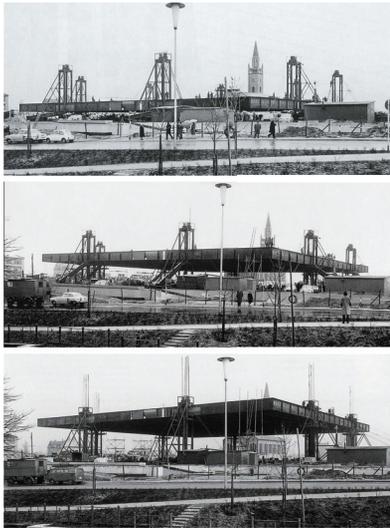


## 04 Dialogue of Opposites. Greek Stories in the Mies Museum in Berlin

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Through a review of some ephemeral occupations of the entrance floor of the Mies' Neue National Gallery in Berlin, inaugurated in 1968 with an exhibition dedicated to Piet Mondrian designed by Mies, some singularities of this construction are unravelled, and some stories about the relationship between the architect and some artists are threaded together. In this way a sketch is drawn of the life in time of this museum, which finds in David Chipperfield's recent double work, that of his temporary installation *Sticks and Stones* before its closure for a few years to carry out the renovation work on the building, and that of this long process that ended with the museographic repartition with the significant exhibition of Alexander Calder; a way of interweaving temporary narratives about architecture, construction and art.



In the summer of 2021 the Neue National Gallery in Berlin, the last major project of Mies van der Rohe's career and at last his first major work in his city, opened to the public in 1968, just a few months before his death. We know those images in which the German architect, aged, without the strength to direct the works, contemplates from the car the evolution of the works, with that singular hydraulic mechanism that would make the project appear in a slow dance: on the great podium, the reticular metallic platform of the roof had been placed, then it would be raised with cranes, one for each of the eight pillars that today support it, escaping from the corners, two on each side of the quadrangular perimeter of this cover that surpasses the inner square of glass that closes the access floor. (fig. 01).

This structural choreography made it possible for the roof to be detached from the paradigm of the plinth in the manner of a canopy. Between one plane and another, the air that appeared, as if separating the plates of a condenser, gave volume —life— to the museum's famous lobby, a sublimation of the notion of neutral and potential vacuum. The duality of the Modern Movement, between

functionalism and rationalism, could be explained in the conversation between the two almost neighbouring pieces in the Kulturforum, Hans Scharoun's Berliner Philharmonie, completed five years earlier, and Mies's national gallery. Scharoun's building, which some say was expressionist, was a functionalist display, its form was indebted to its function, the arrangement of its trays in the auditorium or the silhouette of the building were a response to the study of the propagation of sound, so that expressionism would be nothing more than the expression of wave mechanics, in an architectural demonstration of that verse by Baudelaire, "music digs up the sky"; Mies' work, in its Cartesian regularity, in its abstraction, in its structural clarity, configured a space available for any occupation.

