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The Photographic Absolute: An Architectural Beginning

USER'S MANUAL

PhD Report



Arkitektur- og designhøgskolen i Oslo
The Oslo School of Architecture and Design

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PhD Report
Oslo School of Architecture and Design

CON-TEXT nr.64

ISSN 1502-217X
ISBN 978-82-547-0258-1 (part 1/6)

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PUBLISHER
Oslo School of Architecture and Design
P.O. Box 6768, St. Olavs Plass
N-0130 Oslo

DESIGN
Pavlina Lucas

LAYOUT
En Tipis

PRINT
Imprinta

The present project has been propelled by my wish to introduce intuition at the outset of the creative process towards an architecture, and it is based on my proposition that photographic practice constitutes a beginning in answering the question: *How can I disclose my intuitive insights and how can I bring these into the production of spatial experience?*

My wish originates in the cognizance that analytical thought has come to dominate the design of architecture, and it is founded on my belief that starting from intuition and engaging this in a transactional relationship with the intellect endows the architect's creative process with an authenticity, which is currently most urgently needed.

As I can not command my intuition, I make room for it to arise by subordinating my analytical mind. The intuitive mind surfaces in fleeting apprehensions and the inherent swiftness of the photographic apparatus enables me to capture these spontaneously. Photographs produced under these circumstances retain the moment of their genesis and are my starting point for re-living the originary intuition and disclosing insights via recollection and reflection on its image.

Because my intuitive photographic act is impulsive and unconditioned, at once final in its singularity and infinite in its inaugural character, I call it: *the photographic absolute*. The term covers both the act and the artifact, because under the conditions that this project operates these are simultaneous and indistinguishable.

The photographic absolute is, more than the end of my creative act, a beginning in my creative process. Starting from a first intuitive impulse and following the crystallization of insights latent in its image, I return to photographing and continue my exploration in the disclosed direction. Thus I set a singular journey in motion, the path of which emerges unforeseeably through the negotiation between intuitive action and intentful reflection.

Since my process is predisposed towards the production of spatial experience, what I find in the images is affected by my disposition and contingent on my intention. This self-sustaining and self-reflective process is composed of episodes that are both and simultaneously creative ends and productive beginnings towards an architecture. Hence, photography is hereby a *praxis*, but a poetic praxis nevertheless.

I see architecture as the consequence of a design process that brings forth artifacts which elicit spatial experience. Architecture is hence a noun, while design is a verb. *An architecture*, the term used by Romantics to designate a body of work that expressed the essence of its era, indicates here work that begins from a personal intuition and is developed based on this, manifesting thus the singularity of its author. *An architectural beginning* points then to the specificity of the creative act, while also acknowledging the fact that this is one out of a myriad other possible beginnings.

It is under this light that *the photographic absolute* institutes *an architectural beginning*.

The organic development of my research journey has followed my personal compass, which, like the one used by Captain Jack Sparrow, always points towards my innermost wish at each point in time. Since the primary resistant force in the evolution of this adventure has been my own (dis)position, I proceed with a brief account of the circumstances that led me to this endeavor.

I began my career studying (photo)journalism and art history at Boston University (1989-1993). After my graduation I worked with photography in the context of installation and performance. As I became increasingly engrossed in the production of spatial experience, I decided to hone my skills in this direction by studying architecture. At the time my intention was to continue with the artistic work that I had already begun after the completion of my studies.

During the first two years of my architecture studies at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (1995-2000) I struggled with what I perceived as a streamlined approach to our education and found solace by supplementing my curriculum with art classes I took at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. (Looking back I feel enormously lucky to have had the opportunity to work in those marvelous studios.) Working in the artistic mode allowed me to develop and to give form to my own insights, without the pressure of being reasonable or the demand of producing something useful. In the semester prior to my diploma (Spring 1999) I finally had the chance to work also with architecture as a practice originating in feelings, engaging intuition, and opening up worlds instead of closing questions. This was when I participated in the option studio *House Without a Form*, taught by Peter Zumthor. The following excerpt from Zumthor's introduction to the studio gives a sense of the work we developed during this term:

And within the house, a sequence of seven spaces. We design it, which means we search for it in our memory, intuitively, imagining it to be a real thing of architectural flesh and blood. ...Form is not yet an issue. We think only about sensation, about materials and sounds and smells and shadows and light and about what our hands touch and what our feet walk on and about what the rooms and their sequence allow us to experience and feel and about the way these qualities might fit together and suit their place and enhance the different ways of use.

After my graduation I moved to Switzerland and worked at the atelier of Peter Zumthor as the project architect for a number of projects including Walter De Maria's *360° I Ching Gallery* and Louise Bourgeois' *I Do, I Undo, I Redo Pavilion* for Dia:Beacon; *Kunstgalerie Hinter dem Giesshaus 1* in Berlin; and *Bruder Klaus Feldkapelle* in Germany. We designed these projects by starting from intuitive images that we then explored through model making, assessing what we learned through our exploration in the context of the building's site and use.

I moved to Cyprus in 2003 and started my own office, continuing to work in the same mode that I had practiced during my formative years in Switzerland. After building a handful of projects, I felt the need to step outside the daily routine of running an office, to think architecture again, to read, to ask questions, in a way to re-begin while bearing the experience that I had gained as a professional.

