

Drop Magazine



Markus Miessen

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I must admit I was slightly nervous as Markus Miessen's

Skype name popped up in my contacts and I pressed the call button. I'd come across his architectural work on multiple occasions but hadn't read his published works or heard much about [his studio](#)'s methodology of Critical Spatial Practice. I knew I was speaking with an individual on a different intellectual wavelength even before he picked up the call but what I was greeted with was unexpected.

Markus is as humble as he is brilliant. He's authored and contributed to an extensive catalogue of books; has held professorships at a series of prestigious design institutions; has facilitated a plethora of interesting projects such as the [Brutally Early Club](#) with Hans Ulrich Obrist; and runs an inspiring practice in Berlin. Yet he doesn't advertise his achievements, or speak in unapproachable conceptual vernacular. Instead he is authentic, passionate and amiable. You know that favourite teacher you had at school who had the uncanny ability of turning even the most complicated of ideas into something understandable and exciting? That's Markus Miessen...



Hi Markus, how are you?

I'm good thanks.

What are your plans for the day?

I'm currently at the studio. We have two deadlines this week and then it's just my usual routine: pick up the little one from kindergarten, prepare food, get things ready at home, and make sure two little boys get to sleep as quickly as possible (Laughs).

How old are your children?

I have a daughter, Milly, who's about to turn six and lives with her mom in Bonn. And I have two sons here in Berlin with my partner [Lena](#). Jona, the younger one, is a year old and Lino is almost three.

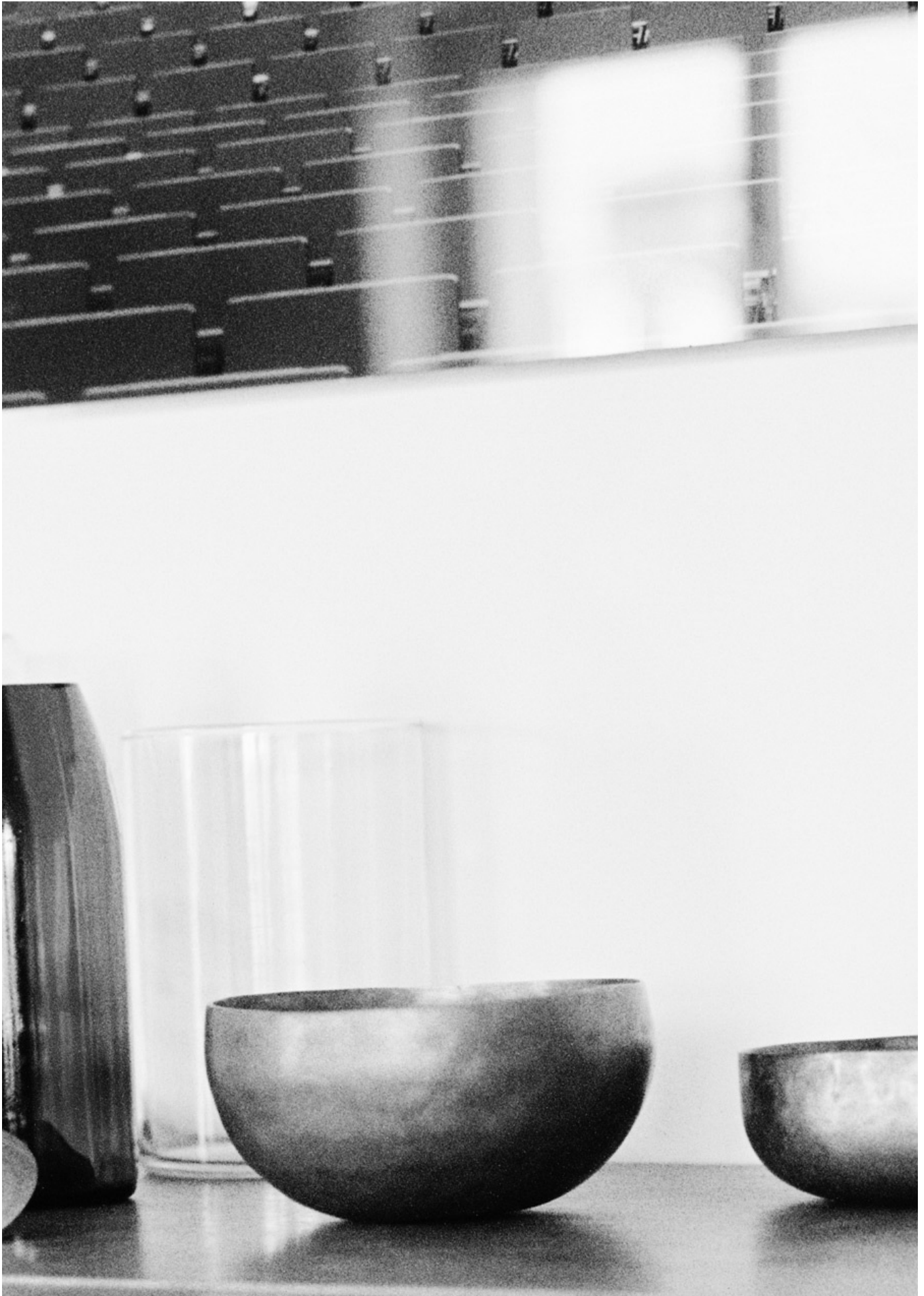
Is the studio near their kindergarten?

