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Für Susi, Maximila und Oskar

A black and white photograph of a modern interior space. The room features a slanted ceiling and a large, light-colored sofa in the foreground. A small, conical pendant lamp hangs from the ceiling. The walls and ceiling appear to have a textured, possibly metallic or stone-like finish. The overall atmosphere is minimalist and architectural.

# PAUL OTT

PHOTOGRAPHY ABOUT ARCHITECTURE  
FOTOGRAFIE ÜBER ARCHITEKTUR

Herausgeber | Editor Matthias Boeckl

SpringerWienNewYork



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# Images, Buildings and the Living Context

On Paul Ott

In the history of modernism the two art forms of photography and architecture have developed in parallel ways, often complementing each other. Whenever these two forms of art came together, they inspired very unique pieces of architectural photography (such as by Julius Shulman) or by photographing architects (such as Lois Welzenbacher). These works were mostly interpreted as skilled documentation of architecture versus artifacts of the history of artistic photography. However, they represent both, for they successfully fuse two and three-dimensional forms of art in images that are works of art and documentation alike. Paul Ott's oeuvre is a perfect example for that. With his "uncommissioned" pieces he teaches us to perceive his documentary images as an expression of a specific artistic approach that reaches far beyond the professional domain. No strict separation can be made here; on the one hand Ott's commissioned photography distinguishes itself by a high degree of artistic ambition, while on the other his uncommissioned works have documentary value.

Graz in the 1980s

If the oeuvre of an ambitious photographer which also offers documentary value is seen as an expression of the artistic *Zeitgeist*, then the question of the period's identity becomes relevant. Ott's artistic-architectural "socialization" took place in Graz during the creative period of the 1980s. The avant-garde revolution of the 1960s that prospered more and longer in this Austrian city than in any other part of the country (Vienna integrated its rebels later and to a lesser extent) had permeated the core of society by the late 1970s. The rebellious scene around the *Forum Stadtpark*, the *Grazer Autorenversammlung* (writers' association of Graz) and the artists of the *Grazer Sezession* formed the representative platforms of the city and enjoyed trans-regional influence. Architecture followed suit in the 1980s with a delay that is typical for the discipline. The institute building of the Graz University of Technology on Lessingstraße by Günther Domenig had ushered in the "Golden Age" in 1983 of the expressive, technically skilled and very confident *Graz School*. Domenig, Klaus Kada and Volker Giencke were its main representatives and the provincial government supported the wind of change by granting large building projects, while new blood emerged from a separate culture of the drawing studios among Domenig's students.

In 1988, the City Museum Graz hosted the exhibit *Indianer* (Indians) featuring art and architecture in Graz of the interwar years (1918-1938)<sup>1</sup>. For Paul Ott this marked the beginning of his photography career. The images that he produced of this exhibition depart from traditional documen-

ting: a close-up (p. 35) shows a confusing explosion of lines and traces of light (resulting from welding works) that reveal parts of a façade and the steel members of a framework that are reflected by an undulated reflective surface. It becomes obvious that Ott focused on the surprise effect of a detail of the installation, and on an aspect that no one had planned for, which however elevated the scene to a work of art. A relevant aspect of his work is apparently the shaping influence of the context, to where such helpful “coincidences” seem to play an important role.

#### Calculated chance

“Chance” became more and more a determining factor in Ott’s oeuvre. However, it is not merely an unforeseeable higher power. Ott relies on it. “Chance situations” arise during every campaign, either way. It is either a temporary atmospheric light effect that takes the motif out of its triviality, or a human user of the object, a passerby or a resident. Another time it is an unusual perspective, an unconventional view or a forgotten prop. In most cases, these are real coincidences, but the photographer must be “ready” to recognize them and to push the button in time. He or she must be patient and be prepared to provoke such coincidences. This implies a paradoxical approach: intervening in a passive way. What makes the difference is the extent and the type of such “chance interventions.” They must never appear constructed, they are always minimally invasive and the observer is often not consciously aware of them.

