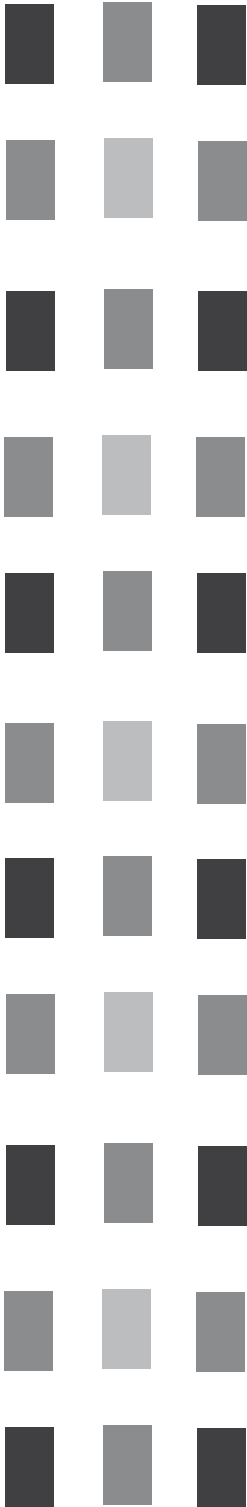


Architecture and Air

Victoria Watson



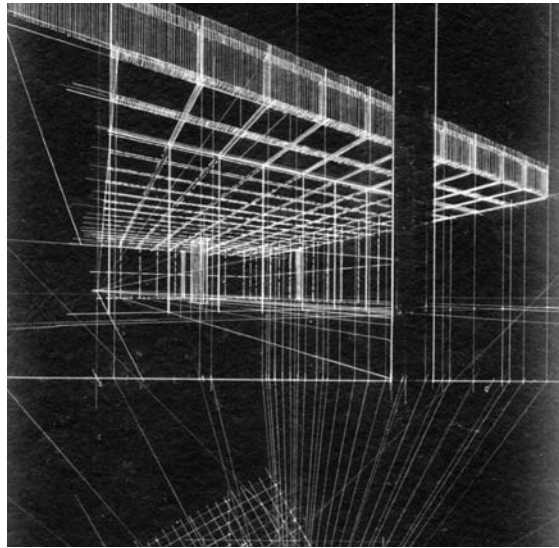
Introduction

This paper has been influenced by an event that took place, some time ago, at the University of Westminster. A diploma student was trying to write his dissertation about a funny feeling he claimed to have had while he stood under the roof of the New National Gallery, the one in Berlin. The student said that this was a feeling of space. It was the use of the word space that spoiled things, evidently causing his tutors to suffer so much embarrassment that they sent the student to see me. I agreed with him, having had a similar feeling myself, it must have been space. But the strange thing was, although we agreed, it must have been space, we couldn't really think of anything else to say.

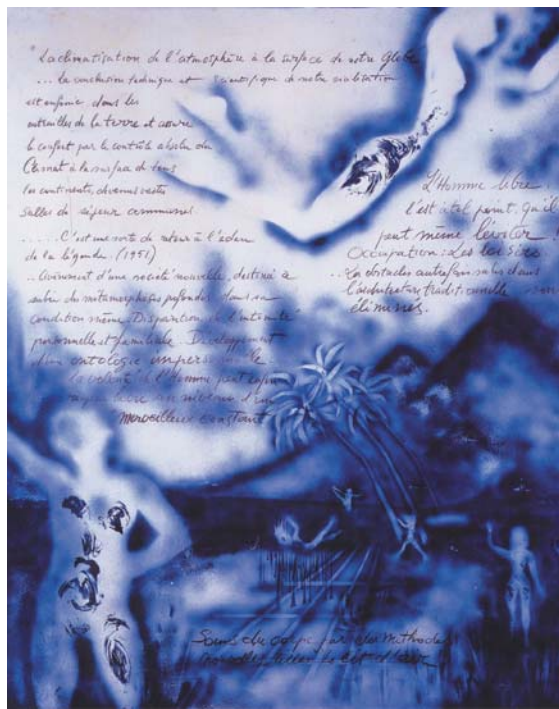
This event has always puzzled me, if space is the medium of architecture then those of us who are interested in architecture ought to be able to talk about space? This paper is an attempt to think about this feeling of space. I have developed the thinking by placing the roof by Mies van der Rohe alongside a roof proposed by Yves Klein. In fact it was not me who put the two roofs together, it was Klein. In 1958, during the lecture he gave at the Sorbonne Klein said: "Through all these researches into an Art that would lead to immaterialisation, Werner Ruhnau and I came together in the architecture of the air. He was hindered by the last obstacle that even a Mies van der Rohe hadn't been able to overcome: the roof, the screen that separates us from the sky, from the blue sky."¹

