



# 16

KUEHN MALVEZZI

# Profile



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**Wilfried + Johannes Kuehn**  
Image Adrian Sauer

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**Johannes Kuehn, Wilfried Kuehn and Simona Malvezzi are better known in the art scene than among architects. No surprise, they think like artists.**

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**Liebieghaus, Frankfurt**

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The rooms in the Binding brewery were something special without, however, being particularly striking. Nowhere did the white fittings for “documenta 11” let on that they were made of plaster, were only temporary. Six years ago there art pilgrims did not so much wander through trade fair berths as typologically accurate and powerful series of rooms. Outside a white strip of light beneath scarred bricks denoted the entrance and was a distant reminder, albeit on another scale, of Herzog & de Meuron’s Tate Modern. The conversion for the “documenta” was the work of the architecture studio Kuehn Malvezzi. Since that conversion in Kassel and the one that followed in 2004 for the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection the architects have been everybody’s darling in the art scene. There has been, and indeed is, no end in sight to the series of conversions in art environments by Kuehn Malvezzi: the foyer of the Schirn in Frankfurt, rooms for the Manifesta in the Italian town of Trento, a viewable storage area in Vienna, several galleries, several art museums, many exhibitions.

Anyone who has long since got used to the idea of a museum being spectacular in design, attracting the masses, like a magnificent, meat-eating plant, finds it difficult to understand the Berlin studio’s success, it remains paradoxical. Rationalist, with no attention to details, no expressive ventures – is one way of describing Kuehn Malvezzi’s architecture. It does not cater to the global museum circus, but rather emerges from collaboration with artists, curators and collectors, in other words with art. Their primary goal is not the media marketability of the works, as is almost par for the course today but, at least as far as the studio’s previous building assignments are concerned, comes last. Kuehn Malvezzi’s conversions and fittings have the magnitude to withdraw, are unflustered and precise.




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**Wilfried Kuehn, Office in Berlin**

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The words of Wilfried Kuehn are also unflustered and precise. The Professor of Exhibition Design and Curatory Practice at the Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe is a blend of English reticence and southern European hairstyle. Together with his brother Johannes and the Italian Simona Malvezzi the 40-year old runs the Berlin-based studio, which has some ten employees. As the three partners are on the road a lot they communicate a lot by telephone. That, says Kuehn, requires a clear definition of goals, and concepts that can be described using the spoken word. The architects do not make any number of different versions but think the assignment and possible solutions through before getting down to more elaborate work – that I what is meant by «conceptual». Yet what Kuehn Malvezzi comes up with is not merely the impractical result of mind games. Wilfried Kuehn often refers to «context» and the «spatial dependence of perception». And if something is being built one just has to be present there. Like in Düsseldorf, where a year ago his studio completed the conversion work at the Julia Stoschek Collection – this too the transformation of a large historical industrial building into premises for contemporary art.

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**Julia Stoschek Collection,  
Duesseldorf**

