

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.
New National Gallery
Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin,
1962–68. Installation view
of inaugural exhibition,
Mondrian, 1968. Photo:
Horst Siegmann. Courtesy
Landesarchiv Berlin.



Mies's Event Space

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When the New National Gallery (NNG) in Berlin opened on September 15, 1968, the critics celebrated it as a monumental work by one of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, a homecoming for Mies van der Rohe who had left for Chicago in 1938 and was now eighty-two years old, too frail to attend the event. Yet voices of dissent rose almost immediately: critics pointed to functional problems in displaying art in the great glass hall under the levitated grid, a space that was colossal in scale, dwarfing most paintings and sculpture; that was almost entirely open, without walls for mounting art; and that was enclosed completely in glass, letting light and views stream in unless the curtains were drawn. Notwithstanding the seriousness of the concerns, the critics excused these functional difficulties in recognition of the architect's own artistic achievement. After all, the spirit of the commission had been first and foremost to secure a representative late work by Mies in Berlin and secondarily to worry about its function. Many people *still* think that Mies was indifferent to his client's needs, the needs of displaying art, imposing on them a work of art to be valued as an end in itself. Moreover, this was a work first conceived for a different purpose and a different climate (the offices of Bacardi in Santiago, Cuba), already once transported to Germany and offered unsuccessfully for a gallery (the Georg Schäfer Museum project in Schweinfurt), and now enlarged and transposed to another city and another context. For later critics, the problems of functionality were symptomatic of the problems of universalist ideology, Mies's quest for a universal space overriding difference for the sake of sameness and control.

Yet, the story of these difficulties is not that simple. Mies knew full well what troubles he was creating for the curators, not through indifference but precisely *because* he cared about art and, especially, it would seem, about the future of art. "It is very difficult," he acknowledged, "to do an exhibition there. No question. But a great possibility for new ways to do it. And I think that I would not want to miss that."¹ For Mies, the task at hand in Berlin was not just to house the art of the past, the great collection of easel paintings and figurative sculpture that was accommodated quite well, after all, in the permanent galleries and sculpture garden on the lower level.² Rather, he sought to support and even provoke the emergence of new ways of displaying and experiencing art, perhaps even new ways of making it.

This was certainly not the first time that Mies set his architecture in the service of new ways of living and, thereby, set it against the perpetuation of old habits and forms. In 1928 he spoke of building the “unleashed forces” of “our time” into a “new order, an order that permits free play for the unfolding of life.”³ The artist Hans Richter called him a new kind of architect, a *Baumeister* for a time of transition, a catalyst and agent of historical change.⁴ Theo van Doesburg, too, singled Mies out as a leader among the younger generation whose work was demonstrative of the future, enabling observers to experience it proleptically, in advance of its fuller realization.⁵

The inaugural exhibition at the NNG—a retrospective of Piet Mondrian—reveals something of the new paradigm in the arts that Mies believed was unfolding. Recognizing that the paintings were too small to be shown effectively in the big glass hall, Mies designed a system of suspended wall-size panels onto which the paintings were mounted. The open configuration of the panels created more intimate spaces for viewing the paintings without interrupting the continuity of the larger space. While critics admired the ingenuity of this solution, they nevertheless pointed to the problems inherent in displaying painting in the great hall and found it disconcerting to see the legs of visitors moving beneath the panels. The idea of suspending panels may have been inspired by exhibitions in Cullinan Hall, which Mies had designed for the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston in 1954–1958—exhibitions curated by James Johnson Sweeney with paintings floating in midair without architectural support. Mies himself had already envisioned something like this in a collage for the hypothetical Museum for a Small City (1942–1943) in which a painting by Wassily Kandinsky hovers above the ground next to a sculpture by Aristide Maillol. Notwithstanding this image, however, it is rare to find levitated planes in Mies’s work. While Mies, like Theo van Doesburg, took the plane to be a new fundamental element of modern architecture, he preferred the freestanding wall to the floating plane, affirming gravity and the ground while embracing the open plan and spatial continuum.