By 1958 Mies had built only two clear span structures, these were The Farnsworth House (1945–50) and The Crown Hall at IIT (1950–56); but he had projected very many more: The Cantor Drive-in Restaurant (1945–46), The 50x50 House (1950–51), The Mannheim National Theatre (1952–53), The Chicago Convention Hall (1953–54), The Bacardi Office Building (1957), and he was only two years from projecting The Georg-Schafer Museum for Schweinfurt, a project that was to transform into The National Gallery in Berlin. So, at the time of Klein's lecture Mies' clear span structures must have seemed like new and exciting ideas for what architecture can do.

In 1958 my provocative roofs are both fictive, but by 2003 one of them has become a thing; by now it has been a thing for somewhere in the order of 23 years – this is the roof of the National Gallery in Berlin (fig. 1). The other roof remains fictive. This fictive roof is the stratum of compressed air that is to serve as a covering for the Architecture of the Air, sheltering privileged regions of natural terrain from adverse climatic conditions. Beneath the air roof the citizens of Yves Klein's paradise on earth will levitate, playing, naked and unencumbered by embarrassment, on jets of air – they will live in a world that devotes most of its time to leisure (fig. 2).



1 | Mies van der Rohe, New National Gallery Berlin, view from the roof, draw by Victoria Watson



2 | Yves Klein, "Ant 102", Detail

It is valid, I think, to see the entire range of Klein's work – from the monotone symphony to his attempts to fly – as enquires, of one kind or another, into the Architecture of the Air (fig. 3). At the heart of the Architecture of the Air lies Klein's intense hostility to 'form'. For Klein, 'form' is the substitute for immediacy, imposed by perception. For Klein, the primary vehicle of form's imposition is line. Klein has invented a mythology of line. Line, like the devil in the myth of Eden, invades the state of paradise in which the unreflective soul of humanity lies bathing in the universal soul of



3 | Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*, 1960

pure colour: "In the beginning pure colour, the universal soul in which the human soul was bathing in a state of earthly paradise, was mastered by the invasion of line, imprisoned, compartmentalised, cut apart, returned to slavery. In the joy and delirium of its guileful victory, line subjugated man and imprinted on him in turn its abstract rhythm."²

Klein claims that he is able to free himself from the abstract rhythm of line, to return to the immediacy of paradise, the Eden of the universal soul, to bathe in colour that is pure. Klein refers to this transformation as an assimilation to space: "Through colour, I experience a feeling of complete identification with space, I am truly free."³

At one with space

In his 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' – which originally appeared in the surrealist publication *Minotaur* in 1935 – Roger Callois is exploring the notion of 'a pure identity with space'; he does so by looking toward the tendency, found in certain insects, to mimic their environment (fig. 4). Callois dismisses the idea that mimicry is a form of self-defence: "generally speaking, one finds many remains of mimetic insects in the stomachs of predators. So it should come as no surprise that such insects sometimes have other and more effective ways to protect themselves. Conversely, some species that are inedible, and thus would have nothing to fear, are also mimetic. It therefore seems that one ought to conclude with Cuénot that this is an 'epiphenomenon' whose 'defensive utility appears to be nul.'"⁴

