

Drawing Mies in Barcelona: Shelagh Keeley's Photographs

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Exhibition Catalogue Essay

In the fall of 2014, the *Guardian's* self-appointed 'contrarian' art critic Jonathan Jones delivered a broadside that achieved its intended effect, at least partly: it got people talking about Jonathan Jones. (I, for one, had never before heard his name, but I suppose that's my fault for not following daily arts criticism from England.) Jones's argument was bold. Art photography, he said, "does not sing on a gallery wall." Proliferating electronic images are wonderful, luminous and often moving. But, in his view, "it just looks stupid when a photograph is framed or backlit and displayed vertically in an exhibition. ... A Photograph is a flat, soulless, superficial substitute for painting."¹

You might call this the art critic's version of the advice delivered by Dean Wormer to the Delta frat boy Flounder in *Animal House* (1978): "Flat, soulless and stupid is no way to go through life, son." Jones concluded: "Today's glib culture endlessly flatters photography's arty pretensions."

Predictably, and necessarily, the article spawned a barrage of counter-opinion, and even some counter-argument. Among the best of these was from another *Guardian* writer, Sean O'Hagan. After noting that the photography exhibitions Jones chose to mention were "eccentric," and making the obvious objection that a show of paintings—or any other medium—can be just as uninspired as any show of photographs, O'Hagan set down the main point: "Several things are wrong about Jonathan's reasoning, not least that he still thinks painting is in some sort of competition with photography. How quaint. He also seems to think that all photography is derivative of painting. This is plainly not so."²

Further, and finally, Jones suggested that all photographs look better on backlit screens than on paper, when this is clearly false, and made no distinction between types of photography. And it's not a matter of technology: great artists can make great art using anything from Polaroids (Evans, Warhol) to digital phone-based cameras. "It's about a way of seeing, not technology." He finished with a plea for Jones to join him at a truly good photography show, with works by Awoiska van der Molen, where he might appreciate the "stillness and mystery" of the works, "so strong that everything on the walls around them seemed muted."

O'Hagan is on the side of the art angels of course, not to mention of merely sane people everywhere; but the sad thing about the riposte was that it felt goaded, as if it had fallen into the original critic's poised trap. "If anything is anachronistic, it's the 'photography is not art' debate," he wrote at one point, and that really is the only rational response to an 'argument' like Jones's. Getting drawn into the very assumptions that one should be rejecting outright—why are we comparing two mediums in the first place?—is the risk anyone takes when they respond to such things. I like to think myself among the sane and rational, and so maybe I should have ignored this little tussle myself, but it happened that I read the exchange while thinking about these superlative photographic works by Shelagh Keeley.

It is a valid commonplace of art that there is no subject unworthy of the artist's attention. Sometimes, as when the content is disturbing or violent, we may have to reiterate the argument before proceeding to appreciate the work. Less common but just as troubling in its own way is the inverse case, where the subject matter is already a supreme work of art itself. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, built as the German contribution to the 1929 International Exposition in Spain, is a modernist masterpiece, one of the finest single buildings on the planet. Mies responded to commissioner Georg von Schnitzler's call for the building to give "voice to the spirit of a new era" in post-Great War Weimar Germany by designing a building that is angular but flowing. Its open-plan concept, relative interior bareness—just the purpose-built furniture known as the "Barcelona chair" and the Georg Kolbe sculpture *Alba* ("Dawn")—was intended by Mies to provide "an ideal zone of tranquillity" for visitors.

The water features, open miniature vistas, and floating roof create a series of elegantly massed elements, such that the Pavilion feels at once solid and about to levitate from the earth. Mies was extravagant with materials, using pure antique marble, travertine, golden onyx, and tinted as well as translucent glass to divide and order the building's spaces. Because the Pavilion itself was the entirety of the German presence at the Exposition, and served in part as a transition to other parts of the grounds, the Pavilion is in effect a large-scale Modernist sculpture, executed in architectural forms. Designed by Mies in less than a year, it was always intended to be temporary: in 1930 it was demolished as planned.

Happily, in 1983 a group of Spanish architects, using archival photographs, plans, and contemporary accounts, reconstructed the building. The reconstruction was completed in 1986, and the Pavilion has since served as the site for art installations and interventions by, among others, architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa, who added interior walls made of spiral acrylic, photographer Jordi Bernadó, who altered the various glass doors, effectively re-sculpting the interior space. Perhaps the most notable intervention was by Ai Weiwei, who refilled the building's two water pools with coffee and milk.

