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Eine Klein(e) Kammer

Kent Kleinman and Leslie Van Duzer

Above: Rear view, Haus Lange. Photograph by H. Engelskirchen. Courtesy of MuseumHaus Lange and Haus Esters.

Right: Living room with draped organ chamber, Haus Lange, 1931. Courtesy of Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters.

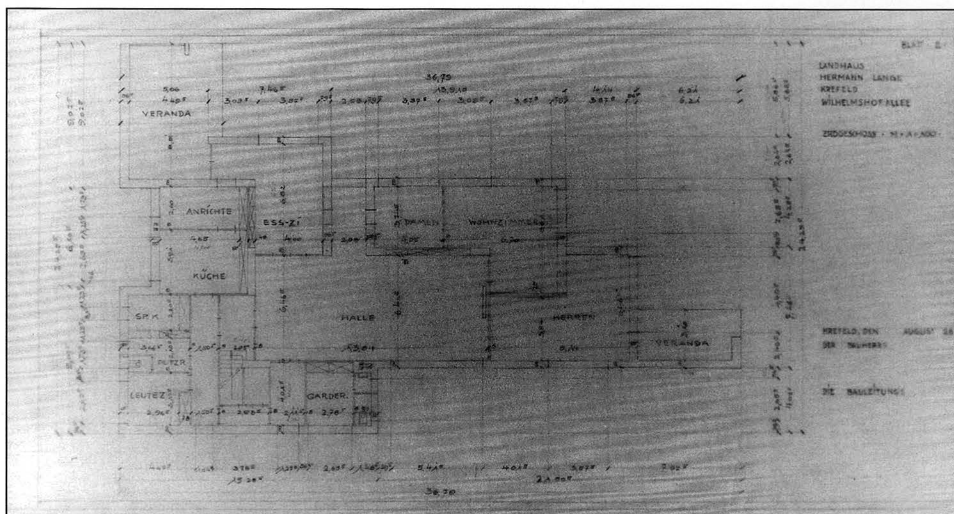
This is the story of a little chamber—the so-called "Klein Room"—in an underestimated work—Haus Lange—by a major architect, Mies van der Rohe. The story concerns a moment of resignation embedded within a larger context of compromise. We would like to suggest that the "weaknesses" in both scales, that of the building and that of the room, have resulted in two modes of durability: in the first instance, a self-reliant architecture remarkably independent of, yet accommodating to, the flux and flow of habitation; in the second case, a contingent architecture whose very lack of resolution has provided an ongoing work in progress.

"Can one live in HausTugendhat?" The question was posed in Die Form in 1931 shortly after the building's completion.[1] Although in many ways this question went to the core of a central issue with Mies, it is important to rephrase the question's implicit accusation. It was not, as is typically assumed, Mies's minimalism that caused anxiety; it was not that Tugendhat might somehow offer too little for domestic life. On the contrary, the attack was leveled at an architecture that appeared to be too pervasive, too maximal. For the parsimonious plan, a plan of few lines and points, of walls as thin as pencil shavings, necessarily extended the grasp of the architect into all domains, at all scales. Mies's excessive grip sparked the controversy, the perception that precisely the refined minimalism, thinness, and planarity of the fixed architectural elements legitimized the architect's transgression into domains that an architect of, say, Adolf Loos's persuasion, had proclaimed off limits: the furniture, the art, the flotsam of quotidian life. For no other work would Mies design more furniture.[2] Hardly a plan exists of the main living space in which the furnishings are absent, and the minute variations in layout that exist between plans indicate an uncompromising compositional program that extends to include even the precise positioning of the baby grand.