This becomes apparent in the early series of model photographs (p. 42–55) that Ott produced for Riegler Riewe, one of the most prominent architectural firms of the second generation of the *Graz School*. However much these abstract images appear calculated and orchestrated, reduced to basic geometry and black-and-white hues, they are still rooted in a real world of objects that requires interpretation to create lasting images. Particularly the view and the lighting are the major components that create the desired abstraction: if the camera has been placed at the main axes of a model or at the height of an imaginary user, then this results in a reduction to a simple orthogonal grid or a geometric-surreal horizontal structure that creates this abstract character. In other words: even the simplest architectural model appears vivid, dynamic, colorful and shaped by various light reflections, if the photographer does not “edit” the possibilities. Ott intuitively used this skill early on, rendering reality more accurately than merely photographing a stereotypical situation in an unreflected manner.































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Paul Ott, geboren 1965

Seit 1989 freischaffender Fotograf, Graz

- 1991 Staatsstipendium für künstlerische Fotografie der Republik Österreich, Ankauf
- 1997 Europäischer Architektur fotografie-Preis, db-Architekturbild, Anerkennung
- 2011 Ausstellung „memory of architecture“, FUGA Budapest Center of Architecture
- 2010 Ausstellung „Error“, Galerie PARA\_SITE Graz
- 2008 Ausstellung zwischennordsüdturm 08.1, zita OBERWALDER, paul OTT, claudius PRATSCH, Mariazell
- 2006 Lehrauftrag und Gastvortrag an der Hochschule Wismar
- 2006 architektur in progress – SPLITTERWERK im Gespräch mit Paul Ott, Wien
- 2005 VI. Architektur-Biennale Sao Paulo Brasilien – SPLITTERWERK „Es lebe die Ente“ | Fotografie Paul Ott – Kuratorin Angelika Fitz
- 2001 Ausstellung „Architektur Landschaft Fotografie II“, ETH Zürich
- 2001 Ausstellung „Architektur Landschaft Fotografie“, Architektur Galerie Berlin (Katalog)
- 2000 Ausstellung „Paul Ott fotografiert Architektur“, Die Zentrale Bad Eisenkappel

Buchpublikationen u.a.:

Markus Pernthaler 902010 – Nikolaus Hellmeyer (Hg.) – raum.kunst.graz 2009

Space & Texture Hertl.Architekten – Matthias Boeckl (Hg.) – SpringerWienNewYork 2009

Justizzentrum Leoben – hg. v. BIG – Edition HFP-Löcker Wien 2006

Whoop to the Duck – SPLITTERWERK – SpringerWienNewYork 2005

A friendly alien – Dieter Bogner (Hg.) – Hatje Cantz Verlag 2004

Steven Holl 1986-2003 – ElCroquis Madrid 2003

Quaderns 232 – Cuaderno de Nueva York – Barcelona 2002

Definite Indefinite – Riegler-Riewe – SpringerWienNewYork 2001

Storefront for Art and Architecture – Werkdokumente 17 –

Kunsthau Bregenz 2000

Gucklhupf – Werkdokumente 8 – Kunsthau Bregenz 1995

Publikationen in internationalen Architekturjournalen

Paul Ott, born in 1965

Since 1989 freelance photographer, Graz

- 1991 Staatsstipendium für künstlerische Fotografie der Republik Österreich (State grant awarded by the Republic of Austria for artistic photography), acquisition
- 1997 European Prize of Architectural Photography, db-Architekturbild, Award
- 2011 Exhibition “Memory of architecture”, FUGA Budapest Center of Architecture
- 2010 Exhibition “Error”, PARA\_SITE Gallery, Graz
- 2008 Exhibition zwischennordsüdturm 08.1, zita OBERWALDER, paul OTT, claudius PRATSCH, Mariazell
- 2006 Teaching appointment and guest lecture at Hochschule Wismar
- 2006 architektur in progress – SPLITTERWERK interview with Paul Ott, Vienna
- 2005 VI. Architecture Biennale Sao Paulo Brasil – SPLITTERWERK “Es lebe die Ente” (Long live the duck) | Fotografie Paul Ott – curated by Angelika Fitz
- 2001 Exhibition “Architektur Landschaft Fotografie II” (Architecture landscape photography II), ETH Zurich
- 2001 Exhibition “Architektur Landschaft Fotografie” (Architecture landscape photography), Architektur Galerie Berlin (catalogue)
- 2000 Exhibition “Paul Ott fotografiert Architektur” (Paul Ott photographs architecture), Die Zentrale Bad Eisenkappel

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Markus Pernthaler 902010 – Nikolaus Hellmeyer (ed.) – raum.kunst.graz 2009

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Gucklhupf – Werkdokumente 8 – Kunsthau Bregenz 1995

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