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On the work of the artist Paul Hutchinson

PAUL HUTCHINSON, *Kleispark*, 2016, framed inkjet print, 195 x 135 cm. All images courtesy Galerie Russi Klenner, Berlin; Knust Kunz Gallery Editions, Munich; and Stes + Höke, Düsseldorf.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

BY PAUL HUTCHINSON, JUNE DREVET, SYLVIA METZ

"and is it good for all or good for nothing? three tinfoil dreams ago you saw it coming. three tinfoil dreams ago you saw them laughing. during the wake nights and the boredom, during the wanting to have some more done. now it's time to stand up, tall, say it all. in their faces and down their throats. shut em up, boy, shut em up. move, stall, move. forward it goes."
 — Paul Hutchinson, *Stadt für Alle* (2020)

Looking at my to-do list, I see three things: "send out *Stadt für Alle*, prepare Russi show, check on parents."

I'm in Berlin, and the "lockdown light" that we've been going through for the past weeks has proven not to be the most effective measure against the spread of Covid-19. Exponential growth of infections has been stopped, but daily case numbers still remain high. All cultural institutions, museums, theaters, and cinemas had to shut down. However, commercial galleries, considered retail, remain open for now and continue to put on shows. But we all see the signs of a tougher lockdown approaching, which we'll probably have to deal with in the new year. And this will affect galleries, too.

I'm meeting my Berlin gallerist and friend Russi Klenner later today. I'm supposed to open a show in his space on January 22, 2021, though neither one of us is certain this will actually happen. So, currently we're considering other options, thinking of a plan B.

This indeed seems to be the time of plan Bs, of reconsidering, of questioning the status quo. This September, I published a book that looks at current developments in urban planning and at co-living in the city. To any German-speaking person, its title, *Stadt für Alle* (City for All) refers to the question of the city's ownership, of equality, of whom the city is built for. I was born in Berlin, where most of my family and friends are from, and I realized that, bit by bit, we as a people are being pushed out. Due to a lack of foresight, the city of Berlin sold much of its own property to international investors back in the 2000s. And, for the past few years, we've been experiencing the effects of that: non-developed plots are being filled with high-stakes real estate, social housing is turned into luxury developments. In a city that for decades spoke of liberty, social justness, and togetherness, the fear for space has become the new normal among the less privileged. I want to question that normal.

By the time this contribution is published most of us will have, hopefully, returned to a state of regularity. Though, like many others, I also believe the crises of the past year offers an opportunity to reconsider how things are going at the moment, that the increasing conflicts of class, in many places amplified by the pandemic, might eventually find a larger forum to be voiced from. There's obviously much to do and think about. I should start working on my list.

Paul Hutchinson
 Berlin, early December 2020



Front covers of **PAUL HUTCHINSON's** *Stadt für Alle*, Distanz Publishing, 2020; and *Pictures and Words*, Distanz Publishing, 2018.



Page 217-8 from **PAUL HUTCHINSON's** *Stadt für Alle*, Distanz Publishing, 2020.

Paul Hutchinson lives and works in his hometown, Berlin. He studied at Berlin University of the Arts and London's Central Saint Martins. He held solo presentations at the German State Opera, Berlin (2017-18); Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2016); and was selected for a solo booth at Art Cologne (2019). He has participated in group shows at Museum im Prediger, Schwäbisch Gmünd (2020); Kunstraum Potsdam (2019); Werkschauhalle Leipzig (2019); Max Liebermann Haus, Berlin (2017); NRW Forum, Düsseldorf (2017); and The Photographers' Gallery, London (2015), among others. So far, he has published five monographs. Hutchinson has been awarded various grants and prizes, such as from Berlin University of the Arts, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and Berlinische Galerie, Museum of Modern Art for its Eberhard Roters Fellowship for Young Art in 2016. In 2021, he will spend three months in Los Angeles on a Villa Aurora Fellowship.

Tinfoil Dreams

BY JUNE DREVET

When looking at Paul Hutchinson's photographs, I notice that the focus is never on fixed positions, but rather on fragile relations comprising attitudes toward the external reality of a contemporary metropolis. As such, the motifs of his pictures are entirely familiar to my own direct experience on the one hand, but they still continually foster a sense of irritation on the other. The Berlin-based photographer sets this transition at the motivic center of his artistic work, but not only that: he also positions it on technical and formal levels, so that we are ultimately faced with a nexus of diverse motifs, a melding of photographic genres, of exposure techniques and lyrical texts. His artistic intention: raising awareness of one's own time.