Rather than a mechanism of defense Callois suggests that mimicry is a luxury – a dangerous luxury: "We are thus dealing with a luxury and even a dangerous luxury, for there are cases in which mimicry causes the creature to go from bad to worse: geometer-moth caterpillars simulate shoots of shrubbery so well that gardeners cut them with their pruning shears. The case of the *Phyllia* is even sadder: they browse among themselves, taking each other for real leaves, in such a way that one



4 | *Peppered Moth*

might accept the idea of a sort of collective masochism leading to mutual homophagy, the simulation of the leaf being a provocation to cannibalism in this kind of totem feast."⁵

Klein predicts a similar cannibalism to be a necessary prelude to the architecture of the air: "We are coming into an anthropophagous era, frightening in appearance only, it will be a practical realization on a universal scale of the famous words 'he who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood will live in me and I in him.'"⁶

Unlike Klein, who seems to promote and to pursue his project of assimilation to space with tremendous enthusiasm, for Callois the notion of assimilation is terrifying: "To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put."⁷

The difference between Klein's joyful pursuit of the assimilation to space and Callois dread would seem to hinge upon vision. The *Architecture of the Air* promotes a world of clear vision, it is 'flooded with light and open to the outside'. For Callois, on the other hand, the assimilation to space is brought about by a failure of vision, and as such it is filled with darkness (fig. 5).

Tricks

Klein and Callois construct their respective propositions about space by effecting a trick. Callois trick is to project what vision feels like to him into a phenomenon which contradicts his understanding of the purpose of vision; this is the phenomenon of insect mimicry. The disorientation arises where Callois imagines that what he is seeing can tell him something about what it feels like to be the thing he sees. What Callois thinks he sees is a body that is insufficiently differentiated as figure against



5 | Buff Tip Moth

ground; but, bear in mind, it is not the organism which fails to distinguish itself from the surrounding environment but Callois who fails to see the organism distinctly. Callois assumes that his failure to distinguish the organism sufficiently is a sign that the organism is suffering a loss of identity; and since Callois feels that clear vision plays an important role in the construction of identity he assumes that the insect is suffering a loss of vision, that it cannot see, that it is in the dark, having become assimilated to space. For his trick Klein relies upon preconceptions about the nature of colour.

Colour is crucial to the way we understand the world – but we cannot touch colour. For example, if we were to touch one of Klein's sponge sculptures it would not be the colour we felt but the texture of the sponge and if we closed our eyes it would make no difference if the sculpture were IKB, Rose or Gold. Neither can we smell, taste or hear colour; it is only through association that we may come to suppose that orange has a particular taste, or that green smells of grass. Colour is a phenomenon of vision; and although we all know that vision is useful, very useful – vision is a type of scanning, facilitating the relay of information about the environment to the receptive system that is the foundation of perception – nevertheless there is attached to our understanding of vision a short-circuit. This short-circuit is caused by a cer-

tain bias, this bias tends toward the belief that reality consists in a world of solid bodies. We have a tendency to believe that those things which we can touch are real, while those things we cannot touch are merely partial.

In so far as reality is deemed to consist in a world of solid bodies, then colour can be merely a secondary quality of that world. It is in order to harness colour to a reality such as this that colour has come to be explained in terms of bodies i. e.: as the subjective experience of the impact upon the retina of tiny reverberating bodies – particles. Klein's 'trick' is to play upon this inbuilt bias of ours that favours touch as the verification of reality.

One of the key stages in the development of *The Architecture of the Air* is the production of the blue monochrome: a wooden plywood or isorel support, covered in velum, which has been painted over with a solution of blue pigment mixed into a transparent fixative resin. The blue monochrome is approximately 56 X 77 centimetres in size. As a single, seamless, undivided tablet of blue, the blueness of the monochrome seems startlingly palpable. Here is blue, not a partial, secondary property of a body but a body-in-itself. I can turn away from the blue monochrome, fully confident that its existence persists, here is colour, no longer partial but real. What is so effective about the monochrome is that it makes us feel that colour is something we can touch, like flesh. But what is curious is that in becoming like flesh colour must be made to seem as if it exists independently of vision. In order for colour to seem as if it is substantial, it must be made to seem like something which it is not – flesh. Colour is a phenomenon of light; light has no mass – which does not mean colour is not real, simply that colour has no body.

