
Philipp von Rosen Galerie

Rebecca Ann Tess

Open to the Public

Exhibition from June 27, 2020 – August 29, 2020

Opening on June 26, 2020, 5-10 pm

Questions to Rebecca Ann Tess about her exhibition *Open to the Public*; the interview was conducted by Philipp von Rosen, Cologne, Berlin, June 2020

Philipp von Rosen: If you compare the photographs *Alpha++ Models* from the show *Open to the Public* with those from your last exhibition *Alpha++*, it is striking that the new images are more narrative and follow a documentary-style compared to those from 2016. Along with that, the distances between the subjects and you, or the camera, have become greater. We see more of the world than quasi-abstract sections of facades of contemporary architecture – as is the case with the *Template Selection*-photographs. Why do you take this step into the distance?

Rebecca Ann Tess: I am interested in different degrees of abstraction in the two groups of works. However, the *Template Selection* and *Alpha++ Models*-photographs are closer to each other in terms of content than it might seem at first glance. I have been taking the photos simultaneously since 2012. The *Templates* series with its 34 photographs is in a way an outtake, not only due to the number of over 100 photographs, of the more complex series *Alpha++ Models*. Also, contentwise I am interested in relating the realities of life in a capitalist, neoliberal world, from multiple perspectives. The *Template Selections* on the other hand show similar places, but as reproducible patterns, forming an aesthetical background like a pattern catalogue.

LOTTE's Empire – on Hold #1, is the prelude to *Alpha++ Models*, taken during my first stay in South Korea. It shows a construction crane from the observation deck of the Lotte shopping mall in Busan. The foundation for the Lotte Town Tower (510 m) had just been laid. At that time I was wondering how the Jaebeol company Lotte is financially able to build two over 500m high skyscrapers in Seoul and Busan simultaneously. In the meantime, the construction in Busan is on hold for an uncertain time.

PvR: In the exhibition you show photographs of landscapes and cityscapes from all over the world. Are they global conditions that you're describing in your pictures?

RAT: Yes, exactly. For a while now, the *Global City* has been the starting point of a series of works. The video *The Tallest* (2014), showing the tallest buildings in the world, marks the beginning of the *Alpha++* project. The core of the new series are global megacities such as Hong Kong, Seoul, Shanghai, London or New York. These cities mark the loosening of the borders of the nation state. Paradoxically, the stronger interconnections of places lead to the fact that the actual physical place loses its significance. This realization has led me to move my gaze from the financial centers to the margins, to almost untouched landscapes that seem to be spared from global economies. The nature shots were mainly taken in Chile, not only because of the fantastic and diverse landscapes. In the 1970s, during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the country underwent radical social and economical changes. Under the influence of Milton Friedman, the Chicago Boys (Chilean economists who had studied at the University of Chicago from 1956-1970) turned Chile into a test-bed of neoliberal economic theories, with consequences that are still far-reaching today. One topic that I encountered again and again on my travels is access to water. Since the military dictatorship, the acquisition of land has been linked with the possession of water rights, so that water, which should be a human right, flows boundlessly into the capitalist exploitation apparatus.

PvR: The photographs from *Open to the Public* sometimes evoke a strong sense of unease. We see nature destroyed by civilizing interventions or nature is completely repressed, only remaining to be seen as "residual nature". Isn't that a somewhat negative view of the world?

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RAT: Various forms of nature appear, those of the big city, which is highly designed, through daily care and pruning, becomes a reflection of the previous computer graphics. Functional nature, such as overgrown walls, which bears the hope to improve urban air quality. There are photographs of nature with a freer growth, which marks the outskirts. I'm not so much interested in a critique of environmental destruction here, but rather in social issues, the distribution of power and access to resources. Nature functions here as an outside, something that exists without us humans. I juxtapose images like *Untouched Creature*, an old tree that provides a home for many other plants, with man-made constructions. The simultaneity of extremely different forms of life comes into focus. To encounter such a huge tree in the land of the Mapuche (one of the few indigenous people that survived the colonial period in Chile) interrupts the constant flow of capitalist logic and raises deep questions: What do I need to live? Furthermore, nature appears directly as an entity through which we can have an intense physical experience of materiality.

PvR: Let me come back to the *Template Selection*-series. These photographs show sections of the facades of skyscrapers, at least of large contemporary architecture, often photographed from a non-horizontal angle. One sees mainly structural elements of the facades, sometimes the immaculate sky, free of details; almost without human traces, which – if at all – are only hinted at with minimal signs. These pictures have a very painterly quality, because they are so abstract that one could almost read them as "hard edge painting". Moreover, for the *Template Selection*-series, the choice of the photo paper with a slight texture and also the framing with a shadow gap of steel (without protective glass) were important. The depictive photography becomes an object that gives back the materiality to the building surfaces. Considered that you took your first academic steps as an artist at the University of the Arts in Berlin in the class of Prof. Bernd Koberling, this painterly approach is not surprising. However now you use the camera and digital image processing in a narrative and documentary way. At the same time, it becomes visible how meticulously the photographs are composed and how much each individual detail "fits". How do the results we see in the exhibition come about? Are the pictures heavily edited? Or do you have many "shots" to choose from for each scene, that most of all the best picture has to be chosen?

RAT: The *Alpha++ Models* share the same paper with the *Template Selection* for the color photographs once, but framed behind glass. For the photographs in black and white I chose a silver paper, which underlines the cool atmosphere. The selection itself plays a big role, not only for each single work. The series connects heterogeneous places with each other, for some groupings it took several years until the pictures found each other. There are only a few pictures where I found the colors and details so that I didn't have to work on them much. In most cases I intervened down to the level of a single pixel, retouching objects and spots and adjusting spatial perspectives. Nevertheless, a documentary moment remains, marked in the subtitle with the location and the year of recording. I do not see the editing as manipulation, but rather as an attempt to intensify a found atmosphere, those of a half-dead, an environment between a still physical place and a digital landscape in the making. An exception to this are the nature pictures, which, with the vitality of the organic forms, form an antipode to the almost deserted, deathlike city pictures.

