

Edgar Lissel

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Edgar Lissel Bakterium

*New projects of the Hamburg artist Edgar Lissel:
Bakterium - water light(s) history (1999/2000),
Bakterium - self portrayal (1999/2000), and
Bakterium - Vanitas (2000/01).*

All works of the three series are products of a special procedure, based on the property of certain bacteria to orientate themselves towards light. Using this dependency on light, Lissel subjected bacterial cultures that were kept in transparent petri dishes filled with agar solution to pictures. As a result, the bacteria grew and aligned themselves to the pictures in a way comparable to photographic processes, where those spots on photographic paper that receive light darken, whereas those that are little exposed remain bright. For *Bakterium - water light(s) history*, photo negatives were projected onto the bacterial cultures in classical photographic fashion. The pieces of the *Bakterium - Vanitas* series, in contrast, are comparable to photograms: The objects were placed between the petri dish and the source of light, which was shining from below. The resulting images were then photographed and enlarged to about 80 cm_ (31.5 in.). They reveal themselves in an ephemeral state, a fleeting moment in the organic cycle of growth and decay. Shadowy and fragile, they recall the early days of photography. They are also, however, products of the modern laboratory, documented and presented like a scientific experiment, in uniform shapes confined by the scientist's petri dishes.

For *Bakterium - self-portrayal*, Lissel took microscopic pictures of the structures of single bacteria and projected them onto petri dishes filled with bacterial solution. As a consequence, the bacterial cultures reproduced their own micro-images. Normally indiscernible to the human eye, a multitude of organisms here can be observed creating a „super sign“ of themselves, with their livelihood being a part of their self-portraits.

The series *Bakterium - water light(s) history* comments on the potential transformation of architecture in ruins. As an example, Lissel used the submarine bunker „Kilian“ in Kiel (which then stood in ruins, but was detonated later). The contours of the gigantic, partially destroyed bunker are vaguely visible. Some parts seem to drown in the water like a shipwreck, while others still stand tall, even if affected by decay, with somber, cave-like windows and concrete walls that seem to be several meters thick. The decline of the building counterposes with the gaining and fading of its symbolic representation in the petri dishes.

The transitoriness of all matter is a central theme of the third series, *Bakterium - Vanitas*. Here Lissel employed classical still life motives such as fruit or animal corpses, whose disintegration is reflected in the petri dishes. The bright silhouettes of the objects are distinctly visible, yet one can also see that the bacteria started growing even in those places that received little light, such that they will eventually „outgrow“ their own image. The representation fading away, however, symbolizes the coming death of the object

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itself.

In this complex testing field of references and counter-references, Lissel juxtaposes three time levels: first, there is the object which once virtually existed but has since dilapidated or decayed. The second level is that of the reproductions, of images that existed for a couple of days by means of bacterial movements, set up in a laboratory. The third one is created by photography, which captures those ephemeral moments and keeps them alive for a long time.