

SIX SCREENS

Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch's Staged Atmospheres

Kristin Washco

INSTALLAZIONE VIDEO, ATMOSFERA, AFTERIMAGE

Questo articolo propone un'analisi approfondita dell'installazione "Six Screens, Six Projectors, Six Cameras" dei registi Nicole Six e Paul Petritsch. Da aprile a luglio 2007, i due artisti hanno posizionato sei telecamere all'interno e nei dintorni di dodici edifici progettati dall'architetto Peter Zumthor. Le riprese sono state poi proiettate su sei schermi disposti in modo identico all'interno delle sale espositive del Kunsthau Bregenz di Zumthor. L'installazione era un esperimento progettuale interdisciplinare che metteva in presenza tre livelli atmosferici: l'architettura originale, la stessa Kunsthau Bregenz e il cinema come mediatore. La disposizione unica sia delle telecamere che degli schermi ha dato vita a una *mise-en-scène* che ha permesso ai visitatori di esplorare due edifici contemporaneamente, sperimentando la fusione di atmosfere altrimenti impossibili da vivere. Nell'opera di Zumthor, lungo tutto il percorso si incontrano in sequenza spazi multisensoriali immersivi. Questi incontri sono effimeri ma permangono nella memoria di chi li vive, trasformandosi in immagini residue. L'allestimento dell'installazione cinematografica di Six e Petritsch ha saputo cogliere in modo unico la presenza fisica dell'architettura contestualizzata di Zumthor, trapiantando frammenti degli ambienti multisensoriali in un nuovo contesto. In quanto dispositivi percettivi, essi incarnano, trasformano e costruiscono atmosfere persistenti. Inoltre, problematizzano il confine disciplinare tra architettura e cinema sfruttando le qualità affettive del film per costruire e alterare lo spazio. Questa sovrapposizione produttiva tra spazio costruito e spazio proiettato permette al pubblico di esistere sia all'interno del film che all'interno degli edifici. L'installazione rivela il potenziale della scenografia come dispositivo rappresentativo, il rapporto tra spazio scenografico e architettura, nonché la capacità delle mostre allestite di creare atmosfere persistenti che trascendono il tempo e lo spazio.

FILM INSTALLATION, ATMOSPHERE, AFTERIMAGE

*This paper offers a close reading of the installation "Six Screens, Six Projectors, Six Cameras" by filmmakers Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch. From April-July 2007, the duo perched six cameras in and around twelve buildings designed by architect Peter Zumthor. The footage was then projected onto six screens identically positioned within the exhibition floors of Zumthor's Kunsthau Bregenz. The installation was an interdisciplinary design experiment that presented three atmospheric layers: the original architecture, the Kunsthau Bregenz itself, and film as mediator. The uniquely situated staging of both the cameras and screens offered a *mise-en-scène* that allowed visitors to explore two buildings concurrently, experiencing the merging of atmospheres that would otherwise be impossible. In Zumthor's work, immersive multi-sensory environments are encountered sequentially across a site. These encounters are ephemeral but linger in the memory of those who experience them, becoming embodied in afterimages. I argue that the staging of Six and Petritsch's film installation uniquely captured the physical presence of Zumthor's sited architecture by transplanting fragments of the multi-sensory environments to a new context. As perceptual devices, they embody, transform, and construct lingering atmospheres. Further, they problematize the disciplinary border between architecture and film by harnessing the affective qualities of film to construct and alter space. This productive overlap between built and projected space allows the audience to exist both within the film and the buildings. The installation reveals the potential of scenography as representational device, the relationship between scenographic space and architecture, and the ability of staged exhibitions to create lingering atmospheres that transcend time and space.*

