

/ATMOSPHERE/ THE ORIGIN OF AIR GRID

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INTRODUCTION

The thesis begins with an observation by the art historian Rosalind Krauss about the modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In 1992 Krauss had been invited to speak at a symposium. It was a celebration of the twenty fifth anniversary of the Toronto Dominion Centre, a building designed by Mies between 1963 and 1969, towards the end of his life (Mies dies in 1969). The symposium papers were published in *The Presence of Mies*, a book edited by the art historian Detlef Mertins. In the introduction to her paper, appearing under the title *The Grid, the /Cloud/ and the Detail*, Krauss expressed some surprise because as she was researching the topic she came across a strange new phenomenon, an anti-modernist Mies, she wrote:

*As I was reading some of the recent literature on Mies van der Rohe, I encountered a phenomenon I had not known of until then: I came across the politically correct Mies, the poststructuralist Mies, almost, we could say, the postmodernist Mies. Which also means that I began to understand what I had not before, namely, why I had been invited to a conference on the 'presence of Mies.'*¹

To understand why Krauss was bemused it is necessary to know something of the history of the old Mies. Unlike Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and other representatives of the Modern Movement it was not until late in his career

that Mies came to be considered a leading contributor to that movement. It was in the 1950s and '60s that Mies, then in his 70s, began to enjoy a wealth of commissions and publications about his work. However, just as Mies' career was rising to a pinnacle of success so, within the institution of architecture, a growing critique of the tenets of the Modern Movement was beginning to form. The critique, broadly labelled 'post-modernism' could be aimed as easily at the mythic figure of Mies as it could be aimed at the Modern Movement in general. During the 1970s the positive response and reception of Miesian architecture began to diminish. In the face of a burgeoning post-modern critique that called for a plurality of architectures, supposedly responsive to the complexity of social structures and institutions, Mies' architecture came to look anaemic and boring.² Interest in Mies lay dormant for several years, but in 1986 an important event took place that was to initiate a reawakening of interest; that event was the reconstruction of the Barcelona Pavilion.

The Barcelona Pavilion had been designed by Mies and erected to serve as a showcase exhibit, its purpose being to represent the German Weimar Republic at the Barcelona International Exposition of 1929. Despite its temporary status, the pavilion was written into the histories of Modern Movement Architecture as a key structural feature, it became an icon of that history. However, because it had been dismantled shortly after

the exposition, so the pavilion's reputation was built on the evidence of photography, reproductions of drawings and textual descriptions but on little, if any, direct, first hand experience of the building itself.

The reconstruction of the pavilion was organised by Ignasi de Solà Morales, Christian Cirici and Fernando Ramos. The value of the reconstruction was that it facilitated embodied, real-time encounters with an actual built structure. Such encounters triggered novel, even spooky experiences because it was not only the physical presence of the pavilion, the materials, the disposition of space, the quality of light and air as it permeated and mediated the pavilion's surfaces that visitors encountered but also the pavilion's mythic status within the canonical history of the Modern Movement, which seemed to bring with it the curious feeling that something from the past had returned to haunt the present!

The novelty of the pavilion had a curious effect on the appreciation of Miesian architecture, a kind of forgetfulness set in, as if the pavilion had leapfrogged over all Mies' other works, causing them to disappear. If the pavilion came to be seen as the focal point of Mies' career then it is hardly surprising the large tower and single-span structures he developed in the 1950s and 60s receded into the background.

Seen as the focus of Mies' career, the pavilion was made to endure a superfluity of critical attention, perhaps more than any small, temporary structure can reasonably be expected to sustain! In her Toronto paper Krauss observed that much of this attention was being framed in terms of a critical strategy, originally developed by herself and others, for understanding Minimalist sculpture:

For it seems that a certain reading of Minimalism - let us call it phenomenological - had been imported into the field of architectural criticism to attack received opinion about Mies' purported classicism, his formalism, his aloofness. If Minimalist sculpture was initially understood - indeed in certain circles continues to be understood - through a set of classicist and idealist terms, understood, that is, as projecting timeless, unchanging geometries, what we might refer to in shorthand as Platonic solids, this reading was challenged (by myself and others) as entirely inappropriate to work that immersed itself in the actual, contingent particularities of its moment of being experienced, insisting that its very point was to focus its viewer's attention on how it changed from moment to moment of its perception in real time.³

Krauss then went on to state that while she was interested in the arguments laid out in favour of the new Mies the old one was for her much more interesting, she wrote:

Now, while I was very interested in the arguments laid out on behalf of this anti-classical Mies, I must say that I was far more riveted by another Mies, to whom I was re-introduced by Franz Schulz's critical biography, the Mies who, in perfect International Style manner continued to insist on architecture and the production of truth as generated by a set of a priori and universalizing laws, and who was caught up in the entirely modernist obsession of repeating a very small repertory of structural ideas - namely the prismatic tower and the universal space of the clear-span pavilion - and was, throughout his career, committed to the use of the grid. It was this Mies who, one chilly day in April 1967, presided over the nine-hour procedure of slowly jacking up the 1,000-ton plate of the gridded roof of the Berlin National Gallery so that it could be lowered onto the pin-joint connections of the eight columns that were to support it - making it seem therefore to float slightly above the columns and the glass of the pavilion's walls like a strangely weightless and buoyant cloud.⁴

The Mies who features in this thesis is the one whom Krauss was referring to here, i.e., the old Mies of the Modern Movement in Architecture, not the new Mies of the reconstructed pavilion.

The first part of the thesis, entitled Specters of Mies, examines the Modern Movement characterization of Mies, it aims to question and to clarify some of the

assumptions upon which that characterization was based. Section 1.1: A Modern Movement Mies, introduces Mies' work in relation to the critical writing of authors who saw the Modern Movement in a positive light and sought to promote it. But it concludes by introducing a critic who was not so positive about the Modern Movement. His name was Henri Lefebvre, a social theorist and philosopher who, in the 1960s, was responsible for formulating a convincing and highly influential critique of the Modern Movement in Architecture and of modernist architects such as Mies. Lefebvre blamed the Modern Movement for having:

...outlined formulated and helped realize the space characteristic of capitalism - that is characteristic of that society which is run and dominated by the bourgeoisie.⁵

This quotation is taken from Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* that he wrote between 1968 and 1972. The book presented a fascinating theory of architecture, which, amongst other things, included a convincing critique of the post war reconstruction then taking place in Europe. Throughout the book Lefebvre portrayed the new architecture of the emerging post war world as little more than the reification of the capitalist economy.

At the time Lefebvre was writing *The Production of Space* Mies was rising to a prestigious position, with a

growing reputation as a leading proponent of Modern Movement principles and attitudes. Lefebvre's hostility towards Mies is only one instance of the general hostility he often expressed towards architects of the Modern Movement. Section 1.1 concludes by introducing the specter of Lefebvre to the specter of Mies; it is set in 1960, where Lefebvre was expressing grave reservations about the new architecture of the post war world.

Section 1.2: Miesian Architecture & Lefebvrian Space, breaks with the analysis of Section 1.1 and is more speculative. Having concluded Section 1.1 by introducing Lefebvre to the Modern Movement Mies, Section 1.2 attempts to apply Lefebvre's ideas about architecture, as opposed to his criticism of the Modern Movement, to the architecture of Mies. The reason for engaging with Mies' work through a body of ideas that, at least superficially, seems hostile to it is because many of Lefebvre's ideas about architecture are derived from philosophical and theoretical sources that were also important influences for Mies. By turning the lens of Lefebvrian theory onto the architecture of Mies it is the intention of this section of the thesis to produce a new reading of Mies, hopefully a useful one with which to confront the Minimalist readings that Krauss objected to at the Toronto conference.

The body of research that first began to reveal

the extent of Mies' philosophical and theoretical preoccupations and influences was conducted by the architectural historian Fritz Neumeyer. It was published under the title *Mies van der Rohe, Das Kunstlose Wort: Gedanken zur Baukunst*. Neumeyer's book was first published in the same year as the opening of the newly reconstructed Barcelona Pavilion, 1986.

Neumeyer's book was translated into English and republished in 1991 as *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*. It was an ingenious work of archival research. Through meticulous analysis and knowledgeable interpretation of the Mies archives, Neumeyer put together an astonishing intellectual biography. The book presented Mies as an avid reader in the fields of architectural theory, nineteenth century German aesthetics, Modern and Medieval philosophy and science, particularly life-sciences. Neumeyer located Mies' work in a tradition of thinking about architecture that could be traced back to Alberti, taking as its fundamental premise the concept of *concinnitas*.⁶ This aspect of Neumeyer's reading is left as a tantalising yet peripheral aside in the thesis work.⁷

Neumeyer's research has been an invaluable resource for this thesis, affording valuable and exciting insights into Mies' intellectual life and supplying much of the scholarship necessary to connect Mies' thinking to Lefebvre's.

The second part of the thesis, Making and Using AIR (nee Cotton) Grid, arises from the second part of Krauss' Toronto paper. In the first part of her paper Krauss drew attention to two key aspects of Mies' modernism, the first was the problem of the grid and the second was the question of autonomy. She then declared herself inadequate to the task of discussing these topics through reflection upon works of architecture and so, in the second part of the paper, turned to the work of the painter Agnes Martin.

