

## CONCRETE MY LOVE

Sand and gravel mixed with cement and water. Several rods of steel. The list does not sound like a recipe for a family portrait, let alone an intimate one. And yet these are the humble ingredients behind Heidi Specker's series *Concrete* (2002—2003). The colour photographs offer close-up glimpses of three buildings made with reinforced concrete: the main lecture hall at the Universität Köln in Cologne, the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London and the National Theatre in London. More bunker than building, the massive structures typify the Brutalism style that dominated public architecture in the 1960s and 1970s. Specker has the curious ability to portray these grey bunkers as if they were family members, if not lovers. Their imposing walls become a myriad of intimately intersecting angles, which Specker has photographed from slightly different perspectives, as if she were trying to capture every single gesture of a loved one. *Concrete* may initially appear to be a study in architectural morphology, but the series has the familiarity of photographs collected in a private album. The buildings are linked, not only by one construction material, but also by the artist, who has captured an experience with the buildings that escapes our gaze.

“National Theatre London” (2003) is a case in point. Specker's slight shifts in perspective—the square honeycomb ceiling viewed from here and then from there, close up, then further away—lend the building both an anthropomorphic and an animated quality. Far from simply giving architecture a lively human face, Specker's shifting perspectives establish a proximity that places the building in a temporal sequence without any definitive event. The square honeycomb ceiling viewed from here and from there, close up, then further away, suggests that something has happened to motivate the change in perspective. Yet there are no indications to explain what is going on, beyond the building's pattern: more honeycomb. Specker tracks the pattern's repetitive movement without providing any clues about why we have moved, why we are moving closer. Indeed, the other images of the National Theatre—walls standing at impossible angles to each other—only add to our disorientation because the images reveal more details about the building without telling us where we are: below, above or somewhere in the middle, wherever the middle might be. Even the shadows seem to contradict each other by falling at kaleidoscopic angles, which could hardly be traced back to the unique source of the sun. In Specker's series, the sense of time lacks the event captured by the media image; the sense of place is missing the location of the tourist snapshot; there is a strong sense of architecture but no clear view of the entire building for the architectural historian; finally, the sense of detail lacks the technical specificity of the building inspector's check for cracks or fissures. While giving us time, place, architecture and detail, Specker holds back the very elements that would allow us to situate the building—and the photographs—with respect to ourselves and within a collective narrative we could share with others. Specker's gaze—insistent yet inaccessible—creates a thoroughly personal relationship to a resolutely public building.

Specker's gesture—to personalize public architecture—is significant, especially if one considers the history of Brutalism. The term can be traced back both to the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, whose explorations in “*béton brut*” (such as the 1952 Unité d'Habitation in Marseille), were a way of remaining true to pure Modernist materials, and to the English architecture critic Reyner Banham, who used “New Brutalism” in 1955 to describe a movement first exemplified by the English architects Peter and Alison Smithson. The South Bank Centre, which holds the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the National Theatre, as well as the Hayward Gallery and the Royal Festival Hall, remains a prime example of Brutalism. The Queen Elizabeth Hall, inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II in 1967, was designed by the GLC Department of Architecture under the direction of Sir Hubert Bennett; the National Theatre, designed by Sir Denys Lasdun, was completed in 1976; while the main lecture hall of the Universität Köln was designed by Rolf Gutbrod and built between 1964—1967. Like Le Corbusier and the Smithsons, the architects Bennett, Lasdun and Gutbrod remained honest both to the materials and to the processes of construction.

Buildings were not covered, let alone decorated, but left to exist in their most primitive state: reinforced concrete. However stubbornly solid, this material proved to be highly expressive, capable of taking on manifold forms on a large scale while maintaining traces from the construction period on its raw surfaces. Brutalism's exposed concrete walls hold the imprints of the wooden cases or “shuttering” in which the concrete was poured and where it hardened on site. While some slabs and forms in Specker's photographs—such as the square honeycomb ceiling—were pre-poured, most walls were made with shuttering and thus bear all the marks of the temporary shuttering: holes from metal rivets and lines from the wooden planks. It is not surprising that Brutalism typified the public architecture of the welfare state, whether in England or in Germany. The complexes in Specker's series—as public buildings built by the state for music, theatre and education—delivered on a promise to make culture available to everyone, without the mystery of hidden structures or decorative class distinctions. More significantly, these solid and raw buildings could last forever while preserving on their surfaces every trace from the moment of their construction, when the concrete walls hardened up against the shuttering. By manifesting this temporality—from inception to eternity—the walls of Brutalism reinforced the cradle-to-grave span of the welfare state's care.

Specker's approach captures the architectural style of Brutalism along with its contradictions.

Unlike the waning welfare state, her gaze does not privatize but rather personalizes the public cultural

complexes. Both the photographs and the buildings are open to a collective gaze; indeed, Specker's medium remains as evident as the buildings' identities, which are included in the individual titles of the series. While visually collective, *Concrete* manages to make the relation between the photographer and the buildings opaque. We can enjoy Specker's view, but we can never quite step into her shoes, let alone understand where the artist was standing when she took the photographs. Inviting viewers to share her perspective while refusing to let them to occupy her position fully, Specker challenges the ideal that the public sphere is made up of completely interchangeable positions and is realized when individuals exchange these positions with each other. While using photography to demarcate a personal relation to the buildings, Specker turns their raw surfaces inside-out. The artist, who grew up during the era when Brutalism flourished, seems to understand rawness as the exposure of a hidden interior rather than as the total absence of decoration, whether banished by Le Corbusier's Modernist purity or eradicated by the Smithsons's truth to materials. By capturing details left behind by the shuttering—the holes from metal rivets and the lines from wooden planks—Specker underscores the fact that the exterior walls of these buildings were once interiors. The buildings may have ended up as concrete bunkers, but they began as wooden structures—temporary shells that were built, dismantled and finally discarded. Even the square honeycomb ceiling holds the negative imprint of a positive mould that has since disappeared. If one judges from Specker's photographs, the architects Bennett, Lasdun and Gutbrod used shuttering and moulds, not in a purely functional way, as Brutalism would appear to dictate, but rather in an elaborately lyrical way. This method adds a personal signature to the functional imprints on their creations: Bennett altered both the width and the length of the wooden planks to create wave effects on the walls of the National Theatre; Lasdun used rivets to punctuate the frames outlining the walls of the Queen Elizabeth Hall; Gutbrod added that sheets and wider planks to vary the appearance of the walls of the Universität Köln lecture hall. Brutalism, far from an egalitarian architecture built for the welfare state, appears as the negative expression of each architect's individuality. By personalizing public architecture, Specker's photographs reflect a uniqueness that was impressed upon a rather unassuming set of ingredients: sand and gravel mixed with cement and water, along with several rods of steel.

Of course, the temporality of the photograph, which freezes one instant forever, approximates the temporality of Brutalism, which promises to run from inception to eternity. While photography forgets the time that follows an instant frozen on film—years might pass before a photograph is finally developed—Brutalism loses the time that led up to its inception. The concrete walls hold the traces of the shuttering and the moulds that formed them, but these temporary shelters and shells were doomed to disappear as architecture. The National Theatre, the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Universität Köln lecture hall were designed and built twice—first in wood and then in concrete—but only the concrete version survived. The melancholy that pervades Specker's photographs—visual odes to a loved one—might arise from their personal character. But then again, every photograph is an attempt to capture an architectural ghost: the structure that went missing once the building was built.

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