Mies van der Rohe,
Toronto-Dominion Centre.
Interior of Banking Pavilion, 1987.
Photo Steven Evans.

MIES VAN DER ROHE AND MINIMALISM

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During the course of the identity crisis that beset the Modern Movement in architecture in the 1960s, one of the theoretical tasks approached with the greatest commitment was the reappraisal of the work of the masters of modern architecture. This cultural operation was begun at a moment of crisis, not only in architecture, but in the visual arts in general. The post-painterly situation saw the emergence of various, diverse, alternative, and radical lines of working. Amongst these, minimalism and pop art constituted two opposing lines of exploration, both having their origins in the same dissatisfaction with the subjectivism of the expressionist tradition and the formalism of painting on conventional supports. The question of signification was of central concern for the artists working in either one of these directions. For the minimalists, the object was to return to a zero point, a *writing degree zero,* to adopt the title of Roland Barthes's famous text of 1953, on the basis of which to construct, painstakingly, a number of minimal aesthetic significations. For pop art, in its symmetrical and opposing way, the signification could be found in the imitation of the models established by the tradition or in the new repertoires — evident and popular — diffused by the new mass communications media.

In architecture, there was a clearly parallel phenomenon. Faced with the no longer tenable clichés of the modern tradition, there were those who sought, through a return to origins, to the pure wellsprings of enlightened architecture or the purism of the Modern Movement, the essential words, the founding gestures of the language of architecture. Others, in marked contrast, believed that they saw in the diffusion of the popular or in the prestige of classical architecture a fountain with the power to renew signifi-

cation. Curiously, the return to Mies van der Rohe was undertaken from both of these standpoints — two points of view that were not always well defined and often held simultaneously.

What is now clearly apparent is that the problem of signification prompted a powerful need to see in Mies's architecture, above all, a reminiscence of the classical architectural tradition, thus giving rise to a false and mistaken reading of his work. Claiming a basis in his apprenticeship to Peter Behrens and in his Berlin-nurtured sympathy for the work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, a classicist Mies van der Rohe has been put forward in recent years, an atypical master of the Modern Movement drenched in classical tradition for all the apparent modernity of the glass and steel of his buildings. This is an enterprise that it is now time to publicly denounce. It resembles too closely what has also been attempted with Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier; behind all of these endeavors, we can detect the desire of architects and critics to find a consistent signification in the work of an architect whose solutions, duly standardized and manipulated, had become the most rhetorically representative commonplace of commercial architecture.

Yet the classicism to be found in certain of Mies's buildings is far from constituting an argument capable of explaining all of the aesthetic intensity of his work. The references to Doric temples and to the Erectheum, the parallels with Schinkel's *Altes Museum* and the *Neue Wache,* the surprising views of the Barcelona Pavilion through Ionic columns or the carving up of the columns of the *Neuenationalgalerie* in Berlin as a redesigning of the classical orders: these correspond to an anxious search for meaning by the path of imitation, of classical mimesis, in an ideological operation that is difficult to justify on the basis of Mies's attitude, his writings, and the body of his work as a whole.

Mies's work was not born of the desire to recreate a permanent, trans-historical nature based on the classical orders and their grammar. Nor is it licit to think of Mies, after the manner of Marcel Duchamp, as the author of a series of architectonic *ready-mades* where the signification would be the product of some kind of modern nominalism, thanks to which the redundancy of the classical icons employed would serve to guarantee the meaning of the work of architecture. Thierry de Duve, in an intelligent recent book on Duchamp, coined the expression *pictorial nominalism.* This refers to the conventional procedure by which aesthetically non-significant objects — the *fontaine,* for example — are transformed into works of art. This nominal-ism, based on the *de facto* acceptance of the artistic status for any object whatsoever, takes the place of the Platonic essentialism in terms of which it is the order obtaining between nature and art, in the harmony of a unique cosmos, that guarantees the profound signification of the work of art. The

semantic procedure is based on the imitative condition — *ars simiae naturae,* art imitates nature — intrinsic to the classical *modus operandi.* Architectonic nominalism, conventionally, makes use of the classical as a sign, as a sur-face display denoting the artistic, in the same way that so-called postmodern architecture, in Charles Jencks's version of it, has contrived to do *ad nauseam.*

In Mies there is no reference to the totality of the cosmos within which classical art constructed meaning, orders, types, proportions, perspective. It makes no sense, then, to turn to Mies as the last classicist. Yet neither is there a pop Mies, capable of freely appropriating the significations of the classical tradition with the cool daring of a bankrobber, a kidnapper. On the contrary, in the construction of a degree zero of the architectonic text the procedure is entirely different.

