

# *Silver Surfaces, Deep Images: Hans Danuser's Photography and Peter Zumthor's Architecture*

Philip Ursprung

In the mid-1980s, a lucky star stood over the Bündner Kunstmuseum. Beat Stutzer, who had recently become director, invited Hans Danuser, who was just over thirty and still little known, to present his first solo exhibition. This exhibition, held in 1985 and titled *Drei Fotoserien* (Three Photo Series), marked the beginning of the photographer Danuser's career as an artist.<sup>1</sup> It also contributed to reopening the doors of the art world to the medium of photography, which, as an applied art, had long been moving in the shadows of the great genres since those doors were closed after a brief phase of exchange in the period of the classical avant-gardes. And, thanks to the meeting of Danuser and Peter Zumthor, it marked the beginning of a new type of architectural photography that would shape the image of Swiss architecture in the years that followed. Danuser had set himself the task—these days it would be called “artistic research”—of creating within ten years a kind of visual encyclopedia of themes that polarized the public at the time: namely, nuclear energy, gene technology, and money. The project, entitled *Wirtschaft, Industrie, Wissenschaft und Forschung* (Economy, Industry, Science, and Research), took him through Switzerland and to France and the United States, with support from scholarships.<sup>2</sup> In 1989, he concluded the project with an extensive exhibition at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau entitled *In Vivo*, and a monograph.<sup>3</sup>

Among the visitors to the exhibition *Drei Fotoserien* were Annalisa and Peter Zumthor, who had been running their own architectural firm in Haldenstein since 1980. Danuser's quasi-forensic look at the details of nuclear power plants and laboratories for genetic research presumably spoke to Zumthor's experience working in the cantonal historical preservation department in Chur in the 1970s, where he had conducted inventories of villages and recorded fragments of former buildings. Danuser's sensitivity to atmospheric interiors and eye for the textures and surfaces of concrete walls, tile floors, and metal surely aroused the interest of an architect who designs buildings from the inside out, and whose projects aim to make the invisible visible and to bring the latent to light. Danuser's method of not reducing the complexity of phenomena to an image but rather breaking it down into a wealth of fragments resembled his own analytical understanding of design and his view of space as something discontinuous. And, finally, as an architect who was pursuing the goal of architectonic autonomy he surely had respect for this young photographer who had chosen to set himself an ambitious task, rather than just to perform tasks for others.

A little later, when Zumthor was invited by the director of the Architekturgalerie Luzern to present his own first solo exhibition, he asked Danuser to photograph three of his buildings. The architectural photography common at the time did not conform to his idea of what constituted adequate representation. In his own words: “The illustrations of architecture in journals were repellent to us—as if the camera with its wide-angle lens was opening its jaws wide in order to record as much information as possible. The whole character of the building was lost in the process.”<sup>4</sup> Zumthor gave Danuser a free hand and guaranteed him autonomy. Danuser accepted the invitation and in 1987 and 1988 he photographed the buildings with a medium-format camera and black-and-white film: the Zumthor studio in Haldenstein (1986), two protective structures for the excavations of Roman finds in Chur (1986), and the nearly finished Sogn Benedetg chapel in Sumvitg (consecrated in September 1988). This resulted in three series of square, black-and-white photographs. They were shown in October 1988 in the exhibition *Partituren und Bilder: Architektonische Arbeiten aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor, 1985–1988* (Scores and Images: Architectonic

Works from the Atelier of Peter Zumthor) at the Architekturgalerie Luzern and then in the summer of 1989 at the Architekturgalerie Graz, and published in catalog form.<sup>5</sup> They were published in November 1989 in the journal *Domus*, in *Ottagono* in 1990, and in *Du* in 1992.<sup>6</sup> Twenty years later, they were reprinted in the book *Seeing Zumthor: Images by Hans Danuser*.<sup>7</sup>

Zumthor had decided to exhibit the photographs in Lucerne in parallel with the project drawings of his buildings, which he compared to musical scores: "With their high degree of abstraction, they are the most precise depiction of the architectonic composition and the binding basis for its execution. Except that what is not in this score is left open to performance practice and to the interpretation of the performer." He understood the photographs to be "images of works performed according to these scores," formulated in the "artistic language of the photographer Hans Danuser." Thus he did not understand them as documentation, but rather as a kind of interpretation or commentary. In his words: "He speaks in this language about our performances."<sup>8</sup>

