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Isabelle Loring Wallace

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Author(s)

Isabelle Loring Wallace

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About the author(s)

is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the Lamar Dodd School of Art at the University of Georgia. She is the author of *Jasper Johns* (2014), and the co-editor of two anthologies on contemporary art within broad cultural and historical contexts: *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, co-edited with Jennifer Hirsh (2011) and *Contemporary Art About Architecture: A Strange Utility* co-edited with Nora Wendl (2013). Wallace is currently completing a second book on Jasper Johns and developing a project that considers intersections between new media art and Judeo-Christian themes.

The window washer and the DJ: reflections on Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's 'Le Baiser / The Kiss'

by Isabelle Loring Wallace • June 2020

Le Baiser / The Kiss (1999–2000) by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle is a complex installation involving architecture, music, video and performance **FIG. 1**. It consists of a suspended screen on which a twelve-minute video plays in a loop, and, around it, a floating metal armature, the proportions of which correspond at reduced scale to Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (1945–51) **FIG. 2**. The house, named for its patron, Edith Farnsworth, is also the subject of the installation's digital video, which focuses on the home's transparent west wall and the labour required to maintain it. Visible on both sides of the installation's rear-projection screen, the video depicts Manglano-Ovalle in the unlikely guise of a window washer, repeatedly rendering the building's façade opaque with soapsuds before restoring its transparency to the landscape beyond. Simultaneously, inside the home, indifferent to the window washer and the kiss-like sound of his squeegee on glass, is a woman wearing headphones, positioned before a portable DJ station. Her eyes downcast, she is either determinedly ignoring him or wholly absorbed in her task **FIG. 3**.

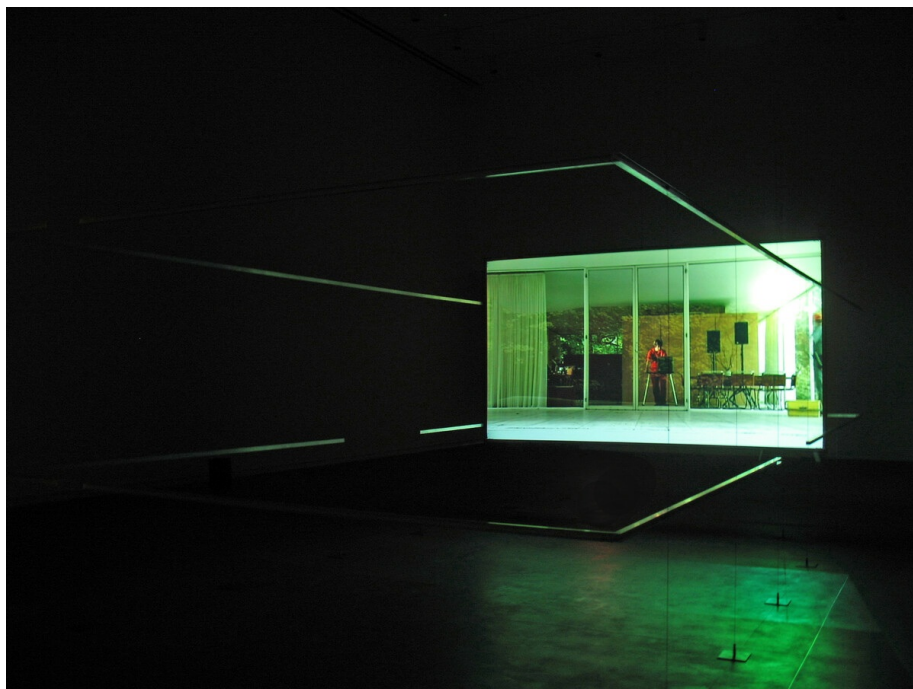


FIG. 1 Installation view of *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. 1999–2000. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule)



FIG. 2 West elevation and terrace of Farnsworth House, Plano IL, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. 1945–51. Photograph.

I. History

On the basis of this dynamic and the work's references to a romantic act absent from the video, it is possible to connect *Le Baiser* with the rumoured failed romance between Mies van der Rohe and his younger female patron, which ended, if ever it began, acrimoniously.¹ As various sources attest, Farnsworth became disgruntled with Mies van der Rohe as the project wore on, complaining that he had built, at excessive, ever-escalating cost, a 'glass cage on stilts' instead of the home on which they had agreed.