I often point out to my students the wisdom of William Curtis's difficult choice of a single cover for his seminal book *Modern Architecture Since 1900*. Invariably in the various editions, the 1923 Miesian drawing for his theoretical proposal —like a manifesto— of the brick house in the countryside (fig. 02) appears as the façade. With its escape inwards or outwards, the plan summarises in its ambiguous indeterminacy some of Mies's lessons about fluid space, open and closed at the same time, like a temple made of walls that would have swirled together, diluting any idea of enclosure until it embraces the floor of the world that continues where the lines are interrupted only because the graphite of three of them reaches the end of the paper. At the same time, the drawing embodies the current between avant-gardes, recalling that Mies saw in Piet Mondrian's graphic order the seed of a new architecture. It may also be that Mondrian, who had begun by painting trees, intuited that new order by looking at the drawings of Frank Lloyd Wright —his German portfolio spread throughout Central Europe in the second decade of the century was highly appreciated by that generation of artists - and his eagerness to break out of the box. More round trips between architecture and art. If we could accompany that foundational floor plan of the brick house in the territory with a photograph, to resonate this thread between creative disciplines, it could be that of the recently opened Berlin gallery, hosting the inaugural exhibition dedicated to Mondrian, in a thrilling coherence: the culminating work of the architect who had built his avant-garde by knowing how to see a clue in the neoplastic grids, then served to pay tribute to the Dutch painter. It was, of course, Mies himself, in whose career exhibition design would play a key role, who designed this installation: He himself would thus prove the capacity of his clearing in the Berlin forest to accommodate heterogeneous uses, arranging a series of planes that hung from the ceiling, giving meaning to his steel grid, and flew over the floor, occupying the intermediate strip of air between one and the other, as the roof once did in the process of construction, architecturing a Mondrian of white panels where, as still today in the snapshot, some of his paintings could be seen, inviting the viewer to make the journey from the three dimensions of the project to the two of the canvases, in the opposite direction to that which Mies had discovered by looking at Mondrian half a century earlier (fig. 03).

After that first scenography on the entrance level of the Berlin museum, several others were to follow, as well as other artists in dialogue with Mies and other architectural exhibitions, such as those of Rem Koolhaas or Herzog and de Meuron, who designed the staging to tell the story of their own work. The series has produced some interesting encounters. Throughout, a single work has remained a witness to this sequence, Alexander Calder's *Head and Tails*, which Mies placed on the museum's stone pedestal, offset from one of the corners of the roof, in a three-way carom that stitches together Calder's steel piece, Mies's modern temple, and the nineteenth-century church of St. Matthäus (fig. 04).

The contrast between the organicity of nature, here evoked in the figuration of the title of Calder's work, was one of Mies's permanent quests: the artist's enormous *Flamingo*, which looks like a creature paused between the geometric purity of the vertical prism and Mies's horizontal one in Federal Plaza in Chicago (fig. 05); the

woman shielding her eyes from the morning sun in George Kolbe's *Sunrise* between the tense walls of the Barcelona pavilion, as in other earlier exhibition projects Mies had tried placing a sculpture on the other side of a pane of glass, sketching this same contrapuntal exercise; nature contemplated, through or reflected, in the glass of the Farnsworth House. It is true that Kolbe's sculpture had been intended for placement in a Berlin garden alongside another sister figure, the *Sunset*, and that it was Lily Reich who called Mies, who was on a site visit to Barcelona, and announced that he had found a figure that would be perfect in the smaller of the two ponds in his exhibition architecture in Barcelona; it is also true that some of Mies's preliminary drawings for the German pavilion did point to a sculptural presence in that space, as yet without a clear form, not even indisputably human, but organic. If the relationship with the figure of Kolbe was thus supervening, by virtue of Reich's intuition, it is conceivable that already at that last moment of his life, when the museum was being completed, it was Mies who chose Calder's work, perhaps seeing in it a suitable conciliation between nature and abstraction, which synthesised his enquiry into the duality between geometry and organicism.

There is in this conversation between Mies and Calder a beautiful dissociation between the mobile and the static, which at the same time refers to the entente between Calder and Mondrian: the American sculptor recounted that he had found his artistic path the day he visited Mondrian's studio, as neatly ordered as one of his paintings, and imagined that a sudden wind began to move those masses of colours through the air and kept them in suspension, as Mies's Berlin roof seemed to be for a few hours. Calder's static steel pieces, like the one that still stands outside the Mies museum, seem to me to be less successful than his mobiles, perhaps because I am attracted by the artist's narrative fiction that situates the magical idea of a sculpture that moves in the reverie of a painting that takes flight, also because of its agreement of opposites. It is difficult to escape the childish fascination aroused by these context-sensitive artefacts, like toys in cradles, to which one as an adult adds the constancy that this requires a structural calculation that guarantees the miracle of orbiting equilibrium. While that of the flamboyant red creature from Chicago is accomplished, some of the others seem to me to be over-inflated in their barracks, welds and rivets, over-muscled, less challenging and playful than the wiry rods that can change direction or speed depending on the atmosphere. Although their form is beautiful, I do not find them so much merit, beyond the exercise, in the wake of Paul Klee, of being between abstraction and the figuration of organic rumour.