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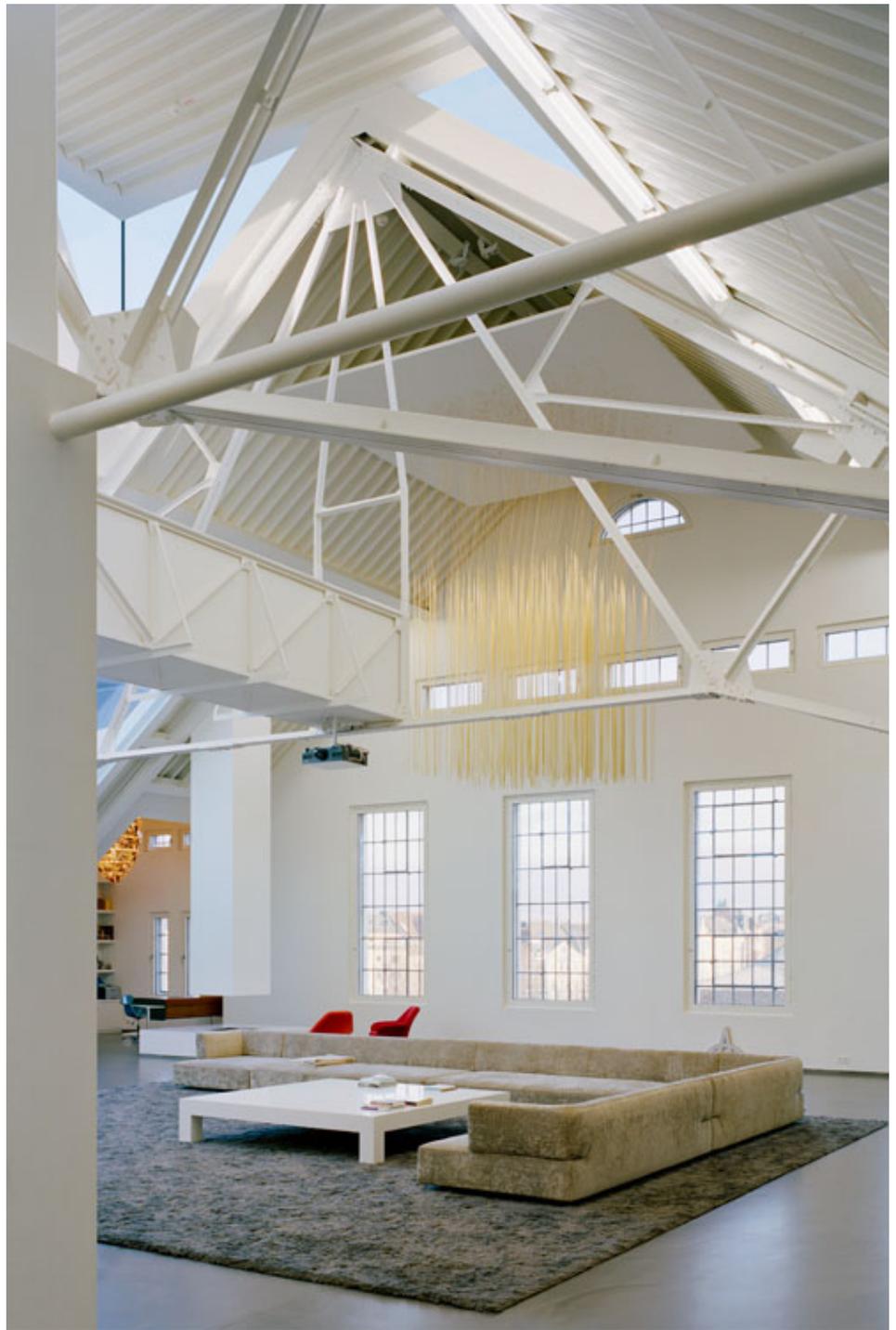
**Video Robert Smithson und Gordon  
Matta-Clark**

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Every week the project leader traveled from Berlin to the Rhineland, even though the company was not responsible for the building work. Kuehn leads the way through the two spacious exhibition floors, which are only open to the public on Saturdays. Nowadays media art no longer means a screen and a black box. Elaborate installations seize control of all manner of different spatial situations. Elsewhere it is the museum, which nestles against it, places small compartments around the art, ensures that the noise of a video does not disturb the observation of the other works; all connected by a route that is consistent but by no means constrained, and if anything adds to the excitement. Kuehn Malvezzi are now masters in the creation of routes such as these. The architect says that the exchange of ideas with artists is important to them, and it was important to create spaces that challenge the art exhibited, give it emphasis as the observer passes by.

«Larger than life»  
–on entering Julia Stoschek’s studio one immediately thinks of the illusory worlds that Ken Adam created for James Bond.



**Julia Stoschek Collection, Studio  
Dan Graham pavilion**



«Larger than life» –on entering Julia Stoschek’s studio one immediately thinks of the illusory worlds that Ken Adam created for James Bond; a residential hall the size of a triple sports hall and with its comfort as well. This space which, a hundred years ago, was used for painting stage sets, fills the steep, 12-meter high saddleback roof and for more than a year now has served the collector as her empire. The fact that this empire, like the museum levels below, are all in white is par for the course. The architects wanted to portray distinction and luxury not through high-end materials, but through space. And it does not even come to an end in the bedrooms on the mezzanine floor. On the crowning roof terrace a Dan Graham pavilion reflect the observer and the north of Düsseldorf. Below, Candida Höfer is just photographing the rooms. Next year she is producing a book and an exhibition with the architects.