But Klein does not stop at giving colour a body, he also gives colour a soul, this soul he calls space. Space is the immaterial soul of which colour is the material body. So, between them, Klein and Callois have made two different but similar notions of space. The former, Klein's *Architecture of the Air* involves going up, it is transcendent – heaven; the latter, Callois dark world of insects involves going down, it is descendant – hell. What is common to both notions of space is that they equate space with a consciousness that has, as it were, been cast adrift, to float in a sea of pure undifferentiated immediacy.

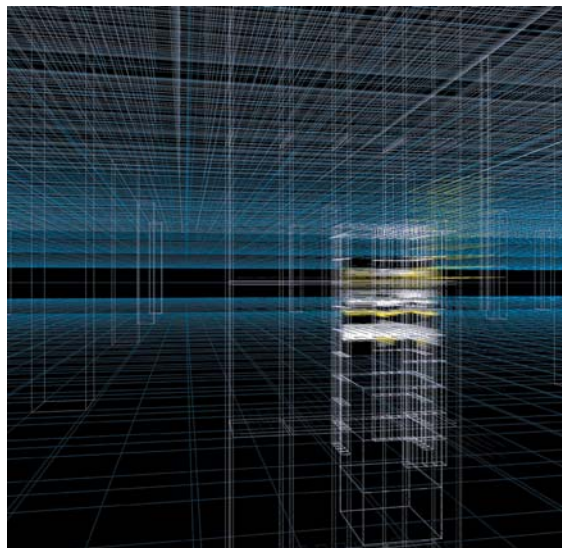
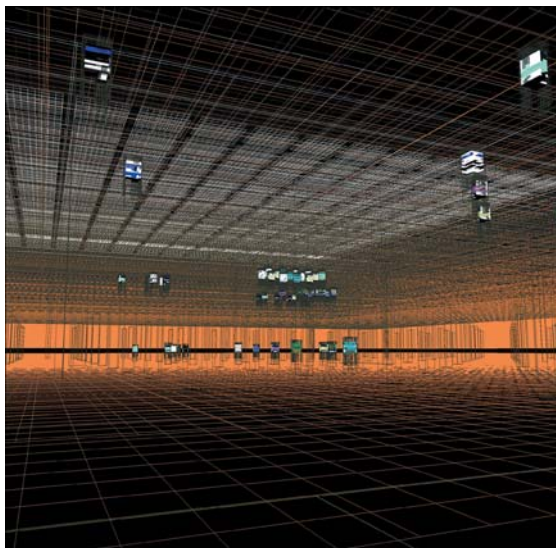
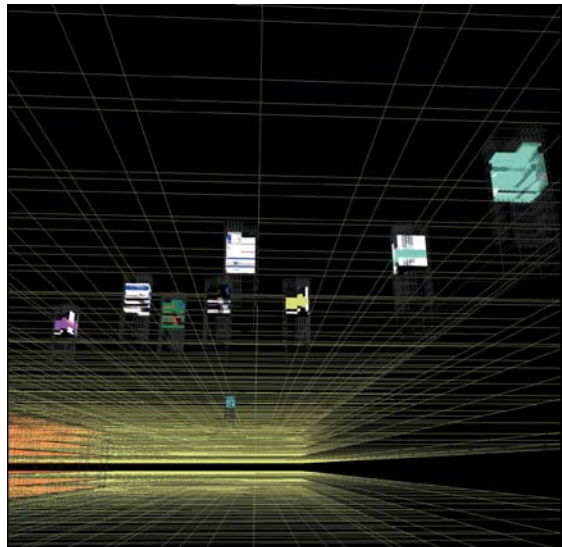
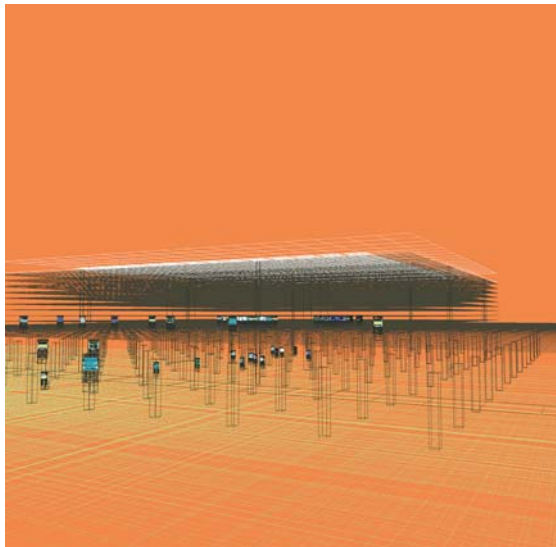
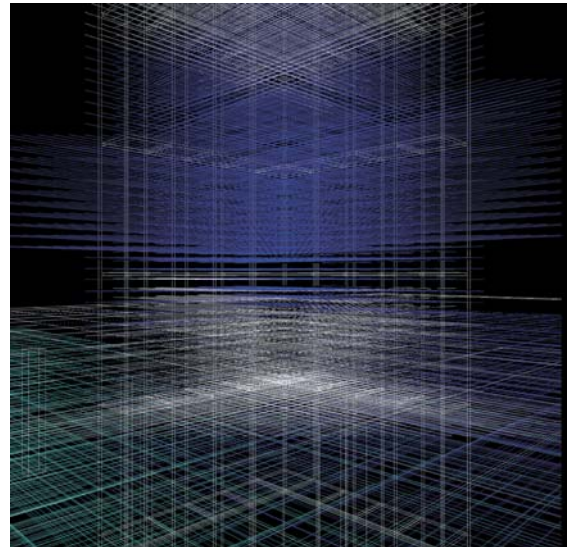
The Roof of the Berlin Gallery