The two Calderian families, the rigid steel works and the wire mobiles, operate on the idea of estrangement, that of the connection of one thing with its opposite: some, by their stillness, unlike the fauna or flora to which they allude; others, in captivating metalinguistic intensity, for having given movement to the traditional immobility of sculpture, which is essentially static. We could also evoke the exceptional nature of *Mercury Fountain*, which in 1937 was exhibited alongside Picasso's *Guernica* in José Luis Sert's Paris pavilion for the Spanish Republic: by replacing water with mercury, by tricking the expected weight, the movement of the drops in the sculpture's basins would give rise to a hypnotic contemplation, as is still possible today in Sert's building for the Miró Foundation in Barcelona; the idea of drops with the appearance of molten metal, another way of undermining the idea of stability, would then have an added semantic charge in those times of conflict.

If the celebration of Mondrian's exhibition inaugurating Mies's museum was symbolic, it would also be symbolic if after the new opening in 2021, almost half a century after Mies's death, Calder was the first artist to be exhibited in a new occupation of that square covered on the plinth (fig. 06). Mondrian and Calder are seemingly antithetical extremes in the line of abstraction: in one of them this essentialisation pretends to be orderly but is playful, like Mondrian

trying out American ribbon paintings in New York towards the end of his life; in the other it is seemingly unruly, like the American sculptor's eternal big-boy smile, and yet involves great rigour, so that the cut-outs remain on the ground as if that wind had not ceased. When we see Calder's forms fluttering, making the conventional idea of sculpture move, we are reminded of Isadora Duncan —like a classical statue come to life— dancing between the columns of the Parthenon, prolonging the static building with the breeze that stirred her clothes and her arms swaying like the columns. Verlaine described Rimbaud as the man with the soles of the wind. If it seemed to Calder that a current was entering Mondrian's studio, it is as if it were still passing, just as in that Dylan Thomas proclamation in which, like an anti-gravitational incantation, he defined poetry thus: "the ball I threw when I played in the park has not yet touched the ground".

Between the first Mondrian exhibition with the inauguration and the Calder exhibition after the new opening, there have been other subtle presences in that framework. Keith Sonnier's intervention in 2002 sought to make explicit, perhaps quite literally, Mies's connection with Mondrian, using the lines of the porticoes to draw fibre mondrians with tubular lights in primary colours. Jenny Holzer's used those same lines of steel ribs on the roof to parade messages in flashes that seemed to write words that were also reflected on the floor and on the glass. Of all of them, Mark Wallinger's *Sleeper* in 2004 is dear to me because it was both endearing and provocative, because it made nods to other Duchampian moments in art, such as Joseph Beuys and the coyote performance in downtown New York, and because it seemed to understand well the uniqueness of the building. In it, Wallinger disguised himself as a bear, and locked himself in solitude in that fishbowl that could be the upper floor of the museum, interacting with the visitors on the other side of the glass, or strolling on the floor, in an animal longing for the absent forest (fig. 07).

For ten nights in October, between 10:00 and 1:00, the artist walked that stage. He would later shoot a video that he would present at the Venice Biennale in 2005 and which would later win the Turner Prize; you can imagine the reaction in the British tabloids, with the play on words with the English infinitive "to bear", which was skilfully translated in the Spanish paragon with the verb "osar", the most daring prize. Wallinger's action was full of suggestive clues, while still being the defiant deed of a guy who disguised himself as a bear and engraved himself in a museum, more fire for the notion of art as displacement of context. The title alluded to the term by which in the Germanic socialist regime people called police informers, veiled as hibernating witnesses. The figure of the bear was also the emblem of the city, and this tourist icon is still almost everywhere. The site-specific accent of his confinement was clear: in another building, his fierce disguise would have been very different. In some of his comments in those days Wallinger seemed to be critical of the idea of transparency of the Miesian project, his discourse was somewhat alien to the architectural, uninteresting, somewhat cryptic; a pity, I still see virtues in the corporeality of the bear, precisely in that building, although they seem unsuspected for its author, bent on other causes.

