

# The Seductions of Linoleum: Lynne Cohen in Dialogue with George Slade

By George Slade and Lynne Cohen

When Andy Adams told me that Flak Photo was running a WEEKEND series in January concentrating on Lynne Cohen's work from her new book *Cover*, and asked if I'd be willing to "interview" her asynchronously through the web, I leaped at the chance to connect with an artist I've admired from a distance since the 1980s. She was gracious to accommodate my questions while suffering the inconvenience of a bruised or broken rib, which kept her from laughing too much. As I realized, the more I looked at her work and after I had a chance to speak with Lynne and hear a recording of her lecturing, not laughing is a significant encumbrance for her. Her work is profoundly, disturbingly funny. David Byrne wrote an essay for her first book, which tells you something about the role of absurdity and surrealism in her creative mission. You can find out more about her biography on her web site; here's an edited record of our electronic exchanges, which appears here with great help from Andrew Lugg.

**GS:** Lynne, my introduction to your work was through reproductions in *Occupied Territory* (Aperture, 1987) and *L'endroit du décor/Lost and Found* (F.R.A.C. Limousin, 1992); you were kind of a virtual artist for me before such a moniker came into fashion. You were more a thought than a person. It wasn't until many years later, the mid-1990s I think, that I realized I was getting only half of the picture (and I still hadn't exchanged words with you or seen you in person). Your works are as much sculptural objects as they are photographs. How conscious are you of the distinction between image and object? How does photography address the distinction as a medium?

**LC:** My training was as a sculptor. This has continued to shape my photography. I'm drawn to, and sometimes repelled by, materials—Naugahyde, wood paneling, rubber, foam, linoleum, Formica and such like. These materials are not neutral. They conjure up a range of memories and smells. And they are very photographic. Working with a view camera and aiming to make everything in the picture appear more or less equally important, it is inevitable that the materials in front of the camera seem larger than life and one sometimes feels one is seeing them as if for the first time.

From early on I have regarded Richard Artschwager as a kindred spirit. I think he has a similar respect for paneling, Formica, and Naugahyde, materials omnipresent in many of the places I photograph. But while Artschwager warps things, I prefer to leave them alone. My aim is to let materials and objects speak for themselves. Things look strange enough as they are. Another connection with sculpture has to do with how I frame my work. From the first photographs I exhibited it struck me that it was my responsibility to devise frames that go with them, that resonate with how they look. Museum house frames neither fit nor work with the images. A serious sculptor would not have left it to the museum or gallery to decide how to show a piece—to put it on a pedestal or hang it on the wall. So early on I decided to frame work. Until about 2007 I used Formica. I liked that when patterned, it was manufactured photographically. Also I wanted to avoid corner seams. My frames were cut from one piece of Formica and glued down.

When I opted for a Formica with a gloss or satin surface instead of a faux pattern (rose granite for example), I had a range of colors to pick from. For large-scale black and white work from the late 1980s and 1990s, I chose a plain color connected to the color I remembered as dominant in the site I photographed. In fact when I showed black and white work in these color frames in an exhibition alongside color work, people remembered black and white pictures as colored and color pictures as black and white. (I framed my color work from this period in satin or matte grey Formica frames and picked greys that were warm or cool according to what I took to be the color temperature of the picture.) More recently I've adopted another approach but still resist leaving the decisions about framing to galleries and collectors.

This framing project has not been without problems. The frames are pieces. They are expensive, fragile and quite beautiful, and they often return damaged and are irreparable. It seems to me that if people treated them as sculpture, they would be handled more sensitively. It is strange that someone would rest a large, heavy glass Formica framed picture on its corner. Recently I've decided to let go of the Formica framing device. I now show my large-scale color photographs in spray-painted frames, which have a similar industrial profile. The color of these frames has the same value—about 8 or 9 on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is the darkest. Each color is chosen from from a palette of about eight colors to echo, more or less, a color in the picture. When viewers enter the gallery space, they usually think the frames are all the same color but once in front of the photographs, they notice that the colors are subtly different.