Kristin Washco
Virginia Tech
kwashco@vt.edu

SIX SCREENS

Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch's Staged Atmospheres

Kristin Washco

This paper offers a close reading of the film installation “*Six Screens, Six Projectors, Six Cameras*” by Austrian filmmakers Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch, which documented twelve buildings designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor. The installation, an interdisciplinary design experiment between Six and Petritsch's projected films and Zumthor's architecture, occupied the first and second floor of Zumthor's Kunsthau Bregenz (hereafter, KUB) for the exhibition “Peter Zumthor: Buildings and Projects 1986-2007.”¹ In Zumthor's work, immersive multi-sensory environments are encountered sequentially (Ursprung 2009). These encounters are ephemeral but *linger* in the memory of those who experience them and in recordings. I argue that the staging of Six and Petritsch's film installation uniquely captured the physical and emotional presence of Zumthor's sited architecture by transplanting fragments of the multi-sensory environments to a new context. The films presence three atmospheric layers: the original architecture filmed in place, the KUB as stage, and film installation as mediator. As perceptual devices, they embody, transform, and construct lingering atmospheres, defined as multi-modal memories of atmospheres that become embodied in afterimages.

Specifically, I explore how Six and Petritsch make Zumthor's architecture present through their staging. I will argue that they do so by encouraging the audience to actively participate in the scene through movement. Further, their *mise-en-scène* blurs spatial boundaries through phenomenal transparency. The duo utilizes minimal filmic devices, relying on staging to produce the desired effects. What results is a film installation that constructs a nuanced sense of space and place, as well as a new understanding of Peter Zumthor's architectural works. More broadly, their method can also offer an effective approach to embodying architectural atmospheres in afterimages.

Setting the stage

Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch's body of work engages and explores perception through experimental documentation of architecture and landscape. Since 1997, their site- and context-specific installations not only observe, but expose and challenge spatial and experiential conditions. Their 2007 KUB installation was preceded by a similar installation from September-November 2005 in the same museum. Together with Marko Lulic, Dorit Margreiter and Gregor Zivi, they mounted the exhibition entitled “Tu Felix Austria Wild at Heart” (Kunsthau Bregenz 2005). A complex experience was achieved through a simple and pure framework. On the third floor of the KUB, six marks were selected, a camera placed on each. Over six days, the cameras filmed Petritsch, who freely confronted the otherwise empty architecture with his body [Figure 1]. His exploration of its interiority was observed in real time by Six from the basement of the building. For the exhibition, the cameras were replaced with projectors, located on the same marks, that shone the footage on six screens [Figure 2]. Museum visitors were invited to walk through the space, in essence becoming the cameras, as they voyeuristically viewed Petritsch's private experience of the room. The visitors were granted a unique view that merged two timeframes within the same space: in real time they would simultaneously see the projected museum in the middle ground, sandwiched by the physical space in the foreground and background.

¹ Archival materials documenting the exhibition, located in the Kunsthau Bregenz archive, were consulted between 2021 and 2023. Materials include preparatory documents, correspondence, drawings by Zumthor, Six, and Petritsch, as well as photographs and film recordings of the exhibition. The filmmakers also graciously provided digital recordings of the exhibition.

The 2007 exhibition utilized a similar framework to the 2005 exhibition. This time, the subjects (filmed between April-July 2007) were twelve of Zumthor's buildings, including the Protective Housing for Roman Archaeological Excavations (Chur, 1986), Therme Vals (Vals, 1996), and again the KUB itself [Figure 3]. Six cameras, identically placed on each site, captured each work of architecture from the same vantage points, and again the footage was projected onto six screens located on the second and third floor of the KUB for the exhibition. The screenings of the films were staggered so that every 20 minutes a new film, and thus a new building, would show on each floor. As a result, all twelve buildings could be explored in just four hours. It should be noted that Zumthor and co-curator Thomas Durisch specifically selected Six and Petritsch to participate in the exhibition “because their approach is closely related to fundamental issues of architecture. The works they are known for consist of simple actions and interventions which they document on film or video and stage as installations” (Kunsthau Bregenz 2007, 2).