Hutchinson's biography was shaped by numerous sojourns in metropolises in various regions of the world, before he returned to Berlin—where he grew up during Germany's post-reunification period, as a child of a family of German-Irish descent. During his youth, he spent his time on the streets and in the public spaces of Berlin's Schöneberg district facing a context of immigration, precariat, and hip-hop. Following the principle "the city as a stateless mind," Hutchinson traces the energetic vigor of big cities in his practice, energy that arises at the borderlands between asperity and poetry. Today, cities throughout the world have morphed, through globalization and media, into spaces of placelessness. They no longer present a clear identity to us, but rather embrace us as "non-places." When moving through these transitory spaces, the question perpetually arises as to which standpoint an artistic perspective can take in relation to these spaces. What standpoint do Hutchinson's shots take in showing us a metropolis? It cannot be that his photographs and texts mean to show us a specific place, since what we see is already familiar; nothing new for anyone. A collection of trivialities is compiled, an apparent bagatelle. And it is at this very point that his narrative begins.

The conflation of transformation, fragility, transience, and ephemerality is evident in numerous photographs. Even his positioning, for instance that chosen for a self-portrait in a subway tunnel (*Kotti, self*; 2016), causes us to suddenly see his body as fragmented. Furthermore, Hutchinson thematically incorporates transitions within society and in photographic discourse by constellating, again and again, low- and high-resolution shots. The images stand alone without hierarchy, together and above discourse on analogue and digital photography. Through blurry and noisy poor images¹ taken by a smartphone camera, along with high-resolution photographs, Hutchinson purposefully allows visual dissonance to arise, resulting in multiplied materiality. The coexistence of moments, events, and feelings becomes formally visible and tangible.

The artist's awareness of street life and tenderness not being mutually exclusive is also found in his texts that have accompanied many of his photographs since 2016. Here, the artist writes in a language familiar to him from his youth and from the streets of his neighborhood, lending the texts lyrical form. He wants to proceed in a way similar to his photographs: creating stand-alone works of art filled with their own magic and without need of any genre ascriptions. Similar to the photos, with his poems Hutchinson



PAUL HUTCHINSON, *Kotti, self*, 2016, framed c-print, 40×30 cm.

1 Steyerl, Hito, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux Journal* 10 (November 2009).

intends to “push and exert physical pressure,” as he said in one of our conversations.

Hutchinson lets the linguistic and artistic exploration of his own origins flow into his work in many respects, which reinforces the impression of a highly subjective artistic approach. Can we liberate ourselves from our situatedness within society by analyzing it? Rather than in the field of sociology, this question is currently being posed in the context of literature: authors like Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, and Ocean Vuong are returning in their narratives to their own social roots, and are viewing the imprint of these roots with a temporal distance from today’s vantage point and also as a transformation of the self. Such a process is likewise evident in Hutchinson’s photographs, whether highly visually concrete through the reiterate rendering of subway rearview mirrors or through the extensive portrait series of his young protagonists. The shots show friends and acquaintances in their material reality of sneakers and hoodies, yet also their softness and vulnerability. For Hutchinson, this softness is actually much more distinctive in the description of young adults today. The establishment of such depictions of emotional worlds in their own semiotic system enables him to create his own kind of matrix. Perhaps this is what gives rise to the impression that the artist is conveying his own inner freedom—or maybe state of liberation—through his work.

Full text by June Drevet, first published in *Camera Austria* #147, 2019, in German and English.

June Drevet studied media theory at Weimar’s Bauhaus University and critical studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. From 2016 to 2018, she was editor at *Eikon*, an international magazine for photography and media art. Currently, she is an editor at *Die Epilog* in Berlin and also works on curatorial and editorial projects between Berlin and Vienna.



Installation view of **PAUL HUTCHINSON**'s “New Positions,” a solo booth at Art Cologne 2019.

My work contains the culture I come from

BY SYLVIA METZ



Installation view of PAUL HUTCHINSON's (from left to right) *Matias (III)*, 2018, framed c-print, 40 × 30 cm; *Aufbruch*, 2020, framed inkjet print, 195 × 130 cm; and *Unité d'habitation, Marseille*, 2019, framed c-print, 70 × 50 cm, at "Aufbruch," Marsano Kunst, Berlin, 2020.

In his photographs and texts, Paul Hutchinson addresses issues of equality, urban life, and social mobility. In doing so, he gives his generation a unique voice, and at the same time draws a bittersweet portrait of our time. Sylvia Metz spoke with the artist in an interview.

You were born in 1987 and, as you once put it yourself, "grew up in the gray post-war Berlin of the '90s." Doesn't really sound like a good time, does it?

That's a pointed phrase of mine. In retrospect, I would say that I had a fulfilling, warm, and loving childhood.

But what also corresponded to the

reality of our lives was the fact that some of us grew up in precarious circumstances. The environment in the north of Schöneberg was a little rough, especially in our youth. Everybody was hanging around on the streets, getting into trouble, smoking pot, waiting for hours for some guy selling weed to show up. There was also violence. Back then, you always put on a kind of armor when you went out, especially in winter. Hanging out at Kleistpark, at Potsdamer Straße, at Pallas . . . there will also be conflict. These are the themes of my early teens.

That doesn't sound like an environment where people say:

"I want to become an artist later!" How did you get into art?