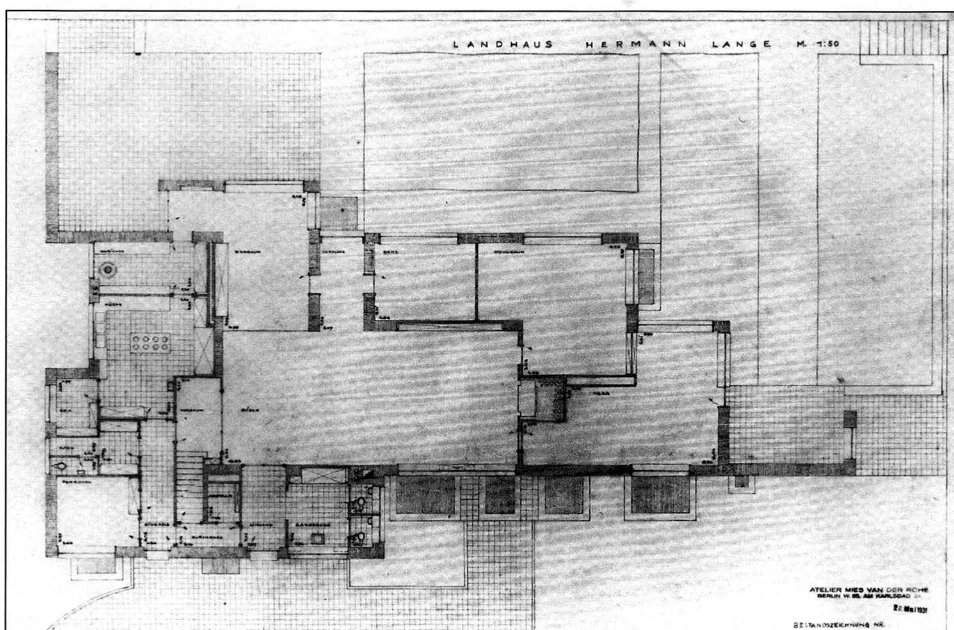
Two years prior to Tugendhat, Mies built two brick villas on adjacent sites in Krefeld, Germany—Haus Lange and Haus Esters—over which it is often said he lost his grip.[3] "I wanted to make these houses much more in glass,"[4] Mies said, meaning he wanted less wall, less enclosure, less thickness, less programmatic luggage, in short, more control. The transparent thinness of Tugendhat is indeed absent from the plan of Haus Lange, in part because of the lack of separation between structure and wall implicit in bearing wall construction, but also in part because there are no exposed edges, no walls without corners, and thus no unbounded spaces. There are, instead, rooms.

What slipped through Mies's grasp with regard to the plan of Lange was the totalizing control that characterizes Tugendhat. Phrased positively, one might say that the lack of absolute authority necessitated a more self-sufficient architectural paradigm, one that did not target the minutia of daily life because they were, quite literally, out of reach. Hermann Lange, a textile industrialist and a renowned collector of modern art, needed surfaces on which to hang his art. The art would rotate, the collection would grow; a degree of separation between container and contained was preprogrammed. Furthermore, Lange came to the project with furniture. The *Möbel* is not inscribed in any of the preliminary plans for Haus Lange, and in fact Mies had no single conception of how the main rooms would be inhabited. He drew at least two plans, shifting pieces into very different configurations. A contemporary photograph from 1931 shows that a third arrangement was finally—or perhaps provisionally—adopted. Speaking of the current condition, Wolfgang Tegethoff has observed that "the loss of the original furnishings, which were kept by the former owners, is of no particular consequence, especially since there were scarcely any original pieces involved."[5] Tegethoff's double use of the term original reveals a bias common to Miesian scholarship, namely

that the authentic Mies environment is original to the degree that it completes itself with Miesian originals. But in Lange, the original state was most unique precisely because the "original furnishings" came (and went) with the inhabitants. Tegethoff is correct, but the sentiment is wrong: one should perhaps insist on refurnishing this villa, if only to demonstrate the extraordinary robustness and durability of its architectural qualities in the absence of "any original pieces." It is a test that Haus Tugendhat, of course, was not designed to withstand.



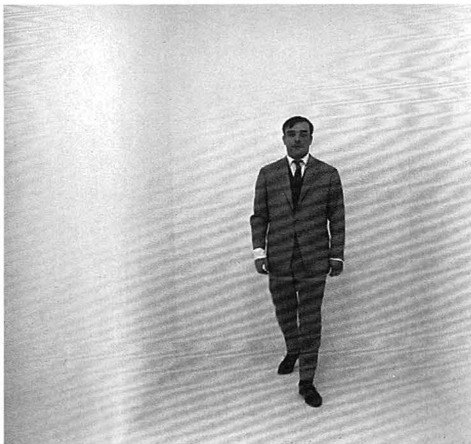
Ground floor plan, Haus Lange.—6.8, Mies van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