Presence through absence

I argue that both installations are examples of architectural afterimages. As defined by architect Marcia Feuerstein, afterimages are images realized *after* the *original*: “an interpretation rather than a copy. The afterimage transforms an original while maintaining some of its aura. This process creates a new iteration of the original, allowing us to see the latest iteration as an entirely new work” (Feuerstein 2022, 419). I expand on Feuerstein's definition to include images that are produced *after* the *atmosphere*; images that seek to engage with what lingers beyond an atmosphere's physical presence. German philosopher Gernot Böhme (1937-2022) defines atmosphere as “the sphere of felt bodily presence” and can refer to both subjective, sensibly felt weather conditions or as quasi-objective feelings of emotionally tinged space (Böhme and Engels-Schwarzpaul 2017, 69-70). ‘Lingering

1
Photograph by Adolf Bereuter.
Production view third floor,
Kunsthau Bregenz. Tu Felix
Austria...Wild at Heart. Nicole
Six & Paul Petritsch. *Untitled*,
2005. © Nicole Six & Paul
Petritsch, Kunsthau Bregenz



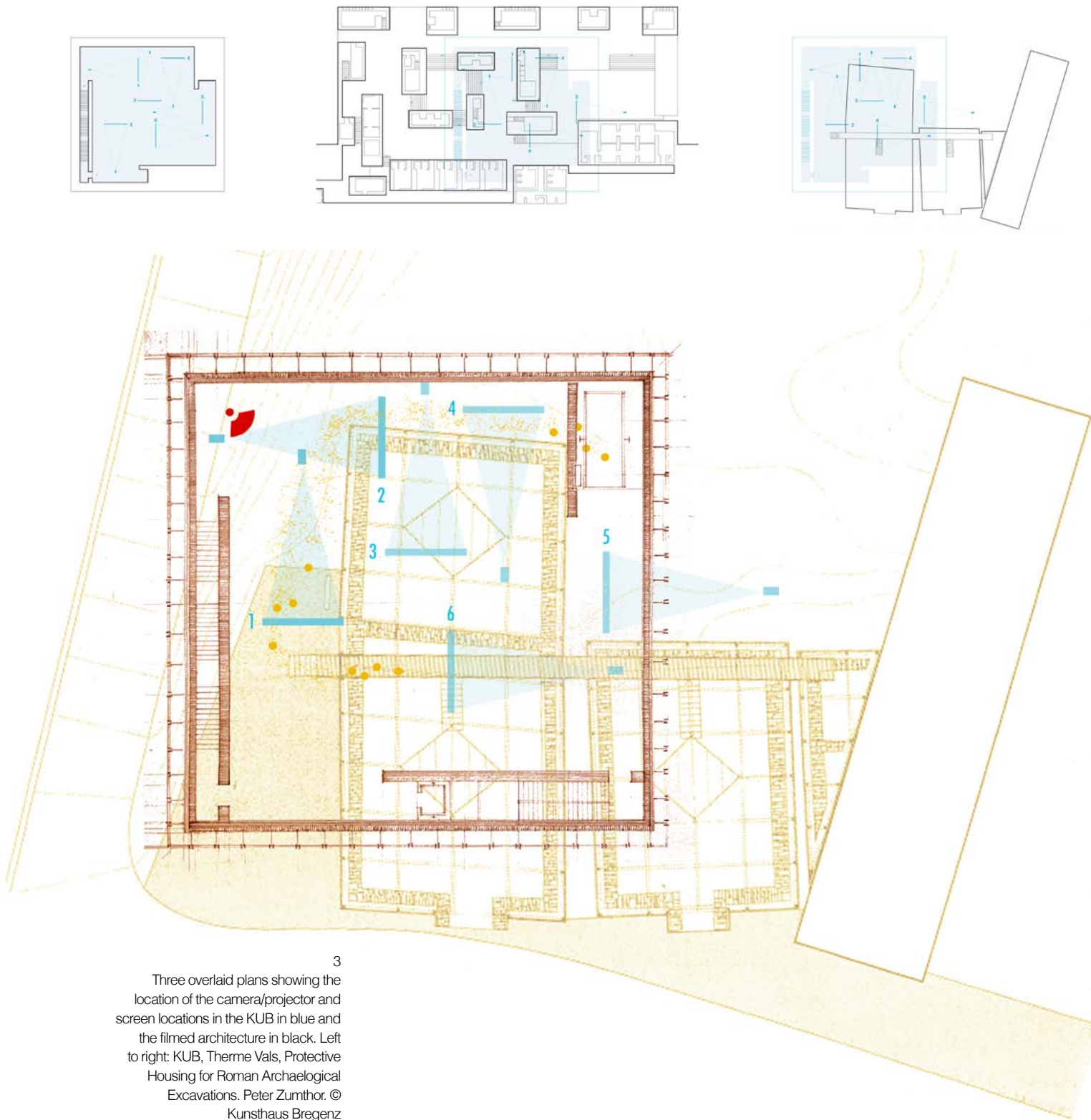
atmospheres' extend atmospheres and are defined by what remains or becomes present *after* the direct experience. As Feuerstein notes, the term "afterimage" or "ghost image" originated in optics and refers to "a lingering image that appears briefly after we stare at something over a prolonged time" (Feuerstein 2022, 419). Afterimages can also support and extend lingering atmospheres beyond the visual, embodying multi-sensory memories in physical artifacts such as drawings, photographs, and films. Importantly, while optical afterimages are ephemeral in nature, slowly fading from vision, made afterimages² remain visible as completely new physical works in themselves. Afterimages such as the film installations by Six and Petritsch reuse and rearrange fragments of the original work, facilitating a new understanding of the original through mediated representation.

