

# turning and re-turning

Jane Rendell



## on entering

Slowly my eyes adjust to the dim, and to the flare. I make my way, finding somewhere to place my feet among the fragments of light scattered, pink, on the floor.

In between *ENTER SLOWLY* (2024) and *find your feet* (2024), I situate myself in the transitional space of the lobby. Having crossed the threshold, I am now inside Helen Robertson's *Echo*, a transmedial figuration, which positions a number of interrelated works across the spaces of the Danielle Arnaud gallery.

*Echo* stages a set of performative associations between several historical figures – artists and architects: male modernists – artist Donald Judd and architect Mies van der Rohe – and the women who worked with them, often obscured from history – Edith Farnsworth, Lilly Reich, and Laretta Vinciarelli. Robertson's response to the absences of these women in the archive is not simply a work of retrieval. Her artistic practice figures motifs of absence and presence when returning to their work, and to other artists and architects who come later, and who also frame and reframe these earlier contributions.

In so doing, Robertson intervenes as an artist into feminist architectural history – producing links that are visual and spatial, indexical and associative – that I will come to describe here as 'figurations.'<sup>1</sup> These relations operate across – *trans* – media, genre, history and geography – combining practices of choreography, design, film-making, photography, sculpture, and textiles. Her works do much more than return others to the canon, or even to return to others, rather they question what it means to return, turning the canon over, addressing the gaps of history through different registers of materiality – light, shadow, reflection, matter, breath – proposing instead re-turns.

Diffraction owes as much to a thick legacy of feminist theorising about difference as it does to physics. As such, I want to begin by re-turning – not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again – iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetimematterings), new diffraction patterns.<sup>2</sup>

So writes Karen Barad in her 2014 article, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,' in which she makes a conceptual distinction between return and re-turn:

in the case of Eileen Gray, Robertson re-turns her experiments with light and air, colour and space, through fragments of colour, arranging as if through the glare caught in a camera lens, drawing attention to the way her works activate a sense of being with. In *Echo*, this 'being with' includes artists like Liz Deschenes and Louise Lawler, the latter, who revisits Judd's sculptures in a different light; Laura Martínez de Guereñu and Frida Escobedo, who reenact and remember the history and the spaces of Mies and Reich's Barcelona Pavilion (1929); and Nora Wendl who revisits client Edith Farnsworth's occupation of her own home designed by Mies in 1945-51.

## **across the light**

In looking ahead, towards the garden, I see greenery beyond. A translucent black curtain pauses in crossing the glass. Precisely positioned, it half fills the window, filtering the light, and partially blocking my gaze.

As if in response to the gently brushing fronds of green, changing flashes of foliage pulse along the adjacent wall. Trees tremble against the sky in one stretched rhomboid; in another, fresh leaves shimmer in their own watery reflection, a scalloped edge forming one side of a dark frame.

In Robertson's film, *indivisible (Y)* (2018), Escobedo's *Serpentine Pavilion* (2018), a structure composed of screens ingeniously constructed of concrete tiles, and entered along cuts across the space, encloses two small chambers, one large central courtyard, and a pool. The pavilion combines two geometries, one facing the gallery orthogonally, and the other positioned diagonally, marking passage in, out, and across the pavilion, and indexing the true north of the Greenwich meridian.<sup>3</sup>

Positioned diagonally. Cut on the bias. Running against the grain. In creating a methodology that is interdisciplinary, Julia Kristeva has spoken of the need to 'construct a diagonal axis.'<sup>4</sup>

*indivisible xyz* (2018) is framed obliquely, projected from *align* (2024), a welded steel sculpture also constructed using diagonal planes. Its shape derives from Escobedo's triangular pavilion pool, which, as the architect describes, with its reflecting surface, references, but also translates, the pool of Reich and Mies' Barcelona Pavilion from 1929, to the Serpentine in London some ninety years later.<sup>5</sup> While *indivisible xyz* makes visible a slice along this pool's meniscus, the sky's reflection in water posi-

tioned as a quivering space of the in between; *align* is fragile, trembling on thin legs, vibrating as footsteps are taken across the wooden floor boards.

