

THE BIG DIG: PETER BRÖTZMANN • INSTAX BOXES



## OUT OF THE BOX

Early in the pandemic, confined to his apartment in Wuppertal, Germany, Peter Brötzmann discovered that he had a cache of canisters from Fuji Instax film. An avid avocational photographer, as he has been for decades, Brötzmann shoots friends and fellow musicians while on tour, as well as notable features of the terrain through which he travels, his photos serving as a visual diary. Without thinking about it much he began to fiddle with the tiny black cases, and before long he'd made a couple into miniature artworks, each one three inches in length. The size constraint emerged as a powerful catalyst, spurring the artist to find new kinds of solutions, imagining ways of manipulating the wee palette, sometimes abusing the film itself or the aluminum and plastic wrappers or adding an exogenous element like a strip of wood, packing tape, or metal filament.

At a larger scale, Brötzmann has constructed box assemblages for more than sixty years. He was making them before he graduated from Wuppertal's Werkkunstschule, at the time of his first solo exhibition in Nijmegen, Holland, in 1959, around the point he began to get more serious about playing music. At various moments, these boxes have covered an interior wall of his bedroom. During one visit I made a decade or so ago, around twenty of them were hanging nearly edge-to-edge, each containing its own microcosmic environment like a little diorama or presenting a life-worn object, something found in the street perhaps, that the container helps recontextualize and revive. The boxes are most often wooden, stained or painted a dark tone. As frames, they serve the usual function of cropping and organizing the image, but they are also containers of dimension – some shallow, some deep, some turned around to show their backside, some available to be exhibited closed or open. These earlier boxes are wildly varied in size, shape, and material, also variously finished, with the wood sanded or written onto or painted over, or left as found, even if cracked or broken. Boxes have appeared on the clarinetist and saxophonist's cover designs for LPs and CDs – on the recent *The Catch of a Ghost* (I Dischi di Angelica, 2020), for instance. But they are mainly private worlds, a sort of hermetic retreat, a multiform sanctuary.



PETER BRÖTZMANN, ZEP IN THE BOX, 1974



PETER BRÖTZMANN, UNTITLED (LANDSCAPE), 2011



PETER BRÖTZMANN, UNTITLED (CLOUD), 2013



The Instax boxes are uniform. Ribbed black plastic rectangles with a shallow interior space. As starting points, there is none of the variety of surface or gestalt of his homemade or trash-picked ones. This uniformity made the Instax format a suitable challenge for Brötzmann during a rare extended period in the studio, who at 80 years of age, had just slammed on the brakes from an annual schedule of more than 100 concerts. They are a new category in the artist's oeuvre, occupying a section all their own in *Along the Way* (Wolke Verlag, 2021), Brötzmann's beautiful new 228-page hardback book (another production inspired by the quarantine), which expansively documents the last decade of his art-making. In small groupings, the two dozen or so Instax works both concentrate and expand Brötzmann's working method. Simple, miraculous little inventions, like Webern compositions, they are self-contained but they open up kaleidoscopically onto the world at large.

- John Corbett, May 2021



Peter Brötzmann, age 19, before his first exhibition, Nijmegen, Holland, 1960.

## PETER BRÖTZMANN IN CONVERSATION WITH JOHN CORBETT

**John Corbett:** How did you get started using boxes as a format in your work?

**Peter Brötzmann:** You mean the very first ones?

**JC:** Yes, the box in a general way.

**PB:** That went hand in hand with my early collage things I did in my first studio in my hometown, Remscheid. Because there was no money around, I was using all sorts of stuff that I found and what I could glue or nail onto some panel. I was making collages with old coal sacks, for instance. Boxes came right away. I just built a frame or used boxes I found. It was a very natural thing. And, of course, I had seen Mr. Schwitters' work and was fascinated by it, so I thought: why not, you can use everything.

