Images of Darkness

According to German philosopher Gernot Böhme atmospheres are intangible aesthetic qualities that lie between the object of interest and the perceiver. Atmospheres create distinct moods that define how one experiences the environment and the current circumstances. During recent years, I have become interested in the atmospheres darkness creates. They have led me to an academic research and artistic exploration. I have approached darkness and various ways to experience it through philosophical and environmental aesthetics. Because the verbal articulation of my thoughts and experiences leaves significant gaps of in the understanding about the dark environments, an important element of my work has been continued attempts to document my experiences of darkness through photography.

However, photographing dark things, places or environments is an oxymoron. Photography is all about capturing light and drawing an image with it. Without light, the image contains nothing but blackness. Even with minimal illumination, light takes a leading role highlighting the view in the front of camera's lens and the darkness turns a backdrop. The question of how to keep darkness on the focus in my images has been the fundamental question in my artistic work. This inquiry has required philosophical, artistic and technical developments.

Bringing the darkness in front – instead of a backdrop

Solving the problem of seeing darkness as the protagonist has been a continuous undercurrent in my academic and artistic inquiry. Understanding the philosophical dimensions of darkness has required investigating the fundamental aesthetic qualities like the sublime experience in darkness as well as the everyday aesthetics' views on night-time environments. While the academic study has concentrated on the analysis of the aesthetic experience and aesthetic qualities of various dark environments, my artistic work has attempted to solve the riddle of dark photographs.

If there is light, darkness is always bypassed or pushed on the background. It is almost impossible to capture the darkness that lies in between the perceiver – or the camera – and the illuminated subject. My current solution has been a constructed photograph: instead of photographing dark environments as such, I have introduced a research instrument. This instrument has acted as a token for directing one's attention to the darkness in the image. The first devise I used consisted of a tripod and two cubes painted black and white. I did attempt to adjust the exposure to match my visual experience of the scene, thus pursued conveying the original circumstances into the image.

My ongoing project that focuses on night-time shadows follows similar pattern. Shadows that result from various artificial and natural lights form the main origin of darkness in the contemporary night. To highlight the complex variety of these shadows, I have constructed a circular shade that allows me to standardize the shape of the shadows. This assists me to demonstrate the variation in outline and color of shadows produced by different light sources. The images are not dark, but consist on different dark tones of fabricated shadows. Moreover, this artistic experimentation provides me material for the analysis of the shadows to be employed in the further academic research.

Conundrum of the dark images

Customarily, the photographic images of dark environment focus on presenting the strong shadows that emphasize the subject. Even though most of the image is dark, the light is the

decisive element. In a similar manner photographs of the celestial objects employ the deep darkness of the night sky to bring forth the faint light of diffuse nebulae and galaxies. Only some cases the faint light of other objects let the dark nebulae to become visible. Thus, photographing darkness involves light – unless one allows the images to be completely black.

For me, the artistic problem with black photographs has been to accept the black images even if they reflect the reality. Exhibiting a black photograph seems to be a subversive act, a protest against the essence of the photographic medium. Furthermore, a dark image alone does not suffice, but requires an accompanying text to clarify the arrangement. In that sense my research and artistic practice are closely intertwined.

In addition to dealing with the artistic issues, the project has required considerable technical experimentation. The technical aspect of the project has focused on the questions relating on the possibilities of capturing and presentation of perceived darkness through the medium of photography. While the contemporary photographic technology allows an extremely detailed documentation of night-time views and its ability to see through darkness exceeds the human eye by far, employing its possibilities requires practice. The technical potential leads easily to fancy and inaccurate presentations of darkness. This tendency is easily seen in the social media presentations of northern lights and celestial views. My attempt to moderate the pressure of technological capacity has impacted to the whole workflow from the choice of the camera to editing and finally printing and exhibiting the artworks. It has obliged me to develop my own set of *techne* or practical skills of photographing darkness. While my central interest has not been in developing techniques for low light photography and capturing the minimal differences in deep greys that the eye can perceive, this expansion of skill set has been intrinsic part of the work.

An Inquiry Through Photography

My presentation aims to explore the central issues concerning the combination of artistic practice and academic research I have detected during my attempts to photograph darkness. I will explicate the significant artistic development during my journey as well as the outcomes of my research in academic aesthetics. In addition, I will open up some of the technical solutions assisting in capturing darkness I have found during the process. The presentation will provide an account of conducting a particular inquiry through photography.