Escobedo discusses how her pavilion was designed in terms of fragments – planes and diagonals – creating intimate and collective spaces, and how the lattice wall produces different degrees of transparency – translucent and opaque – as it responds to changing movements of light and shadow throughout the day. When she describes a journey through the pavilion ‘like a montage of spaces that happen, one right next to the other,’ her voice reminds me of Cristina Iglesias introducing her solo show at the Whitechapel Galley in 2003. An exhibition that contained works such as *Untitled: Passage I* (2002), *Vegetation Rooms*, *Untitled (Celosia I)* (1996), and *Untitled (Celosia VII)* (2002), Iglesias talked of how, in moving through the seven works in the exhibition, ‘some things you see will remind you of others.’ She mentioned in particular *déjà vu* as ‘a memory that keeps coming back.’<sup>6</sup>

In responding to her work, first in 2003, and then again, almost twenty years later,<sup>7</sup> I referred to Peter Krapp, and his discussion of how *déjà vu*, as a ‘recurring structure[s] of the cover up and the secret,’<sup>8</sup> can be connected to ‘the temporal folding of two “memories”’ in Sigmund Freud’s ‘screen memory.’<sup>9</sup> I noted how in Freud’s different temporal models of screen memory, the layering effect of the fold occurs in at least two directions; first, when an earlier memory screens a later one;<sup>10</sup> second, when a later memory covers an earlier one; and finally when both memories appear to emerge from the same historical moment.<sup>11</sup>

What to make of these folded memories, voluntary and involuntary, and the spaces created out of remembering?

Michel de Certeau argues that psychoanalysis and history ‘have two different ways of distributing the space of memory’:

They conceive of the relation between the past and the present differently. Psychoanalysis recognizes the past *in* the present; historiography places them *beside* one another. Psychoanalysis treats the relation as one of imbrication (one in the place of the other) ... Historiography conceives the relation as one of succession (one after the other) ... Two strategies of time thus confront one another.<sup>12</sup>

Artistic installations that combine media, time-based and otherwise, can stage this temporal confrontation by positioning the viewer in threshold spaces, staging experiences that are transitional and between. In film, sequence can prioritise succession and create dissolves, while montage can produce juxtapositions, simultaneous scenes that combine sameness and difference. In architecture, spaces can be designed as progressions, as centralised, as networks, as clusters, as grids or as free plans; all these can be investigated in the journeys we take as users through them.

Here we are moving through the rooms of *Echo*. At first we might head from the front to the back of the house. In response to the offer of a staircase, we might go up, or instead hear through a door to the side, then drift to and fro, around and back, later being drawn up and then down again. *Echo's* artworks mediate our passage through space, and produce in flowing, a sense of one place after another, and in pausing, an appreciation of what two, or more, things can do when situated beside one another. But there is also hesitation, and movements back and forth, visiting and revisiting experiences, turning and returning, looking and relooking, framing and reframing, all from different points of view, between rooms, into alcoves, through windows, doors and screens, across scenes, both filmic and fabric.

The hanging black fabric screen of *Chamber* (2024) filters the light, pausing my view. Flowing around the corner of the room, it stops before meeting a moving image – reflected and obliquely projected – on a juxtaposed plane, itself facing the rhomboidal frame that supports the origin of its projection. This arrangement of frames and screens gestures back to previous works here and elsewhere, but also anticipate what is yet to come – hanging fabrics, welded steel frames, projected images – geometric variations in subsequent rooms: ‘Some things you see will remind you of others.’

### **figures fade, then reappear**

As I come through the door, I face a welded steel frame, that sits orthogonally to the right of a fireplace. To my side is another, made in the round, sitting more centrally in the room. Beyond, at the bay window, hangs a fabric, its woven geometric pattern gently distorting in the changing light and shifting air currents.

Two female dancers across a white space. They match one another's gestures, coming together, moving apart, their feet beating a dull rhythm, their breath rising and falling. The figures are screened periodically by a rippling fabric – red, grey, then red again, interrupting, then dissolving.

Flowing, blowing, floating, beating, fading, breathing, marking, pulsing ... time. If the use of the fabric curtain or 'curtain wall',<sup>13</sup> in modern architecture is connected historically to one figure, then it is to the exhibition designer Lilly Reich. Reich, with her history of designing the display of artefacts, fashion, fabrics and other materials, as well as furniture, and also collaborating with Mies on many projects for exhibition and housing design. Some of these involved the design and positioning of glass and fabric screens, most famously in the Velvet and Silk Café at the *Die Mode der Dame* (Women's Fashion) exhibition for Berlin's *Funkturmhalle* in 1927. Although there are no drawings of the cafe, installation photographs show how several small spaces flowed into one another 'partially defined by draperies of black, orange, and red velvet as well as black and lemon-yellow silk suspended from gracefully curved metal rods.'<sup>14</sup> As Matilda McQuaid describes, the invention here was the 'floating wall.' This idea was developed later at the German Pavilion at the International Exposition at Barcelona in 1929, and the Tugendhat House in Brno, now the Czech Republic, in 1928-30. Both architectural designs, collaborations between Mies and Reich, set an important precedent for Mies' design of the Farnsworth House (1949-51).<sup>15</sup> And sometime later Reich herself would 'enhance[d] her unusual status as a furniture designer,' becoming the only woman 'to design a full series of furniture made of tubular steel.'<sup>16</sup>

