

Andrea Grützner, *Erbgericht*

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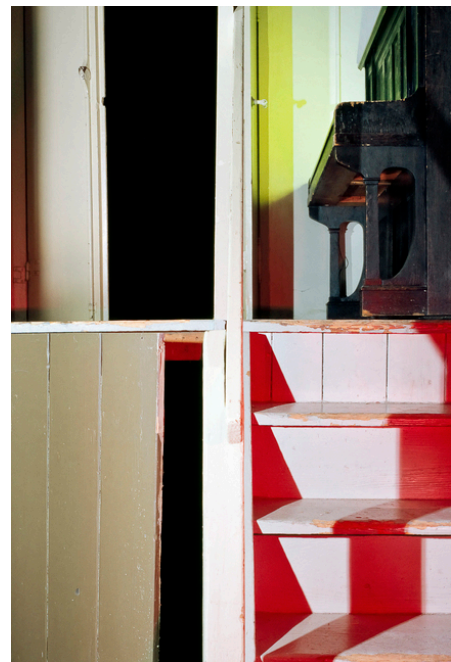
Once, when travelling in Norway, I kicked the gate of a guesthouse we were to be staying at. It opened the wrong way. It was final act of a long frustrating day. I was not aware our host was standing in the doorway ready to greet us. He looked in horror at my behaviour. This was the beginning of an excruciating weekend under his roof. On departing I felt obliged to leave behind my copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's letters from her Scandinavian travels. This was as much a declaration of civility as an act of appeasement.

I had broken the ancient law of *xenia*: the bond of hospitality between host and stranger. In Homeric times *xenia* was a strong social bond in the absence of civil institutions. All strangers and travellers are sacred in the eyes of Zeus. The host was obliged to offer hospitality and the guest was to reciprocate.

The humanist scholar Erasmus considered good manners in convivial life as a central feature of his idea of *civilité*. His comparisons of French and German inns in *Diversoria* (1523) helped clarify codes of good behaviour existing beyond national boundaries and courtly circles. He stressed the obligation

to observe people and to connect the particular with the general in the search for apt forms of social integration not necessarily bound by social and class distinction.

The Erbgericht in Erasmus's day would have played a central role in village life. The proprietor often carried out judicial and other civic functions as well as holding brewing rights for its guest house. It would be also be an important meeting point between the local and the traveller. Many village restaurants and community centres in Germany now carry the name if not its historical associations. The Erbgericht in Polenz, a village east of Dresden, is one such example. It is a guest house, restaurant and cultural centre of the village. It has been run by the same family since its opening at the end of the nineteenth century. The interior is the subject of Andrea Grützner's *Erbgericht*.



What is striking from the outset is that the bonds of hospitality have their visual form. The upkeep of the building serves the functional demand of providing comfort for local and stranger alike. The bedrooms, halls and stairways are a palimpsest of accrued tastes. The décor ranges from herringbone wallpaper, linoleum floors, brightly painted wooden boarding and laminate panelling. There are elements of modernist design in some abstract patterning. The universal utopian aspiration from another age persists as a charmed residue. There is a string of outdoor coloured light bulbs that give

a low-key glitz. What emerges is a vernacular allure indifferent to (and yet so often an inspiration for) the demands of contemporary interior design.



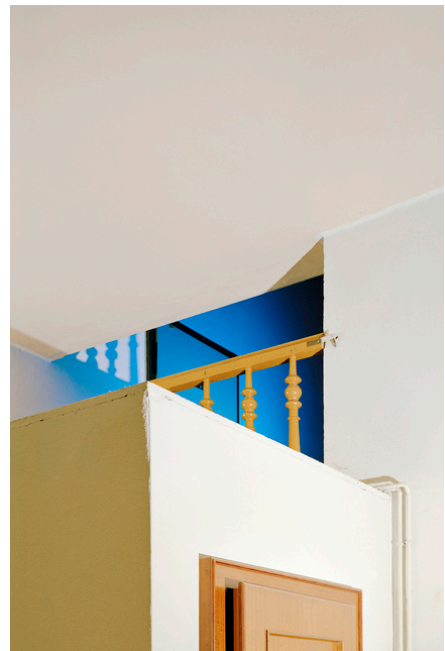
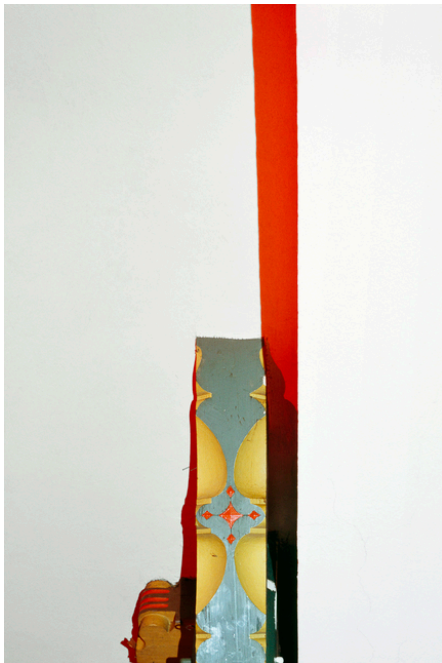
These spaces are also a repository of memory and history. Grützner spent her early childhood years in the village and returned frequently for family visits and celebrations at the *Erbgericht*. Her mother and grandparents spent their younger years at dances, theatrical productions and sporting events in its hall. Family histories and community ties are entwined with the wider history of the area, particularly with significant changes brought about by the fall of the Wall and the enduring legacy of the GDR. In this sense, *Erbgericht* can be seen as a locus for reconsidering the idea that where you are from is who you are: that place confers identity through the close attachments and memories we accrue.

If this suggests that a figuring of self in present circumstance finds stability in a lament for lost time in a stilled place, the photographs can be seen to resist such a notion. The images relish artifice. The use of flash and filters bathe surfaces with unusual shadows. A new light is projected back upon the interiors. At times the shadows are sharp and angular. They act as an imposing counterpoint to the physical structures in the photographic frame. In other images, shadows introduce subtle hues and warm tones transfiguring the banal into a temporal space of repose. The unusual choice of angle defamiliarizes space and place. An image of a bathroom floor, for instance, can be worked out but its

recognition is held in check by the flatness imposed by the yellow and turquoise shadows. Indeed, many compositions dwell on recession and insist on flatness, more often both at once. They thrive on a collapsed sense of space. The work is akin to a Kurt Schwitters collage. Interiors are fragmented, reassembled and re-imagined so the photographs exist in and of themselves. This is the language of abstraction where enchantment is sought from a formal rigour and measured dissonance.

The photographs are constantly between places, pensive in their commitment to coherence and stability. They are between memory and artifice; shadow and substance. They are between visualizing the material form of social attachment and aesthetic aspiration. They are between what has been and what might be. This returns us to another word of Greek origin: *utopia*. Thomas More stressed its ambiguous form of being no place and a good place. It conjured up an impossible realm of ideas that can nonetheless help us aspire and pattern our drive for the good life. Somewhere amidst these fragmented scenes and their lambent charm lies a spark that kindles the promise of the ineffable in communal bonds then, now and beyond. I am reminded of the foolish traveller I had been that day as I approached the threshold.

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