**JC:** What did the box do for you formally? It was like a frame but it was a little more than a frame.



Peter Brötzmann

Untitled (landscape), 2011

painted cardboard box construction with painted metal, foam, and cut paper

7 1/4 x 5 1/2 x 3 1/4 inches

**PB:** Ja, I think the three dimensions were in a way very interesting. You know, the time you're talking about, which is really teenage years, I was in school, busy already with a little painting and drawing, and I was also running into the theater whenever I could, and I was very interested in stage sets, stage design, where you have to deal with three dimensions. Especially because I was interested in Bert[olt] Brecht dramas, and he had always very special stages. I was fascinated by this. I wanted to build up situations, in a way.

**JC:** That's interesting because the boxes have a scenario-like quality. They almost always contain a little scene.

**PB:** Of course, most of them, you can see as landscapes. If you want you can make a little story with them, in a way.

**JC:** And that format has been consistent for you since the late 1950s.

**PB:** All over the years, yes. In the early metal boxes, I used things I found when our roof was renewed, old tin pipes, for example. Or we always had a lot of cats around and the cat food came in tins, so I used part of those tins. And if you threw old glue tubes into the oven they blew up and made a kind of zeppelin. Things like that. It's a lot of playing around, and that's what I always like to do.

**JC:** That seems also to be behind the Instax boxes. They are also a kind of refuse.

**PB:** Ja ja, I mean I had a handful of these boxes in the studio and they make a frame with some space in it. It was natural to put something inside. That's what I did for this series of 20 or 25, quite a nice series.

**JC:** They're very different one from another, the Instax works.

**PB:** I just was trying to see what I could do with it. For the Pola Pics series, I had some films where something went wrong, and I started to scratch around and press on them, because I felt there was some color in it, some ink, so I was curious to see what happens. The other series, what's in the boxes, is whatever – small things you find at breakfast or in the night. It's nothing special, in a way.

**JC:** It's a way of finding something special in the everyday.

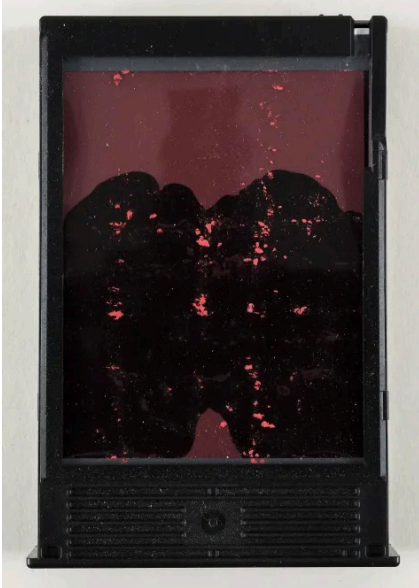
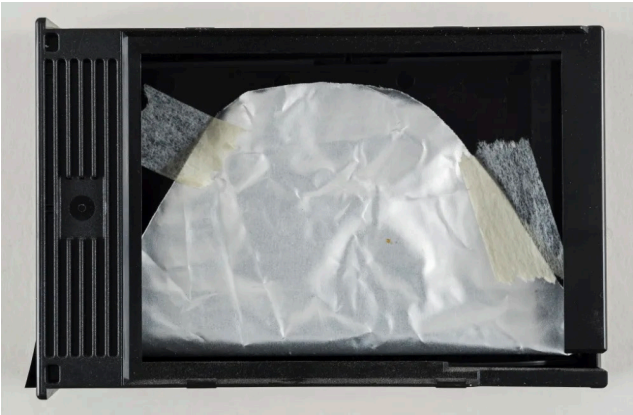
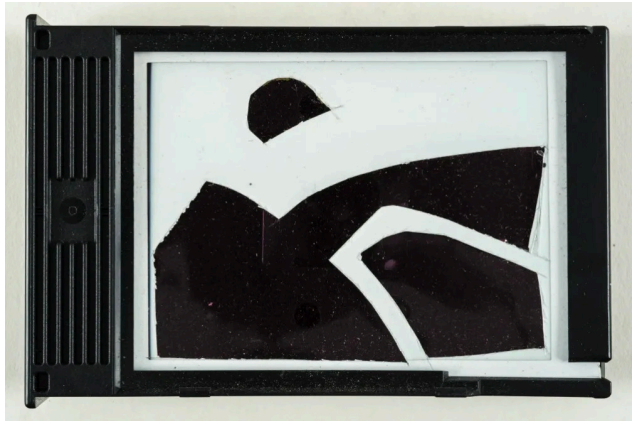
**PB:** That's the way to look at things. If I go through the streets here in Wuppertal, at the moment they are quite clean because nobody is on them. [laughs] But usually you find something in any corner. If you put a frame around it there's a picture already, instead of taking a photograph. And if you see things on the floor or in the corner...I was always a fan of Wolf Vostell's décollages, the very early ones he did mostly in Paris. You remember those?