² As she related to a journalist for *House Beautiful* in 1951:

The truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass I feel like a prowling animal, always on the alert. I am always restless. Even in the evening. I feel like a sentinel on guard day and night.³

As Farnsworth's statement suggests, her dissatisfaction with the house was multifaceted: it was a question not only of money but of her experience of the space Mies van der Rohe had designed. Yet, with a few recent exceptions, including the work of A.T. Friedman and Nora Wendl, the literature around the Farnsworth House consistently returns to the clichéd notion of heartbreak, relying on rumour rather than concrete evidence.⁴ Likewise, in Mangano-

Ovalle's installation, one encounters the idea of romance without the depiction of romantic acts.



FIG. 3 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, showing the full west elevation. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Furthering the connection between the installation and the complex history of the Farnsworth House is the video's gendering of space and pointed use of costume. Seeming to reference Farnsworth's characterisation of the house-as-cage and she as its lone inhabitant, the male window washer is dressed in prison guard blues, while the female DJ is dressed in an orange standard-issue jumpsuit, reminiscent of those worn by American prison inmates. These clothes establish a power struggle that is hard to reconcile with conventional ideas of romance, and through the suggestion of Farnsworth's imprisonment they pit the story of Mies van der Rohe and his masterpiece against the messier, less celebratory account of his discontented patron. *Le Baiser*, however, is a multivalent, analogical work that uses the estranged relationship between the DJ and window washer to reflect on more expansive, topical questions about the legacy of Modernism for contemporary conceptions of art and sociability.

II. Cell

Following its first showing in 1999 at the Institute of Visual Arts at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, *Le Baiser* was remade for the Whitney Biennial of 2000 in a form the artist now considers definitive.⁵ In both iterations, the installation's video tracks the window washer as he methodically traverses the structure's west façade. It oscillates between shots taken from a point of view behind the window washer that show the DJ and interior as seen from the outside **FIG. 4** and frontal shots of the window washer and exterior pavilion as seen from inside the home **FIG. 5**. This rhythmic vacillation between two points of view is further underscored by alternating soundtracks, and is complicated by the sporadic insertion of non-diegetic scenes. Twice we see the window washer from the front, motionless with his back to the window and his fingers in his ears, and on several occasions we see just the

window, either covered in soapsuds or wiped clean and wholly transparent. Thus, whether seen or seen through, depicted in isolation or as the barrier between two characters absorbed in their tasks, the house's glass wall, with the important exception of the video's final shots, is always in frame. Moreover, because the translucent, dual-sided video screen – roughly 11 by 6 feet (335 by 183 centimetres) – also serves as a stand-in for that wall within the installation's architectonic schema, it splits the framed space of the installation into uneven parts, just as the west wall of Farnsworth House separates the exterior pavilion from the larger space of the home's interior. Consequently, the video can be seen from two positions within the installation.



FIG. 4 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, showing the DJ from the exterior. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).



FIG. 5 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. View from the interior. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Given the video's vacillation between exterior and interior shots, viewers are bound to find themselves in the 'wrong' place – seeing from the installation's 'exterior' side, for example, footage filmed from an interior point of view. This sense of disorientation and instability is important, but what is constant and equally significant is the function of the screen as barrier. Positioned within the framed space of the installation and extending across the whole of its width, the screen effectively divides the installation and its spectators, even as they consume identical – one side of the screen the mirror image of the other – footage. As the window washer and DJ are proximate and separated only by a thin sheet of glass, so *Le Baiser*'s viewers are together but alone, alienated from one another by the installation's bifurcated structure.

A prominent Chicago physician, Farnsworth met and commissioned Mies van der Rohe to build her a holiday home in Plano at a dinner party in November 1945. The pair spent a considerable amount of time together while at work on the commission and were thought to be romantically involved, a speculation recorded by Mies van der Rohe's staff and, subsequently, Farnsworth's sister, Marion Carpenter.⁶ However, as the project neared completion Farnsworth moved into the house, whereupon the relationship soured: Mies van der Rohe sued Farnsworth for refusing to pay for the house's skyrocketing costs and Farnsworth sued Mies van der Rohe in turn, claiming that the house was uninhabitable. In the end, Farnsworth paid some portion of the escalated costs and lived at the home intermittently for the next twenty years.⁷ Reflecting on the house and her relationship with Mies van der Rohe in her unpublished memoirs, she concludes that 'perhaps it was never a friend and a collaborator [. . .] that he wanted, but a dupe and a victim'.⁸