Krauss introduced Martin as a painter who, since 1960, had been obsessed with producing paintings, always measuring six foot square and constructed with pencilled lines on a lightly gessoed canvas surface (figure 1). The lines were arranged either as grids or as bands. Although for Krauss Martin's paintings were unflinchingly abstract she complained of a general tendency amongst critics to read them as analogues of nature. Such readings, complained Krauss, were made despite the insistence of Martin herself that her paintings were not about nature:

It is this covert allusion to nature that the category 'abstract sublime' has come to imply, with the abstract work always able to be decoded by its romantic double: Mark Rothko read out through Casper David Friedrich; Jackson Pollock by J.M.W. Turner's storms; Martin by Turner's skies.⁹

Krauss was not convinced by the romantic readings of Martin's work, to make her point she drew attention to Martin's own insistence on the work's abstraction and the fact of its lacking a subject. With great approval Krauss cited a reading made by a critic called Kasha Linville, focusing on Linville's reading of a painting entitled *Red Bird*. Linville's reading included a description of what it is actually like to be in the presence of the painting. It described the painting as a sequence of optical textures that change as the viewing distance changes and it identified three key moments in the sequence of change. In her Toronto paper Krauss used quotations from Linville to describe those three moments:

First there is the close-to reading, in which one is engaged in the work's facture and drawing, in the details of its materiality in all their sparse precision: the irregular weave of the linen, the thickness and uniformity of the gesso, the touch of the application of the pencilled lines.⁹

The second moment of the painting occurs when the viewer steps back from the canvas, moving away from the tactile immediacy of the painting's materiality and mode of making. Linville observed how, as the viewer moves away, the painting changes, it becomes ambiguous. She used the expression 'going atmospheric' to evoke what it was like to experience the transition, as if the painting dissolves.

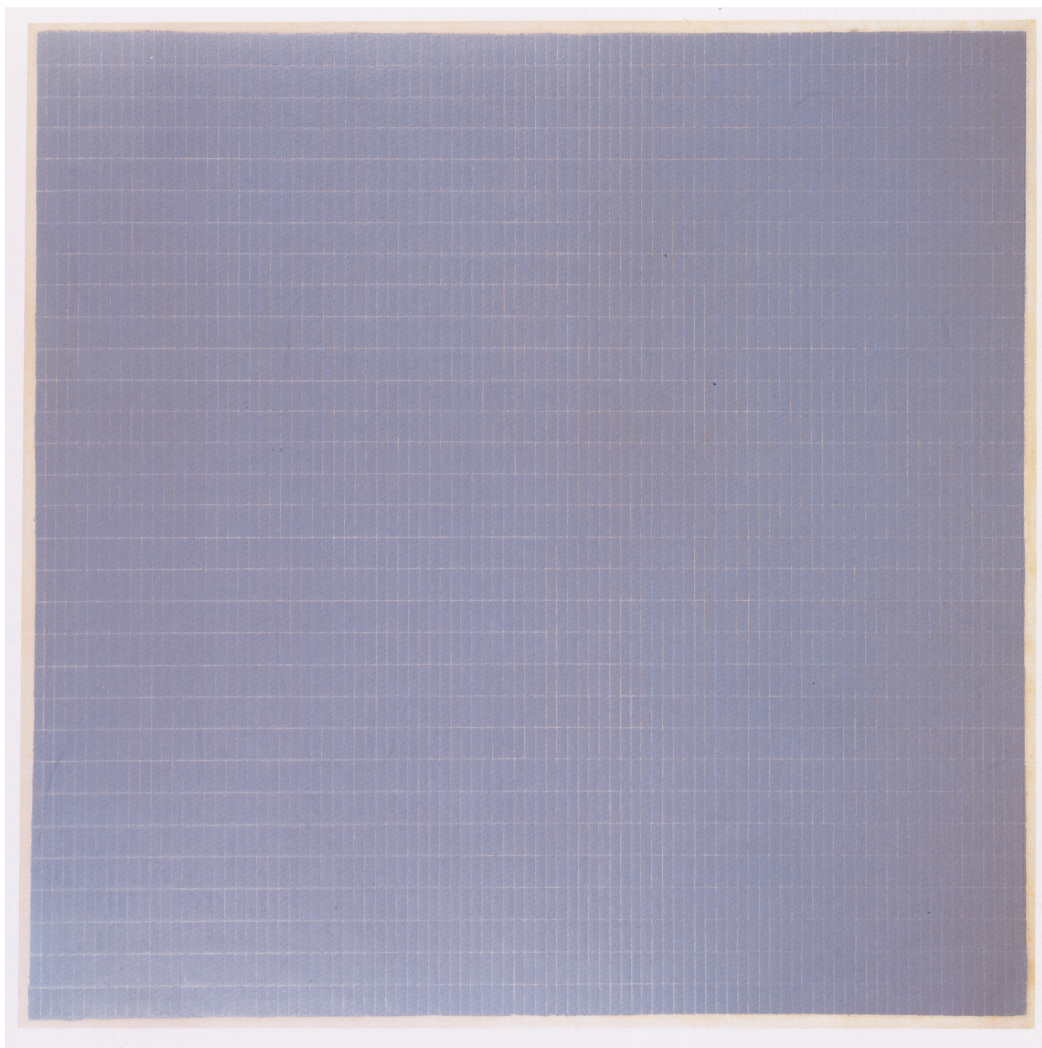


FIGURE 1

Agnes Martin, Night Sea, 1963, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 182.9 x 182.9 cm