Mies's work is developed, not out of images, but out of materials — materials in the strongest sense of the word, that is naturally, the matter from which objects are constructed. This matter is abstract, general, geometrically cut, smooth and polished, but it is also material that is sub-stantial, tangible, and solid. And at the same time, it implies a wider materiality that takes in the gravity and weight of the elements of construction, the tensions in their static behavior, their hardness or fragility, and the material artifice of the technology that prepares and handles the elements from which the building is raised. This is a materialism, finally, that sets out from the origin of the material problems of lighting, air conditioning, sealing of the outer skin, and the satisfactory functioning of the building in relation to the use for which it was designed. The whole tremendous body of innovation in Mies derives neither from imitation nor from the abstract discourse of concepts of space, light, or territory. In Mies, the realities are, from the very outset, material for the work of architecture, and his calls to understand architecture solely as building, as *bauen,* are no mere paying of lip-service to a fashionable functionalism, but rather are proof that for the creator of the Tugendhat house, the perceptual conditions established by the materiality of the building are at the very origins of its spiritual signification. It is only by way of the material conditions that we can arrive at "the forces which act in their interior" and the "authentic field of action which is, without a doubt, that of signification."

Of course, the relationship that is established between the materiality of the architectonic object and its reception as spiritual signification does not, for Mies, take place in some previously elaborated tissue of abstract elements such as rhythm, balance, proportion, and measure. These values are, in any event, an outcome. To put it another way, the architect does not adapt the forms of his materials to laws or conventions that have to be imitated or reproduced.

Our relationship with the architecture is im-mediate. The work of modern art, as Deleuze and Guattari observe in their most recent book, *Qu'est-ce que c'est la philosophie?* — is a block of sensations, that is to say a compound of perceptions and affections (*percepts et affects*). Such sensations do not pass us on to other objects or images serving as points of reference. The material and its durability are what support and produce both the perceptions that we receive by means of our senses and the affections that are neither merely subjective nor to be considered pure reactions on the part of the individual confronted with the work of art. The radical architecture of Mies is a consolidated, permanent block for the production of sensations, through which the materials pass and the concepts are reached.

The abstract condition of the Miesian sensibility reinforces the transition from sensation to perception and from perception to concept. A concept that has nothing to do with science or philosophy, which steers well clear of the dangers associated with so-called conceptual art. Through the extreme dematerialization of its messages, this tended, in effect, towards pure information, towards taxonomy, towards the formulation of general aims and projects. Mies's art, like the work of Donald Judd or Dan Flavin, has a material component that delimits it. The concrete materiality, which these have in common, makes them not general but particular. Their works are not the expression of a general idea, but tangible physical objects, the producers of perceptions and affections.

It is wrong to think of the architecture of Mies as a stage, even an empty one. The metaphor, as it has been used by Manfred Tafuri and certain of his disciples in reference to the Barcelona Pavilion, betrays once again the modernity of Mies's work by reducing it to a framework — the stage — that is by definition a previously determined visual convention. To speak of the empty stage is to see the perceptive discharges constituted by Mies's buildings as the last redoubt of the work of art as representation. Yet the modern sensibility has abandoned this procedure. Since the empiricism of the eighteenth century, since David Hume and Edmund Burke, since Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, the aesthetic experience has been the unexpected commotion provoked by a course pursued at random, by an accumulation of images, by an excess of stimulations.

In his essay of 1931, "A Small History of Photography," Walter Benjamin said, "The cinema provides material for collective, simultaneous perception, just as architecture has always done." In Mies's work, the perception that we are offered presupposes neither point of view nor order of reading nor hierarchy. Modern vision, which photography developed, has resulted, as Paul Virilio suggests, in the disappearance not only of spatial distance but also of distance in time. There is nothing fortuitous about Mies's interest in photomontage and in having control of the photographs reproduced in his books; photographs, it should be noted, for which all notions of stage-setting or theatricality prove entirely inadequate.

In the same way, to speak of context in the work of Mies is to introduce another inadequate, inappropriate conceptual paradigm. His works of architecture were not produced in relation to the context, nor did they constitute a commentary on, or mimesis of, the place in which they were situated. Once again, looking at things in this way is a trick whose purpose is to carry Mies's work beyond the architect's own intentions. In the words of Harold Rosenberg, with reference to works of minimalist art, these "affirm the independent existence of the artistic object as significative in itself," rather than in relation to works from the past or to social ideas or to individual emotions.