Knowing that his photographs would be presented together with the drawings and would therefore not have to shoulder the burden of representation in and of themselves expanded Danuser's latitude. Whereas his earlier works had been carried out, as he put it, "in the laboratory," now he could conduct an "experiment in the field" and "expose them to life."<sup>9</sup> The methodology that had already been vaguely outlined in *Drei Fotoserien*—namely, the representation of abstract themes by means of architecture—was now made concrete with reference to three specific edifices. In essence, the photographs of Zumthor's buildings continue on from the images of the laboratories and power plants and are thus closely related to the *In Vivo* cycle. Just as Danuser—when photographing the nuclear power plants—deliberately ignored the cliché of the iconic cooling tower, instead photographing a sequence of diverse interiors in the plants, here he dispensed with the then-common reduction of architecture to a single photograph showing the building together with its surroundings. Instead, he concentrated primarily on the interiors and made a series of photographs of each of the three buildings.<sup>10</sup>

For example, no one looking at the photographs of the Zumthor studio can tell what the building looks like from outside, where it is located, how large it is, or of what material it is made. No photograph shows its now famous facade with its characteristic slat structure. The images do, however, enable viewers to visualize the thought processes of the architects, to follow the play of light and shadows on the floor, and to admire a wall decorated by Matthias Spescha. Viewers can put themselves in the place of the architects and sense that perhaps some ideas are found not when working at the drafting table but rather when standing on the stair landing, looking out the window, or daydreaming in front of a wall.

Danuser took two exterior photographs of the protective structures, but they are so far removed from the conventions of architectural photography that viewers cannot determine their urban context or their dimensions. The volumes of the buildings stand out against the meadow, which appears white because of overexposure, and a bright background, as if they were floating between heaven and earth like a *fata morgana*. The bridge connecting two buildings in another photograph recalls, in turn, an oversized camera bellows. It almost looks as if the camera itself is reflected in the architecture. The photograph of the space that rises up above the barely perceptible remains of the excavation resembles the image of a giant camera obscura into which daylight is penetrating, and which projects images of the outside world. And the photograph of the

pitch-black corridor leading across a bridge to the front door looks like the interior of a camera: a mechanism with a mysterious black rectangle lying in its area of focus.

In the Caplutta Sogn Benedetg, too, the camera traces a photographic space within the architecture, for example in the image which shows where the bearing structure connects with the outer shell. Without the caption, it would be impossible to identify this as part of the chapel. Danuser's photograph shows the metal pins connecting the wooden supports to the wooden shell. They are what makes the interior seem like a sound box, since the viewer gets the impression that the outer spatial membrane has almost been suspended in the air. This makes manifest a theme that characterizes Zumthor's oeuvre: a space created entirely from surfaces. Zumthor painted the inside of the shell silver because he wanted to create, as he put it, a "silver wall."<sup>11</sup> This has the effect of dematerializing, in a sense, the surface of the wood and making the space seem deeper. (Several years earlier Herzog & de Meuron had employed a comparable method for their *Blaues Haus* [Blue House], in which the blue seems to plunge the viewers into a color space.) With regard to the relationship between architecture and photography, this shot is central because it functions like a hinge between the two genres. The silver surface of the wooden membrane corresponds to the silver surface of the photographic paper. Just as the silver paint causes the wood to shine, produces an illusion of depth, and reinforces the atmospheric spatial effect, the silver surface of the photographic paper lends depth to the photographic image. Danuser used black-and-white negatives, not color negatives, yet the silver surface of the black-and-white paper is not completely planar but rather forms a kind of highly delicate relief from the structure of the silver crystals. It takes on an almost infinite gradation of shades of gray and to the viewers appears multicolored, because the facets of the silver crystals reflect the natural light.