*Void* (2023) and *incurve* (2024) are positioned across the room from one another: two figures of steel – one orthogonal, the other round – in dialogue with each other. Along the wall, another dialogue is in motion: two figures dance in close correspondence. Robertson's film, *my heart or shall I say one of my hearts is in building* (2022), presents two female dancers performing a sequence of positions and movements she choreographed in reference to the plan of the Velvet and Silk Café, and a quote from Reich provides the film's title: 'My real heart — or let us say one of my hearts — is in building, after all, and I am happy that I am still able to return to this love from time to time.'<sup>17</sup>

These words are taken from the research of Magdalena Droste, whose essay features in the catalogue of an exhibition on Reich curated by McQuaid. Reich talks here of how in 1928 she turned down the offer of a job heading up a new fashion institute in Munich in order to continue working in exhibition design, a position which was to change when Mies became the director of the Bauhaus in Dessau in September 1930, and Reich was offered, in January 1932, the role of director of the weaving studio and the interiors workshop. By bringing together wall paper designs and designs for

printed fabrics, this position connected architecture, a traditionally male domain, and textiles, the only part of the Bauhaus to employ women at the time.<sup>18</sup>

In identifying the possible points of exit from phallogocentric modes of thought, Rosi Braidotti claims Gilles Deleuze for the feminist project, stressing how his philosophy of the Figure allows the emergence of new images of thought.<sup>19</sup> She argues: ‘The notion of the *figural* (as opposed to the more conventional aesthetic category of the “figurative”) is central to this project; it stresses the need for a positive, assertive style of thought, which expresses an active state of being.’<sup>20</sup> This position, Braidotti claims, ‘results in the elaboration of a new philosophical style that aims at expressing new, postmetaphysical figurations of the subject.’<sup>21</sup> Following the feminist and materialist account she gives of difference in *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti goes on to develop the ethics of her nomadic philosophy in a subsequent book, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*,<sup>22</sup> describing how ‘[t]he notion of “figurations,” the quest for an adequate style, as opposed to “metaphors,” emerges as crucial to Deleuze’s use of the imagination as a concept.’<sup>23</sup> For Braidotti:

Figurations are not mere metaphors, but rather markers of more concretely situated historical positions. A figuration is the expression of one’s specific positioning in space and time. It marks certain territorial or geopolitical coordinates, but it also points out one’s sense of genealogy of historical inscription. Figurations deterritorialise and destabilise the certainties of the subject and allow for a proliferation of situated or ‘micro’ narratives of self and others.<sup>24</sup>

### **through the window**

Light falls. From the bay window facing the garden, I turn towards the front of the house, where three tall windows cast shadows across the exposed wooden floor of a wide room. Outside a background, a street where traffic flows, and one red bus passes, then another. In the foreground, an intricate set of works are configured, a conversation between them begins.

To the left of the fire place is *Lucent* (2021) a moving image projection of a sculptural work *Stereograph #36* by artist Liz Deschenes. Its projector sits on a low level frame, which offers *Orange Sound (for Laretta Vinciarelli)* (2024), a photographic image

placed horizontally. Below the central window, *Shaft* (2024), a textile work in monochrome stripes, runs across the wooden floor boards and into the room. Opposite *Lucent*, *My Fox River House Project* (2024), is projected into the alcove, from *prism* (2024). The orthogonal structure of its frame has been skewed, echoing the form of *Shaft*, and suggesting how *My Fox River House Project* (the name Edith Farnsworth gave to the house when it was being designed and built), might be viewed in perspective.