In the succession of temporary occupations of that space, it is suggestive that a few months before the Mies museum was temporarily closed for a total of seven years, in 2014, the architect in charge of the building's renovation work, David Chipperfield, devised an intervention that came to blow in all these paradigms, intertwining, like Mies with Mondrian or Calder, architecture with art. The installation *Sitcks and Stones*, surreal and at the same time material, was powerful and attractive in both the artistic and architectural registers, for here they were one and the same. In this Berlin roofed void, which we have already described as a clearing in the forest, the British architect came to recover the lost forest, which Wallinger's bear longed for, by placing a trunk, shod with

stone slabs, at each intersection in the metal checkerboard of the roof, opposing the rusticity of the irregular wood of each stalk with the smooth perfection of the steel (fig. 08).

Seen from the perspective of the trunk, it is as if the tops were now the canopy. Seen from nature, it is as if the forest that was emptied had reappeared. Seen from the skin of a bear, perhaps that environment was now a less ungrateful place. Seen from quantum physics, it is as if the temple were both there and not there, as if the forest were both alive and dead. Seen from the theory of relativity it was as if time was both eternal and transitory. Seen from the Zen continuum, emptiness and forest were the same. Seen from the point of view of art, between minimalist and conceptual, the trunks made that void visible, which was now temporarily absent, like those actions in which Martin Creed introduced balloons into the volumetry of certain museums until they occupied a percentage of the air stated in the title of each piece in the series. Seen from the complicity with Beuys, if Wallinger's was associated with the action with the coyote, this is comparable to his *7000 Oak Trees*. Seen from the pictorial decoy, it is as if we were returning not from Mies to the Mondrian of the plots, but to the Mondrian of the trees first. Seen from the immediacy of the work, it was as if it were finished or as if it were about to begin. Seen from the translocated masonry, it was like attaching props to a material that doesn't need them, or like contrasting the simplicity of wood with the technology of steel. Seen from Mies' research, the dissimilarity between nature and artifice appeared sublimated. Seen from the history of architecture, the Mosque of Cordoba was brought to the Germanic cultural epicentre, or allusion was made to the Japanese temple that is built in wood and leaves a small wooden pillar on the adjoining empty space as the only pattern of the fallow area, where the new one will be built when the existing one is dismantled, or the mutual appreciation between Wright and Mies was again hinted at, evoking the Johnson Wax hall in Wisconsin.

From the ancestral architectural paradigm, it is as if the connection between Mies's project and the church had now been underlined in this crossroads of hypotheses: Mies's structural premise was transposed by the removal of the pillars from the inside to the outside, as if the interior of Peter Zumthor's Bruder Klaus Chapel in the countryside had been reattached to the trunks that gave it form and then burned, referring with their absence to the material invisibility of spirituality; the engraving on the cover of Marc Antoine Laugier's *Essay on the Origin of Architecture*, in which the goddess pointed out to the angel the origin of the temple by observing the trees, became literal; it was evident from the metaphorical verse that Mies was a temple builder, because the rows of trunks now resembled columns around a cella, among which Duncan could have danced. It is worth remembering that the archetype of the Greek temple, in a centuries-long decantation, ended up as a result of the properties of wood, which made it necessary to overhang the roof beyond the walls to protect them from the dampness of the heads of the beams, or which had that exact slope to prevent the slabs that made up the roof from falling; later on, when the improvement of the construction process made it possible to build it in stone, the slope and the angle would remain, no longer as a logical reason but as an attribute, even an ornament, as was the case with the triglyphs and metopes, which made sense when the wooden pieces had to be fastened together like carpentry knots. Mies, on the other hand, did make his timeless temples different in form but not in essence, making the most of steel, hence the flat roof, hence the eight pillars where they were.

