

Inhabiting the skin of another: Lilly Reich and the Barcelona Pavilion

Re-enactment: Lilly Reich's Work Occupies the Barcelona Pavilion by Laura Martínez de Guereñu

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The impetus of Laura Martínez de Guereñu's artistic intervention *Re-enactment* at the Barcelona Pavilion was to involve visitors in an architectural situation that shed new light on the history and authorship of the pavilion itself. Through a radical reconfiguration of the pavilion, Martínez de Guereñu enacted an experiential rumination on the missing presence of Lilly Reich within the pavilion's historiography. Her intention was to redress the fact that although Lilly Reich and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe worked together for more than a decade and were also a couple, the architectural canon continues to overlook Reich's contribution. Indeed, it still remains widely unrecognized that Reich is now credited as coauthor with Mies in the conception and construction of the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion.

Martínez de Guereñu's intervention (the outcome of the first Lilly Reich Grant for Equality in Architecture, awarded in 2018) was remarkable for the way in which archival research and artistic/architectural practice became inextricably embedded, the one within the other, without either becoming secondary. Notably, Martínez de Guereñu—who is an academic researcher and an associate professor in architectural history and theory at IE School of Architecture and Design—formerly practiced architecture professionally. Research into relations between the design of the Barcelona Pavilion and Reich's overall design of the German sections of the 1929 International Exposition became the focus of *Re-enactment*. In a radical architectural gesture, Martínez de Guereñu conflated display-case architecture

designed by Reich for the 1929 International Exposition with the Barcelona Pavilion's architecture, thus making Reich and Mies's shared architectural sensibilities and the implicit depth of their collaboration tangible.

The pavilion's central double-faced white glass wall, lit from within by a hidden skylight, was removed by Martínez de Guereñu so as to activate the normally unseen space enclosed within this glass wall while also opening the interior space to the outside. Within this voided space, she inserted a reconstruction of two horizontal display tables designed by Reich for the 1929 German exhibits in Barcelona (figs. 1, 2, 3). Reich's design was adapted to fit the length and width normally occupied by the translucent glass wall. On the ceiling above, she inserted stretched white fabric into the skylight opening, creating a luminous rectangle to mirror the dimensions of the reflective glass-topped display cases directly below. Pivotal to her intervention is the fact that the double-glass wall normally conceals a hidden space that was literally brought to light. The act of opening this space was conceptually embedded in the idea of shedding light on Reich's obscurity in the building's historiography.

There was something iconoclastic about intervening into the actual fabric of the building that highlights the politics enfolded within Martínez de Guereñu's gesture. To alter the structure of a seminal work of twentieth-century architecture routinely ascribed solely to Mies would be an assertive gesture for any architect. In this instance, the author's gender further politicized what was at stake. Martínez de Guereñu's decision to open up a central vista between outside and inside, allowing light and air currents to flow through the center of the building, created a strong experiential affect. It is as if this intervention represented a performance that implemented a destabilization of the fixity of the canon. No doubt, if the pavilion was itself not a reconstruction, such a radical intervention would not have been possible. This said, the political significance that this gesture staged was still potent. In

Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories, Griselda Pollock makes the argument that new representations of existing representations can act to shift inherited canonical, patriarchal norms.¹ If histories and their canons are thus kept fluid, then the inequalities that such histories enfold have the potential to shift. Martínez de Guereñu's intervention thus gave form to a process of rereading history that exemplified what Pollock expounds. Martínez de Guereñu's interrogation of the silences, gaps, and omissions within historical accounts was central to her methodology. She used this approach to probe "the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots or the space-off, of its representations"; thus, the voided space of the double-glass wall gave architectural form, through a process of excavation, to the work's overarching conceptual preoccupation with gaps and blind spots in the reception of Reich's work.²

The act of subtraction that the removal of the double wall performed was complex. While it intervened in—or one might even say, violated—the original design, it was at the same time responsive and sympathetic to the existing pavilion's architecture, resonant with its choreography of empty space and movement, its play of voids, planes, and reflections. There is, as Victor Burgin succinctly states of the building, "No point of rest amongst its mirrored planes".³ Through such embodiment of the restless, the pavilion can be said to self-reflexively stage the fleeting presence of the visitor moving through the space. Here Mies's interest in Henri Bergson's idea of the living body as "un lieu de passage" (a thoroughfare) is

¹ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

² Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 25.

³ Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 75.

pertinent.⁴ Through its enactment of motion, rhythm, and light, the architecture becomes an active agent that invites movement.⁵ For me, this architectural fluidity and reciprocity already enacts a situation that runs counter to the symbolism of the canon and the notion of fixity it establishes. It is as if Martínez de Guereñu took up an invitation to act or rather “intra-act” that is inherent within the ontology of the pavilion’s architecture.

Inside the horizontal display cases, Martínez de Guereñu placed scanned archival material relating to the German exhibits of 1929. Plans, patents, and documentary photographs were sequenced to enact movement through the Exposition, to the effect that one’s own live bodily movement within the pavilion became interlinked with an imagined movement of bodies through the exhibition rooms of the 1929 fair. This intertwining of past and present was compounded by reflections in the display-case glass that drew in the surrounding architecture. Due to the depth of the display cases, the paper documentation within appeared to float, parallel with the plane of the pavilion floor or, from certain perspectives, as if beneath the floor plane. This illusion enacted a feeling of dematerialization while extending the mirroring effects already at play in the surrounding pavilion’s reflective surfaces (fig. 4). Hereby visitors could be drawn into the author’s process of reconfiguring history while becoming aware of the inherent instability of such a process.

The archival material was brought together in four related narrative sequences that were placed in distinct horizontal rows spanning the two display tables. The upper sequence—copies of black-and-white photographs of the 1929 exhibits from the MoMA archive—was set in counterpoint with a further sequence of black-and-white photographs of

⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 141–42. Lutz Robbers notes that Mies had marked up the section of his copy of *Creative Evolution* that discusses this idea (“Mies: A Fighter For Film [Second Part],” *Revista UNAM*, no. 41 [2019]: 115).

⁵ Robbers, “Mies,” 116.

the exposition's industrial displays that Martínez de Guereñu sourced from eight different European archives. Placed between these black-and-white rows was a sequence of color prints of industrial product patents, registered at the time of the exposition, that described the products in technical, diagrammatic form. The fourth sequence included architectural plans of the palaces that housed the German exhibits and showed the layout of bespoke display architecture designed by Reich. This sequence importantly articulated the pavilion's original function as an antechamber to the wider German exhibits and showed that the pavilion was interrelated with hundreds of meters of display space designed by Reich. This contextualization emphasized the links between the pavilion design and Reich's independent architectural work, making visible Mies and Reich's shared architectural language, characterized by their radical use of self-reflexive architectural enactments of ideas of exhibition and display. This approach confounded conventional boundaries between interior design and architecture as all elements both large and small scale—structure, material, color, and finish—were considered as holistically interrelated. Significantly, the pavilion's open structure and the related circulatory flow through the exhibition halls actively worked against divisions between exterior and interior. In the light of this attitude to architecture as interrelational and experiential, *Re-enactment* prompted a reconsideration of Reich's role normally relegated to interiors—that is, choices of texture, color and fabric—all of which fit within the conventions of her time with regard to women.

The decision to use the patents as a pivot for the other documentary material was conceptually important as these diagrams hold within their structure references to missing objects, here doubly displaced by being prints of drawings that themselves stand in for objects. Through the scanning process, the colored paper backgrounds of these prints (blue, pale yellow, green, and orange) became luminous, almost incandescent. Such spatial,

temporal displacement foregrounded a loss of tangibility—the idea of missing substance—which paralleled the intervention’s concern with the missing body of Reich.

