Nora Wendl, *Glass House (Levitation)*, 2013. 24 x 36" C-print

INHABITATION | CONTROL
BY
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# attempts at breaking into a glass house

historiography
modernism
poetry
architecture
projection

Nora Wendl, *Glass House (Levitation) 2*, 2013. 24 x 36" C-print



It is impossible to occupy architectural history. The ephemera that stands in place of architecture, that serves to tell its history – photographs, texts, correspondence, exhibitions, drawings, paintings, sketches, models and other forms of representation – all belong to a temporal dimension that we cannot occupy.

Perhaps for this reason, architectural archives are full of selectively curated historical ephemera that conspire to create an official and narratological history of a particular structure – one that, through its cohesiveness, we can comprehend. When more than one archive on any particular structure can be found, questions arise and the narratological history of architecture begins to chip away. This essay is such a chipping.

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Consider the photograph. Before the photograph comes the subject. In between the human eye and the subject, a lens is placed – the lens of a camera, perhaps, which will focus the scene's visible wavelengths of light into a reproduction of what the eye sees. Light will enter the lens and fall on a light-sensitive surface within the camera to produce a negative image. This negative image on film will then be placed in an enlarger and reversed – exposed to light-sensitive paper to reveal the scene. The result, the photograph, is a glimpse into a temporal dimension now lost – a time that cannot be re-entered. It is as distant to us as fiction. And yet, photographs – records of light as it fell in a particular place and time, as it fell through the lens of a camera and as it burned away silver halide crystals on the film – are one of our most direct links with history.

What is history? And where does it begin? On December 31, 1950, Dr. Edith Farnsworth spent her first evening in the Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe, Plano, Illinois, 1951). In her memoirs, she describes the evening as uneasy: the house was not quite finished, spots and strokes of white paint were still visible on the uncurtained expanses of glass that were her exterior walls, and her dinner, a can of soup warmed on a hot plate, was prepared by the light of one 60-watt bulb. This is where architectural history typically ends: with occupation.

Indeed, the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive at the Lily Auchincloss Study Center for Architecture and Design in the Museum of Modern Art – the official archive of the American phase of Mies' career – is a collection of ephemera that strangely denies Farnsworth's occupation of the glass house. It is a history dedicated to the artefactual presence of the Farnsworth House and the artefactual presence, or occupation, of the architect: we see the architect on the terrace, smoking a cigar, alone or lingering with colleagues, students, visiting architects touring the house under construction. The photographs that fill this archive are, after all, primarily those commissioned by Mies, who hired Chicago-based photographer Hedrich Blessing and his staff to document the house during its construction and just after Farnsworth's occupation of it. In the photographs taken during the house's construction, we see Farnsworth clearly only in strange and peripheral roles – tending to her garden, with the steel of the Farnsworth House rising up in the background as if an afterthought. In later photographs, those taken once she had occupied the house, we hover round the building's exterior – the house is presented in striking and formal contrast to its lush surroundings, a Midwestern floodplain. The curtains are drawn in strategic ways that allow us only partial views of the interior. Whether these choices were made to provide Dr. Farnsworth privacy, or to remove her corporeal presence from the history of the house is unclear. What is obvious is that she is nowhere within these images, despite her investment in the design and construction of the house. And the very few photographs that we do see from the interior of the house are staged and strange. In a photograph from within the south-facing living space, we see Farnsworth's bed on the travertine floor covered by a white chenille blanket and, in the foreground and far background of the photograph, a composition of chairs – six in total, and two small tables. They are artful compositions that lack any logic of domestic inhabitation.

Stranger still, no body is here. No body *could* be here.

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I am standing alone in the dark space of a small wood outbuilding at a residency on the western coast of Oregon trying to piece together an architectural history. One by one, I project images onto the cheap scrim I have hung at the back of this shed. The warm summer light filtering under the door illuminates the detritus on the floor: dead leaves, husks of insects, dirt and sand, the ephemera that constitutes the history of this shed. The projector hums in the dark, filling the space with its own, colourless light.

Advance slide. I adjust the lens of the projector to see the image as large as possible, a photograph of the interior southwest corner of the house. Here, Farnsworth has placed a set of dark wooden chairs facing each other on a thick ornamental rug. On the terrace, seen beyond the interior of the house, her two Chinese Fu dogs face one another. Roller blinds are curled up at the top of the glass walls. The whole photograph is a confusing play of reflections, as objects that face one another (as if on either side of a mirror) are also actually mirrored in the glass walls of the house. Only the inhabitant of a glass house could have known how to compose such an image in actual space.