**GS:** A lot of your work addresses certain images that we carry with us, largely in the form of simulations, contrivances, or stereotypes. There are some astoundingly insufficient attempts at verisimilitude in the spaces you've photographed, though there your approach is always head-on and even-keeled. I find a certain corollary in this to what you've just mentioned above; by extension, too, to the “respect” you and Artschwager have for industrial surfaces as real artifice. Photographs are rarely given their due as objects; when I discovered all the different, unconventional approaches you'd taken to frame and present your work, I got a pleasant shock, a reminder that there are images, and then there are works. I'm reminded a bit of the piece Margaret Bourke-White did (*United States Airship “Akron,”* 1931, including the Duralumin frame); a photograph of a dirigible framed in metal that was used in the construction of that aircraft. Sometimes, the detail one gets with a view camera and a large negative becomes an end in itself, a kind of centripetal seduction. Sounds like you transformed the materials within your frames by employing them in both two- and three-dimensional forms.

**LC:** The Bourke-White piece is new to me. It is extraordinary. I would have liked to have known about it when people gave me a hard time for insisting on having appropriate frames for my work. I used to mention Renaissance framing devices as precursors but it would have been better if I had a photographic example like this one. As for transforming materials, the view camera records them in almost hallucinogenic detail. One is reminded of Proustian associations that one has with the materials. In my experience the photographic process tends to warp the shapes of objects and exaggerate their sizes. The interiors in my pictures often strike people as if they couldn't be true (they are in fact mostly true), and you might mistake them for installation art, the sort of art in contemporary art galleries. The sites I photograph look impossible even to me when I first come across them. As you can see I haven't left my training in sculpture far behind. This is not something I resist. It is, in any case, often hard to know whether surfaces in the photographs are authentic or simulated. The black marble or rose granite often looks more real than fake. And the same goes for plants and such like. The plants I photograph are mostly fake but as often as not they look real and function as as “symbols”— of life or whatever. Again the view camera conspires to heighten the presence of the materials. Even in my first pictures, which I made in around 1970, I wanted my subjects to seem as though left alone rather than selected to illustrate some predetermined conception. Then and now what I photographed seemed perfectly capable of speaking for itself. I have always intended that my pictures appear neutral, and it struck me

when I started that a view camera would enhance their seeming neutrality. Consistent with this I have sought to give all the elements in the picture more or less the same weight. I refrain from imposing a hierarchy on them and prefer to leave it to the viewer to sort things out for themselves. As part of a recent project linking my work with a 19th century collection of Spanish photography, I wrote a text comparing the formal strategies in my work with the the formal strategies used in this work. It seemed to me that my way of framing the world is very similar, though my aims are, of course, very different. One other thing about materials links up with a comment that is often made about my work. I am regularly asked, as if it should matter, why there are no people in my pictures. My feeling is that the objects (and the associations that they conjure up) as well as simulations, traces, and substitutes, double for people. Also the light, natural or otherwise, strange shadows and the theatrical interaction of objects give you the impression that you are not alone.

**GS:** Your comments remind me of Plato's cave. Obviously, these are complexly cultured spaces, rendered with deceptive clarity. I think you get asked about people because viewers want to have familiar reference points, a sense of scale that somehow situates and rationalizes the image. But in the cave allegory, the conflict between the real and their projected silhouettes, and the challenge of moving from one to the other, can cause blindness and disorientation. Do you feel any kind of responsibility to either viewers or the people who created these spaces to serve as a translator, as someone who interprets or eases the transition from one world into another? I ask because on its face the work, in its blunt, matter-of-fact frontality, suggests not; even the captions, one or two words that supposedly label the space we see, can be misleading. By the way, I didn't know that Formica was created using photography.