In counterpoint to these horizontal display cases, a reconstruction of a vertical display case by Reich scaled to the dimensions of the windowed wall panels was installed adjacent to the screen facing the pavilion’s internal pool. Looped archival film footage from the opening of the 1929 Exposition from two different sources was displayed on both sides of this upright stand, the flickering light of the film reverberating with reflections in the display stand’s black glass panels and chrome frame and with the passage of daylight within the surrounding architecture. This archival footage took the visitor on two filmic journeys through the spacious 1929 exhibition halls, all adapted by Reich with bespoke free-standing and built-in display cases, circular tube railings, false ceilings, and continuous flooring to create a uniform and modern aesthetic across the exhibits. Views of the pavilion of 1929 in the film footage were aligned with views within the present-day pavilion so that past and present became coincident. Through this, the historical footage became continuous with the visitor’s embodied experience of the present architecture: the movement of the flag in the film footage mirrored at times the shadow of the flag on the marble pool wall, while the pavilion’s velvet curtain billowed with occasional air currents, echoing the film’s fragile flicker (fig. 5).

Staged within the opened-up interior of the pavilion, the reconstructed display cases took on the presence of minimal sculptures. This minimalistic aspect resonated with Reich’s overall design strategy that choreographed relations between the exhibition hall architecture, display stands, and manufactured materials and appliances, an innovative approach to exhibition design that resembled—and could be seen as a precursor of—the work of minimalist artists such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd. Such minimalistic use of upright and horizontal planes, characteristic of all of Reich’s exhibition design, is also fundamental to the radicality of the pavilion architecture’s choreography of vertical and horizontal planes. A

similar approach characterized Mies and Reich's *Velvet and Silk Café* of 1927—an acknowledged collaborative work—where suspended vertical planes of fabric became architecture.

For me, the counterpoint between the prone and upright body, enacted by the reconstructed horizontal and vertical display cases, resonated with dialectics of active/passive, positive/negative, absent/present, male/female—all of which Martínez de Guereñu's intervention worked to destabilize through its conflation of such binaries and its involvement of the viewer's active and receptive being. One might see her artistic intervention as a riposte to Georg Kolbe's sculpture *Sunrise* (fig. 6). Kolbe's standing female nude, gesturing as if to shield herself from the light, is a pivotal bodily presence within the pavilion architecture.⁶ As one moves, this standing figure appears elusive, as if at once present and absent; continuously revealed and obscured by the pavilion's reflective, intersecting wall and window planes and animated by modulations in light and its shifting reflections on the pool surface. This female nude seems to represent the mystical idea of the female muse that pervades the history of art: a generalized idea of woman for man, the female body not individuated in its own right but defined in relation to patriarchal codes. Martínez de Guereñu's play with slippages, in which positive is at once negative and negative positive, problematized such ascriptions of the female body as mystical, negative, absent, dependent, or essentialized.

This feminist agenda was situated within a wider process of democratization. To this end, Martínez de Guereñu sought to alter the hierarchical structure of the architecture, metaphorically opening the interior—originally functioning as a royal ceremonial space—to the wider populace. In a further gesture towards a democratization of the space, she removed

⁶ Burgin, *Remembered Film*, 77.

the luxurious Barcelona chairs from the interior and replaced them with the more everyday MR chairs that had occupied the pavilion before the formal opening ceremonies. The black carpet was also removed to extend the effect of openness created by the removal of the skylight wall. Thus, Martínez de Guereñu's desire to address the economies of patriarchal power were embedded in a wider quest for equality of agency.

This brings me back to Mies's concern with architecture as an active agent and his related interest in the idea of the body as a "lieu de passage." In its staging of an experiential situation, *Re-enactment* foregrounded the involvement of visitors, so that visitors took on a central and active role. The visitors' bodies, each a "lieu de passage," could be said to represent, or rather embody, multiple perspectives or journeys. This idea of plurality is for me at the heart of *Re-enactment* and core to Martínez de Guereñu's methodology, which itself could be said to perform the body as a "lieu de passage." In the development of the work, Reich and the Barcelona Pavilion became conduits or *thoroughfares* through which Martínez de Guereñu lived and worked. By investing herself in research into the life and work of Reich and re-enacting her designs within the contemporary moment, Martínez de Guereñu created a new work in which past and present were mutually reconfigured. This conflation of past and present bodies added complexity to the idea of agency.