I would like to suggest that my other roof, the roof of the National Gallery in Berlin, plays a part in the evocation of a very different notion of space. This is the sense of something that is artificial, aside from nature, something that is man-made. It is the

sense of space evoked by Georges Bataille, the feeling of an irreversible difference that separates the world of men from the world of animals. I believe that the roof of the New National Gallery may be looked upon as a statement of this difference (fig. 6–10).

The roof of the New National Gallery could be described as a large steel grid, floating above a raised, artificial ground, gently held in place by eight slender, tapering columns. This grid measures 64.8 metres square and its depth is 1.8 metres. The module of the grid is 3.6 metres. The roof of the gallery is 8.4 metres above the surface of the artificial ground. The eight columns which support the roof are 8.1 metres high, between the column and the roof is a 30 cm zone in which there is a pin-joint connection. On all four sides, set back from the edge of the grid by two modules and hanging from the grid is a screen, primarily of glass, but sub-divided into panels by a system of fine steel columns; being immured in a wall of transparent glass the

6–10 | CGEUK: evocations of the National Gallery



columns seem to be hanging. Within the enclosing screen of steel and glass and between the horizontal surfaces of artificial ground and roof is a vast empty space. This space contains only four things:

1+2: Two identical sets of free standing screens, in english brown oak, are clustered around the symmetrically placed holes in the slab – through which the stairways lead down into the podium.

3+4: To the back of the space, again symmetrically placed, are two identical, rectangular shafts. Clad in panels of green tinos marble, these shafts appear to reach up to the underside of the steel grid of the roof – but it is not clear if they touch it or not. The panels of tinos marble are cut to correspond to the grid; they mark out a horizontal rhythm that corresponds to the pattern of the floor tiles, and a vertical rhythm that divides the space under the roof into nine equal striations.

The striation of the space is neither visible or invisible, rather it is something that is felt. The third of these vertical striations is marked too by a transom on the enclosing screen of steel and glass. The surface of the artificial ground exhibits a grid, this is the pattern of the paving slabs. The grid of the paving slabs corresponds to the grid of the roof and is connected to it, visually, by the cadence of the steel columns that support the enclosing glass screen. Within the curtilage of the enclosed space each bay of the roof grid is sub-divided by the ten increments of a black aluminium ceiling grid. There are lights, set into the blackness of the grid, which appear like stars. The overall effect of this space is of a man-made clearing in a primeval forest.

