

“BIZARRERIE CUBIQUE”

Dieter Roelstraete

Men are by nature roofers... except when in their own room.

Blaise Pascal

What we think of as art – that is to say, what comes to mind whenever we *hear* the word “art” – is shaped in no small part by childhood experiences. Think of your first-ever visit to a museum, the first time you were made aware of the meaning and value – both personal and crudely financial – of a certain image in a private environment such as a family home (a reproduction of a famous painting hung above a sofa, say), or your first encounter with a picture in an “art for kids” book. Serendipitously, the artwork that is at the center of Chicago-based artist Assaf Evron’s *Collage for the Edith Farnsworth House* – George Braque’s *Houses Near l’Estaque*, from 1908 – is one of a handful of such images that I chanced upon at a formative early age, most likely in a book of the aforementioned variety. *Houses Near l’Estaque*, a modestly sized, unassuming proto-Cubist landscape permanently owned by the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland, is this author’s archetypal “modern” work of art – the very symbol of painting’s momentous emancipation from the dictates of representational logic. A far cry from the instantly recognizable, epically scaled icons of modernism that we may more reasonably expect to serve such a heroic signaling function (think of Matisse’s *Dance*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Pollock’s action paintings), *Houses Near l’Estaque*’s very discretion enacts and enables one of modernism’s foundational demands: the dissolution of art into life (and vice versa) that is at the heart of both Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe’s marvel of radical transparency that is the Edith Farnsworth House and the series of site-specific photo-installations conceived by Chicago-based artist Assaf Evron in response to a number of classic Mies buildings scattered across the German architect’s adopted Midwestern home.

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Although the Provençal village of L’Estaque has long been incorporated in the suburban sprawl of the port of Marseille, it was once a remote, idyllic fishing village noted for its patchwork of red-tiled roofs. Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, it attracted a steady stream of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters – among whom Paul Cézanne was, initially at least, both the best known and most prolific. (Among the dozen or so paintings Cézanne made while sojourning there, *The Bay of Marseilles, Seen from L’Estaque*, from 1885, is now on permanent display at the Art Institute of Chicago.)

However, it is a much more modest number of paintings made by George Braque in the same location that forever altered the course of art history, for it is in response to one such landscape – the exact 1908 picture appropriated and enlarged by Evron – that the French art critic Louis Vauxcelles famously coined the term “cubism.” In a review of an exhibition of Braque’s paintings that appeared in the literary journal *Gil Blas* in November 1908, he observed how the youthful iconoclast “despises form, reducing everything, sites and a figures and houses, to geometric schemas, to cubes,” or (as he put it in a later review) “*bizarreries cubiques*”: cubic oddities. It seems telling, in retrospect, that the art-historical notion of cubism did not originate in the epiphanic shock of Pablo Picasso’s much better known *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (1907), but rather from a quintessential modern “Sunday painting” – one that appears perfectly suited for the quintessential modern weekend retreat, which is equally tellingly located in Plano, Illinois, of all places. Far removed from the revolutionary fervor associated with the urbane avant-gardist transgressions that would follow in cubism’s wake (Duchamp, Malevich, Picabia, Tatlin), Braque’s founding document of modernist art is a somewhat stolid, pastoral affair – a midsummer’s daydream that resonates perfectly with the unique, self-effacing architecture of the Edith Farnsworth House on a range of levels, from the obvious “cubist” echoes of the house itself (a structure that famously can’t “house” art because it is an artwork in and of itself) and the programmatic intertwining of art and nature in both Braque and Mies’ work to their worlds’ converging in a shared ethos of insular quietism and minimalist understatement.