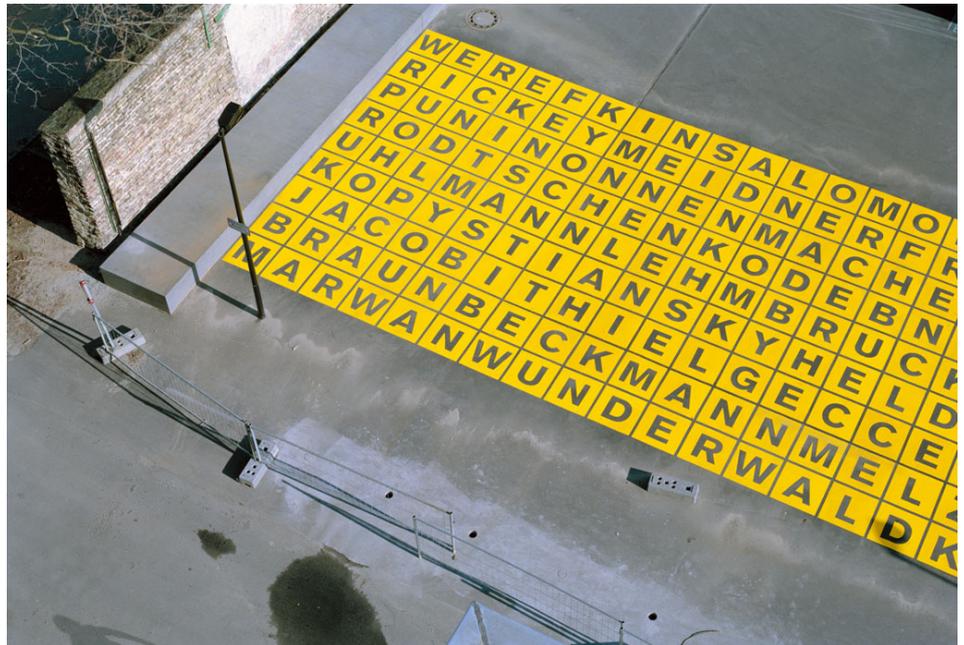

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**Festivalzentrum Theaterformen**  
**Braunschweig / Hannover**

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Kuehn Malvezzi do not only build for art. They have also learned from it. From how artists proceed, their view, the artistic process. This becomes most evident in their more minor projects, where it was a case of making something visible. For example the Berlinische Galerie in Kreuzberg. A façade design was intended to draw attention to it. In the competition Kühn Malvezzi dissected the assignment and the location and came to the conclusion that a new façade would not produce the desired communication. Instead they placed a long, yellow field of letters on the ground in front of the building, as a playground and eye-catcher for the residents of the welfare housing opposite – art and living united in play. Or in Braunschweig where, for the Festival Theaterformen, the architects put a giant red staircase in front of the Classicist theater. With this caricature of an orchestrated element they gave the festival a logo, the building a new entrance and the visitors a new look out over their city.

Wilfried Kuehn sees himself not just as an architect, but also as a curator. He would like to establish the term «curatorial design», among other places at his university. «Curatorial design is not only to do with exhibiting, but with architecture and urban planning as well. What does it involve, apart from selecting and configuring?»




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**Berlinische Galerie in Kreuzberg**

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#### STATEMENTS

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[www.julia-stoschek-collection.net](http://www.julia-stoschek-collection.net)

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My attention was drawn to the team of architects at Kuehn Malvezzi in the art context. I was looking for a suitable team of architects to handle my private exhibition building and repeatedly came across their name, which is why when tendering for the conversion of the house I also asked Kuehn Malvezzi to submit a design. In general there were three major challenges involved: First, the gentle and careful handling of the historical, listed backbone to the house. Then the task of creating exhibition rooms destined to fit the special needs of media art, and specifically the linking/separation of private and public spaces. Kuehn Malvezzi's designs did a superlative job of addressing these three points and they concurred with my own notion of a "serving" architecture. The natural way in which the individual spatial elements link with the rest of the house and the clarity and restraint of their spatial structure that was stringently maintained throughout the building prove to me that my decision was absolutely right, even today when I am busy preparing the next exhibition and thus for "life" in the house.

**Julia Stoschek / Duesseldorf, Julia Stoschek Collection**

Since first encountering their work in the Binding Brewery which they designed for the documenta show, I have found the combination of clarity and restraint coupled with stringency: the clarity of the spatial perception and the design of space, the restraint in the choice and use of architectural means, and the stringency with which, when handling the details and the overall issues, they give rooms an appropriate appearance.