Danuser treats the exterior photographs of Sogn Benedetg as if the building stood within an interior space. He turns his back on the view onto the *Surselva*. A layer of fog closes the space, and the placement of the chapel in the upper part of the image makes the pictorial space seem planar. The steep meadow is punctuated by boulders, which testify to the rawness of the natural forces in the mountains and remind us that the previous building, located just a stone's throw away, was destroyed by an avalanche in 1984. But the chapel, too, looks like a foreign body in its surroundings. It fits with its surroundings neither typologically (most chapels in the mountains are stone) nor formally (its tube-like shape, viewed from below, more closely resembles a tower than a sacred building). It is therefore unsurprising that the monastery remained skeptical and granted the building permission "without conviction" after the competition had been won, as Zumthor remarks in retrospect.<sup>12</sup>

Another exterior photograph makes it clear that the building is not round, but neither does it fully reveal the teardrop ground plan. It shows a pasture fence and gives the viewers a sense of the sparseness of the resources available in the mountain region. By showing a detail of the new building next to the fence and allowing its concrete foundation to loom up into the image, Danuser not only prevents any nostalgic evocation of a supposedly ideal, preindustrial world but also shines a light on the leitmotif of work—whether industrially organized or preindustrial. He relates the built concrete to the way the fence and chapel were produced. The unfinished branches rammed in and the pieces of bark inserted between them are waste products of the lumber industry, from the production of boards or shingles, for example, like those that protect the chapel's exterior wall from weathering.

A similarly subtle look at production is also provided by the details of the floor, which Danuser photographed before and after the pews were installed. They reveal that although small, inexpensive boards are used, their ornamental grain and variation improve the aesthetic effect of the interior. Danuser puts materials and work processes center stage—and for that reason, with a few photographs he is able to say more about Zumthor’s method as an architect than any text that makes hasty mention of his training as a carpenter. In addition, he thus reinforces the impression that the landscape in which the chapel is located is at least in part made by human beings. Danuser’s analytical approach brings together the economic conditions of agriculture and the building on the same level of representation. Both photographs show the building not against the backdrop of an aesthetic *landscape* but rather as part of the concrete surroundings of the *rural*.

The camera brings the surfaces very close, as if it wanted to draw a connection between the space of the architecture and the space of the camera, and as if it conceived of the architecture not as a closed-off space, but rather as a starting point from which the camera can expand into the imaginary realm, thus extending the architecture further. The pictorial space and the built space collide on the surface of the photograph. The meeting between Danuser and Zumthor brings out a potential in both that had not been clearly perceivable previously. The architectonic quality that is made manifest in Danuser’s sequences of photographs is not a mere motif, but rather an embodiment of his method of creating spaces with the camera. The photographic quality in Zumthor’s buildings, in turn, is not limited to the theme of the camera obscura but also pertains to the way light falls on surfaces and how the outside is transferred to the inside. Danuser’s camera discovers its mirror image wherever it turns, or rather, it projects elements of photography onto Zumthor’s architecture. In Danuser’s photographs, Zumthor sees elements of architecture in a form he was unable to perceive previously. That may explain why the architect was moved by looking at the photographs in Danuser’s studio “spread out on the floor and hung on the walls.” That is to say, organized in space. In his words: “The photographs were ... powerful. It was so beautiful that I had tears in my eyes. These beautiful, deep-black-and-white photographs in these bright and dark shades of gray not only met my expectations but exceeded them.”<sup>13</sup>

Their collaboration on the 1988 exhibition was deliberately planned by Zumthor and Danuser as a one-time experiment, and Danuser has not taken pictures commissioned by Zumthor since. But their encounter led to a fundamental change in the conventions of architectural photography. Danuser’s way of depicting Zumthor’s architecture influenced its reception. Just as anyone who has ever seen the photographs that Hans Namuth took in 1950 of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio will almost involuntarily associate his paintings with the images of their production, so too are Danuser’s photographs interwoven with Zumthor’s work. He chose a personal interpretation rather than a neutral documentation. And rather than reducing the phenomena to a photograph, he broke them down perspectively into their individual parts, as if in a short film that subdivides the object into sequences and shows it from different angles. These fragments permit the viewers to construct the architecture in their imagination. This fruitful relationship between architecture and photography had been made possible because the borders between the two genres had been temporarily relaxed. Zumthor, who was trying to make the move from landmark preservation to architecture, temporarily put responsibility in the hands of an artist. Danuser, in

turn, who had just turned from a photographer into an artist, agreed to do commissioned work for a time.