Shelagh Keeley visited the Pavilion in August of 1986, while living in Barcelona. The newly reconstructed building had not yet been opened to the public, and Keeley was able, with the help of fellow artist Antoni Muntadas, to view it "empty and austere," as she has put it. The plastic bag visible floating in one of the water features is the sole foreign object, a poignant little grace note. She has said that her inspiration was "the genius of Mies and the notion of the pavilion." The immediate connotation of pavilion is of a tent, or temporary structure, but its deeper etymology stretches back through Middle English and Old French (*pavillon*) to the Latin word for butterfly (*papilio*)—a metaphorical joining suitable to tents, but also to Mies's floating forms. Keeley's interest in architecture was already obvious. In 1985 she spent two months in Kyoto, Japan, studying the Zen gardens and temples, and making a two-hour Super 8 "essay film." In 1986 she did the same in Las Vegas, observing the decadence and decay of the American Dream's edgy playground. The engagement with the Barcelona Pavilion, a reconstruction of an architectural monument that was intentionally temporary, makes a sort of middle term in this exploration of the different kind of temples humans use to worship their deities.

The resulting work, like the more obvious artistic interventions, is a kind of collaboration—but without adding anything to the physical space. The images show the building as it would have appeared in 1929. The challenge here is to reveal, in the subtle textures of slides produced with an ordinary Olympus camera, something about what makes the building so spare and moving,

so toughly perfect. And to do this she had to use, contra the Jonathan Joneses of the world, the now-ubiquitous medium of photography. But there is, as always, the matter of who is wielding the camera. The works we see in this series are the result of scanning the original slides, which were developed in 1986 but never before shown, and then blowing them up to scale. “I love the grainy quality of slide film,” Keeley told me. “No digital re-touching was done, or altering of the images with Photoshop. They are what they were.”

Keeley has said that she views photography as really a kind of drawing: not the imitation of painting that so irks Jones, but rather a recognition that the medium of photography is just as much a matter of texture as it is of composition. This feature of her work can only be appreciated in the gallery-hung versions of these images, something that offers further evidence of the nullity of the anti-photography position. I can attest to this directly, since I first saw Keeley’s Barcelona Pavilion images as backlit jpeg files which she had sent me, of course, via email. They were stunning, to be sure, revealing already to my eye the masterly sense of immediate familiarity in her relationship to the building. Their composition, capturing shadows and light at the same time as stone and water, was assured and revelatory. One immediately sensed, here, a version of Heidegger’s notion of truth as disclosure, a combined revealing and concealing, the “clearing” of an open space that he calls, after the Greeks, *aletheia*.

This was just the beginning of the manifold gifts of Keeley’s work, however. When one views them at the full intended scale, rendered on high-quality rag paper whose toothy surface is saturated with deeply injected pigment, the photographs take on a larger, more profound life. Another Heidegger resonance then, at least for me: his enthralled discussion of Van Gogh’s celebrated 1885 oil painting, *A Pair of Shoes*. Here, Heidegger notes, in the heavily used and mud-caked work shoes of a peasant woman, we see revealed a world of her concern. She herself is absent—but fully, even painfully, present in her absence. The shoes are sweat-soaked, the leather gnarled like (we must imagine) the feet that struggle into their hardened shape each morning. They are also well-kept, however, because they must last. Heidegger saw the painting in Amsterdam in 1930, and this is part of his famous description, from his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935): “From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.”³

Later scholars, especially art historian Meyer Schapiro in *The Still Life as a Personal Object* (1968), demonstrated that the shoes had actually been purchased by Van Gogh himself at a Paris flea market, ostensibly for his own use, only to find that they did not fit. Facing the viewer as they do, Schapiro suggests, the shoes in fact execute yet another Van Gogh self-portrait.⁴ But whatever their exact provenance, the shoes embody the materiality of Van Gogh’s oils, themselves drawn from earthly materials, and make the essential connection between earth and the world of meaning that gives them place and identity. This is, we might say, the inversion of the glossy oils of official portraiture and still life which, as John Berger provocatively remarked once upon a time, exactly matches the glittering money of the *haute-bourgeois* and landed-gentry classes who were able to purchase them.

The same connection, maybe unexpectedly, is achieved via Keeley's use of everyday technical materials—high-quality rag paper, yes, but paper all the same; fine art inkjet printing, yes, but a process not all that different, technically, from the one available in most home offices. And yet, this can only be appreciated by standing in front of the printed works themselves. In their almost abstract arrangements of colour, light, and form we feel, as well as see, the sense of place that is so important to her work generally. The graininess of enlarged film is executed just as the rough surface of a drawing would be, with carbon or pastel on toothy paper. The images capture the fleeting moments of liminal relations with space and place: the sense, achieved by a particular architectural 'container' that one is *somewhere in particular*, grounded in one's physical embodiment and aware of being so. The images are phenomenological bracket-devices, isolating and concentrating our sense of the burden and blessing of consciousness.

This almost overwhelming sense of place—the properly scaled images are eye-filling, making the viewer feel a vertiginous inner squeak that she might tip into the framed scene—is one of the aesthetic connections drawing her to this subject in the first place. Mies, justly renowned for the monumental skyscraper design evident in the Seagram Building in Manhattan and TD Centre in Toronto, is actually an architect of the intimate. (Hence his interest in furniture, one he shares with other masters of the interior detail such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Le Corbusier, the Eameses, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Khan, Ron Thom, and Frank Gehry.) But there is another essential affinity here, between Keeley's larger aesthetic practice and the Mies masterwork. I mean the very idea of a wall.