**Candida Höfer, Cologne, Photographer**

As a very young architect Wilfried Kuehn responded to a tender to design the foyer of the Akademietheater in Vienna, the second venue used by the Burgtheater and he won out despite fierce competition from established offices. It was clear to me from our collaboration there that should I ever build something myself, I would the Berlin office Kuehn Malvezzi design it. Wilfried Kuehn was moreover the only person behind my idea of opting for a very difficult, very steep piece of ground and he developed an especially intelligent and brilliant design in the form of a house based on an open plan concept. In order to familiarize me with the concept of an open plan, he sent me to Prague to Adolf Loos' Müller Villa.

From the approach taken by the Kuehn Malvezzi office you soon see that they have their roots in exhibition architecture. First, they create the basic concept, then they face up to the restrictions. Here is where they are so different to many others, who first look at the problems and then propose compromised solutions. To exaggerate, the initial statement could be: Here, a great exhibition room has arisen. But where are the light switches and the power sockets and all those practical things? I personally found precisely Kuehn Malvezzi's approach very pleasant, as they did not first compromise, but took a free conceptual tack. Only then did they consider what makes an apartment different from an exhibition space. The result: a great design. Interestingly, it fascinates everyone who has ever entered it – regardless of whether they see the house at the tender age of seven or seventy.

**Thomas Drozda, Vienna**

**MD of Vereinigte Bühnen Wien and developer of Haus Drozda**

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**Haus Drozda, Vienna**



# Interview

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Wilfried Kuehn  
Sculpture Marco Lulic

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**The three best-known Kuehn Malvezzi projects are conversions of former industrial buildings into exhibition rooms for contemporary art. Do old warehouses make better museums?**

The idea of warehouses as lofts come from artists' studios, a free, simple, universal space. Exhibition rooms for art have always been influenced by the rooms in which it was produced, which is why it is more natural for contemporary art to be exhibited in an industrial hall than in a museum.

**What sort of space does today's art need?**

There is no such thing as the ideal room. In my opinion it has to be as close as possible to what the work is based on. Harking back to the theme again: In the early 20th century we had top-lit artists' studios, and as a consequence we now have the first galleries functioning in the same way. Nowadays art is produced in the most office-like conditions. Not only media art, for installations and sculptures as well concepts and templates are devised on computers and then implemented. So to be radical one really ought to say: Today's art ought to be exhibited in office-like conditions. People are longing more and more for triviality and the normality of an office, the heroics of an industrial building are no longer that interesting.

**Your exhibition rooms are for the most part characterless, «still» rooms that withdraw entirely behind the exhibits. There are very few places left for you to articulate yourselves as architects. In the Rieckhallen it is the gangway from Hamburger Bahnhof, at the «documenta» it was the corridors with an ever recurring bench element. Is that what is left for «architecture» in your concept?**

Yes, but in my view that is not negative. For me these are the fundamental tasks of architecture: Motion in a space, the creation of routes and the narrative aspect of series of rooms. And these things develop in an exhibition room with demonstrative precision, a dramaturgy. If I do not think of an exhibition in the context of its day, it runs the risk for me of degenerating into a sort of trade fair, with stands lined up one

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Documenta 11, Kassel

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**Documenta 11, Kassel**

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after the other vying for attention. An exhibition is not conceived as a competition but as an instance of dialog between two various events. From our point of view the experience of time in the room is the basic prerequisite of all architecture, be it a school, a hospital or an exhibition. That is not a little but a great deal, because an exhibition is the spatial model par excellence.

**But a building not only has an inside but an outside as well and serves some sort of representative function. The conversion for the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection was described as «modest» and «cheap» – and is the museum that houses one of the richest art collectors of our time. Is it not a capital contradiction?**

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In an exhibition room or art marble is a disturbance, bronze is a disturbance, the entire architectural up-grading scenario is a disturbance. For art I need spaces, spatial clarity, and I do not achieve that with materials. I know enough artists who do not like exhibiting in the boom museums of the 1980s and 1990s because it is extremely difficult to enter into dialog with spaces such as these. They have a unique form of dominance and representational affectations. I do not think that representation is a particularly favorable precondition for art. It is always better to try and create the most direct form of presentation. With no mediation! All form of mediation by means of representative techniques creates distance and a museum atmosphere in the sense of the killing off of art.