The most direct evidence for Mies’s ideas about new ways of exhibiting art at the NNG is found in a model from 1964 showing a possible exhibition in which two very large wall-size paintings, abstract expressionist in nature, stand as freestanding planes among the wood partitions and marble shafts of the building and, curiously, a tree. The image recalls a series of collages, beginning with the Court House projects of the 1930s, in which Mies gradually developed a distinctive idea about combining painting, sculpture, architecture, and landscape. Some of the ethereal interior perspectives include rectangles of wood texture pasted onto the sheet to represent freestanding walls such as the ebony

wall of the Tugendhat House with its optically charged grain. Other collages incorporate fragments of a painting by Georges Braque, *Fruit Dish, Sheet Music, and Pitcher* (1926). By taking only a fragment of the Braque painting and inverting it, Mies dissociated it from the actual work and transformed what was representational into a pure abstract composition of color, enlarged to architectural scale and legible at a distance.⁶

The well-known collage of the Resor House of 1939 combines a wood wall, a fragment of Paul Klee's painting *Colorful Meal (Bunte Mahlzeit; 1928)*, and a photograph of the landscape visible through the floor-to-ceiling panoramic windows—one instance each of an architectural element (the wall), a painting, and a landscape, brought together in an assemblage. This marks a new kind of unity through montage, one that respects, even heightens, the integrity and autonomy of each work and each medium, while bringing them into a structural and proportional relationship to one another. This is not a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) in which the operative principle is fusion, but rather an *Einheitskunst* (art of unity) in which a common principle (inner cause) is understood to underpin the different forms of artistic practice and the expression of their inner logic. Moreover, the collage foregrounds the elementary character and material facture of each of its parts. The abstraction that emerges at the elemental level begins to suggest structural—that is, organizational—affinities lurking beneath the surface of appearance. The three pieces of the Resor House collage thus share an affinity with the flattening and estranging photography of Albert Renger-Patzsch, Umbo, László Moholy-Nagy, and others who, in the 1920s, developed a “new objectivity” in photography, exploiting the capacity of the camera to reveal a world of secret truths and universal forms unavailable to the naked eye. As vice president of the German Werkbund, Mies was well

Office of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago. New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin, model, 1964. Photo: Hubert Henry. Courtesy Chicago Historical Society HB-27505-B.

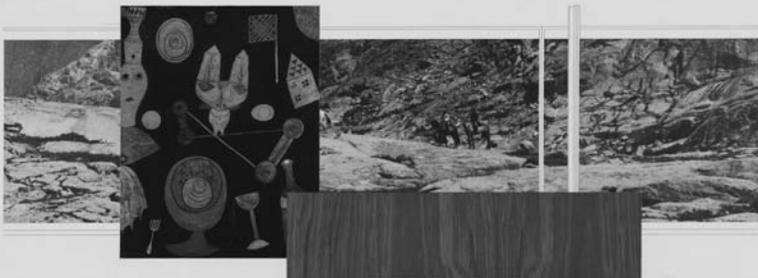


aware of the new objectivity and the new optics featured in the Werkbund's *Film und Foto* exhibition of 1929, organized largely by Moholy-Nagy and commemorated in publications by Mies's friends Richter and Werner Graeff as well as the historian/critic Franz Roh.

If the abstracting effect of the close-up is most evident at the Resor House in the fragment of Klee's *Colorful Meal*, in the collage of the Museum for a Small City (1943) the effect is most evident in the photographs of the landscape—in the surface of water and the pattern of leaves. The painting, in this case Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), is here shown in its totality. Despite this reversal, the abstracted figuration of the painting is in scale with the building and in proportion with the sculptures by Maillol and even the enlarged patterns of water and leaves beyond. Through careful relationship Mies created ensembles that enhanced the distinctness and autonomy of each component while simultaneously bringing their underlying material organization (elemental, atomic) into alignment and visibility.