Of the 2005 installation, Petritsch noted that the filmmakers "perceived the [KUB] as a functioning organism – almost as a physical body in its own right" (Kunsthaus Bregenz 2005, 10). Six added that the unique staging of the cameras in the third-floor exhibition space "resulted in blind spots and overlaps" that almost extended the space (Kunsthaus Bregenz 2005, 10). Both aspects of the 2005 exhibition – the treatment of building as body and the camera and screen positioning – would become critical to the 2007 exhibition as well. The 2005 films were both a one-to-one experience of architectural space and a cinematic reproduction of space – a mirror of inhabitation. The presence and absence of the visitor, the space, and Petritsch's body created a doubling and merging of atmospheres as human and architectural bodies cohabitated through the surface of the screens. In both the 2005 and 2007 installations, the simplicity and consistency of the filmic strategy "concentrates on only a few elements, reduces the technical aspect to the point where it is hardly perceived at all,

² I differentiate between optical afterimages and made afterimages. Optical afterimages occur in perception and are experienced by an individual, while made afterimages are physical representations that are used to interpret or communicate an original work or event.



2
Photograph by Markus Tretter.
Installation view third floor,
Kunsthaus Bregenz. Tu Felix
Austria...Wild at Heart. Nicole
Six & Paul Petritsch. *Untitled*,
2005. © Nicole Six & Paul
Petritsch, Kunsthaus Bregenz



3
Three overlaid plans showing the
location of the camera/projector and
screen locations in the KUB in blue and
the filmed architecture in black. Left
to right: KUB, Therme Vals, Protective
Housing for Roman Archaeological
Excavations. Peter Zumthor. ©
Kunsthaus Bregenz

4
Collage by author showing the overlaid
plans of the KUB (red) and Protective
Housing for Roman Archaeological
Excavations (yellow) with the camera
and screen positions shown in blue. The
location of the museum viewer upon
entering the exhibition floor is shown
in red. The various locations of the four
building visitors are shown in yellow, with
their path dotted



5
 Stills from recording of the film installation "Six Screens, Six Projectors, Six Cameras" by Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch. Left: Four visitors exit the building (screen 1 at right of photo). Right: Four visitors move around the building via the rear yard (screen 2 at left of photo). Screen 5 not pictured. © Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch, Kunsthhaus Bregenz

thus making the direct sensory presence of architecture, the experience of space, and the treatment of time all the more pronounced as a physical-mental experience of the individual" (Kunsthhaus Bregenz 2007). This was achieved through stationary camera locations and the lack of editing or montage. In other words, the effect of the film installation is almost solely achieved through staging.