As-built ground floor plan, Haus Lange, 1931.—6.151, Mies van der Rohe Archives, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

"I wanted to make this house much more in glass," Mies has said. "I had great trouble." The trouble was not, however, limited to the facades, which could in fact be said to have profited enormously from the delicate, and oftentimes paradoxical, balance between brick and glazing, accomplished through the extensive use of steel lintels. It is revealing that Mies wanted "more" glass, indicating that it was a question of relative proportion of material, rather than a question of type (i.e. frame versus bearing wall construction.) Although the matter requires more elaboration, suffice it to say that in no sense is Haus Lange a straightforward bearing wall structure; neither its structural logic nor its tectonic expression support such a classification.

At some moment after the completion of the working drawings and before the completion of construction, Hermann Lange imposed what must have been an intractable demand. Lange required Mies to add a small chamber, 2.0 meters by 1.7 meters, in order to accommodate his wifes organ, and to cut a large opening into the west wall of the main hall in order to frame the keyboard and performer.[6] Mies, of course, could do closets, even in a parsimonious plan such as Tugendhat. Indeed, the one built-in closet on the main level of the Brno house is a veritable essay on how to thicken walls while preserving conceptual thinness by employing artful deceit



Above: Yves Klein in the "Void Room," Haus Lange, 1961. Photograph by C. Wilp, courtesy of Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters.

Right: Yves Klein coating the interior of the "Void Room," Haus Lange, 1961. Photograph by B. Wember, courtesy of Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters.

and camouflage. But such strategies were not applicable to the Haus Lange dilemma, and the disfiguring chamber, opening onto the main hall and projecting into the man's study, is recorded in the as-built drawings and the photograph of 1931.

While the requirement for less glass culminated in an extraordinary, albeit hybrid, facade, and while the lack of total control over the interior prompted an autonomous, and yet accommodating, conception of the plan, it is perhaps hard to see the virtue in, or even to be interested in, what amounts to little more than a large, poorly disguised closet. Virtue aside, this little room has a curious history, one that might be referred to as the redemption of marginal space. The protagonist of this portion of the tale is the artist Yves Klein. When Klein came to the villa in 1961, it was on the invitation of the prophetic curator Paul Wember, director of a then relatively new acquisition: Museum Haus Lange.[7] Klein was to prepare a major solo exhibition in the unfurnished building. The villa was essentially untouched by the passage of 30 turbulent years, with the exception of the little chamber, which had been sealed up, enlarged, turned into a kitchenette, joined with a second door to the woman's salon, fronted with a discrete hallway, and then emptied again. The room, now measuring 2.0 meters by 4.5 meters, must have seemed irresistible as an illicit, aberrant space, an opportunity to be within Mies's work and without simultaneously.

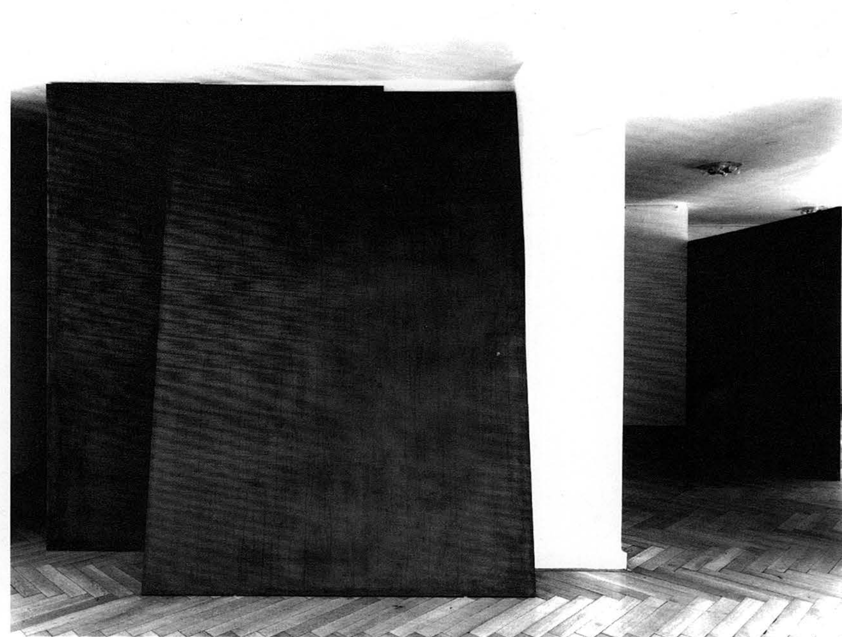
Klein's work in the small chamber has alternatively been called the "Void Room," and the "Immaterial Room," and simply the "Klein Room." He coated the interior of the chamber—walls, ceiling, floor, doors—with white paint mixed with a granular additive. A single fluorescent fixture illuminated the space. *Le vide* was unarticulated, immaterial emptiness. It was a program that characterized another Klein work: the void room in the Gallerie Iris Clert, in which, similar to the room in Haus Lange, there were no paintings on the walls, no objects in the room.