**LC:** Formica textures like marble and granite are produced photographically. I don't think they would look as real if they weren't. In *Occupied Territory* I wanted to simulate black marble Formica for end paper but I found it worked better if I photographed a piece of marble linoleum instead. The end paper looks like marble from Versailles. As for recognizable objects and clues regarding scale in my pictures, it seems, strangely enough, that the more mundane the interiors, the more disturbing or disorienting they seem. Even out-of-the-ordinary places I photograph (military installations or health spas, for instance) are full of familiar, homey bits and pieces. But the familiar doesn't help supply the information that makes you feel you are in a real place. Inevitably, objects in the places I photograph look peculiar. They look too big or too little. And there often seems to be no air, nor any clue as to how to get into or out of the spaces. It is not just that the view camera heightens the strangeness of the world. There is also something really odd about the places themselves, about the world we've created for ourselves. Everything I zero in on is off in some way when one steps back and has a look. I don't think adding a ruler or a person to give one an idea of scale (as they did in some 19th century photography) would make them seem any more likely or inhabitable. I can't explain that. What mainly interests me is the "puzzle," and I resist helping the viewer figure it out. To the contrary, I prefer that the puzzle be indecipherable so that the viewer feels something strange is going on, even somewhat disoriented. It's the crazy way the world is configured that intrigues me, the many hidden and not so hidden associations in the unlikeliest (or likeliest) places. I've aimed to make the viewer feel uneasy in the hope that this might act on them intellectually, aesthetically, psychologically, ideologically. The means I've chosen to do this, I'd agree, are somewhat hidden. They seem seem neutral when in fact they aren't.

**GS:** Can you say something about the titles and subtitles?

**LC:** The short captions are intended as a tool to identify an image (rather than my assigning them a number or a poetic title). I labeled my earliest pictures on the backs. I identified them as a type (like living room or men's club), said where they were taken and dated them, for example: *Phillips' Living Room, Racine, Wisconsin, 1971*. Later, not wanting to give the false impression that I was

a documentary photographer (in the strict sense), I removed information about location and date. Instead I specified only the type of place where the picture was taken, for example: "Spa", "Laboratory", "Classroom", "Military Installation". Rather than leaving it to the gallery to put this information on a wall panel, for a while I stenciled the title on the window mat itself. I preferred this method since it avoided the problem of viewers bobbing back and forth between the wall and the photograph. It bothered me that viewers would spend more time reading labels than looking at artwork. These generic titles appeared to explain something when in fact they explained hardly anything at all. Because they didn't help identify the work, I had to add what I took to be secret code words. These codes were never supposed to leave the gallery. They were simple identification devices. But since they turned up in articles, catalogs and on the web, I felt I should take control. And making the private codes public it was necessary for me to make them a bit more presentable. Now my photographs are all untitled with accompanying parenthetical code descriptions. The intent is still to identify rather than explain. I'm not sure what there is to explain.

**GS:** At one point in our dialogue you emailed me from a coffee shop, during a stop on a train trip. This struck me as somehow related to the anachronistic situations that arise in your work. What I mean is that your images were immersed in contrived, dislocated versions of the "real" long before the world of the Internet began drumming up considerations of "virtual reality."

