

GET

A

L  
I  
F  
E

Biographer Franz Schulze digs into the private lives of famous architects.

Text [Katya Tylevich](#)  
Photos [Alexei Tylevich](#)

Franz Schulze launches into our conversation by reciting a letter from Mies van der Rohe to his wife. In so many Miesian words: 'I love you, but I'm not in love with you.' I look down at the charcoal portrait in front of me: Mies as drawn by Schulze, who is an artist by training. I feel that maybe I should flip the great architect's face over to avoid eye contact. By Schulze's account, Mies van der Rohe was a reserved man, very private – certainly not one to air the dirty laundry of his personal life. The same cannot be said of, oh, a certain Philip Johnson. Schulze would know. He is the author of highly acclaimed biographies of both of these Lions of the Architecture Kingdom (*Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, 1985, and *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*, 1994). At present, Schulze is working on the biography of Chicago-based architect Helmut Jahn.

Schulze lives in Illinois, where he is professor of art, emeritus, at Lake Forest College, but we meet in Los Angeles, at the comfortable, sun-filled home of a friend Schulze is visiting. The biographer – typically on the other end of the tape recorder – answers my questions with great care, asking 'Can I take a few minutes here?' before telling me how he chooses the subjects for his books and stating 'I want to say this the right way' before explaining why he thinks Philip Johnson reacted negatively to his biography. But when I ask the biographer why he believes it is important to write about the architect (shortcomings, sex life and all) behind the architecture, Schulze replies rather definitively: 'Because it should be done.'

*You were trained as a painter. How did 'painter' transition into 'biographer of architects'?*

In the 1960s I was writing art criticism in Chicago. This was back when abstract expressionism was the language of the land, but that 'land' was New York City, and New York City had absolutely nothing to do with Chicago. Well, I went to New York to talk to the editors of publications like *ARTnews* and *Art in America*, and I said, 'I want to write criticisms of Chicago artists.' They told me: 'We're not interested in Chicago artists. Don't you have some buildings out there? Write about that.' So I did. I began writing about architecture, which had always interested me. Chicago was looking very good at that time, with very important buildings – Mies was still alive then.

*How do you choose the subjects you write about?*

In the case of Mies, I got a call from the then curator of the Mies van der Rohe Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, who said, 'Look, I'm a native Berliner; you're from Chicago. Let's write this biography together. I'll do Berlin. You do Chicago.' Well, I couldn't say no to that. Then, one way or another, this man was dropped by the Museum of Modern Art, and he left the whole thing in my lap.

I worked on the book for about eight years [while simultaneously teaching and writing criticism] and spent a good deal of that time talking about Mies with Philip Johnson, one of his admirers. One thing led to another; the Philip Johnson book came out, and Philip hated it.

*Why?*

I never got a good answer from him. I asked him whether it was something I said about his personal life. No. His work? No. So I'm not quite sure. It was clear the whole time he and I were talking that this

was going to be an unauthorized biography. In fact, there were very, very few things he said that I did not mention in the biography, especially having to do with a particular woman to whom he made love when he had no business doing so. In any case, the book did prove successful. So here I am with these two books. Now my colleague, Ed Windhorst – my coauthor for the Mies book – and I have begun working on a book about Helmut Jahn. I've got about one-tenth of it done so far.

*How did Jahn become your next subject?*

I was interviewed for an architecture magazine in Chicago, and the conversation got around to Helmut. I said, 'Jahn's the best architect in Chicago, and it's high time somebody wrote a book on him.' Two days later I got a call from Helmut: 'Let's get together.' As in the case of Johnson, here was a major architect just waiting for attention.

*How do you conduct your research?*

While writing about Mies, I had the Mies van der Rohe Archive at the Museum of Modern Art at my avail, which is to say almost all the professional papers with any connection to the man. There is also a huge cache of documents pertaining to Mies's personal life at the Library of Congress. Now, Mies was something of a god in Chicago at the time, and, as you know, God does not have a personal life. One did not pry into the personal life of Mies van der Rohe, but I did anyway. Actually, once the book was finished, many people came forward and said, 'I could have told you more.' [Laughs.] As a matter of fact, since that book was published, my coauthor and I have discovered things that nobody knew before: a house that we thought had never been built had indeed been built; a house that we didn't even know existed does, in Wiesbaden.

As far as Johnson is concerned, again the Museum of Modern Art – where he was a major figure – was a source of good material. Also, I saw the man often. Once every month or two, I would travel to his Glass House in New Canaan [Connecticut] – Philip paid my way, thank goodness – and we would talk with the tape recorder running. I also had occasion to meet some of the people Johnson knew: painters like Frank Stella and Jasper Johns, who were close to him, and his partner, David Whitney, who was a connoisseur of contemporary art and knew everybody. Of course, Johnson was a very controversial man.

*So you have God with no personal life and Johnson with a very controversial one. What was your approach to making their private – and sometimes embarrassing – matters quite public?*

My professional position is that of the biographer; I'm supposed to tell the story as it is. I know the faults of Johnson, and I'm perfectly willing to lecture on them. But he was also a very attractive, charming guy, and he gave me a lot of attention. In the case of Mies, I had met him only once and I admired him – more than I admired Johnson, although Johnson has done some damn good things. At the same time, I was perfectly prepared to acknowledge Mies's infidelity to his wife and the fact that he had left her.