We also find in Chipperfield's intervention prior to the closure another suggestive ambivalence: the English architect's work to renovate Mies's project was intended, in commendable discretion, to leave no trace of authorship that would eclipse the original project, as would be verified as soon as the museum reopened, and yet it is already difficult to avoid the memory of this ephemeral

action of a few days prior to the seven-year intervention — three months as opposed to three years, that was the initial estimate of the calendar — even though the studied fixing of those sticks and stones was intended to leave no trace, and indeed they did not leave any physical mark. With his installation Chipperfield was assembling the forest that progress had been dismantling, recovering the value of the column, inventing rooms and settings where before and after would have been clear, making complementary truths coexist: in his elegant diplomacy of wood and stone — *sticks and stones* is the beginning of a popular rhyme among British children — before dismantling and reassembling Mies's work, he was shaking up the very concept of that space, recalling what Saenz de Oiza said: "An architect, when he has true inner strength, has to say with García Lorca I will break all the Parthenons at night and raise them every morning".

We continue to inhabit a land of paradoxes: the architectural renovation operation has rejuvenated the building, going back up to half a century, renovating the steel or the stone, and although it seems that nothing has been done, it has been a long and arduous job, updating the original building with as little visual and structural impact as possible, dismantling the stone cladding and other interior elements, removing thousands of pieces to restore them before returning them to their original position, introducing new installations and improving the technical functions of the original building; the artistic intervention — as much artistic as architectural — has allowed a return to the very conceptual origins of the architecture.

Chipperfield has played with time. With his work of seven years he has achieved the fiction that time had not passed in Mies's project, that the wind had continued to blow, while in his ephemeral installation he has played at turning back the clock by many centuries. A little less than Chipperfield's installation, in 2017, Anna and Eugeni Bach carried out a fortunate manipulation of Mies' project, of which I would also like to write sometime, that in certain significant and metarchitectural keys, is not far removed from this one in Berlin, when they achieved the alchemy of making the materiality of the German pavilion in Barcelona disappear, as if they could go back in the almanac, to the moment when the project was just a paper model on the table of their studio. In the dazzling opening of Anna Michaels' *The Winter Vault* we read this subjugating passage, which also hovers over this convulsion in the timeline that changes direction as the air changes direction: "Perhaps we painted on our own skin, with ochre and charcoal, long before we painted on stone. But forty thousand years ago, in any case, we left handprints painted on the walls of the caves of Lascaux, Ardennes, Chauvet. The black pigment used to paint the animals at Lascaux was composed of manganese dioxide and ground quartz, and almost half of the mixture was calcium phosphate. To make calcium phosphate you have to heat bones to four hundred degrees centigrade, and then grind them. We made paint from the bones of the animals we painted. No image forgets this image. The future casts its shadow on the past.

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**Images**

**01.** Elevation of the roof of the Neue National Gallery, Berlin. Mies van der Rohe. 5 April 1967.

**02.** Mies van der Rohe. Brick Country House. 1923.

**03.** Mies van der Rohe. Montage for the inaugural exhibition at the Neue National Gallery in Berlin dedicated to Mondrian. 1968.

**04.** Alexander Calder. *Heads and Tails*. Berlin. 1965.

**05.** Alexander Calder. *Flamingo*. Federal Plaza, Chicago. Mies van der Rohe. 1974.

**06.** Alexander Calder. 3 *Segments*. 1973. Alexander Calder exhibition at the Neue National Gallery, Berlin. 2021.

**07.** Mark Wallinger. *Sleeper*. Neue National Gallery, Berlin. 2005.

**08.** David Chipperfield. *Sticks and Stones*. Temporary installation at the Neue National Gallery, Berlin. 2014.