"I have...never felt the spaces as being precious, but rather austere and grand—but not in a way that oppresses, but rather liberates."[8] "With the void, full powers."[9] It is curious that these two remarks, the first by Mr. Tugendhat regarding his house, the second by Albert Camus regarding Klein's *Le Vide* exhibition, should voice such similar sentiments. In a sense, Klein's treatment supplements Haus Lange, gives it an instance of unbounded, transcendent spatiality that Mies wanted to achieve with glass. And curiously, Klein's grasp is no less greedy than the architect's was to become. The Klein room is over-determined, fixed, and ultimately fragile in its comprehensive demands; even the key chain to the room was painted white. But the point is not to exaggerate similarities; Klein's program was far too politicized by the context of the 1960s neo-avant garde to be placed parallel to Mies's. The point is rather that Klein opted to operate in this marginal, surplus space precisely because it was marginal and superfluous; it could therefore serve well as a test-site for the transformative potential of his art. Turning stone into gold is ultimately more rewarding than turning one precious material into another; this is the source of the great appeal of marginal conditions to architects and artists alike. What is interesting about the Klein Room is that it has not—yet—degraded back to stone.

On the contrary. Klein's Room exists intact, lodged in the plan and in the history of the building. It has inspired subsequent work, such as Richard Serra's installation "Klein's Walls" of 1985. It has also provoked an ongoing debate regarding the present restoration of Haus Lange, wherein competing originals vie for priority, including an original that never properly existed, namely the condition as projected in Mies's drawings after Mies had reconciled himself to the client's resistance to "more glass," but before the irksome issue of the organ chamber with its subsequent claims to an independent authenticity, but after the removal of the "original furnishings," those of "no particular consequence." Which brings us back to the question of durability. Haus Lange, because of its particular history of accommodation, is positioned both inside and outside the flux of the circumstantial. Frampton, addressing the tectonic paradoxes of the brick projects of Mies's so-called "middle-period," identifies this work as "perhaps the most complex of his entire career, since here the conflict between avant-gardism and tradition attains its greatest intensity."[10] How telling that this conflict should now play itself out between the defenders of Klein and the champions of Mies; or between those who do, and those who do not, believe that paradoxes are infinitely more durable than answers.

Notes

1. Justus Bier, "Kann man im Haus Tugendhat wohnen?," *Die Form* 6 (15 October 1931): 392-93.
2. Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 169.
3. Various commentators have described these works as compromised, including Wolfgang Tegethoff and Franz Schulze. Mies himself refused to publish these houses after his major retrospective at MoMA in 1947.
4. Mies van der Rohe, "Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: my address of appreciation," *Architectural Association Journal* 75 (July 1959): 26-46.
5. Wolfgang Tegethoff, *Mies van der Rohe: The Villas and Country Houses* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985): 65.
6. This and all subsequent information regarding the development of the small chamber is taken from the authors' interviews with Dr. J. Heynen, Director of the Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters, in Krefeld in 1996 and from the authors' correspondence with Dr. Heynen in 1998.
7. In 1955, the Lange family offered their house to the city of Krefeld for use as a contemporary art museum.
8. Fritz Tugendhat cited in Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): 170. Originally published in Fritz and Grete Tugendhat, "Die Bewohner des Hauses Tugendhat äussern sich," Die Form 6 (15 November 1931): 437-38.
9. Albert Camus cited in Pierre Restancy, *Yves Klein* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1982): 49.
10. Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995):159.



"Klein's Walls" by Richard Serra, 1985. Photograph by V. Döhne, courtesy of Museum Haus Lange and Haus Esters.