The combination of autonomy and homology, difference and sameness, is paradigmatic of Mies's conception of *Bildung* for people (formation, cultivation, and learning) and *Gestaltung* for art, technology, and buildings (the self-generated creation of form through elemental means, individuation through inner cause). Mies understood autonomy not as an isolated autopoiesis but as a kind of self-fashioning that is embedded in and responsive to context. Individuation was understood to occur within structures—social structures, economic structures, structures of mind and of existence—but also to actualize these structures. For Mies, the capacity for *Bildung* had been lost with the great detachment of the individual from the community that began in the Renaissance and assumed gargantuan proportions with the advent of mass society in the

Office of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Chicago, George Danforth and William Priestley, delineators. Resor House project, collage with reproduction of Paul Klee's *Colorful Meal* (1939). Courtesy The Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Architect. 716.63



late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Renewing this capacity became increasingly key to his conception of the task at hand. If the architecture of the NNG—especially its gridded roof—is an essay in making implicit structure explicit and tangible, it also provides a setting for others to explore the same goal in different artistic media.

Mies's collages of the 1930s and 1940s belong to a history of avant-garde critiques of traditional forms of art which underpinned numerous experiments toward a new environmental paradigm that would reunite the arts and reunite art with life. The abstract, coloristic, and immersive environments envisioned in the 1920s by Bruno Taut, Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, El Lissitzky, and Le Corbusier are only the most well-known of these experiments. The Barcelona Pavilion (1928–1929) demonstrated Mies's own version with a hybrid spatial structure—part *open plan* and part *free plan*. However, Mies rejected the application of colored pigment to architectural surfaces and instead used color only as an integral property of architectural materials. He made freestanding walls (as well as floors and ceilings) not of uniform color but of uniform material: glass, wood, marble, and plaster. Where El Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinets* in Dresden (1926) and Hanover (1927–1928) attempted to absorb small paintings and sculptural works into the overall architectural composition, his *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne of 1928 created an entire *mileau* out of photographic images, many of them dramatically enlarged in scale. Similarly, Mies understood, as did others at that time, that framed paintings would be superseded by wall-size works, contributing to a new unity of the arts within a new open and fluid spatiality. Having imagined such a possibility in the 1930s, it is hardly surprising that Mies responded as enthusiastically as he did to Picasso's *Guernica* when it appeared in Chicago in 1939–1940—at last, a wall-size painting that demanded to become a freestanding wall in Mies's conception of the museum.

Reviewing the model of the NNG

Top: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta exhibition installation, 1974. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.

Bottom: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: Francois Morellet exhibition installation, 1977. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.



made in 1964 and the collages that preceded it helps to revivify what Mies might have understood the emerging paradigm of art to be. However, it would be hard to claim that this new unity of painting, sculpture, architecture, and landscape was the only form of display that Mies anticipated for the exhibition hall of the NNG. The space was, after all, intended for temporary exhibitions whose specific nature could not be predicted in advance. And it extended Mies's exploration of the flexible open plan—the “variable ground plan” or “universal space”—which he had been developing since the early 1940s and whose primary virtue was the capacity to accommodate change. The openness of the long-span pavilion in steel and glass constitutes another way in which the



NNG supported new ways of displaying art, one that comes into focus when we look at the history of exhibitions and events held there over the past thirty years.