It just happened over time, really. Early on, I felt the need to get out and see more of the world. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that as a child I spent a lot of time in Ireland. And I had the opportunities: I graduated from high school, I was always able to work, and at some point, I became aware of the disposition of having a German passport and thus being eligible for German funding opportunities. I realized that if I wanted to leave, I could do it. I could apply to 100 different things and get 90 rejections. But maybe ten would work out. It had nothing to do with art in the first place, but with the idea of travel. Somehow, I've always found a way to find work placements or so and receive funding for it. The translation of these experiences, of the travels, but also of the notion of somehow having been fortunate enough to find myself undergoing an academic education, the physical manifestation of all that, for me personally, was to take pictures.

What was the moment when you realized that there was no longer a plan B, that this is not a hobby, this is me?

The feeling of knowing that I am able to do this and also having a sense of integrity about it, claiming it as my own and not just repeating the patterns of others, came in retrospect rather late, after the completion of my studies, during the last three or four years. Of course, there are still references, but I believe that I have developed my own language and a discourse that stands for itself. If anyone asks me today what I do for a living, I answer: "I'm an artist." That's not so easy and natural to say in photography, I think. For me, it really had a lot to do with recognition from the outside. To a large degree my self-reflection was initiated by others, by the way my work was perceived and how it touched people. I first had to develop a lot of work in order to convince myself that it came out of me, was authentic, and not copied or in any way derivative.

What does it mean to you to photograph?

Today, as then, photography to me is always about a consciousness of "being in the world." It is a possibility of reflection. I am here. I am doing and experiencing this. Generally, when looking at my work, it's useful to bear in mind that I am purposefully creating my own system of references to reflect my inner emotions on the one hand and my perception of our reality on the other. Within this system, metro stations can exist next to butterflies next to worn out trainers next to social housing architecture, because they all have a similar air to them and reflect the mindset with which I approach the world: naivety. And taking photographs was only a symptom of this attitude. I have a healthy body and a mind that works well, and I have the privilege of this German passport. So, here we go.



Installation view of **PAUL HUTCHINSON's** *vorwärts*, 2017, framed inkjet print, 130 x 195 cm, at "You are here - Works from the Peters-Messer Collection," Werkschauhalle, Leipzig, 2019.

When did you start writing as a counterpart to photography?

For the last three or four years I've kept what I have written. I've been writing for a while, but it's only recently that I've afforded it space and allowed myself to take my efforts seriously; it was a similar process with my photography. I had never really felt represented in contemporary German literature, neither as the person that I am nor in the culture that I come from. With all these books and texts, I was unable to see myself in them, hear my language, or the language of the people that surround me. So, I felt an urge to address this and tried to find words of my own.

What does a day in your artistic practice look like? Do you get up in the morning and decide: today I make art?

No, I don't think like that. Every day of the week is a normal working day. For me, the most demanding aspect is to organize the work. Writing e-mails, assigning inventory numbers, making sure that the production is right, that the galleries have what they need and so on. Everything else is intuition. I do a lot of creative things on the side, unconsciously and unfiltered. For example, I often write texts on the side, in the subway, 400 words at once, or sometimes only two words, when some thought enters my mind, totally rough. I send them to my own archive e-mail address and edit them later, which can happen up to a year later. Generally, I produce a lot of material, and then filter it at some stage. And then in that second step I analyze what my impulses made me do. I would say that this filtering is actually my artistic practice. When I cognitively force myself to produce something, then you often see the artistic will in the work, the *Kunstwille*, and I try to avoid that. Being free, being in flow—that's a good description of my work.

A detail, no matter how small, receives maximum attention in your photographs. Where does this eye for the "besides," for the unspectacular, come from?

I find that small details can also be used to illustrate larger statements about our world. For example, the new motif I am currently thinking about: the shoe that almost steps on a flower. For me this is a political act. Or the picture of my old Reebok sneaker: it contains so many aspects of the culture I stem from. And every boy on the street could relate to that: the tough Berlin winters that have worn this shoe down twice, hip-hop, street culture, aggression. However, this picture is titled *vorwärts* (*onwards*, 2017). So, it's also about social mobility, about how do we get out of here, where do we go, motion, and progress. A large part of my work and of my thinking is concerned with class differentiation, the questioning of alleged authorities, rebelling at feelings of exclusion. Surely, people with an affinity for art can decode certain images easily, as they have more access, more practice and knowledge in doing so. But I am concerned with people of my background—people without academic parents or much financial security—who should also be able to access these pictures and words, read them, and maybe see something touching and relatable in them. If I can get even a little bit closer to that with images like *vorwärts*, then I know what I am doing my work for.

Full text by Sylvia Metz, first published in *Collectors Agenda*, 2020, in German and English.

Sylvia Metz is responsible for Hessian Cultural Foundation's scholarship program and international residencies. She lives in Frankfurt and Berlin. Her writing and curatorial practice focus on contemporary art, and she wrote her dissertation on Willem de Kooning and his black-and-white artworks.