A decade later, however, Danuser would again engage with Zumthor’s work, this time at the invitation of Fritz Hauser. The musician had composed *Sounding Stones* for Therme Vals: a sound composition played on sounding stones that is heard on infinite loop in the spa’s relaxation rooms. Hauser asked Danuser to take photographs for the CD. H el ene Binet had already photographed the spa, which opened in 1996, and her photographs contributed to Zumthor’s international breakthrough. Danuser was therefore not the first to approach the building from the perspective of photography. But as had already been the case with the three buildings ten years earlier, he used the opportunity to experiment with photography’s ability to show the invisible—this time, sound and music. Zumthor’s metaphor of the “score” echoes in this new project, but in contrast to the 1988 exhibition, the photographs were displayed on their own, with no project drawings placed next to them.

The nine-part series *Peter Zumthor: Therme Vals* (1998) is methodologically linked to the series produced ten years earlier. As already in that first encounter, Danuser approached his object with a series of photographs of the interior—including one group of five photographs—and once again the exterior was left out. He visited the spa several times in different seasons. One of the visits coincided with a modification to the pool, during which the water was drained. In order to obtain the most uniform interior lighting possible, the skylights were also covered with tarps.<sup>14</sup> Danuser did not photograph the room where *Sounding Stones* is heard. Instead, he presents the entire main room of the spa as a hermetically closed space or as a labyrinth of rooms. Just as visitors to the spa can never get a view of the entire space and can sometimes get lost, Danuser offers no overview or orientation but instead fragments the building into numerous spatial impressions. And just as the visitors to the bath are always surrounded by the gurgling, splashing, and dripping of the water and of course by the sounds they make themselves, and can give themselves over to the illusion that they can hear the echo of the water gurgling inside the mountain, Danuser interprets the interior as a kind of sound box in stone.

In several photographs, we see the traces of water left behind on the floor by bathers. In the photograph of the stairs, small puddles have been left behind on one step. The viewers imagine filling the empty pool. The absence of water is not perceived as a flaw but rather further underscores the scenographic effect of the building. The series inevitably recalls the stage sets of Adolphe Appia from the early twentieth century, with their steps and landings, or the light installations of James Turrell undertaken since the 1960s. As in the photograph sequences from 1988, the camera seeks out an affinity with the interior in the spa, for example, in the form of the light that penetrates the gap in the concrete ceiling and shines on the gneiss slabs that serve as wall panels. The role played by the silver wall in the photographs of the chapel—that of an interface between the architectonic and the photographic space—is here played by this gneiss surface. The grayish blue, slightly sparkling color of the stone is translated by Danuser into many nuances of gray.

Danuser continued this theme after 2000 in the three *Erosion* cycles. The surface of the rocks corresponds to the surface of the photographs placed on the floor like objects. The images fix the ever-changing surface of the rocks in the topology of the photograph surfaces, but at the same

time they themselves become objects that can be experienced spatially as the viewers move around them in the room. With *Schiefertafel Beverin* (Beverin Slate Slab) of 2001, Danuser risked the move into the medium of architecture. A plaza made of slate slabs serves as a platform and a meeting place for the Beverin psychiatric clinic. Whereas the photographs function as a continuation of the built space, the built space now extends the imaginary spaces of photography. The silver surfaces and deep images have produced a concrete, built entity.

1  
Hans Danuser, *Drei Fotoserien*, exh. cat. (Chur: Bündner Kunstmuseum, 1985).

2  
In 1980, 1983, and 1985, Danuser received the Eidgenössisches Kunststipendium (Federal Art Scholarship); in 1979, 1983, and 1985, the Kunststipendium des Kantons Zürich (Art Scholarship of the Canton of Zurich); and in 1983, 1984, and 1985, the Kunststipendium der Stadt Zürich (Art Scholarship of the City of Zurich). In 1984, he was the first photographer to receive an Atelierstipendium der Stadt Zürich (Studio Scholarship of the City of Zurich) in New York.

3  
See Hans Danuser, *In vivo: 93 Fotografien*, exh. cat. (Aarau: Aargauer Kunsthaus, 1989).

4  
Hans Danuser, in Hans Danuser and Peter Zumthor, "Ateliergespräch," in Hans Danuser and Bettina Gockel, eds., *Neuerfindung der Fotografie: Hans Danuser, Gespräche, Materialien, Analysen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 149–66, esp. 152.

5  
*Partituren und Bilder: Architektonische Arbeiten aus dem Atelier Peter Zumthor, 1985–1988; Fotos: Hans Danuser*, 2nd ed. (Lucerne: Architekturgalerie, 1994).