Of the 2007 installation, Zumthor stated that although it did not necessarily provide a coherent spatial sequence, or "a readily understandable tour of the building" he nevertheless was overcome by how the installation produced "a calm undistorted 1:1 representation" of the architecture (Kunsthhaus Bregenz 2007, 6). It is remarkable that Zumthor, an architect deeply committed to physical presence, materiality, and multi-sensory experience, believed that the installation carried the essence of his work despite the absence of the physical architecture. I believe that it is Six and Petritsch's approach to architecture as functioning organism – a physical body in its own right – that allowed them to achieve this paradox. Their films attain a sense of presence through absence, illustrating the power of scenography to not only depict built space, but to construct new unique atmospheres that exist between architecture and film. As argued by German design firm Atelier Brückner, "scenography is an aesthetic interpretation, a subject charged with significance, a spatialized message – a staged reality...scenography allows the expansion of the physical space, the contemplative space, of the scope for interpretation" (Atelier Brückner 2019, 156). In the exhibition, Six and Petritsch's spatialized message aesthetically interprets the architecture through abstraction and minimalism. They do not lament that the entire buildings cannot be reproduced in the museum. Rather, they harness the framed views to construct a new experience of them.

Between composure and seduction

Zumthor argues for the importance of designing for movement in his 2006 book *Atmospheres*. In a section entitled "Between Composure and Seduction" he states that architecture is both a spatial and temporal art. For example, in Therme Vals, "it was incredibly important for us to induce a sense of freedom of movement, a milieu for strolling, a mood that had less to do with directing people than seducing them" (Zumthor 2006, 41). He likens his approach to designing a stage setting and directing a play in the baths. Similarly, Six and Petritsch's installation utilizes staging to entice the museum visitor to explore the projected architecture. The positioning of the six projectors challenges the flatness of the screen and collapses the distance between the audience and the subject, allowing them to exist within the films rather than view them from a distance. As Zumthor explains, freedom of movement must be delicately balanced within a coherent framework, giving the inhabitant a sense of

mystery without becoming labyrinthian (Zumthor 2006, 43). Six and Petritsch are attentive to this balance in their own work. The staging encourages the visitors to move through the film fragments, but they do so through a structured schema.

In the 1969 book *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*, architectural and art historian Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1903-1971) quotes German-American architect Walter Gropius' (1883-1969) appeal for the "Total Theater" in which the staging aims to "rouse the spectator from his intellectual apathy...(and) coerce him into participation in the play" (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 53, referencing Gropius 1934). Six and Petritsch achieve this in their installation, rousing the visitors to join in playing within the projected space. Through the staging, the exhibition inhabitants can mingle with the building inhabitants, connecting the two sets of actors otherwise distanced by time and space. For example, in the film "Protective Housing for Roman Archaeological Excavations" (hereafter, Protective Housing) shot on June 29, 2007 from 12:58 to 1:38 p.m., a party of four visitors explore the building's interior before exiting and moving around the exterior [Figure 4]. They move from screen to screen, disappearing from one to reappear in another seconds later [Figure 5]. As the party exits the building, museum viewers can view their trajectory from the south corner of the KUB floor without relocating, but as the filmed party moves from screen 1 to screen 5 around the outside of the structure, the museum viewer would need to walk to the north end of the exhibition floor to complete the scene. The presence of the four bodies in the films activate the museum viewer's understanding of the architecture in several ways. Their bodies frame an understanding of scale, their voices and actions trigger acoustic experience, and their positioning on screen reveals a dynamic ground plane. But it is their movement that orients the viewer as they track the party from one screen to the next, enticed to 'follow the leader' and move around the exhibition floor to explore the other screens.

Differently staged, the installation would lose the effect. The camera positioning creates deliberately fragmented scenes, yet strategic overlaps emphasize the sense of movement and space. For example, three cameras film the entrance of the Protective Housing, but from different perspectives: exterior and interior, on and off axis. Not only does this encourage the museum visitor to reposition their body in space, but also allows even the stationary viewer to walk the building with their eyes, putting themselves in the position of the various cameras by shifting their view from one screen to the next. In this way, the film installation allows the viewer to move more freely through the building than they would be able to in actuality. Notably, unlike the architecture of Therme Vals, where the plan allows for free movement, the Protective Housing features a singular path; a raised walkway lifts the visitor off the ground above the ruins, prescribing movement to minimize damage to the delicate ruins below. In the installation, one can flow more freely because their roaming body cannot do physical harm to the historic structures. That is to say, the staging encourages the freedom of movement that Zumthor prefers, even when the architectural situation itself cannot.