This is one in a series of photographs held by the Newberry Library in Chicago, a voluminous archive that has confused both the history and discourse of the Farnsworth House. Photographed by Plano, Illinois-based 'Gorman's Child Photography', as the credit stamped on the back of each photograph awkwardly announces, the series of photographs documents the house as Dr. Farnsworth occupied it. These records are, in a sense, doubly *wrong*. They are an affront to Mies' drawings of the house, which predicted furniture of his own design. Beyond this, the compositions of the photographs reveal the mercurial nature of a glass house – its tendency to reflect, to mirror and to distort one's understanding of space. Indeed, these photographs remake the Farnsworth House.[1] They stand against architectural history. A testament to the deviousness of these photographs is that they have never circulated in architectural histories or theorisations of the house – and copyrights surrounding these photographs make their circulation very difficult, unless one finds an unorthodox method of presenting them.

Nora Wendl, *Glass House (Bedroom)*, 2013. 24 x 36″ C-print

In a library, I might observe them studiously. But I am standing in wood shed, and here, I am not observing but physically reckoning with a series of photographs that comprise a largely unacknowledged architectural history. How might I inhabit such a history? How might I inhabit the space between an historian's casual detachment and the interior perspective offered here, through the body of Dr. Farnsworth? The projected photograph flickers in black and white. The pixelated outlines of travertine, primavera, steel and glass travel through the scrim, which undulates lightly in the breeze drifting under and above the shed's doors, and ultimately come to rest on the white wall two feet behind the scrim. This distance between scrim and wall, two projected surfaces, gives the photograph a false depth that begins to suggest space, a dimension that can be occupied. Is it possible?

Within the shed are a few strange tools – a bucket, a stepladder, panes of glass, bricks. Using these, I work to align myself with the photograph. I stand on an upturned bucket to bring my feet to the height of the floor as shown in the photograph, as strewn in pixels on the scrim. I align myself against the glass of the Farnsworth House's south elevation, and look out toward the Fox River – a world beyond the edge of this photograph and beyond the shed's wooden door. I envision the Fox River in the summer of 1951 and assume the posture of a woman pausing on the edge of her glass house, contemplating walking the river's edge.

In the glow of the projector's light, I work to know and to re-animate an architectural history that has never surfaced. I reach to rest my hand on the image of the cold glass wall of the kitchen, watching the horizon of an Illinois floodplain recede into a pixelated line; I climb a short stepladder to stand at the same height as the terrace and tend to the sculptures and plants projected in that space; I walk toward the space that Farnsworth used as a bedroom, aligning my own body with the perspective presented in the photograph. I cannot occupy history, none of us can. But we can choose to engage historical artefacts on artefactual terms, to know them with our senses.

Questions linger: for whom were these photographs produced? Did Farnsworth create them for personal documentation, or for a future, public presentation that was never realised? In her memoirs, she writes about the house as already and always mythic, dematerialised: 'The simpler of those that came to look expected to find the glass box afloat, moored to mystic columns enclosing mystic space...all the walls turned to air.'[2] Such has been the history of the house. Walter Benjamin warned that without a materialist engagement with history, the past could be absorbed by 'the course of history', a narratological fiction. Against this homogenous continuum, the forgotten or forsaken artefact – the photograph hidden in an unacknowledged archive – stands as a testament to other, equally true histories. Through the radical inhabitation of the archive, a chipping away of 'the course of history', we cannot inhabit history *per se*, but we can project new knowledge about it. To do this, we must in some way inhabit the voices, the eyes, of those that have authored these histories such that, as Farnsworth writes, '...once in awhile, by a fulminating ricochet...by another bound of paradoxes, 'you' may become 'I'...'[3] □



Nora Wendl, *Glass House (Kitchen)*, 2013. 36 x 24″ C-print

1 Dr Edith Farnsworth took Mies on site visits as early as 1945, visited his design office in Chicago frequently, drove the architect and his apprentices and students to the house frequently during construction (1949-50) – in other words, her engagement in the process was quite active, more than the Blessing photographs of the construction might otherwise indicate. For more, see: Alice T. Friedman, 'People Who Live in Glass Houses: Edith Farnsworth, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Philip Johnson', in *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007

2 Farnsworth, Edith. Newberry Library Midwest MS Farnsworth Box 2 Folder 34.

3 ibid.

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