Reflecting on Linville's account, Krauss wrote:

*Linville's description of this effect is elegant and precise. 'I don't mean 'atmosphere' in the spatially illusionistic sense I associate with color field painting,' she writes. 'Rather it is a non-radiating, impermeable....mist. It feels like, rather than looks like atmosphere. Somehow the red lines (she is writing here of a work called Red Bird) dematerialize the canvas, making it hazy, velvety.'*¹⁰

The third moment of the painting involves a further stepping back from the canvas, in this transition the feeling of atmosphere dissipates and the painting becomes flat and opaque. As Krauss explained:

*Wall-like and impenetrable, this view now disperses the earlier atmosphere. And this final result, as Linville again writes on Martin, is 'to make her paintings impermeable, immovable as stone.'*¹¹

Having introduced painterly atmospheric into her discussion, Krauss then went on to make an important distinction between the notion of 'atmosphere' involved in the abstract sublime readings of Martin's paintings and the notion of 'going atmospheric' that came out of Linville's reading. She explained how the abstract sublime readings posited atmosphere as the subject of the painting, wherein, just like any other landscape subject, such as clouds, sea or light,

atmosphere is signified as the content of an image. On the other hand, Krauss explained, in Linville's reading atmosphere is presented as an affect of the painting, the painting does not look like atmosphere, it feels like atmosphere, it induces the perception of atmosphere in the viewer. Krauss uses inverted commas and forward slashes respectively to mark the distinction between atmosphere-as-signified and atmosphere-as-signifier:

*Linville's three distances, that is, transform the experience from an intuition into a system, and convert 'atmosphere' from a signified (the content of an image) into a signifier - /atmosphere/*¹²

When language is theorised as a system for the production of meaning the signifier is considered to be a signal. In any linguistic system the significance of the signifier depends on everything else within that system which the signifier is not. The implication of Krauss' reading of Linville's three distances is that the signifier /atmosphere/ belongs to the system of signifiers with only one member. Because there are no other signifiers to relate to, so the atmospheric signifier cannot produce meaning, it is a system without difference, thus in a sense it is a pure signifier.

Another word that might be used instead of atmosphere is cloud. The actual experience of being engulfed by a cloud can be alarming, certainly it is visually

challenging and can induce blindness, which can in turn give rise to loss of nerve, breathlessness and panic. However to a person standing outside, looking in, a cloud can be quite exhilarating because, as they gaze upon the nebulous volume, they are free to enjoy the curious bifurcation between sense and sensation at play in the process, as their perceptual apparatuses try to fathom the cloud's resistant depths.

In her Toronto paper Krauss implied that what she had to say about Martin's painterly grids had some bearing on the architectural grids of Mies; but she offered little if any guidance as to how to make the connection. There are two obvious differences between Martin's grids and Mies'. First, the marks of a pencil on a stretched and gessoed canvas produce hers, while his are produced by constructing out of steel, concrete, stone and glass. Second, Martin's paintings are produced at a scale that corresponds, approximately, to the size of the human body; Mies constructions are produced at the scale of the medium or large building.

The second part of this thesis is a design project, it aims to test out the thesis that Mies' grids too can be understood as /atmosphere/ and thus, in a certain sense, as messages from the forever unknown, i.e., pure signifiers.

The first section of the second part of this thesis,

Genesis & Evolution, is a record of the research and development of AIR Grid. AIR Grid is a device for the production of /atmosphere/. As an artifact it occupies a region somewhere between Martin's painting and Mies' architecture. Air Grid is unlike Martin's painting in that it is, like Mies' architecture, constructed, not drawn. On the other hand, AIR Grid is unlike Mies' architecture in that it is, like Martin's painting, produced at a scale corresponding, approximately, to that of the human body, not that of the medium or large building.

The second section of the second part of this thesis, The Cotton Caves addresses the question of programme, that is the question of how the /atmosphere/ generated by AIR Grid, might be utilised, as a signifier, to trigger feelings of the unknown and yet, perhaps, necessary and valuable? In this section the thesis returns to address Lefebvre's critique of Modern Movement attitudes in architecture.