III. The Kiss

While *Le Baiser* is undoubtedly informed by the history of the Farnsworth House, reading the work in relation to architectural history also serves as a springboard to other ideas. As a clip taken from the beginning of the video demonstrates **FIG. 6**, the video toggles back and forth between two soundtracks that correspond to the camera's oscillating point of view. When the video is filmed from outside the building – looking inside – the soundtrack is ambient, comprising sounds of the rural landscape and the noises of Manglano-Ovalle as he proceeds with his task. When the camera faces the window washer and the landscape from inside the house, the soundtrack consists of ambient music arranged by Jeremy Boyle to accompany Manglano-Ovalle's video.⁹



FIG. 6 Clip from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. 1999–2000. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Pioneered by musicians such as Robert Fripp and Brian Eno in the 1970s, ambient music aims to envelop its listener and is often the hypnotic result of repetition, appropriation and doubling. Fripp & Eno's album *No Pussyfooting* of 1973, for example, was made using two reel-to-reel tape decks that allowed the pair to layer sounds made with an electric guitar and synthesizers. Working more than two decades later, Boyle realised a hypnotic, guitar-only score for *Le Baiser* through a wholly digital process in which a micro sample – in this case, an isolated instance of electric guitar performed by the rock band Kiss audible between consecutive drum beats – was laboriously stretched, processed and layered to transform 5 milliseconds of music into 5 seconds of indeterminate audio.¹⁰

Because it plays over the footage filmed from inside the building, Boyle's score is aligned with the figure of the DJ. And yet her movements are too quick to suggest that she is listening to, or composing, the ethereal soundtrack. Boyle's score is better understood as a stand in for the DJ's music, a means of creating an absorbing, aural experience that mirrors but remains divorced from the DJ's absorption in her own music. For, if one attribute of ambient music is that it envelops listeners, then it also works to isolate them, as is the case for the DJ, who remains alone despite the presence of the window washer on the other side of a wall designed to disappear.



FIG. 7 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, showing the window washer. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Le Baiser's soundtracks can be used to further an architectural reading of the installation, advancing the interpretation of the DJ as a stand-in for Edith Farnsworth, the brilliant physician absorbed in her work and indifferent to the gendered expectations of mid-century American culture, as well as potentially blind to a truth about Mies van der Rohe: that his affections were reserved for the building she had commissioned. But, if the DJ remains blind and deaf to the window washer, it is also the case that the window washer is shown twice with his back to the DJ, his fingers in his ears and his eyes cropped from the frame **FIG. 7**. This gesture further aligns him with Mies van der Rohe. As Wendl observes, drawing on Farnsworth's unpublished memoir:

The final rift between the client and architect, according to Farnsworth's memoirs, is logistical. It occurs when Farnsworth argues that a young man from Mies' office is bothering construction workers with unnecessary questions, thus delaying their progress. Mies responds curtly: 'You go back to your nephritis where you belong and leave me to build your house without interference'.¹¹

The very image of defensive isolation, the window washer is thus aligned with Mies van der Rohe, who ostensibly resented interference of any kind while attending, like the window washer, to the rigours of form. The fact that the music the window washer shuts out is associated with a kiss – or, as noted, a score comprised of a manipulated, individual guitar note once performed by the rock band Kiss – makes it all too clear that theirs is mutual and determined indifference. Indeed, Manglano-Ovalle's soundtracks, each dominated by the idea of a kiss, nevertheless succeed in deepening the association of glass with self-absorption and isolation.

IV. Window

This association hints at another interpretation of *Le Baiser*, one which establishes a connection between the glass walls of the Farnsworth House and the many transparent lenses that mediate contemporary culture. Such a reading provides a possible argument for the continuing relevance of mid-century Modern architecture, outwith the dubious ongoing speculations about Farnsworth's and Mies van der Rohe's relationship. For *Le Baiser* also serves as a portrait of contemporary sociability in a world dominated by glass (or glass-like) partitions, typically described within digital culture as windows that are seen to facilitate communication while arguably exacerbating a sense of alienation and entrapment. Video calling applications such as Skype, FaceTime or Zoom promise connection in real time, despite the physical isolation of users who look into respective 'windows' on computers and smartphones that seem to be, but are not in common.