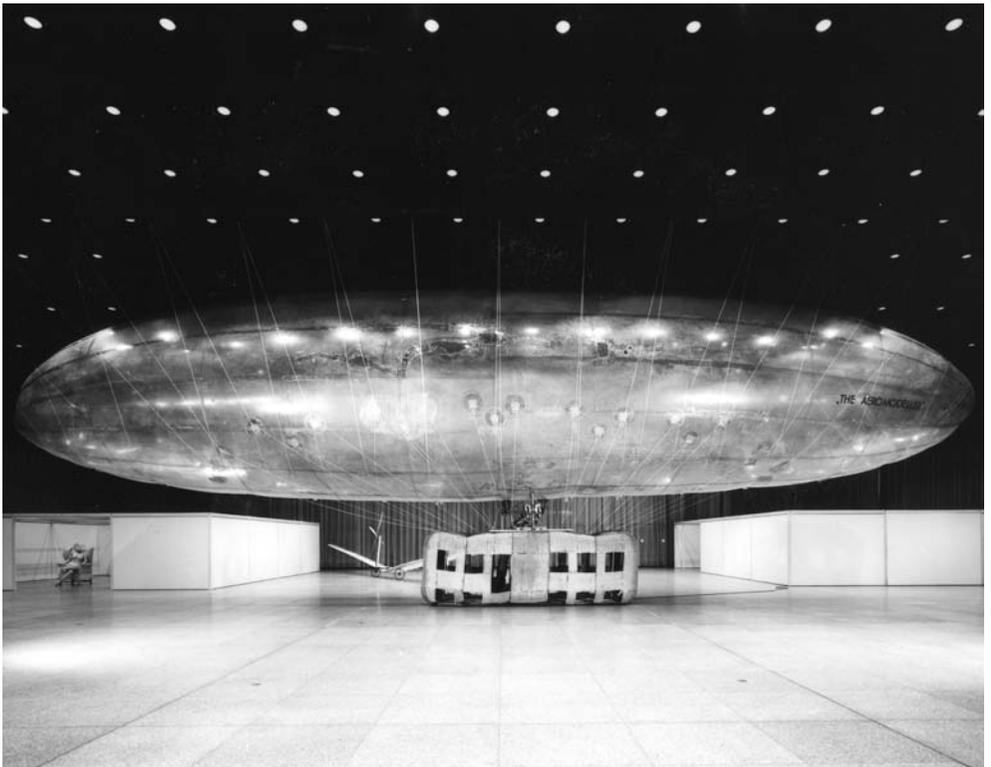
A diversity of responses to the building, some consistent with Mies's vision, some brilliant in unexpected ways, and others decidedly awkward, followed the Mondrian show. Although the curators found Mies's suspended panels too cumbersome in their size and weight (substantial equipment was required to move them around), they used them for several more shows, including an exhibition of large paintings by Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta in 1970. In 1977 the exhibition of works by François Morellet featured large paintings hung directly from the ceiling, harkening back to Sweeney's shows at Cullinan Hall. As an alternative, however, an exhibition system of demountable wall panels with overhead structure and lighting track was commissioned in 1977 from designer Walter Kuhn of Hannover in order to facilitate variable configurations of more intimate spaces for smaller works. Although it, too, was awkward for the display of art and competed with the larger architectural frame, it was used for more than seven years. Beginning in this period, but more consistently later on, extensive walls and even rooms were constructed directly on the floor within the great hall. The *a.r. penck* exhibition of 1988, *Art Spaces—Visiting the National Gallery (Kunsträume—Zu Gast in der Nationalgalerie)* of 1987, and architect Frank O. Gehry's effective installation for *Exiles and Emigrés* of 1997 all used this strategy.

In the 1970s the space began to be used for installation art as well as multimedia installations. Panamarenko's *Aeromodeller* was shown together with smaller inventions and wall-mounted works in 1978, and

Opposite, top: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: *New Painting in Germany* exhibition installation, 1983, using display system designed by Walter Kuhn. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.

Opposite, bottom: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: *a.r. penck* exhibition installation, 1988. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.

Below: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: *Panamarenko* exhibition installation, 1978. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.



Mario Merz's *Drop of Water* (1987) was featured in the show *Positions in Contemporary Art* (1988). The Douglas Gordon show in 1998, featuring *5 Year Drive-By* and *Bootleg (Empire)*, continued this genre and appeared to fulfill Mies's desire for large-scale works—albeit now in the medium of video. For his show in 2000, the architect Renzo Piano created a richly layered installation of suspended horizontal vitrines punctuated with floating prototypes of roof elements and structural joints. By revisiting the idea of suspension from the Mondrian show but without subdividing the great hall into smaller spaces, Piano achieved a heightened sense of lightness, transparency, and theatricality.

The space has also been used for performances, including the



Metamusik Festival in 1974 and the circus that was part of the exhibition *Circus* in 1978. The installation of Alberto Giacometti's attenuated existential figures in 1988 also had something of the quality of a performance when seen in silhouette or in relation to visitors moving through the gallery.