*My Fox River House Project* has more often been known as the Farnsworth House, the building that Mies designed for, and with, Edith Farnsworth, his client.<sup>25</sup> It has been celebrated in architectural history as a manifestation of the modernist free plan, which, as architectural historian Jonathan Hill describes, is ‘familiarily associated with visual transparency and spatial continuity.’ In discussing how the design calibrates the relation between architecture and nature, Hill notes how ‘Viewing nature from a sealed glass enclosure was a familiar theme in early modernist architecture’,<sup>26</sup> and quotes Mies as saying, ‘If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from outside.’<sup>27</sup> But as Hill argues, when nature is seen on all sides, ‘as in a panorama rather than a picture’, then, rather than ‘commanding the view, the viewer feels exposed.’<sup>28</sup> With the design of the house placing the services – two bathrooms and a kitchen – in a wooden box in the centre of the plan, and leaving the rest of the living space open to the perimeter glass curtain wall, the client’s vulnerability to gazes from the outside has been argued as key to the dispute that emerged with her architect.<sup>29</sup>

Architectural historian and artist Nora Wendl’s research collaborations have endeavoured to ‘re-store Farnsworth’s place in the house,’ including, as Brian Goldstein recounts, ‘replac[ing] its historically inaccurate furniture with the items that Farnsworth herself chose for her home.’ With Scott Mehaffey and Rob Kleinschmidt, Wendl researched the furniture and decor using historical photographs, including chaise lounge chairs, dining room furniture, a daybed, and decorative objects<sup>30</sup>. Robertson filmed *My Fox River House Project* at that time.

It snowed. The landscape and the building within it turned monochrome. Silence settled.

Robertson’s film, *My Fox River House Project* (2022/24), presents a frozen white landscape viewed through windows. A cream curtain is pulled to the side. We next see it pulled across slightly, and later a little more, until the curtain fills the whole screen,



its creaminess flowing and rippling. After a while, the edge of the window frame is visible, and then the pearlescent curve of a lampshade. Suddenly, rather abruptly, a wooden panel obstructs the view. When the scene opens out again, the curtain is restricted to a narrow cream stripe running vertically through the landscape, parallel to the brown-grey columns of the winter trees, and cutting across the black water that flows horizontally.

We shift to a wooden door viewed in elevation. Next we see a long tall strip of that door in section, its silver handle projecting to the side. Then a bathroom interior appears as a restricted narrow slice, followed by the vertical folded drapes of a white shower curtain.

At times reflections of movement in the room are perceptible, a ghostly layer briefly glimpsed across the glass. In its perambulations of the plan, and circling the perimeter surfaces of the building, the camera turns towards and away from the river, creating exquisite abstracted tableaus, compositions of nature and architecture, soft and hard surfaces, vertically arranged with horizontal dashes.

The curtain contained, then blows free.

The river flows, its surface light, melting ice floats with reflections of cloud.

If echo describes the reflection of sound, then what kind of echo does light make? Reflections? Refractions? Diffractions? Not all surfaces return things from where they came, the same, and certainly not in mirrored symmetry. The passage of light *through* matters – the differing and deferring offered by cloud, curtain, glass, ice, snow.

In 2020, during the unsettling quiet of the COVID-19 pandemic, artist Louise Lawler photographed the Donald Judd retrospective at MoMA, New York, at night – *LIGHTS OFF, AFTER HOURS, IN THE DARK* (2021).

Velvet darkness. Rich shadows. Silken highlights. Sleek edges. Judd's sculptures become huge silent hulks, captured in sequential frames, revealing the subtleties of darkness, and night's mysterious qualities to keep secrets, withhold meaning.<sup>31</sup>

Robertson borrows a black and white fragment – an oblique shadow of a window frame lying across the wooden boards of the MoMA floor in the darkness – and transforms this into a fragment of tufted carpet. The changing colour of the yarn is a record of one shifting light condition, but *Shaft's* monochrome stripes also respond to the light that comes in from this window, here in *Echo*. *Shaft* contains traces of text,

which Robertson wrote, drawing connections across the work of Eileen Gray, Laretta Vinciarelli and Virginia Woolf. Together, the text and the textile produce an optical patterning of interspersed spaces and lines, a textual interweave of presence and absence, fabricated of word and yarn.

Liz Deschenes' sculpture *Stereograph 36* also registers ambient light conditions. When shown at Large Glass, London in 2021, Robertson's *Lucent* witnessed the movement of light and shadow on its surface – how the silvery surfaces *Stereograph 36's* photographic paper changed over time in response to the shifting light of the viewing conditions. In projecting a record of these light shifts, *Lucent* becomes *Stereograph 36's* displaced double. The subtle dialogue between *Stereograph 36* and *Shaft* is refigured in the relation between *Lucent* and *Shaft* concerning the trace, as both substance and image of a moment in time. While *Shaft* rematerialises the displaced moment of the Lawler photograph back into a haptic spatial experience, *Lucent* dematerialises Deschenes' light sensitive sculpture into projected light.