*In a positive review of your Mies biography, a critic praised your ability to paint the architect's 'shortcomings'. →*

## Franz Schulze's eight golden rules for would-be biographers

- Ideally, the subject ought to be dead. You'll save yourself the potential grief that comes with writing about someone who's alive and doesn't like what you wrote.
- If the subject is alive, it's best to be on fairly good personal terms with him or her.
- Even if you have a low opinion of the subject, you should have some measure of respect, however small, for him or her. Otherwise, your work may read like a hatchet job.
- If there are other biographies of the subject, make sure you have something to say that is new. If you choose to disagree with the findings and opinions of another author, consider the next rule.
- It's vital to be exhaustive in your research. Reviewers love pointing out data that they know and you haven't come up with.
- If your biography is 'authorized' – meaning that you have given the subject the right to correct, amend, or reject any portion of what you have written – your work will not be taken seriously by scholars.
- Sometimes you may find stories of people you have interviewed in conflict with each other. Try to determine, possibly by triangulating, which story is true. If the truth is still not known, feel free to quote both interviewees.
- Any author who thinks he doesn't need an editor needs one – for that very reason. Be sure you have an editor with a good record and that the two of you get along.

**'Mies was something of a god, and, as you know, God does not have a personal life'**

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, drawn by Franz Schulze.



Well, what distinguishes biography from monograph, Katya? The life, the loves, and the personal habits of the architect. I've had people tell me there's too much sex in the Philip Johnson book. The way I see it is: this was a life. Life is what I'm interested in.

*But why is it important for us to know the shortcomings – or let's say the 'humanness' – of a great architect?*

Because it's there. Because it should be done. Here is an important architect, and somebody's got to write about him. When the Mies book came out in 1985, I actually think it helped to restore Mies's reputation. At that time, everything Mies stood for was something that postmodernists like Robert Stern did not agree with.

Don't forget, however, that the writer is getting something out of it, too: an answer to his own personal ambition. I certainly would not have done these things without the expectation of somehow being appreciated for doing them.

*Appreciated by whom?*

By the people who read the book, by the reviewers.

*Do you think you have written the definitive works on Mies and Johnson?*

I think our latest revision of the Mies bio is indeed definitive. The last word. The Johnson book is good, though some of the material on his work in Texas needs improving. A revised edition would be a good idea.

*Are there other biographies of architects that you particularly like or dislike?*

I know the Meryle Secrest and Brendan Gill biographies of Frank Lloyd Wright. They are good reads, as the saying goes, but neither is a masterpiece of scholarship. We are still waiting for the definitive Frank Lloyd Wright bio.

*Do you experience a mental shift between writing, for example, about the life of Philip Johnson and the work of Philip Johnson?*

Writing about Johnson's lovers is not the same thing as writing about his buildings. In one case you are dealing with something that might be objectively describable and, in another, with something that is less so. In both instances, however, you try to be as factual and as honest as you can be. I'm thinking of Johnson's 'Crescent' in Dallas, for example. It's junk; there's no denying it. But the Glass House in New Canaan is superb and so is the sculpture garden at the Museum of Modern Art.

*When it comes to evaluating your subject's works, what are the rules of biography? As you say, you're not writing a monograph, but you're also not writing criticism.*

Well you are, to some extent. After all, the Mies book is called a critical biography. Speaking for myself, I think a good, authentic biography is one that evaluates the work fairly but does point out the things that are not good. Of course, when you're writing about somebody, you don't want to crucify him. But a lot of stuff that Johnson did – another example is the RepublicBank in Houston – is awful, and I have no problem saying so. I think that's one of the reasons why he did not care for what I had written.

*Does it bother you that he didn't care for it?*

Yes. His reaction came as a great surprise to me, because I had figured: 'Jesus, Philip. You gave me permission to say everything. I'm doing you a pretty big favour here. I'm writing your biography.'

As a matter of fact, Johnson himself had gotten in touch with me after reading the Mies book. He told me, 'It reads like a novel. I like it very much.' So I said, 'Well, Philip, how 'bout you and me, baby?' [Laughs.] That's how it worked out, and I don't regret it. But I am sorry about how he took the book when it was published. Personally, I think maybe he expected a hagiography, but then I went around criticizing the Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston, and he thought: not fair. I want to say this the right way: I think Johnson knew he was admired by a great many people in the American art world. Mies also knew he was admired, but Mies did not crave it the way Johnson did. Johnson craved the admiration. Now, how would Mies have felt about his biography were he alive to read it? Possibly the same way as Johnson felt, though maybe not quite so pronouncedly. Anyway, that's why you write a book about somebody who's already dead. [Laughs.]

*There must be an element of truth to that. I imagine it's quite a different experience writing about the life of someone still living?*

In Johnson's case, it wasn't. I really felt that he and I were on the same page. Now with Helmut, one of the conditions of working together is his willingness to be criticized. When we had just begun, I told him: 'The fact that we're doing this biography is affirmation of what you've done, but at the same time some of the work is not particularly good, and we will talk about that.' He agreed. Of course, it remains to be seen what happens next. [Laughs.] We're still a long way off from publication, and I've yet to face the Sony Center in Berlin, which I think has its problems. But I can speak to Helmut very frankly. Just the other day I asked him, 'How do you feel about the fact that you've never won a Pritzker Prize?' He answered honestly: 'I won't say that it doesn't bother me. But I have to go on, and I maintain a very, very high opinion of my own work.'

So it's going very nicely. It also helps that he already knows many of the things I've written. And keep in mind: these guys do like to be memorialized. We all do. <–