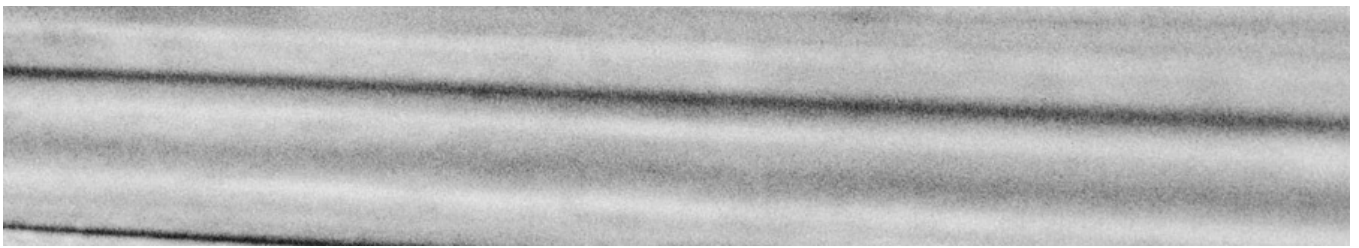
Yeah, we moved the studio about two years ago. It used to be in a really vibrant area, Potsdamer Strasse, but the location – in the long run – was difficult as I had to travel an hour to get there every day. About two years ago, there was an opportunity to take over a small shopfront, which is a one minute walk from our home. Ever since then my life has become much easier and more adaptable to the needs of the kids and Lena.

[Markus show's me the space]

It's great, because it's literally next door to our house and everything has become much more comfortable in terms of everyday logistics. Our quality

of life has increased dramatically.





That's great. So...I don't want to ask you about participatory practice and politics or spatial concepts, because I think these topics have been covered – at length – by people far more qualified than I. Instead, I'd like to know a bit more about you as a person. What was young Markus Miessen like?

When I was younger I spent a lot of my time skating and snowboarding, but when I was finishing high school in Germany there was still jurisdiction in place by which you had to do either military service or social work for a year.

Wow...okay.

I managed to find a program within the Mountain Rangers near Salzburg, which allowed me to continue my snowboarding. I spent twelve months in the Alps which was fantastic, but then I unfortunately had a series of accidents, which resulted in a terrible summer in a wheelchair and meant that I had to re-think my future and what I was going to do next. It came as a shock. I was interested in architecture so I applied for an architecture school in the UK. The only thing that was definite in my head was that I wanted to leave Germany and study in an English speaking country and back then, the UK seemed to be an interesting and affordable choice. This was well before anyone thought that something like BREXIT would or could ever take place.

