

Petra Wunderlich
Zuoz

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The Hidden Stories behind the House Facades of Zuoz:
Sensitive Yet Detached Photographs and the Problem
of Other Minds

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Influenced by the Düsseldorf School of the late 1970s, whose sober, unembellished and documentary approach captivated viewers through its exactitude, serialization and diversified typologies of anonymous artifacts, Petra Wunderlich cultivates a subjective element that is paradoxically expressed through a detached pictorial concept: with their lucid, restrained, unambiguous visual language of minimalism and objectivity, her photographs of Zuoz house facades illustrate that we will never be allowed a glimpse of the most intimate stories that lie behind them.

Captured by a large-format camera, these facades of Zuoz, as frozen moments in time, reflect this barrier to knowledge in a bivalent — in other words, sensitive yet detached—manner. They visually translate the fragmentary nature of our epistemological “thrownness” through the use of occasionally severely cropped image compositions. The fire of Zuoz in 1499, which was set for defensive reasons, might serve as a reminder that even what is objective slips into irretrievability by virtue of its ephemerality. In contrast, the gelatin silver prints made by the artist demonstrate the preservation of a point in time.

Petra Wunderlich studied painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where she explored the work of Atget and Mondrian in depth. Due to her renunciation of staged lighting and perspectival distortions, her photographs of Zuoz allude to the philosophical problem of other minds: no matter what perspective we adopt or what narrative we concoct, the interiority, the subjective experience of other people remains essentially hidden from us. No amount of lighting or staging is capable of depicting what an experiencing subject sees in their mind’s eye in their own unique way.

The high degree of exactitude in Wunderlich’s photographic act eliminates anything arbitrary through a comprehensively composed performative process. With a camera, just a few millimeters can dramatically change the visual imagery—yet in addition to the accuracy prescribed by her instrument, the photographer applies precise subjective parameters to her image-making process: only the residual shockwaves caused by an event, the condition of being moved by an object, evoke in the artist that concentration of attention which, by continuing the subject-object dialogue further, temporally freezes this particular yet ephemeral moment in a photograph.