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Covering some five hundred square feet of the architectural masterpiece’s southern glass façade – and thereby partly dimming the view of the Fox River floodplain, one of the primary reasons for the house’s siting in the late 1940s – *Collage for the Edith Farnsworth House* is the fifth installment in a series of site-specific “interventions” Evron began in 2019. His *Collage for the McCormick House* was followed by *Collage for the Esplanade Apartments* (2019), *Collage for S. R. Crown Hall* (2022), and *Collage for the Arts Club of Chicago* (2023). In the first three works, the source material was derived from Evron’s own exterior photographs of giant geological formations and mountain ranges (an allusion, in part, to the fact that Mies enjoyed incorporating photographs that resemble the Alps into his collages, which are of course the primary frame of reference for Evron’s overarching project). Evron placed the rocky environs of the Dead Sea in the McCormick House, the pock-marked western slopes of Mount Carmel in the Esplanade Apartments – better known as the 900-910 Lake Shore Drive Apartments – and the Vermillion Cliffs in Arizona in Crown Hall. The transparent photo-mural he devised for the Arts Club’s iconic Mies-designed staircase was based on an image of a conch shell,

which “corresponded with the form of the enclosed staircase and echoed the ancient past and geological history of its stone cladding.” *Collage for the Edith Farnsworth House* is the first project, in other words, to feature an *artwork* as its primary point of departure – and one made by an artist, incidentally, whose work Mies collected. Here, incidentally, is what Alex Beam in his *Broken Glass: Mies Van der Rohe, Edith Farnsworth, and the Fight over a Modernist Masterpiece* has to report about Mies’s revelatory collecting habits: “Mies was a man almost entirely without domestic necessity. “You must learn to live differently – you mustn’t keep things,” Mies told Lora Marx. In the years after his youthful marriage, Mies strove to lead an attachment-free life, and that applied to possessions as much as people. He enumerated to Marx his valued possessions: “Cigars, whisky, clothes.” To his friend the architect Paul Schweikher, he added, “My Schwitters,” referring to his beloved Kurt Schwitters collages that (sparely) decorated the walls of his Chicago apartment. Mies also owned a Picasso, some works by his friend Paul Klee, and almost a hundred etchings and lithographs by Edvard Munch.” To return to my earlier remark about the contrast between Braque and Duchamp, the Apollo and Dionysus of modern art: Mies van der Rohe’s taste in art clearly veered towards modernism’s more inward-looking, buttoned-up “classicizing” impulse rather than its transgressive, loudmouth antithesis. I have no idea what Mies might have felt about an artist like Marcel Duchamp (they were almost exact contemporaries), but it seems safe to wager that the famous functionalist had little time for the Frenchman’s subversive scatological humor, which reached its controversial nadir in the “invention” of the readymade by elevating a simple piece of plumbing to the status of a work of art. Mies van der Rohe’s imperious disdain for the practical constraints and pragmatic demands of the designing trade, so spectacularly displayed in the tortuous story of the Edith Farnsworth House, is the stuff of legend. But it was nowhere more emphatically pronounced as in his visceral revulsion vis-à-vis the arch-American wonder of *plumbing* – that painful, embarrassing reminder of the scandal of embodiment. Indeed, the architect Joseph Fujikawa, a longtime member of Mies’s inner circle, was especially fond of recalling Mies’s oft-repeated conviction that “the reason the Gothic church is such a great building is because it” – much like Braque’s titular houses near L’Estaque, platonic ciphers of the architectonic ideal – “doesn’t have any plumbing”.

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In the adjoining Farnsworth Gallery, Evron has installed a giant photo-collage based on pictures he made of prairie flowers in nearby Aurora, where Mies spent so much time during the infamous court case that pitted him against his disgruntled patron shortly after the house was completed in the early 1950s. Although the case consisted of an

initial lawsuit filed by Mies against Edith Farnsworth for failing to pay close to \$30,000 in additional construction costs, followed by a countersuit alleging “malpractice,” its true crux concerned the insurmountable challenges inherent in the utopian dream of art’s dissolution into life (and vice versa). Although the Edith Farnsworth House was of course meant to be inhabited (it is called a *house*, after all), it could never become much of a *home*: much like Braque’s cubist painting, it quickly became clear that it was primarily there for me to “merely” marvel at. And this, in the end, is the “point” of Assaf Evron’s superimposition of both cubic oddities.