Was there a reason you wanted to leave Germany?

Mainly to see something different – a change of place and culture – and since English was the only other language I spoke, I ended up in Glasgow. At the time there was still an amazing European policy where if you had an EU passport you could basically study for free. It was about eight hundred pounds per year. Glasgow, and specifically the Glasgow School of Art, turned out to be a fantastic and very inspiring place to spend time. I chose Glasgow because of the art school, but also because it was a really interesting place to be during the tail end of the nineties. The city was going through a lot of urban and social change. I also like to surf, so it was great to be in a city and, at the same time, be able to take the car and be at three pretty good surf spots within ninety minutes from school.



Amazing...

Yeah, I had a fantastic time. I was mostly mingling with art students as

opposed to architects. After three years of bachelor study in the UK I went to Berlin and became close friends with a guy from Belgium, Kenny. We started working on a book called “Spaces of Uncertainty”, which in many ways became a blueprint for the way that I work, especially the practice of writing and publishing as a continuous form of research.

In 2002 I received a scholarship for the Architectural Association in London and after two years of Diploma studies the school asked me if I'd like to start teaching there. Originally the idea was to go back to Berlin but somehow two years became eight and I ended up staying in London for quite some time and started my professional studio there. I was running the studio, teaching on the side and also doing my Masters at the London Consortium, which was a very interesting institution in the sense that it didn't necessitate a physical location or singular site of operation. It was a master's and PhD program, which was a collaboration between the Architectural Association, Tate Modern, Institute of Contemporary Arts, and Birkbeck College. You got different elements, input, and knowledge transferred from all of these different institutions. I did that for a year and was then invited to start a PhD program with Eyal Weizman at Goldsmiths, which I finally finished last year.

In 2008 I was mainly working at the studio and decided to move to Berlin, which made things much easier to organize in terms of working on projects that can exist outside of a purely commercial reality. One of the main reasons I left London was because the general costs and professional overheads had become unbearable. Not just in terms of living, but also the whole infrastructure you needed and still need in order to sustain a studio there. If you don't do corporate projects then surviving in London is almost impossible. The way we're set up in Berlin now is very different. We can work mainly with public institutional clients, about ninety percent being situated in the art world and the cultural sphere.



Is that the space you enjoy operating in the most? The art world?

Compared to residential or commercial, yes. It's the space and environment in which I feel most comfortable and at home, but it's also a context that can be quite tricky to navigate. There's a lot of subjects that are seemingly really urgent and relevant in terms of being discussed, but there's also quite a divide between the level of discussion, the follow-up, and the reality of how things operate. The intense criticality behind projects is an aspect that I find slightly problematic sometimes, but compared to more corporate environments it definitely maintains a certain level of independence in which you can pose questions and speculate. I'm also able to do a lot of work-related travel and bring the family, which is great. Family is crucial.

It's nice being able to facilitate that through your work. On that topic, what do you love about being a father?

Ha! Well, right now Milly is turning almost six and Lino is almost three. They are both at a point where they're starting to ask questions. Lino can talk a bit now and he's already pretty good at putting you on the spot by using certain behaviours and forcing you to respond through action. Jona, the one year old, is mostly observing and commenting through body language and sounds. Milly asks all sorts of intelligent and critical questions, which are often so direct that I find them difficult to answer. With kids, you have to understand what they're really asking, even if it's a seemingly straightforward question. They have this very neutral criticality which enables them to see things as they are – and I love that. I'm enjoying spending as much time with them as possible.

Milly lives with her mom which is about six hours door-to-door by train, so when I see her every second weekend it's an interesting transition from one environment to another. I would definitely prefer if my daughter lived

in Berlin so I could spend more time with her but unfortunately it's not possible currently. One day she will be able to decide herself. Even though this exceptional migration every couple of weeks creates a lot of difficulties it also creates a very special space when I'm with her. Kids are fantastic; they're the best reality check that you can possibly be exposed to.