Both Judd in art, and Mies in architecture, represent a minimalist brand of modernism, that was concerned with light and form. In the early 1970s, Judd moved to Marfa, Texas, where he is known for his architectural interventions on the abandoned army base purchased by the Dia Art Foundation in 1971 to house long-term art installations of Judd and his contemporaries. Architect Laretta Vinciarelli joined him there in the late 1970s. From her extensive research, Rebecca Siefert has argued that during their time together, Vinciarelli and Judd collaborated on some of his most well-known architectural projects, including work in Providence, Rhode Island, Cleveland, Ohio, and Marfa, and how Vinciarelli had a vital impact on Judd's work in architecture and design.<sup>33</sup>

MoMA acquired some of Vinciarelli's early works on paper, such as the series *The Non-Homogenous Grid* (1973–74), in 1974, and *Orange Sound* (1999), sometime later, in 1999.<sup>32</sup> This series of seven images, water colour on paper, pay homage to light, giving an auditory note to visual phenomena – the sound of light on water. Robertson places her own photographic image of one of this series facing upwards. In *Orange Sound (for Laretta Vinciarelli)*, a digital print on aluminium, Robertson's own presence is reflected in the glass, a barely registered whisper. Gently perched on welded steel, the frame cropped, an oblique orange light hovers. The colour is luminous, resonant with emotion. The memory of sunlight in the American southwest, refracted through New York, glows in a London room.

Explorations of the grid, and the combinatorial possibilities it offers for arranging space are a strong feature of minimal and conceptual art. Vinciarelli's work investigates the role of the grid in configuring architectural typologies, specifically the courtyard. Like the screen or *celosia*, the courtyard or *patio* allows both privacy and the free circulation of air, making it well suited to hot and dry climates, including that of southwest Texas. Siefert notes that Vinciarelli argued against the abstraction of the grid and 'the universal building type,' preferring an architecture that responds with a sense for the 'specificity of place.' With reference to drawings like 'Hangar and Courtyard' (1980) and 'The Seven Courtyards' (1981), Siefert discusses how Vinciarelli engages with the history of Italian building culture and 'the dynamic between openness and enclosure' of such elements as the pergola found in micro-gardens. Such forms Vinciarelli employed in her designs for a garden at the Walker House in Marfa 1979, and likened to a 'spatial fabric.'<sup>33</sup>

In a text written near the end of his life, Sigmund Freud distinguishes between construction and interpretation as different forms of analytic technique:

'Interpretation' applies to something that one does to some single element of the material, such as an association or a parapraxis. But it is a 'construction' when one lays before the subject of the analysis a piece of his early history that he has forgotten ...<sup>34</sup>

For Freud, according to Jean Laplanche, any construction or interpretation of material made by an analyst is always a reconstruction,<sup>35</sup> but for Laplanche, analysis is first and foremost a method of deconstruction (analysis), where the analyst is tasked with the aim of clearing a way for a new construction. Laplanche writes of Penelope, who in the myth weaves with the sole aim of unweaving, to gain time until Ulysses returns. He discusses the Greek word *analuein*, which is to analyse, to undo, to unweave. He sees the work of unweaving 'as the very model of psychoanalysis': 'unweaving so that a new fabric can be woven, disentangling to *allow* the formation of new knots'.<sup>36</sup>

Woolf describes her process of literary scene-making as involving the composition of knots:

These scenes, by the way, are not altogether a literary device – a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable little threads. Innumerable threads there were; still, if I stopped to disentangle, I could collect a number. But whatever the reason may be, I find that scene making is my

natural way of marking the past. A scene always comes to the top; arranged, representative.<sup>37</sup>

In her autobiographical writing, in 'Sketch of the Past,' in one of the earliest scenes Woolf remembers, when she hears waves on the beach outside, from behind a yellow blind, relates sound to light through a textile experience:

... of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing the splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here ...<sup>38</sup>

### **while ascending**

I encounter another scene, and remember, again, how one thing reminds me of another.

A hand woven double cloth, black and white, hangs on the stairs. *keep the mystery* (2024) reminds me of how *Shaft* translates the trace of one reflecting light condition on a surface into a receptacle for receiving another, and how *Lucent's* recording of an earlier scene of light and shadow projects this into a different space, creating another situation.