Phenomenal Transparency

In their essay "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal" architectural historian Colin Rowe (1920-1999) and architectural theorist Robert Slutzky (1929-2005) reference Hungarian painter György Kepes to define spatial transparency. According to Kepes, overlapping figures in artistic compositions have the potential to contradict spatial dimensions, becoming "able to interpenetrate without an optical destruction of the other" (Rowe and Slutzky 1963, 45 referencing Kepes 1944, 77). He clarifies further that beyond the optical characteristic, transparency can imply "a broader spatial order...a simultaneous perception of different spatial locations" (Rowe and Slutzky 1963, 45 referencing Kepes 1944, 77). Rowe and Slutzky define this kind of abstract, spatial transparency as "phenomenal transparency," a condition that can result from works of art and architecture that create illusions of spatial depth (Rowe and Slutzky 1963, 46). Although at odds with physical reality, such conditions invite exploration and discovery. I argue that Kepes, Rowe, and Slutzky's notion of phenomenal transparency is particularly present in Six and Petritsch's film installation, whose presentation

of Zumthor's architecture amplifies the sense of spatial depth and complexity already extant, although more subtle, in the original works.

The installation depicting Therme Vals is particularly strong in emphasizing and extending this perceptive quality [Figure 6]. As Zumthor states, the "magic" of the installation is due to the interaction between the screens (Kunsthaus Bregenz 2007, 6). Similarly, the magic of the Therme is in the interaction of space between the volumes: "the network of open spaces resembles woven fabric...the spatial continuum is intended to emphasize each space differently...Peter Zumthor calls this an orchestration of spaces" (Zumthor 2007, 59). In experience, continuity of space is the dominant perception when walking through the baths, yet it is the least captured in still photography of the building. While adept in capturing atmosphere, light, material, and scale, most widely circulated photographs of the baths – such as those by Hélène Binet and Hans Danuser – approach but never quite capture the spatial depth present in the architecture. Even films of the space – such as those by Richard Copans and Christoph Schaub – though providing a more nuanced representation of spatial depth, are still wanting. I argue that Six and Petritsch most accurately capture the phenomenal transparency of Therme Vals' interior spaces, in large part due to the staging.

Several factors contribute to this reading. First, the homogeneity of material – the Valser Gneiss that dominates the architecture and, subsequently, the screens – encourages the fragments to merge as one continuous image. Although the linear nature of the stacked material hints at perspective and orientation, it is at times almost impossible to tell one surface from another. Space recedes and beckons, framed by the stone walls that seem to shift and dance despite their stability. Further, light and shadow exist in a high contrast dichotomy. In the films, this is further compounded by the lack of lighting in the exhibition space as the screens provide the sole source of light. As Zumthor describes in *Atmospheres*,

he believes that one should design architecture "as a pure mass of shadow then, afterwards, to put in light as if you were hollowing out the dark, as if the light were a new mass seeping in" (Zumthor 2006, 59). In the installation, shadow is primary: the black space between the screens mimics the black space between the stone volumes. Light seeps in, but it's presence further destabilizes the relationship between the physical and filmed space. The placement of the cameras, mounted on both the stone floors and within the pools, amplify this overlap. The reflection of the projected images on the highly polished floor of the KUB merges water, stone, and terrazzo, giving the effect that the museum visitor is submerged in the water with the bathers. As Zumthor stated of the exhibition: "Since one sees all six films simultaneously and experiences them together from different angles in a way that would not be possible in real life, the visual and acoustic impressions start to overlap and consolidate. This creates an atmosphere that for a moment lets me forget the absence of the real object in the museum" (Kunsthaus Bregenz 2007, 6).