The potential political ramifications of such engagement in the life and work of another is explicated by Verónica Zebadúa Yáñez in *Projects of Freedom: Biography as Political Theory in Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir*. Here biography, as situated, lived experience, is seen as critical to the political process: "Biographies become a source for exploring the *experiential grounds* of politics, and the conditions for the possibility of

politics.”⁷ For Zebadúa Yáñez, the subject of biography does not concern essences and identities but rather experience that is situated historically and politically. Through reference to Johanna Oksala and Simone de Beauvoir, she foregrounds how thinking through another’s experience takes one beyond the individualistic into an understanding of experience as plural.⁸ Quoting De Beauvoir, Zebadúa Yáñez speaks of “the feeling of inhabiting ‘another man’s skin’, altering one’s vision, ‘of the human state of the world and the space [one occupies] in it,’”⁹ and she cites Oksala to claim: “Such identification with the other can also allow one to ‘dis-identify from the singularity of [one’s own] positions.’”¹⁰ Martínez de Guereñu uses such processes of identification and disidentification as a creative action, one that visitors then inhabit. This visitor involvement is crucial to the notion of plurality that the work enacts and can be aligned with the political philosophy of De Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, in which politics and lived experience are seen to be “contingent on the dynamics of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and action with plural others.”¹¹ This ontology challenges canonical frameworks that continue to rely on the notion of individual artistic genius, precisely the norm that has left Reich largely uncredited for her collaboration with Mies.

Re-enactment, in its articulation of an experiential situation formed through an investment in the lives of others, embodied a potential to extend one’s horizons while at the same time enabling one to travel inwards.¹² Such two-way movement is both temporal and

⁷ Verónica Zebadúa Yáñez, “Projects of Freedom: Biography as Political Theory in Hannah Arendt and Simone De Beauvoir,” PhD diss., The New School, New York, 2019, 41.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Simone De Beauvoir, “All Said and Done,” quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁰ Johanna Oksala, “In Defense of Experience,” 397, quoted in *ibid.*

¹¹ Ibid. 18.

¹² Zebadúa Yáñez, “Reading the Lives of Others: Biography as Political Thought in Hannah Arendt and Simone de Beauvoir,” *Hypatia* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 94–110.

spatial, so that past and present are endlessly reconfigured. I suggest that the notion of agency that Martínez de Guereñu’s intervention called forth was not a sovereign agency—one that undermines the agency of another—but rather a reciprocal, interdependent idea of agency, in which human beings recognize their plurality.

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Fig 1-6

All images are stills from *Lieu de passage* 2020 a filmic response to *Re-enactment*

by Helen Robertson

fig 1. View of the Pavilion’s double-faced glass wall from the interior © Helen Robertson