Fabric returns light through refraction and diffraction as well as reflection. Depending on the looseness of the weave, a textile can both diffract and refract light. Some light waves may pass through the gaps between threads, creating optical patterns and diffracted textures, others may be refracted by the medium itself.

Optical intra-actions. Echoes of a kind.

The light conditions on Judd's sculptures recorded in Lawler's photographs, the received light registered by Deschenes' photograms, all these reflecting, refracting and diffracting through Robertson's material mediations and sculptural choreography.

Turned and re-turned.

I am reminded again of Barad, who in a related footnote to the quote above, suggests:

While returning might have the association of reflection (how light returns from where it came once it hits the mirror), re-turning ... is about diffracting.

The play here between reflection/returning and diffraction/re-turning, separated only by the mere mark of a hyphen, is an important reminder that reflection and diffraction are not opposites, not mutually exclusive, but rather different optical intra-actions highlighting different patterns, optics, geometries that often overlap in practice.<sup>39</sup>

These knots that bind, those entanglements that ensue; these threads that shuttle back and forth weaving patterns, those strands that slip away unravelling the structure ... Textile provides another set of geometries, both material and metaphorical, for grasping the intra-relations between and across Robertson's works situated in *Echo's* ground floor.

### **in an upstairs room**

Laplanche argues that Freud's aim was not to restore historical continuity by reintegrating lost memories, but rather to produce a history of the unconscious. In this history – one of discontinuity, burial and resurgence – the difference is that the turning points or moments of transformation are internal rather than external, described in terms of 'scenes' as opposed to the 'events' of history.<sup>40</sup> In reworking Freud's discussion of the kinds of material presented for analysis, Laplanche notes how it is in memories and fragments of memories that 'the major scenes are to be found', 'scattered, fragmented or repeated'.<sup>41</sup>

This last room of *Echo* is a 'major' scene, but it is not a final one. In returning us to Reich and Mies, to the Barcelona Pavilion, and to a 'piece of early history,' we are witness to the performance of another re-turn:

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.<sup>42</sup>

Robertson writes here of *Re-enactment* (2020), footage of which forms the subject of her film *Thoroughfare* (2020), which moves in and out of the spaces of the Barcelona Pavilion, re-turning time and again to the pool, where the water surface, in catching the light, casts reflections on the walls behind.

The camera pans back.

We see the vertical polished red onyx wall, with its strangely repeating patterns and mirror symmetries of geology, reminding me of the inkblots of the psychological Rorschach test.

The camera moves in again.

People are passing through the pavilion in archival footage framed on an exhibition screen.

A flag blows in the wind. The shadow of another flag flutters on the wall behind.

Light glances across the glass top of a display case where archival documents appear to float, becoming a floor of distributed textual patterns.

Images of the Barcelona Pavilion, taken in 1929, dissolve into views of those images as they were presented in *Re-enactment* in 2020.

Robertson continues:

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. ... 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.

We see an uncanny doubling, the raised arms of *Alba* (or Dawn) Georg Kolbe's bronze female figure who stands facing south in the pool in the archival footage, is seen next to Dawn, again, in Robertson's filming of *Re-enactment*.

Dawn's image flips.

I remember too, the other reconstruction at play in this architectural history. The German Pavilion, originally designed by Mies and Reich, for the International Exhibition in Barcelona in 1929, was rebuilt in 1986. This Dawn is a reproduction of that Dawn, today located elsewhere, in Berlin, as Catalina Mejia Moreno recounts, opposite Morning.<sup>43</sup>

Framing and reframing. Turning and returning. Returning and re-turning.

A red curtain ripples.

Absence and presence. Construction and reconstruction. Repetition and reversal.

Now and then. Now and again.

What to make of these re-enactments, re-materialisations, re-figurations?

Figuration allows a feminist re-turning of minimalism. If abstraction rejects the figural, then figuration works across the two:

As a concept, figuration refers to the creative *act* of producing form for thought but also to the *process* of the taking shape of thought figures, as well as the result of this act and process. As such figuration cuts across traditional categorizations of the *figurative* versus the *abstract* as two distinct categories of representation in art history.<sup>44</sup>

And when figuration, as a practice of feminist materialism, takes situated positionality as not only a perceptual, but a cultural and historical experience, then minimalism's take on the body, which can run the risk of foreclosing the political, can be recharged in a self-reflective mode. Robertson's work points to the possibilities for addressing absences or gaps in history, but not simply by representing. Rather a certain ambivalence is palpable, performed through screens and curtains that reveal and conceal, permit and refuse.