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**Friedrich Christian Flick  
Collection , Berlin**

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**A profiled sheeting facade also represents something.**

It makes a statement, but not a rhetoric, primarily representative statement. It says: We want to achieve something with the least possible effort. That is something that plays an important role in conceptual art: The directness of the statement. In art I get nowhere with rhetoric, only with direct conceptual steps. Conceptual art is a role model for the precise use of means and for «autonomous shape» not meaning being expressive. An autonomous shape can also be an extremely calm, almost invisible shape. You can learn that from Donald Judd, and you can also learn it from the architects Alison and Peter Smithson: Directness of means and freedom from rhetoric.

**That would infer that there is no longer any difference between the sublime cultural space of a museums and commercial gallery space.**

Exactly. The difference between a museum, a gallery, production space and in fact an archive as well has become totally unclear. Thank goodness. You can swap the spaces with each other, which is why several museums now have their «project spaces» and operate in places that are not museum-like and there are also artists who install their





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**Johannes Kuehn**

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**Conference room Kuehn Malvezzi**  
**Desk + graphic art Michael Riedel,**  
**Installation wood truss + video**  
**John Bock**

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studio in museums. When it becomes interesting is when the living quarters, the private sphere are included, like here in the Stoschek Collection.

**The visible storage area in Basle represents another blending of the spheres. The position of your exhibition spaces was compared with those of Herzog & de Meuron, was referred to as «modest minimalism». Your projects are characterized by a sort of rationalism, an interest in typologies, a desire for long spaces and volumes, as well as a desire for concealing. How would you describe your architectural interests?**

The notion of coming up with a strong model, a strong type, which one then applies to a concrete situation it initially has nothing to do with – that is the basic idea behind all our interventions. Nothing emerges of its own accord, organically, from the situation. One always turns up with an idea in one's head, with specific preconceptions, so we introduce the following idea: A labyrinth. Or a race course. We always start out from a strong preconception. It is almost certainly based on Ungers' method of thinking and designing in images and preconceptions. But then it is also a case of inspecting the situation on site, drawing conclusions from it, trying to understand what it means and asking: How does the situation cope with this pure model? The typology encounters the desire for the pragmatic, unique, situational, even totally non-programmed, something that emerges when people come together, like an off-the-cuff conversation. For many people that is a contradiction: Rationalists are not situational and anyone who thinks organically has an aversion towards clear shapes. Our approach is to network these systems, put up with the contradictions and develop the design from precisely that.



**You dare this balancing act, and in Berlin of all places, where the two poles you described form seemingly irreconcilable fronts. Is this an indication that what you have created elsewhere was completed under a wide variety of influences? For example in Milan and Vienna.**

It is true that we are very much influenced by Milanese rationalism, but also by architecture in Portugal, where we also studied, by the Porto school, but primarily by Alvaro Siza. Of course there it was to do with contextualization, but also at all times with a social model, participation.



**"Manifesta 7", Trento**

The Portuguese were very open to Italian rationalism and turned it into something organic. For us that was formative. And Vienna was too. I worked with Adolf Krischanitz – also someone who knows how to produce architecture from conceptualizing questions and not from preferences. And I hold Hermann Czech in very high esteem, as he repeatedly manages to create conceptual mannerisms.

**Hermann Czech – much to his dislike – is treated as a guesthouse architect. Of this he once said: «You cannot be too good in any one field, otherwise it is not regarded as a concept but a trade». Kuehn Malvezzi are regarded as architects of the art scene. Does that give you stomach ache?**

No, the hospitality business would give me greater stomach ache! No but seriously: We do not want to be treated as pure exhibition architects and are not. We have designed a school, we are currently designing a hotel, and we have designed several residential buildings. The topics we research are the same.

**In other words you do not market yourselves specifically as architects for the art scene?**

Every project has proved to be advertising for us, in particular, of course, the exhibition spaces, as the public perception is very big there. We do not do PR work in the traditional sense. I would not say that as a studio we specialize in exhibitions. What I would say is that as a studio we are interested in exhibitions. We are also interested in exhibiting as a model case for space. How does a tension emerge from an object and a context that turns it into a work of art? Because it is not the object or the space itself that makes it a work of art, but precisely this tension. If you only deal investor or

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politicians who commission things in line with their own calculating you do not come up with such interesting ideas. For us working with artists, curators, and collectors is very profitable.