It is this awareness – of something produced by artifice but which is poised on the limit of something more immediate – that invokes the feeling of an irrevocable difference. This is how Bataille describes this difference

There is every indication that the first men were closer than we are to the animal world; they distinguished the animal from themselves perhaps, but not without a feeling of doubt mixed with terror and longing. The sense of continuity that we must attribute to animals no longer impressed itself on the mind unequivocally (the positing of dis-

tinct objects was perhaps its negation) But it had derived a new significance from the contrast it formed to the world of things.

Bataille suggests that the constitution of the threshold between the continuous world of animals and the differentiated world of mankind arises through the positing of objects. The positing of objects occurs through the human use of tools. What is particular to the tool is that it is subordinate to its user and to its user's ends. The tool has no value in itself but is given value in relation to an anticipated result – it is useful.

Unfortunately – and Bataille sees language as to blame for this aberration – the usefulness of the tool comes to be conflated with the anticipated result. Thus the anticipated result is deemed to be of value only in so far as it is useful. This manner of valuing gives rise to the absurdity of an endless deferral which can only be brought to closure by the equally absurd proposal of an absolute end. In this respect it is interesting to recall what Mies has to say about his interest in clear-span structures, the implication would seem to be that he regards the space beneath the roof rather like a tool, not as an end but as an operational means: "As you see, the entire building is a single large room. We believe that this is the most economical and most practical way of building today. The purposes for which a building is used are constantly changing and we cannot afford to tear down the building each time. That is why we have revised Sullivan's formula 'form follows function' and construct a practical and economical space into which we fit the functions."⁹

It seems to me that it is in this sense of space as an operational means that the proposition: architecture as space – space as medium, makes sense. And the fact that this formulation posits means and purposes without an end seems to me to draw this architecture much closer to the air than does Yves Klein's charming formulation of an end without means and purposes.

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Notes:

1 Stich, S.: Yves Klein, Stuttgart, 1994, p. 121.

2 Klein, Y.: Selections from *The War: A Little Personal Mythology of the Monochrome*, in: Houston, Rice University, Institute for the Arts: *Yves Klein 1928–1962 a Retrospective*, New York, 1982, p. 218.

3 Klein, Y.: Selections from *The Monochrome Adventure*, in: Houston, Rice University, Institute for the Arts: *Yves Klein 1928–1962 a Retrospective*, New York, 1982, p. 220.

4 Callois, R.: *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, in: *October*, no 31, 1984 p. 25.

5 Ibid.

6 Klein, Y.: *Truth Become Realit*, in: Houston, Rice University, Institute for the Arts: *Yves Klein 1928–1962 a Retrospective*, New York, 1982, p. 231.

7 Op. cit., note 4, p. 30.

- 8 Bataille, G.: *Theory of Religion*, New York, 1992, p. 35.
- 9 Norberg-Schulz, C.: *A Talk With Mies van Der Rohe*, in: Neumeier, F.: *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art MIT*, 1991, p. 339.

Credits:

- 1 Drawn by Victoria Watson.
- 2 Body imprints and cosmogony with hand-written text Pigment and synthetic resin on paper on canvas, 263 x 214cm, Tokyo National Museum.
- 3 Photograph by Harry Shunk.
- 4 Peppered Moth, *Biston Betularia*: "the amazingly twig-like caterpillar can be either green or brown in colour, and has a number of warts to complete the illusion of a small jointed twig", Harper Collins: *Collins Wild Guide, Butterflies and Moths*, London, 1996, p. 158.
- 5 Buff Tip Moth, *Phalera Bucephalus*: "It wraps its wings tightly around its body when resting during the day and looks amazingly like a broken twig, making it very hard to spot" – Harper Collins: *Collins Wild Guide, Butterflies and Moths*, London, 1996, p. 196.
- 6–10 CGEUK: evocations of The New National Gallery.