

Under Construction: The photography of Anne Kathrin Greiner

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In some of her photographs – for example the series *Disciplined Spaces* (2002) and *The Lodgers* (2007/2008) – Anne Kathrin Greiner appears to be photographing architectural models. Empty streets, institutional interiors, playground structures. The eerie perfection of the image as well as their total abandonment is part of what makes the images appear like scale reproductions.

The resulting aesthetic is undeniably striking. But more striking is the way the idea of a constructed set is folded into Greiner's overarching project. She works with spaces that exist in personal and collective memory, whether they are the school classrooms of Greiner's own childhood, or the contested ground of an American army base in post-war Germany. These spaces are actively constructed, in our memory and in our culture. In this sense, Greiner is indeed photographing the construction of a space. Her photographs linger in the imagination precisely because they depict the processes by which the mind – through recollection and invention – creates spaces. The depopulated aspect of the works is important for this reason. These are not spaces in which people are seen, but rather spaces that are rendered by the human eye. Greiner links the act of seeing with the structure of perception. She often explores a single subject from two perspectives: one is a critical eye that examines the mechanism of an institution, whether it is the school or the military. The other is a more deeply psychological gaze, that can employ elements of fantasy or horror to bring a silent landscape to life.

In her earlier work, Greiner focuses on spaces that represent childhood, whether it is the classroom (*Disciplined Spaces*) or the playground (*Theatres of Play*, since 2004). In photographing classrooms without the subjects for which they are created, Greiner is able to draw attention to the institution of education and the school. The rigid formality of the classroom, the menacing, pedantic quality of the architecture – in this way Greiner frames the discipline and coercion that is inherent to the idea of institutional education. The series also communicates the rituals of education, and by extension youth and childhood. The geometric constructions of the interiors, the almost origami-like constructions of the perfectly symmetrical rooms, work to create the sense of childhood as a fetish of sorts. This idea is furthered in *Theatres of Play*. Here, in a series of photographs taken at night, Greiner highlights the culture of fear that has grown around the safety of children. In these photographs, she stages the camera as a menacing eye, stalking a dark and abandoned playground. *Disciplined Spaces* and *Theatres of Play* go hand in hand, tracing the evolution of what childhood means in our culture – from a time of extreme discipline, to a time of growing anxiety. Crucially, *Theatres of Play* seems to offer less a critique of the institution, more an uneasy point of identification through the camera gaze. The viewer is put in an unknown and unstable subjective position. Similarly, Greiner's work on another key institution – the military – captures the shift in social perceptions of the army, but also enacts a shift from a clear institutional critique to a more radical point of subjectivity. An early series presented the border of a US Army base in Germany, while the more recent *The Lodgers* features an abandoned American military base in Iceland.

In Passing: American Army Bases in Germany (2002/2003) is concerned with the non-space of the border (much in the way that *Wa* (2004/2005), a series of photographs taken in Japan, examines the slipping border between urban space and the country), but it is also implicitly a critique of post-war American politics. By photographing the literal division created by the base, in a country already marked by fracturing, Greiner questions the possibility of unity under American imperialism.

But *The Lodgers* represents a different geopolitical moment (Greiner's own interest in the base was triggered by a photograph of Icelandic soldiers in Afghanistan). Crucially, the base is no longer active and has been abandoned. As in her *Disciplined Spaces* series, Greiner penetrates the institution, photographing the empty interiors of the base. The effect has its own absurd humour – an exercise machine stands in an empty, ice blue room. What might have been an office now contains a collection of abandoned furniture – a bookshelf, a television stand. The base stands as an artifact of a turbulent geopolitical moment, in which America's global dominance is increasingly called into question. But it is also an almost alien ruin. A giant satellite dish looks as if it is making contact with another world. A swirling collection of tyre marks in the base's parking lot look like symbols from a vanished world and culture.

If Greiner's work functions in two parts, the first being a critique of the institution and its apparatuses and the second a subjective presentation, then it seems clear that this latter body of work is a more narrative-driven, psychological space of anxiety and horror. It calls from the vocabulary of science fiction and horror movies, and in particular from the postapocalyptic – the base documented in *The Lodgers* is preserved in a state following hasty departure. In this way, despite the fact that nothing about the interiors recorded in *The Lodgers* is tangibly out of date, it appears as if from another time. Precisely where the alien quality of these images is located – whether in the place itself, in the seemingly apocalyptic event that propelled the 'evacuation', or in the position of the camera itself – is unclear. But what is definite is the free-floating anxiety that pervades all these images.

They are, ultimately, simply images of empty rooms. But Greiner triggers specific memories – narratives that we are all able to assemble, whether they are those of apocalypse, alien invasion or American imperialism. Those stories inhabit these spaces and give them meaning. For this reason, despite the fact that Greiner photographs institutions in various states of occupation and abandonment, the images remain intensely personal. They are spaces into which the viewer projects a collection of anxieties and desires, stories that are culturally inherited, and also self-generated.

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Anne Kat hrin Greiner was born in Weinheim, Germany, in 1975. She studied photography and film at Napier University, Edinburgh, graduating in 2002 with a 1st Class degree; in 2005, she completed her MA studies in Fine Art Photography at the Royal College of Art in London. Her work has been widely published and exhibited and is held in international collections, both private and public. Greiner has received numerous awards, including an RCA scholarship for Kyoto in 2004, Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2005, the Magenta Foundation's Flash Forward 2007 and a Goldrausch Künstlerinnenprojekt art IT scholarship in 2010. She lives and works in Berlin and London.

Kati e Kitamura was born in 1979 and brought up in California and Japan. She has written for numerous publications including Frieze, Wired, The Guardian and The New York Times. She is the author of *Japanese for Travellers* (2006) and the novel *The Longshot* (2009) which was a finalist for the 2010 New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award.