More recently, in several solo exhibitions of site-specific work, artists have actively engaged the architecture in dialogue. This type of work would not have been anticipated by Mies, although his building lends itself especially well to those who enter into its logic or respond—be it affirmatively or critically—to his desire to manifest the deep structure immanent to creation. While the scale and proportion of Matt Mullican's *Banners* (1995) clearly show the work belongs to the building—the graphic language of the former echoes the universalist ambitions of the latter—it is at the same time entirely alien to the building, blocking its transparency with sheets of bold, colorful icons that radically transform the image of the building outside and render the experience inside almost claustrophobic. More subtly, Ulrich Rückriem's installation of 1999–2000 placed stones that were exactly the size of the building module on the floor in a pattern generated through a locational formula that was both random and rigorous, thereby stretching the logic of the grid beyond the limit of pure rationality. Where Rückriem took over the floor, Jenny Holzer took over the ceiling with *SMPK* in 2001. By attaching lines of moving electronic text to the underside of Mies's dark artificial sky, Holzer transformed the implied extension of the grid to the horizon on all sides into a one-way flow of information. Like soldiers marching in formation, row upon row of provocative yet enigmatic slogans rush by overhead, at times so quickly or with the lights oscillating that their messages can be read only a few words at a time and thus become abstract, a wave flowing through and beyond the grid.

Opposite, top: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: Douglas Gordon exhibition installation, 1999. Photo: Stefan Müller. Courtesy Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, Berlin.

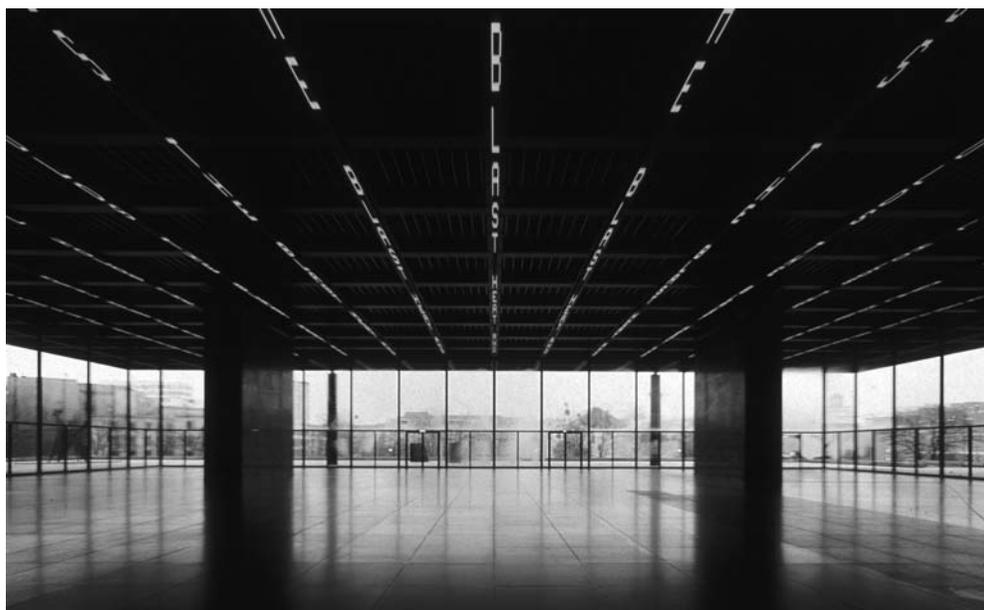
Opposite, bottom: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: *Metamusik Festival* installation, 1974. Photo: Reinhard Friedrich.

Below: New National Gallery Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin: Ulrich Rückriem exhibition installation, 1999–2000. Courtesy New National Gallery.



Most recently, in 2003 the exhibition *Content* by Rem Koolhaas and OMA took aim at the pristine purity of the glass box and filled it up with the scattered material from designing their most recent buildings and urban projects—models and maquettes in different materials and scales, graphic presentations of research data and imagery, material studies, engineering calculations, and even the media spectacle of global politics. If in Mies's time the production of difference or events required emptiness, today, Koolhaas implies, it requires the fullness of content, the entropy of junk, and the flows of information and politics as much as matter.