In Manglano-Ovalle's installation, a video that stands in for a wall made of glass also provides a common focal point for the installation's potentially isolated spectators, a kind of no place where they might face off and meet, despite being at a physical remove. In this reading, then, digital natives are thus as the window-washer and DJ more soberly and critically appear: subjects poised before seemingly transparent windows that have the potential to render them lonely and narcissistic, every potential encounter a missed encounter that instead functions as an occasion for self-regard.



FIG. 8 Installation view of *Gravity is a force to be reckoned with* by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. 2009. (exh. MASS MoCA, North Adams).

This line of thinking – one that connects glass architecture with contemporary technologies and the idea of missed encounters – emerged in Manglano-Ovalle’s work with *Le Baiser*, but it was developed by the artist in a work of 2009 that features a cell phone inside an inverted, half-scale replica of Mies van der Rohe’s never-realised 50/50 house.¹² *Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* (2009) **FIG. 8** is at once an installation, which consists of Mies van der Rohe’s glass house and iconic furnishings designed by the architect, and a stage set. But actors never appear on stage and speak only in the form of increasingly desperate video-messages left on an iPhone that presumably belongs to the home’s missing resident. Loosely based on Yevegny Zamyatin’s *We* (a dystopian novel of 1921 that imagines a future in which all walls are made of glass), the script for this play-without-actors, written by Manglano-Ovalle, is also entangled with a second unrealised project: a filmic adaptation of *We* by Sergei Eisenstein, titled *The Glass House*. As the last of five works by Manglano-Ovalle to engage with Mies van der Rohe’s glass architecture, *Gravity* suggests the depth of that engagement and lends credence to a digitally inflected reading of *Le Baiser*, where the connections between glass houses and digital technologies were first formed.¹³

V. Art

If windows are now inextricable from digital culture, their association with the medium of painting is more longstanding. Operative since the codification of one-point perspective by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435, the connection between window and painting derives from Alberti’s suggestion that artists think of the framed picture plane as a transparent surface through which a three-dimensional vista is apparent.¹⁴ *Le Baiser*, a work focused on a window and the labour of maintaining its transparency, seems therefore to court this association, which is further encouraged by Manglano-Ovalle’s comportment and the painterly trace of his squeegee on glass. And yet Manglano-Ovalle’s sweeping, embodied gestures are more de Kooning than da Vinci, and given that the video oscillates back and forth between images of the window wiped clean – recalling illusionistic, old-master paintings – and images in which the window is sudsy and opaque – correlating with modernist abstractions that foreground the materiality of paint **FIG. 9** – we might nevertheless say that the figure of the window washer stands for painting in general and the dialectics that have shaped canonical understandings of the medium.

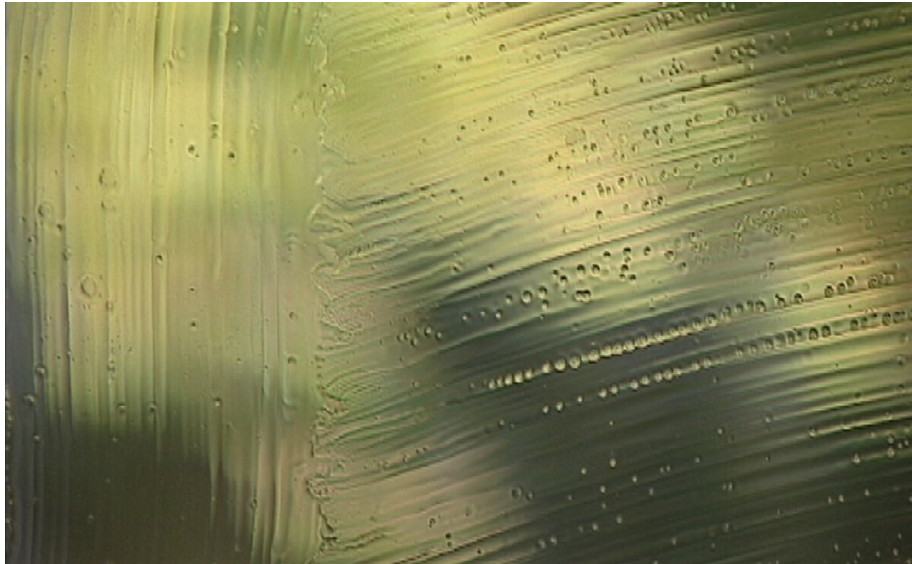


FIG. 9 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, showing the painterly soap suds. by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

The figure of the DJ also resonates with art-historical discourse, being used by Nicolas Bourriaud as a metaphor for artists who have displaced painting and the logic for which it stands:

Since the early nineties, an ever-increasing number of artworks have been created on the basis of pre-existing works [. . .] These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work [. . .] Notions of originality [. . .] and even of creation are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape marked by the twin figures of the DJ and the programmer, both of whom have the tasks of selecting cultural objects and inserting them into new contexts.¹⁵

Eschewing traditional, *ex nihilo*, ideas of creation, Bourriaud suggests that many artists working today conflate consumption and production, making art from that which already exists. With origins that can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp and the readymade, this approach to making art – involving sampling, appropriation and recontextualisation – has become the dominant mode of global contemporary art, aided by the development of digital technologies that facilitate these iterative methods.



FIG. 10 Detail of still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. View from the interior. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec. (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Manglano-Ovalle's installation is a product of these methods, as well as a self-conscious reflection upon them. On the one hand, *Le Baiser* – a video installation featuring the appropriated, repurposed image of the Farnsworth House and a remixed Kiss sample in its soundtrack – is methodologically aligned with the figures of the programmer and DJ. On the other hand, Manglano-Ovalle plays the part of the window washer, and so is aligned performatively with 'painting' **FIG. 10**. The artist is therefore implicated in both sides of the stand-off between one notion of art making – digital, repetitious, appropriative – and its purported opposite – manual, analogue, creative, original. Hence, *Le Baiser* is best understood as an illustration of the antagonistic distinction between two conceptions of art and as evidence of the debate's irrelevance within an era that is wholly indebted to appropriative and digital technologies.

VI: Home

Manglano-Ovalle grounds his meditation on art, technology and contemporary sociability in the medium of architecture, and in particular in the notion of home, which was radically transformed by the Farnsworth House in 1951, at the same moment that video emerged as a viable alternative to film **FIG. 11**.¹⁶ As Boris Groys and Gregg Horowitz have argued, video is radical because it is placeless, its content unmoored from any particular support.¹⁷ This

essential fact was initially obscured by the medium's coupling with the television set, but soon enough video was liberated from the cabinet and made weightless by the phenomenon of projection. But, unlike film – another medium associated with projection – video does not require or even prefer specific, theatrical conditions. On the contrary, it is a mode of transmission that is homeless, entirely liberated from place and indeed, 'from the constraints of placement as such'.¹⁸ Digitalisation was required to thoroughly exploit this aspect of the medium, transforming our computers, phones, and dashboards into indiscriminate vehicles for video. Yet, this capacity was already there in 1951 just as the finishing touches were put on a house Philip Johnson would describe as a 'free-floating cage', remarkable for having achieved the effect of hovering within a landscape to which its inhabitants no longer seemed bound.¹⁹



FIG. 11 Farnsworth house, side elevation, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. 1950–51. Photograph.

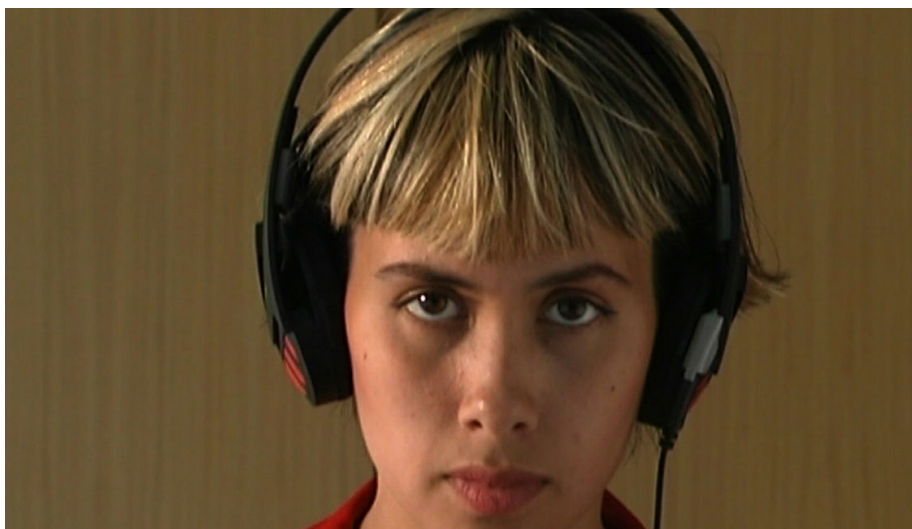


FIG. 12 Still from *Le Baiser / The Kiss*, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, showing the DJ making eye contact with the viewer. 1999–2000. 12 min 30 sec.

(Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thomas Schule GmbH/Mareike Spendel).

Thus, a link emerges between the twin frames of Manglano-Ovalle's installation, between the weightless metal armature of the Farnsworth House and the homeless medium of video through which the installation's narrative is articulated. These two mid-century inventions, namely video and the glass house, gestured in the moment of their shared inception towards the digital present and towards a culture in which we visit more homepages than homes and spend (Face)time online watching videos that are at once our windows and walls.

Coda

'No one knows what it's like to live in a glass house', Edith Farnsworth once said. But in a world of digital technologies, perhaps, increasingly, we do. It's in this spirit that I take the final frames of *Le Baiser*, in which the DJ, following the window washer's exit, looks up to meet the eyes of the spectator directly, her gaze for the first time unmediated by the building's glass façade **FIG. 12**. Joining her there within the confines of Mies van der Rohe's cage, her headphones firmly in place playing a song we cannot hear, the viewer, although together with the DJ for the first time, remains apart: isolated but proximate; free-floating but subtly contained; at home, but hovering in space.

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the generosity of Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, as well as thank his studio and gallery, and Jeremy Boyle. Thanks also to Nora Wendl, whose work on Edith Farnsworth has been a source of inspiration throughout, as well as those audiences who generously responded to versions of this work in progress.

Footnotes

- 1 Numerous sources reference the alleged affair between Farnsworth and Mies van der Rohe despite the lack of evidence; see, for example, M. Vandenberg: *Farnsworth House: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, London 2003, pp.14–15; and F. Schulze: *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, Chicago 1985, p.253.

- 2 E. Gordon: 'The threat to the next America', *House Beautiful* 95 (April 1953), pp.126–30 and 250–51. For another contemporaneous source, see 'Charges famed architect with fraud, deceit', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30th October 1951.
- 3 J.A. Barry: 'Report on the American battle between good and bad modern houses', *House Beautiful* 95 (May 1953), p.270.
- 4 See A.T. Friedman: 'Domestic differences: Edith Farnsworth, Mies van der Rohe, and the gendered body', in C. Reed: *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, London 1996, pp.179–92; and N. Wendl: 'Uncompromising reasons for going West: a story of sex and real estate, reconsidered', *Thresholds* 43 (2015), pp.20–32 and 347–61, https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00052.
- 5 In this preliminary version of the work, Manglano-Ovalle included furniture and headphones within the space defined by the work's metal armature.
- 6 Schulze, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.252–53.
- 7 For an overview of the legal dispute, see Friedman, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.179–92.
- 8 Cited in Wendl, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.347.
- 9 The score for *Le Baiser* also appears as track one on Jeremy Boyle's album *Songs from the Guitar Solos* (1999); Boyle was at work on the *Le Baiser* commission and the album simultaneously.
- 10 Jeremy Boyle, emails to the author, January 2014. For references to Boyle's source material see, 'Ecology' [video] *Art 21*, Season 4 (2007): <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s4/inigo-manglano-ovalle-in-ecology-segment/>.
- 11 Wendl, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.32.
- 12 See exh. cat. *Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle: Gravity is a Force to be Reckoned With* (North Adams, MA (MASS MoCA) 2009).
- 13 Manglano-Ovalle's other Mies van der Rohe inspired works are: *Climate* (2000), *Alltagzeit (In Ordinary Time)* (2001), *Always After: The Glass House* (2006).
- 14 See L.B. Alberti: 'On Painting' and 'On sculpture', ed. and transl. C. Grayson, London 1972.
- 15 N. Bourriaud: *Postproduction*, New York 2000, p.7.
- 16 R. Nuwer: 'The inventor of videotape recorders didn't live to see Blockbuster's fall', *Smithsonian Magazine* (7th November 2013): <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-inventor-of-videotape-recorders-didnt-live-to-see-blockbusters-fall-180947594/>, accessed 29th April 2020.

- 17** B. Groys: 'From image to image file – and back: art in the age of digitalization', in *Art Power*, Cambridge MA 2008, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7469.001.0001>; and G.M. Horowitz: 'Absolute bodies: the video puppets of Tony Oursler', *Parallax* 16, no.2 (2010), pp.95–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534641003634721>.
- 18** *Ibid.*, p.95
- 19** P. Johnson: exh. cat. *Mies van der Rohe*, New York (Museum of Modern Art) 1947, p.162.

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