A new method

In the 2018 book, *The Routledge Companion to Scenography*, theatre historian Arnold Aronson discusses the notion of *skenographia*, or scenic writing, stating that "*skenographia* can be understood *not* as the creation of scenery, *nor* the creation of a backdrop, but as the creation of an atmosphere as described by Gernot Böhme" (Aronson 2018, 7). Referencing Böhme's 1993 essay "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," Aronson explains that the power of scenography exists in the "the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived" that creates a "web of relationships. It has a physical shape and the properties of its constituent materials and architectural structures, but it is understood in the context of the particular performance" (Aronson 2018, 7 referencing Böhme 1993, 119-122). In the case of Six and Petritsch, the staging of the performance creates a new set of atmospheres as twelve built spaces overlap and merge with one another.

Embodying lingering atmospheres in staged films (afterimages), offers a new method for foregrounding multi-sensory experience and the relationship between space and time in architecture. Six and Petritsch's work clearly demonstrates the potential of scenography to translate architectural atmospheres, making them available to new audiences in ways that still photography or even traditional film formats cannot. By staging Zumthor's architectural space, they intensify his architectural intent, making the viewer an active participant in reconstructing the atmospheric experience. Yet, the potential of their method expands beyond Zumthor's oeuvre. By problematizing the disciplinary border between architecture and film, Six and Petritsch harness the affective qualities of film to construct and alter space. The installation reveals the potential of scenography as representational device, the relationship between scenographic space and architecture, and the ability of staged exhibitions to create lingering atmospheres that transcend time and space.

6

Photo by Markus Tretter.
Installation view first floor, KUB.
Therme Vals, filmed on June
10 2007, 9:51-10:31 a.m. "Six
Screens, Six Projectors, Six
Cameras" by Nicole Six and Paul
Petritsch. © Nicole Six & Paul
Petritsch, Kunsthaus Bregenz



References

- ARONSON, Arnold, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Scenography*. Routledge, 2018.
- ATELIER BRÜCKNER. *Scenography – Szenografie 2: Staging the Space – Der inszenierte Raum*. Birkhäuser Verlag, 2019.
- BÖHME, Gernot. "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven* 36, 1993: 113-26.
- BÖHME, Gernot, and A.-Chr ENGELS-SCHWARZPAUL. *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.
- FEUERSTEIN, Marcia. "After the Original (the Afterimage): High Costs, Low Roads, and Circumventions." In *The Routledge Companion to Architectural Drawings and Models: From Translating to Archiving, Collecting and Displaying*, edited by Federica Goffi. Routledge, 2022.
- GROPIUS, Walter. "Theaterbau". *Reale Accademia D'Italia* No. XII, 1934.
- KEPES, Gyorgy. *Language of Vision*. Wisconsin Cuneo Press, 1944.
- KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ. *Tu Felix Austria...Wild at Heart*. With contributions by Marko Lulic, Dorit Margreiter, Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch, Gregor Zivi. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at the Kunsthaus Bregenz, September 17-November 6, 2005.
- KUNSTHAUS BREGENZ. *Peter Zumthor Buildings and Projects 1986-2007*. With contributions by Hans-Joachim Müller, Eckhard Schneider, Peter Zumthor, Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at the Kunsthaus Bregenz, September 29, 2007-January 20, 2008.
- MOHOLY-NAGY, Sibyl. *Moholy-Nagy: Experiment in Totality*. The M.I.T. Press, 1969.
- ROWE, Colin and Robert Slutzky. "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal". *Perspecta* (8), 1963: 45-54.
- URSPRUNG, Phillip. "Earthworks: The Architecture of Peter Zumthor." The Pritzker Architecture Prize, 2009. Accessed May 21, 2026. https://www.pritzkerprize.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/2009_PhilipUrprungEssay.pdf
- ZUMTHOR, Peter. *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*. Birkhäuser, 2006.
- ZUMTHOR, Peter, Sigrid HAUSER, and Hélène BINET. *Peter Zumthor: Therme Vals*. Scheidegger & Spiess, 2007.