**JC:** Yes, for sure.

**PB:** That was nice, he just ripped the posters off the wall and had a fantastic painting. Things like that. If you are in your studio and have all the materials around, all the stuff like the rest of old paintings, you use them and deform them and put them in this little frame. Collecting things – you know my boxes with bones and feathers and skulls. In the graphic arts, the main thing is to make order. To make some order with these things which can look completely chaotic but for yourself it is a kind of system. Just to try to see how this fits in there. That's a little game, a playing situation.

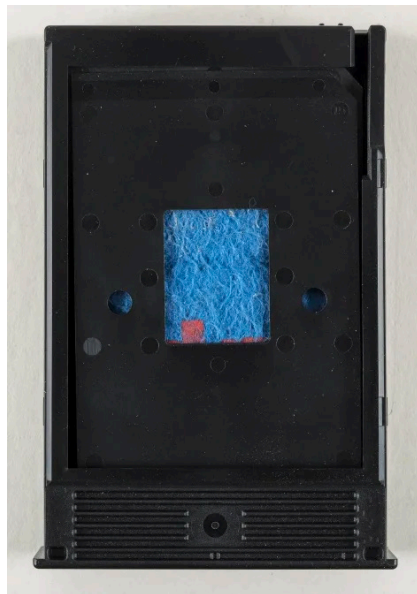
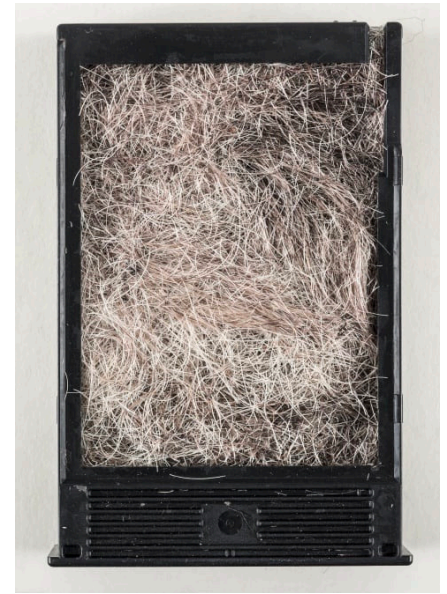


PLATES











**JC:** I'd like to ask about scale here. The surprise is how small these works are, which is also very exciting. They're the smallest of your works.

**PB:** Yeah. I didn't think about the size in the beginning. But the way I've made them over a couple of weeks – I wasn't sitting there and trying to fill the boxes, they just happened to build up. But you have to think about how to put them together. I prefer to make a collection of six or four of them, because I have the feeling that one alone, maybe it's too small. Some people might like the very small things, too. Still, I have the feeling it would be nice to keep them in groups.

**JC:** As little collections. It forces you to see relationships between them which is different from seeing them by themselves.

**PB:** Ja. I agree, that's right.

**JC:** They're so intimate. There's a preciousness, which is quite different from your work at a larger scale, even at the normal box assemblage range.