The variety of shows and events held at the NNG, beginning with the



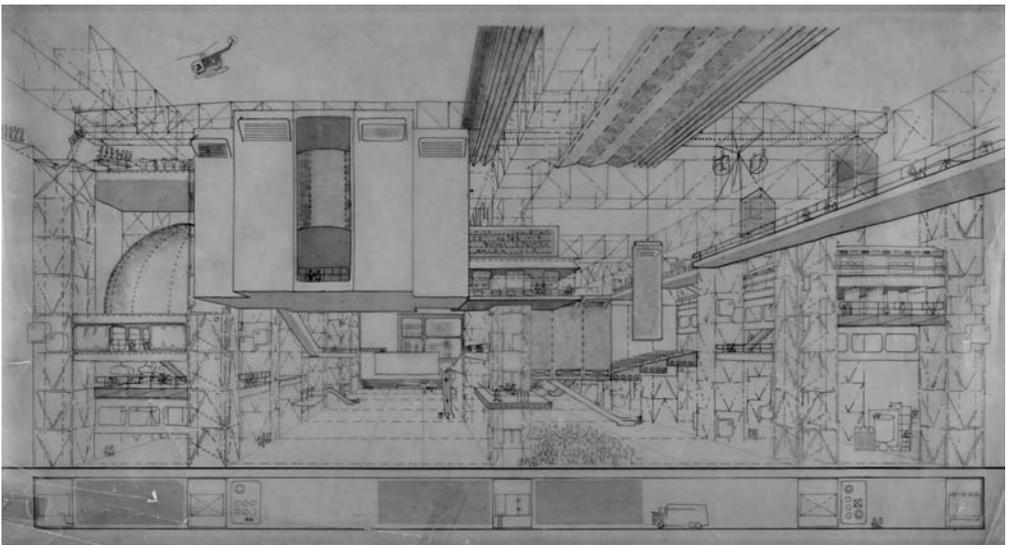
raising of the roof and the celebration (Richtfest) that followed, points to its function as a framework or infrastructure for an experimental approach to art and life in which the question of autonomy extends to the curators and artists themselves. It is something like a black-box theater, a flexible tool capable of being adapted to different functions and desires, not unlike Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* project (1961–1964)—a giant Erector Set in which British workers were to realize their “potential for self-expression by dancing, beating drums, Method-acting, tuning in on Hong Kong in closed-circuit television and action painting.”⁸ Thus the NNG also shows an affinity with Coop Himme(l)blau's *Large Cloud Scene* (1976)—a temporary structure in Vienna, four framework towers thirteen meters high with heaven stretched between them, an open setting for events, mobile performances, circuses, and street fests, hoping to increase the vitality of urban life in order to precipitate urban change.

As with Price, Mies's stage has no set script, nor is there a teleology to be performed. Instead its extreme openness anticipates dramatic events. Mies captured this spirit in a sketch that diagrams life in the universal space, the open yet lightly structured space within which partitions, furniture, and installations can be configured and reconfigured with ease. With a few strokes of his pencil, Mies marked the edges of a square box within which a squiggly line circles around the empty center, an event whose form and character remain indeterminate. The swirling flux has yet to settle or harden into forms or striations, is still in the process of becoming, is smooth, even chaotic, little more than a potential. Mies's squiggly line depicts the potentiality of becoming, the potential to actualize being in a multiplicity of contingent concrete configurations over time. This is the spirit of Mies's quest for the “almost nothing” that takes us back to what, for millennia, has been understood as the original nothingness and potentiality of existence. Like Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), it is all and nothing. If people are disturbed and unsettled by its ascetic emptiness, that is precisely its point: to create within the world—the world that is already fixed in form—a clearing, a radical negation, an open space that demands and facilitates the production of being, as close to pure presence as possible. Mies's glass box

Opposite, top:
New National Gallery
Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin:
Jenny Holzer, *SMPK* exhibi-
tion installation, 2001.
Courtesy New National
Gallery.