Walls are thresholds. They divide and join at once, creating insides and outsides, simultaneously part of both and neither. They create spaces and volumes that mark off the sites of life. Sometimes they bear loads, but they need not, and though the structural difference is all too real, the perceptual one is not. Above all, at least in domestic settings or other places where we spend a lot of our time, they are blank canvases asking to be decorated, covered, or papered. Mies lets his rich palette of veneers and glasses do the decorating in the Pavilion: the soothing minimalist aesthetic he favoured. Keeley cares about and draws on walls in another way altogether: she is a collage artist of playfully maximalist persuasion.

Since 1979 she has been making site-specific wall installations, executed in galleries in many parts of the world, that combine drawings and photography with a strong but elusive sense of interconnection. The viewer moves in and through the space created by the wall within the gallery, encountering the individual parts of the work, then stepping back and being struck by the whole. The works are also, of course, engaged in an aesthetic and physical exchange—not always comfortable—with the particular gallery spaces in which they are created. "You can't fight with architecture," she said of this process in a recent interview. "It's a dialogue with the space of the walls — the architecture of the space that I work in — and I respond to that. ... It's not a framed drawing hanging on a wall. It's not a painting. It's directly on a wall, so it's a whole different discourse and a relationship for the viewer with their body in relation to the architecture."⁵

One thinks again, and not fondly, of Jonathan Jones and his aversion to the framed and flat image. His target was not drawing but photography; nevertheless, here the whole wall, the gallery itself plus the drawings and images affixed thereon, is the work. Keeley sees the installation itself as an extension of working with pigment and paper. "Drawing is a very physical act," she said in the same interview. "It's not just your hand and your wrist. It's your whole body—particularly with this method of working. It's the body, the head; your body is physically

making the drawing. You can't do a huge wall drawing without involving the arc of your whole body. ... I reclaim space through the gesture of drawing.”

The Barcelona Pavilion images might seem to lie some distance from the physicality of the drawing gesture but we can still feel the hand of the artist here, the sense of their composition. There is also, in the two bodies of work, a linked reflection on the environmental psychologist James Gibson's idea of *affordances*: those elements of a physical space that answer to our embodiment and its many projects, large and small. A plane surface elevated above the floor is an affordance—a table. It allows us to place objects close to hand while we are upright, to sit and eat, to sit and write, and so on. The floor itself is an affordance, a most basic one, answering the needs of the organism, in this case a human one, to stand upon a surface that is (to use Gibson's language) nearly horizontal, nearly flat, sufficiently extended relative to human size, and of rigid surface. This floor *affords support*. “It is stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds,” Gibson writes. “It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able. It is not sink-into-able like a surface of water or a swamp.”⁶ Walls afford division and conjunction, entertainment to the eye, and the deployment of equipment at rest, hung or shelved upon their vertical surfaces.

If the Barcelona Pavilion is a kind of essay in the negative capability of affordances, offering a sort of phenomenological bracketing of everyday spaces, the gallery-wall drawings are its necessary inverse, the wall itself brought into sharp focus. And though the Barcelona images are more conventionally hung upon the gallery wall, they are no less powerful for being framed. On the contrary, and maybe paradoxically, they are set free to work their haptic magic upon the viewer. They take back space on the wall by glowing with an undiluted luminosity, the “stillness and mystery” that Sean O'Hagan found in Awoiska van der Molen's work, making the world around them seem mute. “I think that's what art does, right?” O'Hagan asked rhetorically in the final line of his article.

Rhetorical questions require no answer but let us offer one anyway, just for emphasis: Yes, that is right. And Keeley's Barcelona Pavilion photographs offer more beautiful proof.

Mark Kingwell, December 2014
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[Source: <http://www.circuitgallery.com/exhibitions/keeley-barcelona-pavilion/mark-kingwell-essay>]

NOTES

1. Jonathan Jones, "Flat, soulless and stupid: why photographs don't work in art galleries," *The Guardian* (13 November); www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/nov/13/why-photographs-dont-work-in-art-galleries
2. Sean O'Hagan, "Photography is art and always will be," *The Guardian* (11 December 2014); www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/11/photography-is-art-sean-ohagan-jonathan-jones
3. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" [*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1935-7; 1950; 1960], in Albert Hofstadter, ed. and trans., *Poetry, Language, Thought* (NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 15-86.
4. For a discussion of this difference between Heidegger and Schapiro, plus a related intervention by Jacques Derrida, see Scott Horton, "Philosophers Rumble Over Van Gogh's Shoes," *Harper's Blog* (5 October 2009); harpers.org/blog/2009/10/philosophers-rumble-over-van-goghs-shoes/
5. Becky Rynor, "An Interview with Shelagh Keeley," *National Gallery of Canada Magazine* (5 September 2014); www.ngcmagazine.ca/artists/an-interview-with-shelagh-keeley
6. James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (orig. 1979; rev. Lawrence Erlbaum & Assoc., 1986), ch. 8.