**LC:** I have to admit I've never been much taken by technology. While it is true that many of my pictures touch on the technological world — military installations and scientific laboratories for example—I'm more interested in how aspects of this world look more like a children's toys or old fashioned game boards. For some people this might be comforting, for others the camouflage might make it seem still more disturbing. But there is another way of interpreting your question. In the late 1980's in a short review of a show I did in NYC, a critic seemed to think I had constructed the interiors that I photograph in my studio, at least introduced objects I brought with me into them. Admittedly, this was a post-modern moment when artists were constructing models in their studios to photograph. But what I photograph is a chunk of the world as I find it (with a few assists). It strikes me that if what I photograph were not more or less true, it would lose an important edge. I am not the first to find reality stranger than fiction. But I have to say that I quite like the idea that there is a question about the truth of what I photograph, that there is the sense that what I am photographing could not be true, that it must be constructed. An interesting example is a picture of an acoustic laboratory that I made the same year as Thomas Demand constructed one. If you look at our pictures next to each other, I am pretty sure you'll think the laboratory in Demand's picture looks more real than the laboratory in mine even though his is entirely hand-made in his studio and mine a photograph of a real acoustic laboratory that I came upon in England. Trying to figure out why his photograph looks more real than mine, it struck me that he makes all sorts of small corrections when building his models. He must step back to look at them, make changes, have another look, make more changes and so on, before taking a picture. In my case I set up a view camera in front of the actual site and make a photograph because I am intrigued by the many ways things in the world look off. In the case of the laboratory, I remember thinking that everything is the wrong size, the light is strange—hot and cold—that the androgynous dummy looks larger than life and has a bizarre red stopper stuck in its mouth and that the acoustic panels look hairy. Demand seems interested in getting everything to look right and making it believable while I'm interested in the many ways the world looks so wrong and unbelievable. But perhaps I've missed the thrust of your question. Can you rephrase it so I can answer it head on?

**GS:** You're answering it very much head on, in the way that I hoped you would. Those competing realities you and Demand identify and describe are at the core of the vicarious pleasures that both photography and cyber-universes have alluded to (and almost promised) over time. I'm wondering, now, about how you've gone about choosing the spaces you've photographed. Do you scout first? Do you reject more than you accept? How do you gain access? Does your past

work help in pursuit of new spaces to access, or hinder? I could imagine people seeing the work and not wanting to let you in because of some fear of misrepresentation.

**LC:** I scout first. In the early days I'd do a preliminary search in the Yellow Pages. It struck me that the Yellow Pages were like an archive or archaeology of any subject I might be interested in. I'd look under categories like "banquet halls," "men's clubs," "spas" and the like, make lists of addresses and knock on doors. Sometimes I'd just drive around and window peep since some of the subjects of my early work could be seen from the street. Later on, I became more interested in subjects hidden from view, often behind several sets of doors. I'd spend time in libraries perusing scientific and trade journals for ideas and when something struck me, I'd write letters, send faxes and make phone calls. Later still this information became accessible on the internet and emailing saved a lot of time. My early work didn't require a lot of paper work, research or bureaucracy but my later work does. The process of gaining access often makes me feel more like a performance artist than a photographer—or as both. Along with my interest in interiors behind several sets of doors, I've become drawn to more generic spaces, ones without a readily identifiable purpose. As I say in the text I wrote for *Camouflage* (Le Point du Jour Éditeur, Cherbourg-Octeville, 2005). I am now preoccupied with figuring out how close I might get to my subject without it becoming overly aesthetic. Not too close, not too far.

**GS:** And my question about access?

**LC:** Getting access is sometimes complicated, sometimes quite simple. What is strange is that what one might expect to be hard is easy and conversely. It does not fit our stereotypes. The person who gave me the most difficulty was a psychology professor in the university where I was teaching. I asked for permission to photograph an observation room in his laboratory and he refused. Maybe he thought there was something pathological about my project and had a word for me. But since it was in the university where I was a professor, it was difficult to take "no" for an answer. I thought I should have an inalienable right to take the picture this close to home. Another time in France, after much difficulty, I finally got permission to photograph a room in a quite luxurious health spa, a room with three plastic chairs staring in the same direction, seeming to be witnessing a nuclear explosion. The walls and floor pay homage to Sol Lewitt or Agnes Martin or another minimalist. In order to get permission to photograph the room, the director insisted that I sign a form which said I would never exhibit the picture, never reproduce it and so on. Of course I signed it. What is the worst thing that could happen? It seemed worth the risk. A year or so later, I showed the picture in Paris and it was reproduced in a review and there were no repercussions.

