Chamberlin

Calling the Lights

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I remember when I first encountered the English expression "calling the lights." It was in a sketch by the Danish pianist and comedian Victor Borge. The lanky theatre technician Borge brings onstage to turn pages during his play answers Borge's question about his usual function: "I'm calling the lights."—"I beg your pardon?"—"I'm calling the lights!" Of course, the whole joke unfolds around the unfamiliar sound of the phrase. It's probably not the strongest gag, but the phrase left a lasting impression on me for how it names a practical backstage task (prompting lighting cues during a play) in language that sounded unexpectedly poetic through its personification of light. Exclusively used in the context of theatre, the formulation takes on a performative quality, addressing at once fellow technicians, the audience's perception, and light as the medium itself. Borge responds in his typically mischievous manner, with a slight frown: "What do you call the lights?"

Technique and effect are always tightly interwoven. Especially in theatre, the technical apparatus is responsible for everything that cannot be activated by play alone. Light plays a central role in this operation. As a technical means, it operates through intention, direction, and composition: it frames, isolates, exposes, withholds, confuses, and leaves things in the dark. In doing so, it organises transitions and entrances, directs attention, generates tension, and produces shifts of mood and overall atmosphere. In its artificial directedness and its deliberate intention to present, working with light is profoundly theatrical.

The artists in this exhibition lean into the artificial qualities of photography, treating it as a theatrical practice of working with light by employing effects such as illusion, overlay, staging, trick, and deception or even abstraction.

—"Bulbs."

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