Robertson's research into art and architectural history, feminist and other, is present, often obliquely, at the periphery, somehow in the shadow of a reflection you didn't quite notice at the time. In investigating the sensual phenomena – visual and tactile – generated by art and architecture made by others, out of specific

material and historical conditions, Robertson's own work registers social and cultural undercurrents. How often does the desire to see, and to know, in the films, in the gallery, get frustrated, unexpectedly, by a view that is withheld, only later to open out again.

In *Time and Narrative* Paul Ricoeur focuses on configuration or emplotment as the device held in common between historical and fictional narratives that allows one to 'measure' these two narrative modes, of historiography and literature, historical and fictional, by the 'same standard,' and so to examine their temporal relations.<sup>45</sup> The distinction Ricoeur makes between the time of narrating and the time of the narrative itself, resonate with Rosine Perelberg's description of how 'different dimensions of time unfold' within the psychoanalytic setting, where 'a tension between the old and the new [is] set in motion.'<sup>46</sup>

Two white hexagons float around the room.

Caught in the light, their apparent movement shifts me.

Something is set in motion.



## Endnotes

- 1 Jane Rendell, 'Figurations,' *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis: Spaces of Transition*, (London: IB Tauris, 2017), pp. 209-224, and Jane Rendell, 'Figurations,' <https://www.practisingethics.org/principles#figuration>.
- 2 Karen Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,' *Parallax*, (2014) 20:3, 168-187, p. 168.
- 3 [Frida Escobedo interview: Serpentine Pavilion 2018](#)
- 4 Julia Kristeva, 'Institutional Interdisciplinarity in Theory and Practice: an interview,' in Alex Coles and Alexia Defert (eds) *The Anxiety of Interdisciplinarity, De-, Dis-, Ex-*, vol. 2 (London: Black Dog Publishing, 1998) pp. 3–21, p. 6.
- 5 Frida Escobedo speaking at 55mins, <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/serpentine-pavilion-2018-designed-frida-escobedo/>
- 6 Quotes from Cristina Iglesias taken from notes I made of her verbal presentation at the opening of *Cristina Iglesias* (7 April – 1 June 2003) Whitechapel Art Gallery, London.
- 7 Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, (London: IB Tauris, 2010) and Jane Rendell, 'Still Life: on returning to the theme of déjà vu in the work of Cristina Iglesias,' *Liquid Sculpture: The Public Art of Cristina Iglesias*, edited by Iwona Blazwick and Richard Noble (Hatje Cantz, 2021).
- 8 Peter Krapp, *Déjà Vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p. xxiv.
- 9 Krapp, *Déjà Vu*, p. 5.
- 10 Sigmund Freud, 'Screen Memories' [1899] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume III (1893–1899): Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962) pp. 299–322, p. 322.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, 'The Psychopathology of Everyday Life', [1901], *The Standard Edition*, pp. vii–296, pp. 43–44.
- 12 Michel de Certeau, 'Psychoanalysis and its History', [1978], *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Massumi, foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 3–16, p. 4.
- 13 For a fascinating discussion of the role of the 'hanging curtain partition' in Mies and Reich's interiors and their relation to the architectural 'curtain wall,' and its connection to 'hide and seek,' to 'Oriental' décor, and to military tents, see Marianne Egger, 'Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich's Fabric Partitions at the Tugendhat House,' *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, 16:2 (Spring–Summer 2009), pp. 66-90.
- 14 Matilda McQuaid, 'Lily Reich and the Art of Exhibition Design,' Matilda McQuaid, *Lilly Reich : designer and architect* (Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 25.