This isolated, autonomous condition of the aesthetic experience has some bearing on the self-referential character of Mies's architecture. With Mies, the architecture is never a monument. It is not a monument in the strict etymological sense of that word: a work that refers to, recalls, something outside itself, such as an event, a moment in history, the community, its origins, or certain civic or moral values. In his writings, Mies appeals time and again to the spiritual signification that the work of architecture ought to attain. In his excellent exegesis of the sources of Mies's thinking, Fritz Neumeyer has underlined the importance to Mies of the phenomenological tradition of the followers of Max Scheller. Romano Guardini and Paul Landsberg are two contemporary thinkers whose influence on Mies seems beyond doubt. Perhaps, however, Neumeyer might have laid greater emphasis on the fact that there was a religious problem occupying a central place in the concerns of each of these thinkers. In the case of Guardini, a Catholic priest, this was an endless search for meaningful relations between human beings, things, and technology. He was trying to reconstruct meaning in a post-Nietzschean world in which not only was God dead, but the Hegelian proclamation of the death of art was at the roots of the activities of the avant-garde. Guardini, whose most developed thought on aesthetics is found in his texts on liturgy and sacred symbols, meditated throughout his life on transcendent significance as something stemming from, but going beyond, the concrete materiality of the objects, the gestures and words of human life. Landsberg, who was a Jew by birth and died in a concentration camp in 1944, was a friend of Mounier and the French personalists and devoted his working life to elaborating a philosophical anthropology, a body of thought that was to reconstruct a place for humanity, human production, and interpersonal relations.

This is the context in which Mies developed his self-referential conception of the work of art. Perhaps the difference between Mies's use of the notion and that of the minimalists derives precisely from the degree to which this self-reference is held as being open or closed in relation to other values. For the minimalists of the 1960s and later, the work neither appeals to nor evokes anything other than itself. It partakes of the pure randomness inherited from Stéphane Mallarmé and the final silence of Kasimir Malevich. The work of art is self-referential because it begins and ends in itself and explains only its own materiality, factuality, obviousness. In Mies there is much of this same spirit, which preserves the work of architecture from any temptation to make it the vehicle for some other signification or the expression of some other content. In Mies, too, the architecture refers to itself. It explains how it is and makes of its own presence, the primordial act of its signification. But in Mies there is an ethical project that is carried out precisely in the work. The entire debate regarding technology in the period between the wars is an ethical debate. Whether it be Oswald Spengler or Martin Heidegger, Thomas Mann or Ernst Jünger, the reflections on technology and its products are framed from an ethical viewpoint within the perspective of reconstruction following in the wake of Nietzschean nihilism. Analyses of the differences between *techne* and *poesis* in Greek thought, such as were being undertaken by Werner Jaeger, were born of a prevalent preoccupation of the time, from which Mies was by no means immune. The reconsideration of Medieval aesthetics, in which production and meaning were perceived as indivisible, provided the thinkers mentioned above, and Mies amongst them, with an indisputable point of reference. The autonomy of the work of architecture, the project of making of it once again a "solid and enduring compound," as Paul Cézanne said of his project for painting, is the very heart of Mies's work. Architecture should not be solipsistic, closed in on itself, complacently satisfied with its own interests, nor purely empirical, the "I don't search, I find" of Pablo Picasso. The Miesian project in architecture is inscribed within a wider ethical project in which the architect's contribution to society is made precisely by means of the transparency, economy, and obviousness of his architectonic proposals. This is the contribution of truth, of honesty. That is his message.

The year 1968 marked, symbolically, the end of the Modern Movement and the explosion of postmodern culture. At that time, minimalism, as a current, had already been given not only its name, but also its definition through the writings of Clement Greenberg, Barbara Rose, Harold Rosenberg, Irving Sandler, and Richard Wollheim, amongst others. It was the year in which the *Neuenationalgalerie* opened in Berlin, the last of Mies's buildings to be completed in the architect's lifetime. And it was at this moment that Gilles Deleuze published his most important book of philosophy, *Différence et répétition*. "I think we will have this work going round our heads for a long time to come. Perhaps one day the century will be Deleuzian," Michel Foucault prophesied.

To cite Deleuze's text here is relevant because it contains a figurative thought capable of formulating the evident nexus between the aesthetic experience of minimalism and the work of Mies. Conceived as a way of breaking away from the rigidity of structuralist thinking and at the same time escaping the pure decomposition of the post-Nietzschean carnival, Deleuze's text establishes the bases for a process of signification and the construction of meaning grounded in the imbalance that results from the introduction of repetition into the monist idea of the same and the uniform. Repetition as innovation, as a mechanism of liberation, of life and death; repetition as will, as the opposite of the laws of nature; repetition as a new morality beyond habit and memory; repetition that only attains tension and creativity with the fissures of difference, with disequilibrium, innovation, opening, and risk.

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