PvR: It is evident that your photographs are based on an analytical, critical stance towards the way we humans deal with nature and with ourselves as parts of nature, which we expose to our civilizing constraints and ruthlessness. On the other hand, there is something like the beauty of horror in the images. The pictures and also what they show are at least interesting, but rather we can speak of fascination, attractiveness or even beauty (a delicate, complex topic, but let's take it as a seemingly uncomplicated term). How do you bring these, as it seems: opposite, aspects together?

RAT: My role here is that of an observer, especially through a physical experience of space, not so much as an individual experience, but in the sense of an exemplary body. The camera keeps a certain distance to the event without hiding its involvement, as for example in the Shanghai hotel room *No Outside*. The chosen aesthetic means, the focus

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on an exact composition and the precise choice of the framing, creates space for the unfolding of the event without having to take a direct position. The viewer can take her or his time to sense the ambivalences.

PvR: Almost all of the photographs in the current exhibition have speaking titles, such as *Naturally Green*, which shows the lawn of a golf course in Berlin that has been tended to parallel bands (and to death) by a lawn mower, or *Whose Water – Tropical Desert*, which shows an avocado plantation in Chile's countryside that has been cordoned off with a barbed wire fence. Do you see your pictures as an activist impetus for resistance? Or is it rather an analysis of the given situation?

RAT: I don't want to rule out the possibility that the viewers of the photograph *Whose Water – Tropical Desert* will feel impulses to reconsider their consumer behavior and see the lifestyle product avocado as a luxury food item that requires a lot of water. With *Alpha++ Models*, but especially with this photograph, first of all I like to put structures into a relation. Do we really want, that for the cultivation of food, here the avocado, torrential rivers dry up, because the plantations are watered with it, and consequently the regional populations have to be supplied with bottled water and they do not have enough water to wash their clothes more often than once a month? What does an avocado taste like when you have walked through the dried out riverbed surrounded by dried out cactus (*Dried out Creature*) in one of these mountain villages?

PvR: Again and again we see in the images the confrontation of civilization and nature. An example of this is the photograph you chose for the invitation card: It shows two monumental concrete blocks on a coast, which seem to have been carelessly deposited there. It is surprising, however, that the two blocks are protected as being on private property by an unfriendly sign ("no entry – private property") and a Chilean national flag. However, if you take a closer look, you will notice that the blocks are resting on a concrete slab and if you then enter the subtitle of the photograph, *Ochoquebradas, Los Vilos, Chile*, as an internet search, you will learn that these are not simple concrete blocks, but avant-garde architecture created in 2014 by the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena. The house on the coast is the first part of a gated community initiated by a private developer. How much admiration, how much criticism is there in such images that show the adoption of wild nature and the satisfaction of luxurious needs?

RAT: At this point I'm not so much interested in the intrusion into the untouched nature, no question it's a very important topic how we deal with natural resources, but the fact that global undertakings don't stop at the margins, that for a global elite it's part of their everyday life to visit their holiday home by helicopter. The debate could end here with a Marxist class critique, if the holiday home was not an interesting avant-garde building, designed by an architect who has also been involved in social housing construction for many years. Here too, ambivalence is central. The concrete blocks block our view of part of the wild Pacific Ocean, while at the same time the brutalist form sets a marker.

PvR: While in your earlier works you had explicitly addressed gender issues in connection with the history of film and television, this is no longer the case in the present photographs. However, when you think of skyscrapers, you could well think of phalli cast in concrete and the male stereotypical self-representation as large and strong. But, as you once hinted, this is not in your interest. Why?

RAT: There are two answers to that. On the one hand, I see a tendency in the transformation of the city into a post-materialistic, post-bodily resp. post-gender form. The navigation through the built city today works similar to the navigation on the computer through architectural renderings. The city becomes a two-dimensional interface, while the physicality gives way more and more to a smart digital complete network. And so one's own body and thus also fixed gender roles have a less important meaning. Gender roles are more fluid in the digital sphere and at least temporarily easier to change.

The other answer is a performative one – what would remain if we recognized a phallus in all vertical forms, would my own body also become a phallus at some point? In the photograph *self-*, my first self-portrait, I placed the body in

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relation to the urban landscape. What possibilities for self-expression are there in these designed areas? Or can my own body only comply with the prevailing design and become part of this structure?

PvR: A last question about the current situation. Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on the reading of *Alpha++ Models*? Does the exhibition title *Open to the Public* refer to the current lockdown that continues in many places around the world?

RAT: The exhibition title shares the name with a photograph from the Hong Kong Elements mall. A privately owned, public space, a so-called POPS, as it is often found in metropolises, both indoors and outdoors. Dos and don'ts are engraved on large metal plates. Apart from bans of demonstrations, there are also bizarre descriptions of how many bags you are allowed to carry and that you are only allowed to enter the places if you are washed. Especially now, in a time when public, physical places are only accessible to a limited extent, one can experience what is at stake when these will be replaced more and more by private and digital spaces in the future.

I edited some of the photographs in the exhibition during the lockdown. It was an interesting moment to see how fragile the global trade network is, which one often takes for granted. The sudden focus on the immediate environment and the shift of many activities into digital spheres has radically changed my perception of space, at least temporarily. A dystopian premonition of a post-city appeared, in which the population would live in small units and social contacts would only take place via digital media. I am all the more pleased to be able to show the new photographs not only in a digital showroom.

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for Culture and Europe

