



TILO
SCHULZ

“One Thing I Want You to Know”: Tilo Schulz at the Secession
by Stephanie Smith

“In a theater, or in front of a performance, just as in a museum, at a school, or on the street, there are only individuals, weaving their own way through the forest of words, acts, and things that stand in front of them or around them...What has to be put to the test by our performances — whether teaching or acting, speaking, writing, making art, etc. — is not the capacity of aggregation of a collective but the capacity of the anonymous, the capacity that makes anybody equal to everybody. This capacity works through unpredictable and irreducible distances. It works through an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and dissociations.”

— Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” keynote lecture for the Fifth International Summer Academy of Arts in Frankfurt 2004, reprinted in *Artforum*, March 2007

“I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden.
I could sing you a tune or promise you the moon,
but if that’s what it takes to hold you I’d just as soon let you go.
But there’s one thing I want you to know...”

— Joe South, lyrics to “(I Never Promised You a) Rose Garden”

By the time you read these words, Tilo Schulz’s project for the Secession will be complete. Perhaps you’ve been there. Perhaps you’re there now. Let’s assume this is the case: that you’re there now, somewhere within the three rooms that house his installation. How does it unfold? Which of Schulz’s ongoing preoccupations are present within this new work — gender, sex, text, politics, display, design, formalism, socialism, representation, autonomy, ornament... others? How has he given them shape, heft, nuance? How does this project extend his artistic practice? What does it offer and why does it matter? Writing from across an ocean and prior to the work’s construction, I can only speculate based on plans, descriptions, conversations, and what I know of Schulz and his prior work as an artist, curator, and writer.(1)

Before we go any further, there’s one thing I want you to know: your participation matters.

Of course, you matter in the sense that all viewers matter. All new art derives at least part of its power from those who encounter the work, filtering it through their varied personal experiences, ideological positions, and degrees of initiation into the languages of contemporary art. I mean something beyond that standard level of engagement. You matter because Schulz designed his project specifically for you. Without your participation, his project fails.

You know this. You’ve been crucial to many of Schulz’s past projects. In some earlier projects about display, for instance, you participated primarily as reader. In his subtle interventions he asked you not only to notice things he designed — a brochure holder in a museum, text on a window, posters plastered on an urban wall — but also to pause and read, and then extend your imagination to envision the alternate realities proposed by the works/words. Within published texts he has sometimes spoken to you through titles that give playful instructions like “stop! ...reading at this point!” (That one, you probably ignored.)[2] More recently, Schulz has emphasized installation- and object-based projects that extend longstanding thematic concerns and continue his signature blending of art, design, and architecture, but require more complexly physical forms of engagement. Sometimes he places obstacles in your path, like small architectural objects that slow your pace and focus your attention. Sometimes he creates paths of desire in which sightlines entice and subtle correspondences build as you move along. Sometimes he orchestrates your passage through a sequence of spaces; in other cases, you must return the way you came, re-encountering — and perhaps reconsidering—the work’s components.(3)

Let’s return to your experience of this new work. Schulz’s project occupies three contiguous spaces within the Secession. At one edge of an otherwise empty room, his structure begins as a low platform, grows walls and ceiling to form an enclosed space that fills most of the second room, and then extends into a narrow walkway that spans the length of the final room. The structure is self-contained — its only point of physical contact with the Secession building is its substructure — but you cannot walk around it. In order to have any but the most glancing contact with this work you must step up on the platform, walk across it and through the other two zones, and then retrace your steps to exit the way you entered.

You know. You have chosen to participate. What happens to you as you stand there, at the beginning?

Although the installation is relatively spare, Schulz has given you many elements to consider as you move among the three zones. The first section, for instance, could be perceived as stage, porch, and/or sculpture. You might thus think of performance and spectatorship, or of transitions from one kind of space or mental state to another. You might think of sculptural antecedents like American Minimalism of the 1960s or the functional hybrid-sculptures that “relational” artists like Tobias Rehberger produced in the 1990s. You might think of places you know or past experiences. You

might notice the skilled labor that went into the platform's construction. You might think of all of these things or none of them. You might simply step up and walk into the next space.