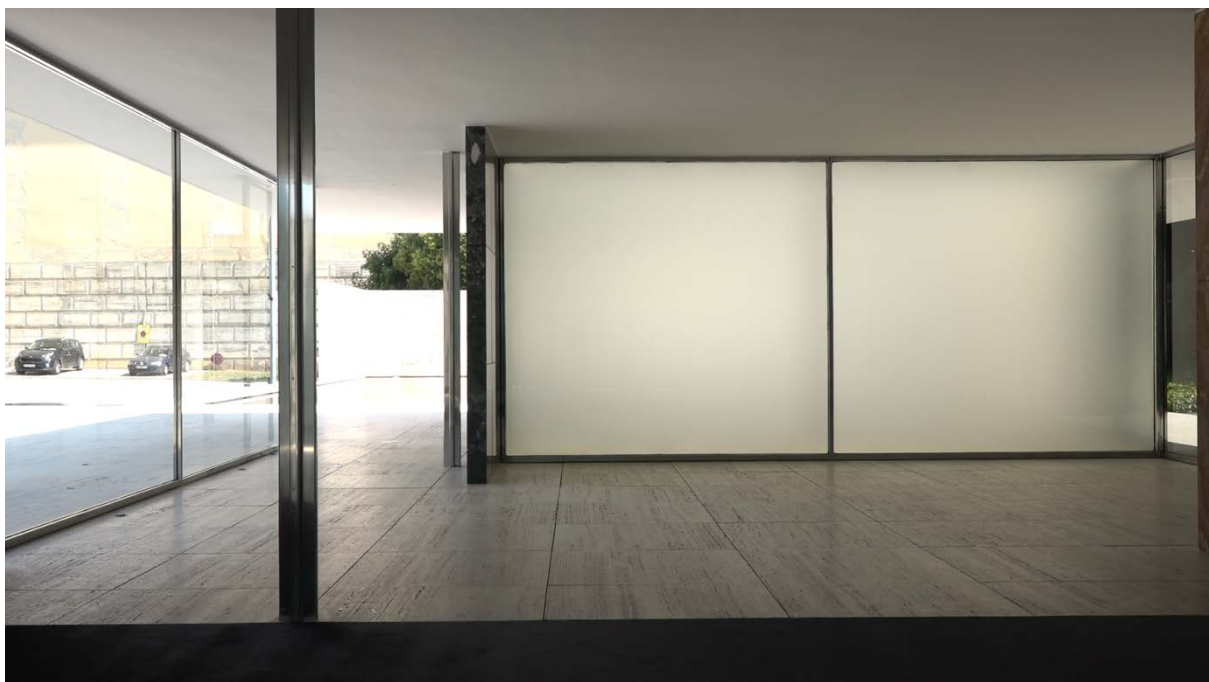


fig 2 Voided double-faced glass wall with reconstructed display tables and skylight fabric ©

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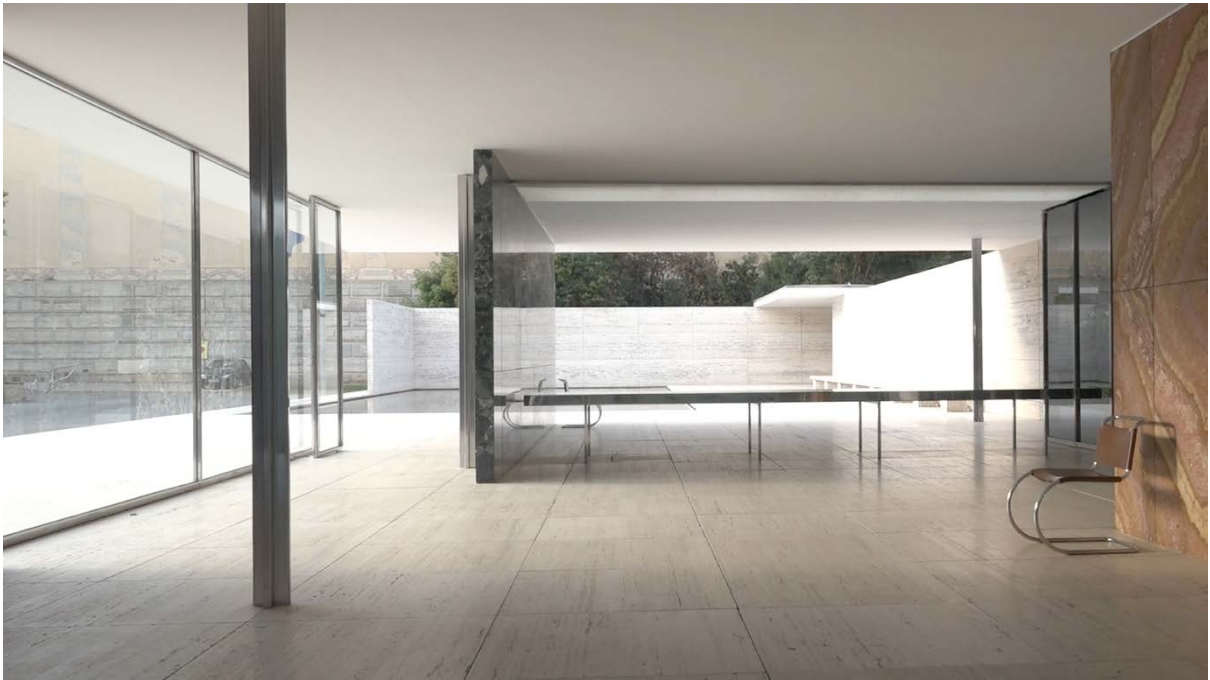