**PB:** It's different, yes. How to explain that? This plastic shit was just lying around. If I started to play with a couple of them, I didn't think of any result or that could be a nice piece or anything. I just put something in and I was surprised: "Oh, doesn't look too bad, let's try more." There isn't a big idea behind it, it's just a little card game or something like that. If you work on bigger boxes with certain already checked out materials, then of course you start already to compose. These Instax boxes are too small to compose a lot. You have not much choice. That makes it on the other hand interesting – to try to get something out of it which is worth looking at. It's the fun and the surprise for myself, too.

**JC:** Steve Lacy told me he'd heard that at the end of his life Giacometti had become obsessed with making tiny sculptures, but he was embarrassed by them and wouldn't show them even to his family. He kept them in matchboxes, making these little sculptures that kept getting smaller and smaller, but he didn't know why.

**PB:** Yeah, great! I like that.

**JC:** You brought up the idea of a card game, which is interesting because of the card compositions that you've made for musical performance, like "Images" and "Signs." These Instax works relate to those card pieces in a way.

**PB:** Yes, that's quite a good connection, I think.

**JC:** Fluxus boxes were scaled like that, mostly, too. Small and with some instructions inside.

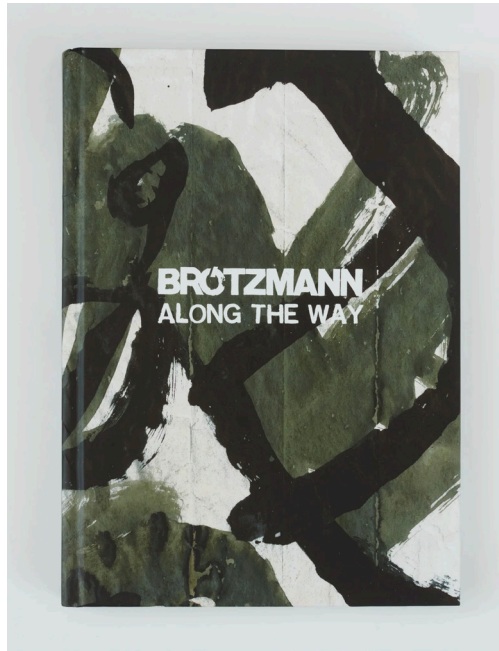
**PB:** Oh yeah, even if my own natural direction is very different from, let's say, Tomas Schmit's, I was always very interested in the idea of getting away from all this emotion, away from all this "being *kunst*," and just following some rules and seeing what happens. Rules can come out of the people or the phone-book or the Olivetti paper strip. The music card boxes were kind of connected to that and the Instax boxes follow from that, too.



Peter Brötzmann in Wels, Austria, 2016. Photo by Heather Leigh.



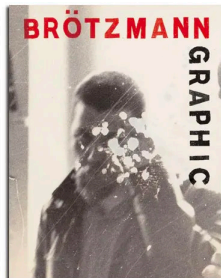
# MERCH



## PETER BRÖTZMANN, ALONG THE WAY

2021, HARDBACK, 230 PAGES

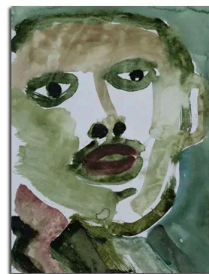
Essays by Peter Brötzmann, Thoms Milroth, John Corbett, Markus Müller, Sotirios Kontos, Stephen O'Malley, Heather Leigh, Karl Lippegas



PETER BRÖTZMANN, GRAPHIC DESIGN WORK, 1959–2013



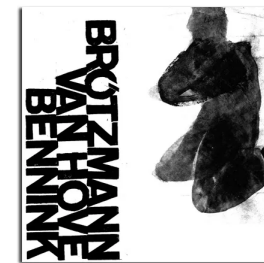
PETER BRÖTZMANN, LEFT / RIGHT



PETER BRÖTZMANN, WOOD & WATER



PETER BRÖTZMANN, PAINTINGS & OBJECTS



PETER BRÖTZMANN, FRED VAN HOVE, HAN BENNINK, 1971



PETER BRÖTZMANN, QUARTET LILA EULÉ NO. 1 & 2