The wish to pursue a practice-based PhD project was already turning in my mind when I visited Documenta in June 2007 and came across the artwork *Al Calor del Pensamiento* (1999) by the Chilean artist Gonzalo Diaz. In a basement room of the Neue Gallerie, ceramic filaments glowed intermittently, exhaling and inhaling the phrase: *WIR SUCHEN ÜBERALL DAS UNBEDINGTE UND FINDEN IMMER NUR DINGE*. (This phrase, which I translated as *We Seek Everywhere The Unconditional And Find Only The Conditional*, belongs to Novalis.) My chance encounter with this "heated" statement instigated a thinking process within me, which six months later informed the project proposal that I submitted with my application for the position of doctoral research fellow at AHO. As my application was accepted, I moved to Oslo and joined the PhD programme in August 2008.

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While developing this project I worked at times as an artist, at other times as a scholar, and for two semesters as an instructor. Discoveries that surfaced in one arena inevitably affected the development of my work in the other two, and so my research journey moved in concert, but not simultaneously, along distinct but crossing trails. Each sphere of activity yielded a body of work different in scope and character but synergic with the others. These three bodies of work are now gathered and placed as units at the center of this project report.

LOGBOOK

In this unit I document the development of my artistic work. All material included here is original except when otherwise noted. Episodes of artistic creation are followed by intervals of critical reflection, in which I reveal insights that move new cycles of work. The hands-on exploration parts operate in the context of intuition, while the discussion parts function in the context of intellectual thought. Through the interaction of instinct and reason my journey evolves as an unforeseeable performance enacted on the stage of the original wish and composed by the progressive accumulation of episodes, core acts that thicken its plot and expand its relevant ken.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN PRACTICE

This unit centers on the elective course that I designed and conducted at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design as part of my research project. By thinking spatial experience through photographing, students revealed insights that they brought into the production of a site-specific artifact. After introducing the structure and the objectives of the course, I document the evolution of six student projects (two in detail and four in their abridged version) so as to give a sense of the breadth and variation of the work produced. With this unit I aim to expose the consequences of actively engaging intuition in architectural education, and to re-begin the discussion on the pedagogical significance of this and its import to the profession at large.

PRACTICING-RESEARCH: TOWARDS A MATHESIS SINGULARIS

In this essay I discuss the emerging culture of what I call *practicing-research* and I consider this vis-à-vis the academic establishment. I survey the roots of this mode of knowledge production and its rapport with pertinent spheres of thought and practice. By delving into the ontology and the epistemology of practicing-research, I aim to delineate the terrain on which my project exists and to frame the conditions under which it operates, priming thus its reception in the public realm.

Each one of the three units of work described above unfolds the consequences of my original wish from a different position and inscribes a universe of its own. These bodies of work are in essence interminable, their evolution could continue *ad infinitum*. Their present closure is ordained by the temporal parameters of my PhD project; and so, they now rest framed on either side by a bi-partite unit, the title of which I borrowed from T.S Eliot's poem *East Coker* included in *Four Quartets*.

IN MY BEGINNING IS MY END ... IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING

The two parts composing this unit are like brackets that anchor the work at the center of my research report, providing a way into and a way out of this, while emphasizing its circular nature. The content of this bi-partite unit follows its function: to unfold the specificity of the creative work and carve out a site where this can presently exist.

In "In my Beginning is my End..." I explicate the wish that has propelled the project and the ground on which this stands. In addition, I place my research project on the collective platform of relevant endeavors.

In "...In my End is my Beginning" I begin with "(Instead of) A Conclusion", where I contemplate the significance of my project by folding it onto itself but also opening it up towards new beginnings. I follow with the "Acknowledgements" and "Literature Cited" and close this unit with three appendices that contain, going backwards in time, events significant to the evolution of my project. "Appendix A" contains the correspondence relating to the permission I was granted to deviate from the standard PhD book format established at AHO. "Appendix B" is the project proposal that I submitted with my application for the position of doctoral research fellow, and I include this as my first step in the current research journey. "Appendix C" documents an art project that I produced two decades ago and which I recall at the present closure of my "Logbook".

I designed the format of this research report with the intention that it reflects the nature of its content. The units fixed on either end of the cover frame the project and mark the site where the three bodies of work placed loosely at the center of the report can exist without prescribing an order in which to be read. As these bodies of work are different from but synergic with each

other, reading one will inevitably affect how the next one is received. The eventual reading of all three will yield the whole experience of my research journey, but each reader is invited to choose how to compose this experience. The decision to offer the opportunity to my readers to author their own journey through my creative work issues from my wish that the reception of this project report is as singular and as dynamic a process as has been the evolution of the work it encloses. (Some repetitions between units were necessary to render each of them comprehensible regardless of the sequence in which they are read.)

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This "User's Manual" sets the stage for each reader's performance. So as to give a common thread at the beginning of these performances, I conclude with a list of terms that I have either invented or that I use in a specific way.

practicing-research

This is a term I coined and which I use to address research activity that integrates hands-on production and critical reflection. I felt compelled to devise my own term, on one hand because I did not want to commit my discussion to the disciplinary or ideological implications inherent in a term already in use, and on the other hand because I felt that there is room for a more inclusive yet specific name for this mode of knowledge production. I explicate the considerations upon which my choice of this term is based at the beginning of the essay "Practicing-Research: Towards a Mathesis Singularis".

research report

I use this term, in lieu of **thesis**, because it excludes the implication of a fixed position and aptly points to this document as the re-bringing forth of my journey, so that this can be redeveloped towards new insights with each new reading. The research report is an experience, and as such it demands a certain level of immersion on the reader's behalf.

proposition

I use this term, instead of **hypothesis**, so as to emphasize the divergence of my project from traditional scientific research. I put forth my proposition as a proposal to be accepted or rejected based on whether it becomes convincing in the way that I have unfolded and developed it.

episode

With this term I indicate the productive acts that are the cores which constitute my research journey, as a per-formed practice, through their successive accumulation.