6  
See Martin Steinmann, "Peter e Annalisa Zumthor: Cappella a Sogn Benedetg, Svizzera," *Domus* 710 (November 1989), 44–45; Wilfried Wang, "An Architecture of Silent Articulations: On the Work of Peter Zumthor," in "Domestic / Antidomestic = Domesticity / Counter-Domesticity," special issue of *Ottagono* 97 (December 1990): 48–80; and "Pendenzen: Neuere Architektur in der Deutschen Schweiz," special issue of *Du: Die Zeitschrift für Kunst und Kultur* 5 (1992): 49–67.

7  
*Zumthor sehen: Bilder von Hans Danuser = Seeing Zumthor: Images by Hans Danuser* (Zurich: Edition Hochparterre bei Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009).

8  
Peter Zumthor, "Partituren und Bilder," in *Partituren und Bilder* (see note 5), 9–10, esp. 10.

9  
Hans Danuser, in Danuser and Zumthor, "Ateliergespräch" (see note 4), 156.

10  
The photographs of interiors and of the cooling tower of the nuclear power plant were taken at the beginning of the cycle. According to Danuser, they were taken in Gösgen in 1979. Hans Danuser in conversation with Philip Ursprung, June 11, 2008.

11  
Peter Zumthor: "Yes, I had decided on a silver wall. Then I sought the advice of the color planner Jean Pfaff anyway. He taped color strips to the back of the supports, which the light then reflected onto the silver wall. The colors appeared and disappeared with the sun. Then we both decided to paint the wall white, since we had convinced ourselves that that would have the desired effect. But white is too similar to the natural color of the wooden supports, so the result was really ... nothing ... or almost nothing." Hans Danuser, in Danuser and Zumthor, "Ateliergespräch" (see note 4), 156.

12  
Peter Zumthor, in *Peter Zumthor: Bauten und Projekte, 1985–2013*, ed. Thomas Durisch, vol. 1 (1985–1989) (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2014), 63.

13  
Hans Danuser, in Danuser and Zumthor, "Ateliergespräch" (see note 4), 153.

14  
Hans Danuser in conversation with Philip Ursprung, June 11, 2008.

Hans Danuser  
**Darkrooms of  
Photography**

Edited by  
**Stephan Kunz and Lynn Kost**

**Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur**

**Steidl**

## Table of Contents

6	<b>MARBLEGRAPHS / MARMOGRAPHIEN, 1976</b>
8	<b>Stephan Kunz, <i>Photography in Motion</i></b>
20	<b>THE LAST ANALOG PHOTOGRAPH, 2007–2017</b>
48	<b>Kelley Wilder, <i>Through the Looking-Glass:</i></b> <i>Hans Danuser's "Last Analog Photograph"</i>
56	<b>EROSION, 2000–2006</b>
74	<b>THE PARTY IS OVER, 1984</b>
90	<b>ALPHABET CITY, 1984</b>
96	<b>HARLEQUIN'S DEATH, HARLEKINS TOD, 1982</b>
98	<b>SCORES AND IMAGES / ZUMTHOR PROJECT, 1988–1999</b>
116	<b>Philip Ursprung, <i>Silver Surfaces, Deep Images:</i></b> <i>Hans Danuser's Photography and Peter Zumthor's Architecture</i>
124	<b>IN VIVO, 1980–1989</b>
156	<b>Urs Stahel, <i>In vivo – in vitro</i></b>
166	<b>FROZEN EMBRYO SERIES, 1997–2000</b>
179	<b>Lynn Kost, <i>From Painting to Photography and Object</i></b>
186	<b>STRANGLED BODY, 1995</b>
196	<b>Stefan Zweifel, <i>Under the Spell of the Black Sun</i></b>
202	<b>MATOGRAPHS / MATOGRAPHIEN, work in progress since 1994</b>
206	<b>Jörg Scheller, <i>Contra Gnosis:</i></b> <i>A Con-Text on the Role of Research in Hans Danuser's Work</i>
214	<b>LANDSCAPE, 1993–1996</b>
	<b>Appendix</b>
218	<b>Catalog of works</b>
220	<b>Biography</b>
220	<b>Exhibitions</b>
224	<b>Bibliography</b>