The other two spaces offer you similarly evocative materials. In the gallery-like second zone you encounter brightly colored, abstract drawings. In the third zone, the catwalk leads you into a room covered in a 1950s-style, subtly patterned wallpaper that Schulz has used for several past projects. In the corner you see a jumble of Thonet chairs that he describes as "a reference to a past action or the possibility of a fictitious audience."

Through the selection, production, and restrained arrangement of these few elements, Schulz has created a space in which to make meaning. He does not intend to prompt social or performative activity. He does not require you to become performer, model, or spectator, but rather invites you to feel and think about such possibilities as you move among these structures (an actively contemplative experience rather than a transformative one). Schulz has devoted his considerable intellect and formal skill to orchestrating a situation in which you bring your own intelligence into a play of references that is partly generated by him and partly by you. This echoes Rancière's sense of making meaning through association/dissociation, here within a situation set up to encourage your self-awareness of this process.

You know. You're there.

There's something else I want you to know. This work grows out of a set of values that permeate Schulz's work and emanate from his own background and sense of self. These facts are well-rehearsed in other publications: born in Leipzig in 1972; trains as a mechanic in the GDR; teaches himself what it means to be an artist; exhibits, curates, and writes steadily beginning in the early 1990s; builds a vibrant artistic practice. In connection with his recent work he coins the phrase "social formalism," which he describes as a working strategy or tool "to deal with the very complex matter of formalism and politics in a very simple way. The complex situation includes for instance: formalism versus realism, formalism and cold war politics, and my new self confidence that I can transport political and social issues through certain media and forms and don't have illustrate them." Some lesser-known details: moves to Berlin last year; makes a few simple architectural interventions into his new apartment to improve upon the given situation; listens to Joe South records on vinyl. Self-awareness (in the broadest sense), curiosity, participation, and play are values that infuse his life and work, as well as his hopes for you.

You don't need to know these things, but now that you do, they may open up new layers within your perception of the work. The same holds for the work's light but intentional connections to the Secession itself. Schulz's long interest in the complexities of autonomy and interdependence is expressed here through his wooden structure, which responds to the surrounding architecture while retaining its structural integrity. His installation also touches on the Secession's history. Its first exhibition mingled fine and applied arts in a carefully arranged display, a clear point of

connection to Schulz's work. Similarly, his installation might be seen as the latest and most temporary in an ongoing series of architectural renovations in which the Secession's caretakers have decided which elements to retain, recreate, or jettison as they repaired war damage and responded to changing tastes and programmatic needs. (If Schulz recreates this project in another space, he will activate another set of connections to those new surroundings.)

So, you have chosen to participate. What has come of this engagement?

I could write that you have had an absorbing and pleasurable experience in which your physical encounter with the work contributed to an activated state of awareness, in which you stretched your own experiential capacities, and in which your participation with Schulz's work increased your capacity to be an engaged citizen-of-the-world. That's one possibility, and perhaps one hope, but I can't write those words with conviction. The work can't make such huge claims for satisfaction, connection, or emancipation, and its capacity to provide smaller pleasures is just as uncertain. It won't promise you the moon or connect every dot for you. As the song says, if that's what it takes to hold you, it had better let you go. What Schulz's work offers is a riskier enterprise. It asks you to take a chance, to step up and walk along, to pay attention to the associations embedded within these resonant spaces, objects, and images, and to add your own intelligence and experience to this encounter. What happens then is up to you.

(1) All information about the project and quotes from Schulz are drawn from his installation schematics and email correspondence between the artist and the author, summer 2008. My thinking about participation has been shaped by the texts in Claire Bishop's recent anthology on the topic and by the writings of Jacques Rancière.

(2) See, for instance, Schulz's text-on-windows project for *Manifesta 2* in 1998; *The Real and the Fake*, a project at the Moderna Museet in which he designed sleek holders for brochures that appropriated standard conventions of museum interpretation to describe a not realized exhibition by other artists; or his 2001 project *The Return of Display — What Does Exhibiting Mean in 2030*, in which plastered San Sebastián streets with colorful posters that presented texts that he had commissioned from four writers. See also his essays for the journal *Spector cut+paste*, which he co-founded.

(3) For example see *city fear / origami version (module 1-4) (with Sibylle Berg)* and exhibitions like *(Don't) Look Back in Anger*, or *FORMSCHÖN*, 2007