Opposite, bottom:
New National Gallery
Exhibition Pavilion, Berlin:
Rem Koolhaas and OMA,
Content exhibition installa-
tion, 2003. Courtesy OMA.

Below: Cedric Price,
*Fun Palace for Joan
Littlewood*, Stratford East,
London, Project, 1959–61.
Perspective graphite on
diazotype. Courtesy The
Museum of Modern Art,
New York.



is so minimal, its infrastructure so well integrated, and its elements so reduced and simplified that it is little more than a recessive, neutral, and empty architectonic in which to play at a modernity whose realization is continually deferred.

However, the palpable discomfort of many of the installations in the NNG suggests that its architecture is not, after all, the same as Price's more accommodating Erector Set or, for that matter, the neutral white box that has become paradigmatic of galleries for contemporary art. While open to change and new ways of doing things, it is not neutral after all. In Mies's phrase, it is "*almost* nothing," and if we put the emphasis on the *almost* rather than the *nothing*, then we realize that it *is* something in fact, something material and tangible that operates between us and nothing, that points to nothing, plays the role of nothing, allows us to imagine nothing and even experience its terror, keeping the chill of nothing at bay while harnessing its catalytic agency. The NNG is, in fact, a resolutely fixed and unchanging frame that is charged with symbolic, even metaphysical, implications, like the dome of a cathedral. And like a cathedral, the purpose of its analogy to the heavens is to take us outside ourselves, beyond the human—to contemplate and experience alterity without appropriating it. At the NNG this extension occurs in the floor as well as the roof, as the building opens to and frames the plaza, the city, and the horizon beyond. Mies did not offer technology as tool, empirical, functional, and transparent. Instead he transformed technology into an architectonic image that was at once technological, artistic, historical, and cosmological. This image provides a stage—almost transparent—on which the homelessness and nihilism so central to the experience of modernity can be enacted as both a crisis *and* an opportunity for constructive self-fashioning. On this stage some performances succeed better than others, and some fail miserably and are seen to do so. The more the exhibitions push beyond the conventions of traditional art and the more they engage the scale of the building and the problematics of modernity, the more successful they are. Nor is the NNG the same as Coop Himmelb(l)au's temporary event structure. Mies's dark artificial sky is not only durable but enduring, heavy in both the literal and figu-

rative sense of the word, less optimistic and light-hearted, more demanding but also galvanizing in its evocation of the structure of existence.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (lower left) attending the "Richtsfest" (Topping Out Ceremony) at the New National Gallery, Berlin, December 4, 1957. Photo: Ludwig Ehlers. Courtesy Landesarchiv Berlin.



Notes

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1. See interview with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the film by Michael Blackwood, *Mies* (New York: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1987).

2. The formation of the Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin brought together the collections of the Nationalgalerie of the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz and the Twentieth Century Collection of the City of Berlin. The Nationalgalerie had been established in 1861 and became one of the greatest collections of post-1800 art. In 1937 the Nazis destroyed or sold nearly 500 works. More perished during World War II; others were taken to the Soviet Union and returned only much later.

3. Mies van der Rohe, "The Preconditions of Architectural Work," in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe and the Building Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991): 301.

4. Hans Richter, "Der neue Baumeister," *Qualität* 4 (January/February 1925): 3–9.

5. Theo van Doesburg, "'The Dwelling'; The Famous Werkbund Exhibition," trans. Charlotte I. Loeb and Arthur L. Leob, *On European Architecture. Complete Essays from Het Bouwbedrijf, 1924–1931* (Basel, Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser, 1990), 164. The original essay was published in *Het Bouwbedrijf*, vol. 4, no. 24 (November 1927): 556–559.

6. I am indebted to Kenneth Hayes for his analysis of these collages and more generally for his insights into the shift from easel painting to wall-sized works and immersive artistic environments.

7. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "The Preconditions of Architectural Work," in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe and the Building Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 301.

8. Ruth Langdon Inglis, "Architecture: The Fun Palace," *Art in America* 54 (January/February 1966): 69–72.