- 15 Matilda McQuaid, 'Lily Reich,' p. 25.
- 16 Magdalena Droste, 'Lily Reich: Her career as an artist,' Matilda McQuaid, *Lilly Reich : designer and architect* (Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 54.
- 17 Droste, 'Lily Reich,' p. 55.
- 18 Droste, 'Lily Reich,' p. 55.
- 19 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 113.
- 20 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 113.
- 21 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 113.
- 22 Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions, On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- 23 Braidotti, *Transpositions*, p. 170.
- 24 Braidotti, *Transpositions*, p. 90.
- 25 For a feminist analysis of their relationship and the role of gender in the design, see for example, Alice T. Friedman, 'People Who Live in Glass Houses: Edith Farnsworth, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Philip Johnson,' *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social And Architectural History*, (Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 127–59.
- 26 Jonathan Hill, *Weather Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 201.
- 27 Jonathan Hill, *Weather Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 208.
- 28 Jonathan Hill, *Weather Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 211.
- 29 For a discussion of this dispute, see for example, Friedman, 'People Who Live in Glass Houses,' pp. 127–59.
- 30 *Edith Farnsworth Reconsidered* is a part of the National Trust's *Where Women Made History* project. <https://saap.unm.edu/news-events/2019/04/poetry-and-place-nora-wendl.html>
- 31 See for example, <https://galeriegreteameert.com/louise-lawler-light-off-after-hours-in-the-dark/>
- 32 See for example, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/944>
- 33 Rebecca Siefert, 'Lauretta Vinciarelli: Into the Light: Her Collaborations with Donald Judd,' *Woman's Art Journal*, 38:1 (Spring/Summer 2017). See also Rebecca Siefert, *Into the Light: The Art and Architecture of Lauretta Vinciarelli* (Lund Humphries, 2021).
- 34 Sigmund Freud, 'Constructions in Analysis' [1937], *The Standard Edition*, pp. 255–70.

- 35 Freud, 'Constructions in Analysis', p. 261.
- 36 Jean Laplanche, 'Time and the Other', [1992], translated by Luke Thurston, in *Essays on Otherness*, edited by John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 234–59, pp. 251–2.
- 37 Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writing*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind, with a new introduction by Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 2002), ebook.
- 38 Woolf, *Moments of Being*.
- 39 Barad, 'Diffracting Diffraction,' pp. 184-5.
- 40 Jean Laplanche, 'Interpretation between Determinism and Hermeneutics' [1992], translated by Philip Slotkin and revised by Jean Laplanche, in *Essays on Otherness*, pp. 138–65, p. 148.
- 41 Laplanche, 'Interpretation', p. 161, and Freud, 'Constructions in Analysis', p. 258.
- 42 See for example, <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/17463/>
- 43 See Catalina Mejía Moreno, 'There was once an empty site,' *arq* (2020), 24.2, 129–140. Through the work of Victor Burgin and his encounter with Dawn, Moreno develops a detailed argument concerning the gendering of absence and presence, and with Burgin, argues for absence as a feminist strategy for resisting the potential return to patriarchal order that can occur as a result of reaffirming primary presence.
- 44 Iris van der Tuin and Nanna Verhoeff, *Critical Concepts for the Creative Humanities*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), p. 156.
- 45 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, v. 2 [1984], translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 157.
- 46 Rosine Jozef Perelberg, *Time, Space and Phantasy* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 132.

**Jane Rendell** is Professor of Critical Spatial Practice at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, where she co-initiated and teaches on the MA Situated Practice, and on the MA Architectural History. She supervises history, theory and design PhDs in architecture, art, urbanism and experimental writing.

Rendell's research, writing and pedagogic practice crosses architecture, art, feminism, history and psychoanalysis. She has introduced concepts of 'critical spatial practice' and 'site-writing' through her authored books: *The Architecture of Psychoanalysis* (2017), *Silver* (2016), *Site-Writing* (2010), *Art and Architecture* (2006), and *The Pursuit of Pleasure* (2002).

<https://www.janerendell.co.uk/>

**Helen Robertson's** work has been shown nationally and internationally including Hayward Gallery London, Stadthaus Ulm Germany, Matt's Gallery London, Arnolfini Gallery Bristol. Recent exhibitions include *Hanging in the Balance Five Years* London 2023, *The Undersides of Practice* APT gallery 2020, *Bauhaus: Utopia in Crisis* Camberwell Space 2019, *Come and go. Halt extreme left.* Winchester Gallery, Winchester School of Art 2019, *Drift* Thames Side Studios Gallery, London 2019. Recent performances include *its song* a performance with dancer Antoinette Brooks Daw for *Architectures in Air* Brixton Library 2023, [these roarers] Whitstable Biennale 2018 (in collaboration with Lucy Gunning and Bernice Donszelmann), *pine beech pine* Architectural Association Hooke Park 2017. Helen Robertson is supported by Studio Wayne McGregor through the FreeSpace programme, by The Acme Jonathan Harvey Tenant Award in 2024, Research at Central Saint Martins and UAL.

<http://www.helenrobertson.net>

Published to coincide with  
***Echo***

Helen Robertson  
22 June - 27 July 2024

Cover: **Helen Robertson**  
*film Still from Thoroughfare 2020*

DANIELLE ARNAUD  
123 Kennington Road  
London SE11 6SF  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7735 8292  
[www.daniellearnaud.com](http://www.daniellearnaud.com)