fig.3 Voided double-faced glass wall with reconstructed display tables and skylight fabric ©

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fig.4 View of horizontal archival display © Helen Robertson

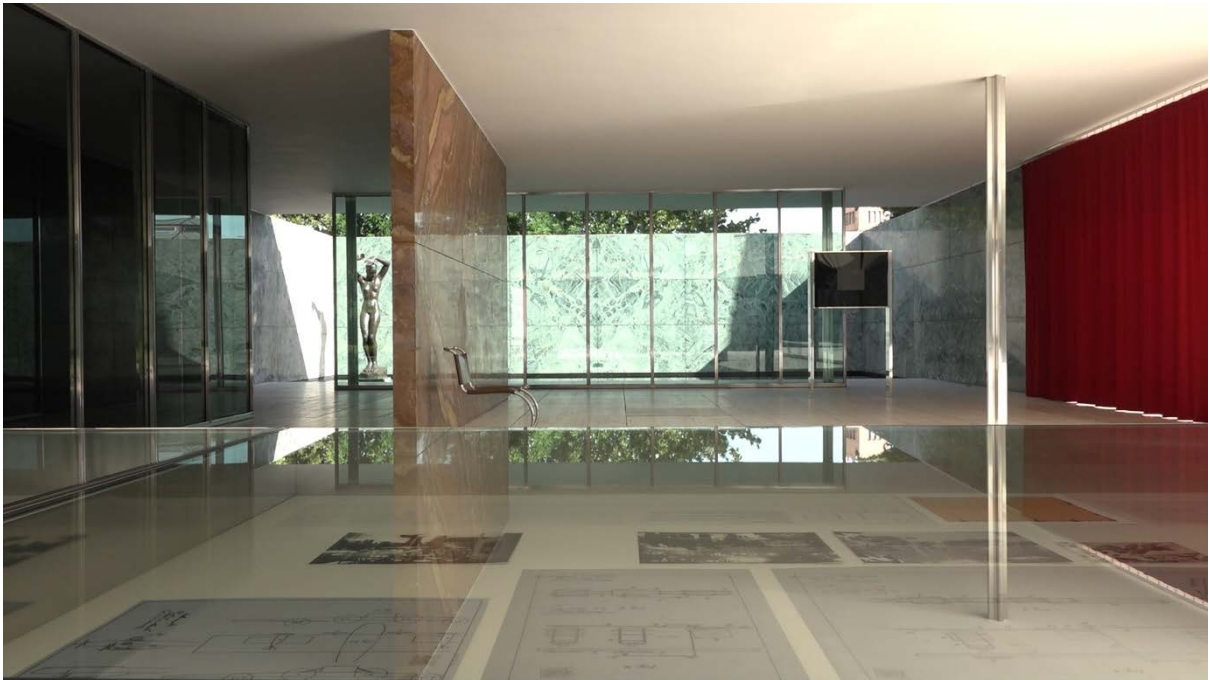


fig. 5 View of archival footage on back face of upright display stand © Helen Robertson



fig. 6 View of archival footage on front face of upright display stand © Helen Robertson