**GS:** What about people knowing about your past work? Does that help or hinder your getting in?

**LC:** When photographing in Europe, I bring along books and catalogs to show people what I'm up to. When I'm in the US, I don't. Maybe that's silly but that seems to work best.

**GS:** You mentioned Richard Artschwager as an artist you resonated with. I'm curious about your relationships with other artists, because you have formal correspondences with many photographers (and I know you appeared in several contexts with the late Roger Merten), though you seem to fall somewhere between New Topographics, typologists, and the Pictures Generation artists. Also, you've made references to your work and its relationship to documentary photography; I'm interested in this, and how you see your work fashioning a dialogue between "art" spaces, like the installation art pieces you're familiar with, and the almost enter-able images you're creating. There is something hallucinogenic about all these levels of reality, isn't there?

**LC:** There were many artists and episodes in the air that interested me. The influences and resonances were more often, however, from contemporary art (and sometimes old art) than

photography. It is sometimes forgotten there weren't many photography departments in those days, and some of us came to photography with baggage from art. It was curators who paired my work with this or that photographer. In those days I was drawn to Pop Art, especially Ruscha, Warhol, and Rosenquist, Minimalism, Art and Language (in particular the move away from art as a commodity) and also cinema. (I loved Rauschenberg but he was not so much an influence.) In addition there were social and political concerns that I was caught up with. In the late sixties I moved from sculpture to print-making before moving on to photography. I made aquatints and photo silkscreens with absurd everyday subject matter culled from consumer catalogs, banal postcards and ordinary language philosophy. When I was rendering middle class living rooms from consumer catalogs, it struck me it would be more interesting and more socially and politically engaged to knock on a door across the street and ask if I could take a picture of their living room instead of producing aquatints and silkscreens. It was in that atmosphere that I began to photograph around 1970. At the same time I made a piece that was something between sculpture and photography. Once when I saw a blond wood end table with skinny black legs and a goose neck lamp attached to it set up in the corner on a linoleum floor, I borrowed the pieces, bought matching linoleum squares and transplanted the corner to a gallery. It became a kind of photograph in three dimensions much like the work from the 1980s by the Belgium artist, Guillaume Bijl. At this time, I wondered whether it wouldn't be enough to give people directions to sites so that people could see them for themselves. Later still I simply made photographs and put these ideas aside once and for all.

**GS:** Your work seems to fall between the cracks. People don't always know where to situate it.

**LC:** A European dealer who took on my work once joked that I was a Düsseldorf photographer living in North America. I liked that. A Becher School photographer with a sense of humor? People for their part think I'm photographing typologies, which I'm not, even if it sometimes seems so. I seldom work on a single subject at a time. In fact I photograph a variety of subjects, not just one, and prefer to mix up the theme in exhibitions and publications (as in the illustrations here). I hope viewers realize that a living room can be more disturbing than a shooting range and that the subject (or type) is often an excuse to point at something else, something beneath the surface. My relationship to documentary photography is more tricky. My photographs look like documents because I exploit flat lighting, deep focus and symmetry and I don't photograph from high up or low down or from very close to or very far away. I prefer to leave it to viewers to enter (or not) the picture as they see fit and to fill in any emotional, social or political content there may be. Despite the look of my pictures, however, my work can't be said to be documentary in the strict sense. Another difference between me and more documentary photographers is that I don't have any illusions about documenting the place I visit. I might spend an enormous amount of time researching a site or subject but end up not photographing anything. If I were a documentary photographer, I would make a picture come what may. You could say that my work is documentary in as much as it documents ideas I have in my head as it documents things in the world. I should add that I exhibit in galleries that show art in general (painting, sculpture and the rest) as well as galleries devoted strictly to photography and my work has been included in a range of group shows. I'm in one opening in Belgium in February which includes Artschwager, Fischli & Weiss, Donald Judd, Bertrand Lavier and Franz West. I very much like this—having my work seen in a variety of contexts. Indeed I am happy that my work doesn't quite fit; I think I would be missing something I am after if it did.

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