It's great that you've been able to create this conscious separation between work and your personal life, especially while running your own practice. Does your girlfriend run her own studio too?

Yes, she does. Lena is amazing; she never really stopped working during pregnancy and still takes on full responsibility for the baby, Jona, while I'm taking care of Lino, which I'm exceptionally grateful for. Lena works as a graphic designer and art director. You can probably imagine that raising three kids as two freelance parents is not always easy.



Yes, I can definitely imagine it's tricky to balance sometimes. On a slightly different note, would you describe yourself as a radical?

Whoa...nah – The word radical has a negative connotation to me.

That's interesting...

Not negative in terms of the actual word, but in that ... it seems a bit unproductive. I'm very interested in ensuring that any conversation is always productive in one way or another. It's something I find important in the way that we work in the studio.

I think you inhabit quite a radical approach to the collaborative process. Reading through some of your works the idea that collaboration should be understood as a form of confrontation was something I hadn't really come across before.

One of the most important elements in terms of our work methodology at the studio is this notion of the outsider in terms of both design approach but also discursive stance. I've had lots of interesting conversations with critics in the art world about this, who believe that it's quite an aged concept, which is absolutely true. In the context of the art world it is very placative in the sense that you are basically describing a role that in any case is the default mode of operation of the artist, because as an artist you are – at least conceptually – an outsider. But it doesn't matter in terms of practice, because you're producing mostly self-referential work that stays within a certain context that has already been appropriated. My ambition is to see how we can use architecture and critical spatial practice as a form of research through which the role of the outsider can have a critical effect and affect on a specific situation. This particular role is that of the

uninvited outsider: someone who becomes active in situations or contexts where he or she has not been invited and is basically forcing their way into an alien reality.

Right now, at the studio, we're working on a project for an internationally operating think tank who have a regional headquarters in Berlin. They've recently been acquired by a huge consultancy and are currently questioning how their spaces work. Even though it's a corporate context, I find it an interesting task, because this role of the outsider is extremely productive in such a setting and it is already ingrained and used within the company's current mode of operating. As a consultancy, no matter what model you follow, you're always coming in from the outside in order to objectively or neutrally scan an existing situation and then propose alternatives based on the fact that you're not directly entangled in the structure which you're critiquing or referring to. Therefore you're actually in a position to critique it – it is the very base of your operation. If you were involved internally, it would not be possible to say or propose certain things.





I wanted to talk briefly about your teaching. What do you hope to achieve by sharing your knowledge, opinions and theories with these young people?

I guess it's about my specific work methodology, modes of interpreting and applying what I would refer to as Critical Spatial Practice, and working with the students to develop a critical approach to the environment they're dealing with. I always try to have a "product" in mind, which the group and team is working towards. Usually it starts with the research and ends with an actual intervention, an exhibition or a book. The process produces an

actual output but also speaks to an audience. This is very important for me – and I believe that this is of great help to the students. The products that we've generated have been quite diverse. Over the past five years of teaching in Los Angeles we have worked almost entirely on one single research project, which looked at the militarization of the desert in the American Southwest. It was probably not the typical way in which academic architecture studios work in the US. Most of the time we were on road trips scouting, mapping, and scanning the different environments that we'd determined were relevant to the project. The final product will be a substantial international conference, an exhibition, as well as a research publication that will encapsulate the findings of the past five years.

I really enjoy it when the students understand that what they're doing is not some imaginary academic project that just disappears into their portfolio, but presents something which actually produces value for an audience other than the audience at the school. It's important to me that the students are able to work on something that has a real impact and culminates in an actual project reality. I am now a professor at the Academy of Design in Gothenburg. We're starting a new program there this year titled Design Politics.

That sounds really interesting. Thanks for speaking with me Markus.

My pleasure.

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