sup> *Certain combinations flash up, certain images form and color, which previously laid dormant; for everything creative is founded not in the clearest, highest state of mind but in the ability, from such clear heights of development, to time and again merge in a powerful wedding with all life that whispers and speaks, urges and searches within us, down into the darkest, most secretive roots of our being.*”<sup>7</sup>

*Verlauf* [Progression] from the series *Sphaera Incognita* was developed during the course of archaeological excavations in Pergamon. A ray of light as an allegory of living presence falls through the center of the oldest still preserved dome of a Roman basilica, feeling its way through the dark interior in a prolonged temporal movement provoked by the continuously changing position of the sun. In Edgar Lissel’s filmography the space – once a monument evidencing the protective, spherical omnipotence of God – is concentrated into a wandering sphere, driven by our desire for a history that harbors secrets. In this subtle reinterpretation of the causality in scientific archaeological surveys, researchers of the past manifest “*as seekers of the inner future in that past in which was included much of the eternal. As descendants of those solitary things, lost out of their time, about which science errs when it burdens them with names and periods, [...] for they held their faces into the earth and shed all name and meaning; and when they were found, they rose up, light, over the earth and became almost as the birds, so very much beings of space and standing like stars above inconstant time.*”<sup>8</sup>

With a surface formed by condensed water, *Sphaera Incognita – Verwandlung* [Transformation] tells an inner-phenomenal story about one of the primary substances of life. From a perspective compressing space and time, the inconspicuous, the fleeting on the periphery of perception manifests as an entity of foam, as an allegory of co-fragile systems, which can be associated with Peter Sloterdijk’s “Interpretation of Foams” in *Spheres III*. “*We could be speaking of a revolt of the inconspicuous through which the small and fleeting secured a share of the vision of great theories – of a study of traces that wanted to read signifiers of world events from the most unassuming indications [...]*”<sup>9</sup> “*Here the most fragile is seen as the heart of the real.*”<sup>10</sup> Following these threads, Lissel’s photo-poetic stories can also be read as a metaphor for the changing world views of our liminal era in which “air at unexpected areas”<sup>11</sup> transforms the central concepts of power into free, fleeting, frivolous, and flippant subversions of substance – into foams. Here, the constraints of polar thinking and the obsession with categorization dissolve in the expanse of multiperspectival perception. The desire that conjured the untenable, coincidental, the playfully foolish in the dreams of nocturnal free spirits for ages confronts us “foam-arisen” from a microspherical reality.

<sup>1</sup> Freely adapted from Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles – Spheres Volume I*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011)

<sup>2</sup> With reference to the notion of “thrownness” (German: *Geworfenheit*) originated by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*.

<sup>3</sup> *Sphaera Incognita – Verlauf*, Edgar Lissel, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Sphaera Incognita – Begegnung*, Edgar Lissel, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *Sphaera Incognita – Verwandlung*, Edgar Lissel, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Lou Andreas-Salomé, *The Erotic*, trans. John Crisp (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Die Erotik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Ullstein, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter 53 to Lou Andreas-Salomé (August 15, 1903) in *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969[1945]).

<sup>9</sup> Translated for this publication from: *Peter Sloterdijk, Sphären III – Schäume* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

## Mnemosyne I Light Memory

2003–2007

I darkened the inside of a walk-in container; focused light enters the space only through a lens. The incidental light rays cast a depiction of the outside world onto a canvas coated with fluorescent color pigments, which are then activated. Upon completion of this charging process, the incoming light is slowly interrupted by a shutter mechanism, leaving behind a glimmering fluorescent after image in the dark room. When the light intensity of the color pigments abates, the image in the dark vanishes and the charging process begins anew. Similar to a memory, information is captured and projected back, visually and temporally transformed.

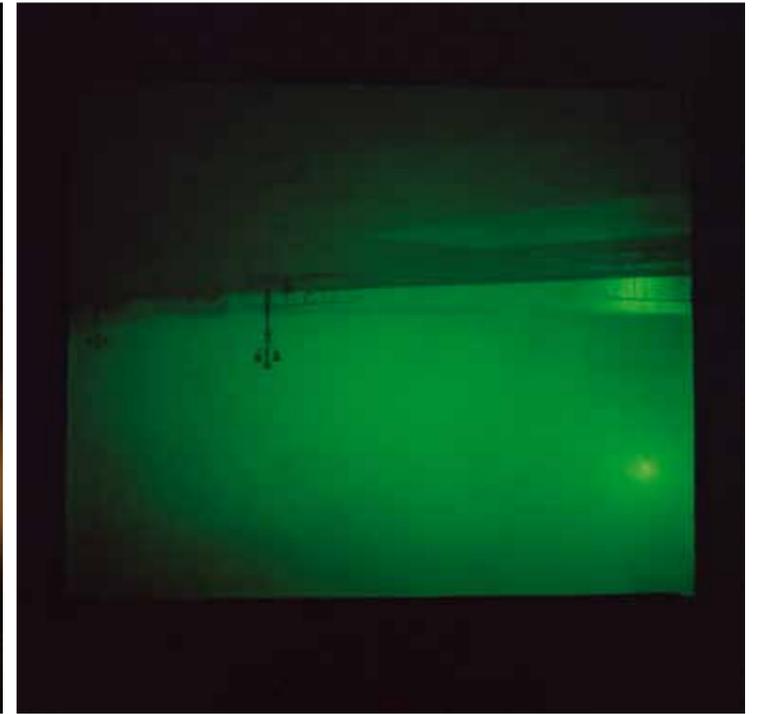
Port of Aegina (Greece) 2003

Berlin, Matthäikirchplatz 2007

Paris, Bassin de la Villette 2007











## Mnemosyne II

2006–2008

In a darkened room foils are mounted with thin vertical strips, alternating between mirror surfaces and luminescent afterglow pigments. A diffuse light source is installed above the image area, a flash on the opposite wall. Upon entering the installation one is initially confronted with one's own mirror image. The observer's movement triggers a piercing flash, casting his or her shadow onto the image surface. This shadow is absorbed by the luminescent pigment strips and remains clearly visible until the next flash lights up. Both images, the mirror image and the glowing shadow, are comprised of fragmentary compositions of the juxtaposed strips. While the observer can take along the mirror image, one can step out of the shadow image which remains behind in the end.