**What do artists, curators and collectors rate about your work?**

We are collectors ourselves and are knowledgeable about art, are friends with artists, live in this environment. It goes without saying that this is expressed in the architecture and is understood by artists and collectors. I can well imagine that it is reassuring for collectors if the person opposite speaks their language. Architects often see art differently. That is quite natural. Architects do not have a problem making a shadow gap with a ventilation slit between the floor and the wall. You can see this in 1980s museums almost everywhere. For the curator and the artist it is preposterous for the wall to hover a few centimeters above the floor and the floor to go off somewhere. For those who work in art, the wall and the floor have to meet, a spatial edge has to be formed. How otherwise can I exhibit a fatty corner? How otherwise can I create the feeling that a picture is hanging on a wall, the wall stands on the floor, and I am standing on the floor?

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**Documenta 11, Kassel**

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Lauder Business School, Vienna

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In addition to your conversions for art you have also designed new buildings: Single-family dwellings in Freiburg, Tübingen and Vienna, and a school in Vienna. These buildings speak a related language. Do you allow people to assume what a new museum by Kuehn Malvezzi would look like?

I do not think you can simply deduce one thing from the other. However, what interests us is the corporeality: a strong edifice and a strong corpus shape. Straight forward geometry, self-contained surfaces, few seams, a lack of «details» too, no visible connections – «a desire for concealing» you just called it, not making everything transparent, but like making a good suit, in which their can be a beautiful body that though you suspect is there you do not immediately see. And a series of rooms, which unfolds through the motion. These are the qualities a new museum building must have.

*Axel Simon conducted the conversation.*

*Axel Simon, who was born in 1966, writes about architecture in the international specialist and popular press. He lives with his wife and two sons in Zurich.  
[www.architekturtexte.ch](http://www.architekturtexte.ch)*



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Museum Berggruen, Berlin

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# Works

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## MUSEUM BERGGRUEN

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Berlin, 2008

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## LIEBIEGHAUS,

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Frankfurt, 2008

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## "MANIFESTA 7"

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Trento, 2008

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**JULIA STOSCHEK COLLECTION**

Duesseldorf, 2007

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**HAUS IN TUEBINGEN**

Tuebingen 2007

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**HAUS IN WIEN**

Wien 2006

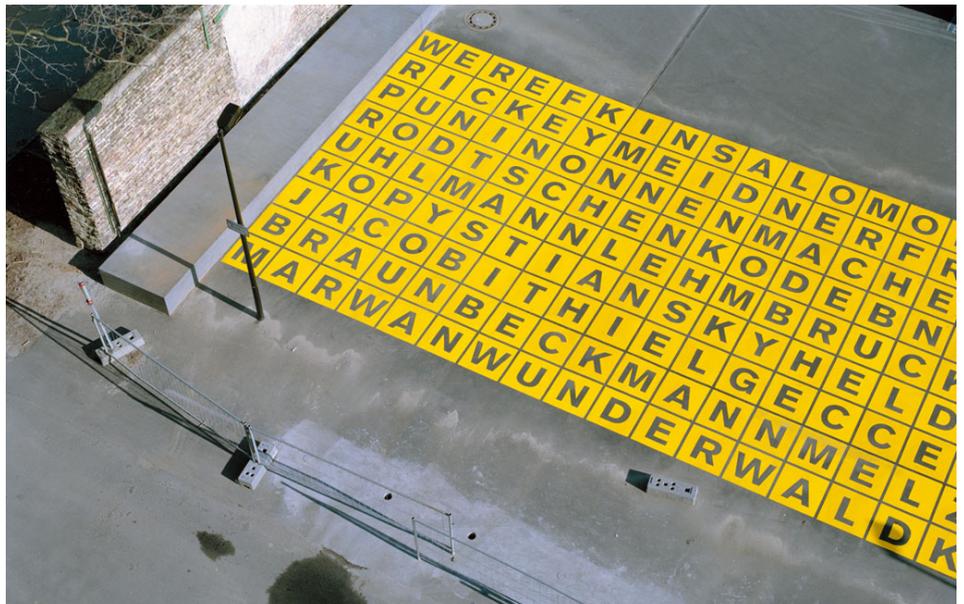
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**FRIEDRICH CHRISTIAN FLICK  
COLLECTION**  
Berlin, 2004



**BERLINISCHE GALERIE**  
Berlin, 2004



**LAUDER BUSINESS SCHOOL**  
Vienna, 2004



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**GALLERIA GIO MARCONI**

Milan, 2003

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**FESTIVALZENTRUM THEATERFORMEN**

Braunschweig / Hannover, 2002

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**DOCUMENTA 11, KASSEL**

Kassel, 2002

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